

Deadly Design



A Ben Merrill Mystery

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PROLOGUE

"Make sure your worst enemy is not living between your own two ears." _unknown



Maddy took another quick look around before she sneaked silently into the tiny tumbledown log cabin. Rebellion spurred her on, sizzling through her soul, boiling hot and urgent Fear whispered caution, but only slightly cooling her determination. She was excited. Still, experience demanded she eliminate any chance of someone finding her inside. Maddy knew what would happen if they saw her go in. But it was a risk she was willing to take. They could not stop her from doing the one thing she found thrilling enough to make her miserable young life tolerable.

Every stolen hour she spent exploring one of the little guest cabins provided a spine-tingling, if absolutely forbidden, adventure for

the lonely little girl. Six equally fascinating and forlorn cabins lay scattered across the grounds of the Rocky Mountain ranch she and Mama now called home. Over the summer Maddy had gleefully explored the other five, ignoring her mother's warnings and threats; giving in to temptation and her hunger for adventure and excitement.

Today, There was the only one cabin left to investigate. This one!

A few days before in the cabin by the lake, hidden away inside a tilting two-shelf cupboard—its paint peeling and one door hanging crazily from a broken hinge—Maddy found a pack-rat's nest filled with stolen bits of shiny loot. That day she added a green marble, a red and gold fishing lure and a miniature silver pickle fork to her collection.

On another morning she found a white china doll with painted yellow hair and blue-blue eyes in the meadow cabin. Finding that doll, long-ago forgotten in a corner behind the stove, seemed like a miracle to her. She decided the doll's name would be Suzie and she dressed her in a bit of blue ribbon scavenged from the trash in back of the lodge. She lovingly carried Suzie everywhere with her now, safely hidden away in the pocket of her baggy jeans where no one could see. Suzie was the only doll she had these days. Mama left all her other dolls behind when, in the middle of a dark December night, they'd hurried to move away from their last house.

Maddy carefully hide her collection for safe keeping, too. She kept it in a rusty red coffee can, tucked away in her secret place, far back under the porch of the cook house. And despite the warnings, the threats and the risk of yet another pounding she continued making expeditions to find more treasures whenever she dared.

Mama and Mr. Vandiver ‘*call me Uncle Harry, Maddy*’ warned her all the time to stay away from the cabins until they were finished with the remodeling. Today she was pretty sure, since the crew was putting up wall board in the main lodge, Mama would be working there with them until lunch time.

Just to make sure she took one more peek over toward the lodge before closing the screen door behind her. Satisfied no one had seen her come in she dragged a chair across the floor to the dish cupboard and hopped up on it. Standing on tippy-toes she ran probing fingers though the dust and debris along the back of the top shelf. The good stuff always seemed to be hidden in places she had a hard time reaching.

Intent on her treasure hunt, she missed the soft squeak made as the sagging screen door opened. By the time it crashed against the wall it was too late. Way too late.

“Just exactly what the hell do you think you’re doin’ in here young lady?”

How did Mama find her? She'd been really careful to see that nobody was out moving around the other buildings before slipping into the cabin. Not one single soul had been in sight. Maddy shuddered again, and braced herself for what she knew was coming. She'd been told exactly what would happen if Mama caught her playing where she had been warned not to go again. Bitter experience had taught her what it meant to get caught disobeying Mama's orders.

Stopping just inside the door Mama rested one hand on a hip, glaring at her small daughter. In the other hand she held a large wooden spoon; a wooden spoon Maddy was all too familiar with. That spoon wasn't used for mixing cakes. It didn't take the hysterical tone of her mother's voice or the splintered wood from the viciously shattered door for Maddy to recognize her mistake. This meant trouble. Big trouble!

Mama slammed the broken and sagging screen door behind her again—hard. The sound of wood shattering only exaggerated her rage.

With Mama blocking the door, there was no way out of this forbidden space. She was going to get it now for sure.

Over the past couple of months Maddy had tried more than once to make Mama understand why she loved her small adventures to explore the cabins. Each of the undersized one room houses had a minuscule wood-burning stove, an antique kitchen cupboard and

a tiny table with four matching chairs. There were narrow cots for sleeping and dilapidated Adirondack chairs on narrow porches facing the lake. Inside the cabins she could pretend to be in a real home; imagine a real dinner with laughing, smiling parents, and make up bedtime stories as she tucked Suzie into bed for her naps. Inside a cabin she could imagine herself far, far from this awful place. On the porch she could sit and read or just watch the huge blue dragonflies hover over the lake, dreaming of happier times. Maddy saw each cabin as her very own life-sized doll's house despite the peeling paint, sagging floors and rotting wall board. They fired her nine-year-old imagination and allowed her to escape the harsh reality of her life for hours on end. But her enthusiasm fell on unsympathetic ears.

Mama told her, "It don't mean squat that nobody's stayin' here right now! Those cabins are no place for you to be playin'. They haven't been cleaned in years. The floors have all but rotted away. Besides bein' filthy, they're just flat dangerous. Now I'm warnin' you fir the last time young lady. You mind me, and stay away from 'em!"

As Maddy hopped off of the chair and backed away from her mother's threatening move forward she shuddered. Looking into Mama's face, contorted with familiar fury, she anticipated the beating she knew was coming. At that moment the greatest desire of her child's heart was to have been more careful. Not more careful about heeding her mother's warnings. Maddy sincerely

wished she had been more careful about checking to see where Mama was working before slipping off to explore.

Mama's first blow was aimed at her face. The smack of the spoon stung her dirt streaked cheek, splitting the delicate skin. As she tasted the warm trickle of blood on her lip Maddy made a promise to herself. Never again! Oh, she would explore the cabins again, for sure. But she promised herself then and there she would never again get caught. To Maddy, getting caught inside one of the tiny buildings by Mama or "uncle Harry" was about the worst thing that could happen in her nine-year-old world.

Mama's hateful words, "You worthless little brat!" and the resounding whack of a second blow electrified the already foul air in the room with vile tension and vicious strife. Maddy stretched herself up to her full four feet in height, locking her spine ramrod straight, fitting her arms tight to her sides; her defiant toy soldier stance announced, "You won't make me cry! Not this time!"

She took one more step back from her mother's raised hand and insanely glittering eyes. Her legs were now pressed tight against the edge of a cot. When Mama's third blow fell it upended her onto the filthy mattress. Only then did she roll into the protective overturned-turtle ball that she knew from experience kept the worst of the blows raining around her from hitting her in the face.

It seemed to Maddy that Mama's temper was worse, much worse, since she'd moved in with 'uncle Harry'. Mama never stopped with

a single stinging slap any more. One blow or two, even three or four, didn't satisfy her wild need to punish someone. For months now, if Mama started hitting Maddy, she pounded away until all the frustration and anger built up inside her was poured out on her daughter's small person.

By her sixth birthday Madison Compton had stopped trying to run away from her mother's anger. At eight she still hoped someday she could, somehow, learn to be a good girl, so Mama wouldn't have to punish her so often. But now she was nine—less than two months from turning ten actually—and Maddy was certain she'd never find a way to make her Mama happy; to make her Mama love her. She'd heard other kids say their moms loved them. But with the wisdom of her almost-ten years, she understood her Mama didn't have time or patience for love. So she rolled up in a ball; elbows, knees and tennis shoes out, covering her face. She pressed her soft behind hard against the filth that was the ragged mattress and gritting her teeth, fought back tears as the blows continued to fall.

“You can't make me cry. You can't make me go where you want me to go. I won't be what you tell me I am. I know you'll never love me! *And I hate you.*” she whispered as Mama's rage wore itself out with the falling blows.

CHAPTER ONE - TUESDAY



A cynic is not merely one who reads bitter lessons from the past; he is one who is prematurely disappointed in the future. _Sidney J. Harris

March 20 - 5:15 AM

Maddy's arms throbbed with pain. Her knees felt scraped and raw. One entire side of her face was numb. She rolled over on her stomach and scrubbed the tears away with the back of her hand.

Trembling violently, she wrestled her way out of the nightmare, flailing limbs tangled in luxurious Egyptian cotton sheets.

Breathing in their sweet, fresh-from-the-laundry smell, she smeared the remaining tears away with the expensive fabric.

“Never get back to sleep now,” she muttered. “Wouldn't want to anyway. Might dream again.”

The very thought of returning to her nightmare was nauseating. Even the certain knowledge that she was at home, safe in her own bed, 20 years removed from the dirty little mountain cabin was small comfort. She knew from experience it would take hours, maybe even days, to clear away the horrors clawing in her gut.

Daylight—just beginning to edge through the blinds, leaked its amber-colored light into her calm, beautifully decorated bedroom—reflected back at her from the cheval mirror standing in the corner. Hearing the first birds softly tuning their dawn chorus, she rolled over to look at the clock. 5:15 AM - Tuesday. She rubbed tentatively at her numbed cheek. Knowing full well the pain came from lying too long in one position and not from Mama's beating did little to soothe her hitching stomach.

“Man! What a night! Maybe I will just roll over, pull the covers over my head and see if I can get a couple hours of real rest.”

Maddy's expertise at driving away the ugly remnants of childhood was well developed. For years, whenever she was overly tired or

majorly stressed out, images of life with Mama had rampaged through her dreams. She'd stopped allowing them to interfere with her life while she was still in college.

She lay quietly for a few more minutes , forcing herself to breathe deeply, contemplating the room that was a designed to play a major part in her personal refuge. The sleek clean lines of her craftsman inspired book shelves and her big bed, dressed in pure white sheets and soft natural fibers were a far cry from the filthy cot of her dream. She deliberately turned her attention to the seating area where a pair of antique French club chairs upholstered in butter-soft white leather flanked a bay window overlooking her garden. She loved this room. Usually it offered a study in simplicity, a sanctuary for the woman, a lullaby for the child. But not this morning.

“Oh, to the devil with it. I want coffee and a smoke and I want ‘em now!” Throwing aside the elegant covers, she rolled off the bed and padded across deep wool carpet to the bathroom.

Madison Compton had reached the ripe old age of twenty-nine last September. She was bright, aggressive, and successful and she knew what she wanted. And when she wanted something she usually knew how to go about getting it. She was gregarious, self-sufficient, financially independent and driven to live life on her own terms. For most of the past ten years she had done remarkably well at it.

A shrewd business woman, she was owner and CEO of a top-notch industrial design firm with clients scattered between both coasts. Madison Compton Design was an organization her competitors referred to as a 'one woman show'. She'd started building the business at nineteen with one computer and one client, three years before graduating from Cal Poly with degrees in Industrial Design, Business and Marketing. The firm was currently housed in a high-toned complex of office suites in the old California mission town of San Luis Obispo. Their high-profile address on Oceanside Boulevard was what might be considered one of the best locations in town.

Maddy had possessed an amazingly optimistic belief in her own ability to overcome any obstacle ever since her teens. Her artistic intuition proved unerring when it came to pleasing clients. She was tireless and determined, never willing to stop at mediocre. Blessed with a knack for surrounding herself with devoted employees, employees who some thought made it their goal in life to keep Madison Compton looking good, her business grew with remarkable speed. Hiring Mick Evans a couple of months ago brought the staff at MCD to a total of eleven.

Maddy was a genuine people person. Friends, clients, employees, competitors and acquaintances were drawn to her physical beauty. But, more than her looks, people were drawn to her happy-go-lucky temperament and ability to make anyone believe her life's

goal was to please them. Being around Maddy somehow just made people feel good.

All things considered, Maddy's life had turned out to be everything she'd ever dreamed of, and more.

Only after a night like the one she'd just fought her way through did she experience any doubts whatsoever about being completely in control of her own destiny. Only after dreams of her childhood, filled with anger, abuse and overwhelming fear, did she fail to bounce out of bed stoked and raring to seize the day. A night like the one just past left Maddy drained; feeling dull and lifeless.

"Like a used-up tissue," she thought, "not fit for anything except discarding. Worthless. Exactly what my mother always told me I'd turn out to be. Empty and worthless!"

She padded to the adjoining bath, another space designed to soothe the soul and calm the senses. She stepped to a bank of exquisitely carved walnut cabinets topped by a hand-blown vessel of aqua glass at least an inch thick. Turning on the elegant faucet she splashed cold water over her face, intent on shocking herself fully awake, attempting to clear her mind of the remnants of her nightmare.

Out of habit she carefully avoided mirrors, both in the bathroom and walk-in closet, knowing full well what she'd see if she caught a glimpse of her reflection. She simply didn't want to look at the ravages of her dreams.

Grabbing a soft white terry-cloth robe from a chair by the window she headed down the hall. No matter how done-in Maddy felt after one of *those* nights she knew she could draw comfort from the gentle sensation of ultra soft fabrics against her skin. Somewhere along the line she had recognized her need for tactile stimulation; the softness and gentleness most children take for granted, but missing entirely from her early years.

The dreams always left her eyes hollow—haunted, the eyes of a lonely, unhappy child. The child she had once been. Not a child she was prepared to come face to face with this morning. Maddy kept her eyes fixed firmly on her pleasant surroundings. She forced herself to remember that in spite of the emotional wreckage left by her mother's mental illness and eventual desertion she had managed, with single-minded purpose, to carve out a life of accomplishment. Only on mornings when that miserable, troubled little girl gazed back from her mirrors did Madison Compton wish for more from life than what she had built here.

“Can't change what was, only what might be,” was Maddy's life philosophy.

In the kitchen she put on the tea kettle, ground coffee beans, added a teaspoon of sugar and a dash of salt, gave them another whirl of the grinder, then measured them carefully into the French press. While she waited for the water to boil she leaned against the counter and took stock of an efficient, yet warm and inviting,

space—one more room designed to her exacting specifications. Cooking in this kitchen was one of her favorite pastimes. It didn't matter whether she was entertaining friends or enjoying a solitary omelet, everything about this space gave her a sense of comfort and accomplishment.

She opened the refrigerator, taking her week's allowance of costly *Cigaronne Exclusiv* from the shelf on the door. One package a week. That's all she allowed herself. Two a day. No more! It was a ritual she rarely skipped. Maddy smoked two strong European cigarettes practically every day. She always smoked them outside, in the parking lot or on the patio, hating the smell of smoke in her house, on her clothes, in her hair or her car. She never smoked when she was working. She usually didn't inhale. As a matter of fact, Maddy smoked two cigarettes a day, not because she really enjoyed them, but because most of her friends frowned on it; suggesting cigarettes were awful, bad for her health, a nasty habit. Most felt an obligation to tell her she should quit smoking every time she lit up. Maddy rarely did what others told her she should do. Often, she made a point of doing the exact opposite.

One friend in particular said she should quit smoking every time he was in her kitchen and for a short time he had been in her kitchen on a fairly regular basis. If she opened the refrigerator for a bottle of wine or ingredients for a dish she was preparing, he'd see her *Cigaronnes* lying on the top shelf and he'd start.

Nobody told Madison Compton what to do and got away with it. Nobody! Not since she was ten years old. Nobody. And certainly not Brandon Williams, even if he did think his position at MCD, plus a few dates with the boss, gave him that right.

Thoughts of Brandon edged her concentration away from last night's dream toward a more pressing problem. She'd hired Williams almost two years ago. The business had unexpectedly shot another notch up the ladder of success and the existing staff simply couldn't cover all the bases anymore. She talked it over with her business partner, Bret Rainier, and together they concluded a qualified in-house accountant would solve several emerging problems. They agreed to run an ad in the local paper as a place to start. Brandon Williams applied for the job the same day the ad came out. He walked in, asked for her personally, laid a very impressive resume on her desk and told her, "You need me, Miss Compton. I'll bring the exact mix of skills and contacts to your firm that you've been looking for."

He was extremely self-assured, well qualified, and not all that hard to look at. A bit under six feet tall, with a handsome narrow face and a great smile; he was impeccably groomed and well spoken. A real professional, she thought. The only problem being, she kept imagining him on a beach, carrying a surf board, instead of entering the board room carrying a brief case. It was the streaky, slightly over-long, blonde hair and the tan she supposed. And

those incredibly dark brown eyes, so often hidden by an expensive pair of shades.

She laid one slim Cigaronne and a single timber match out. Selecting an heirloom linen napkin and an antique silver butter knife, she arranged them on a beautiful red Japanese lacquer-ware tray for carrying to the patio. Dining alfresco had been comfortable most mornings this spring. After spending her childhood in the Colorado Mountains where winter often dragged on until April or May, Maddy cherished each and every luxuriously warm and sunny California March morning.

She put one slice of whole wheat bread in the toaster. Stepping outside the kitchen door, she slipped into a pair of old rubber clogs and dashed into the garden. Within seconds she was back at the sink carrying a plump pink grapefruit. She peeled and segmented it into a crystal bowl. When her toast popped-up she placed it on a hand-thrown stoneware plate, decorated in a random pattern with a golden hued glaze. She added a thin pat of creamy butter to the toast and put it on her tray, studying the overall effect and nodding her approval of the warm color palette. Design was her passion and touched everything she touched. She carried the tray out to the patio, along with her lap-top. Before settling down she picked a single yellow blossom from the hanging basket near the door, putting it in a bud vase to liven up the table. Breakfast was served!

As Maddy poured a second cup of coffee, she flipped open her laptop and waited for the desktop to fill. Drawing in a puff of pungent smoke, she again concentrated on her breathing, on forcing herself to relax. To focus. The CEO in her began to kick in as the computer retrieved last night's email and discarded the junk. Fifty-seven items sent straight to the junk file. Ten keepers this morning. Not too bad! Her breakfast ritual—preparing the meal in her sunny kitchen, serving it on things she loved to see and touch, eating outside on the shade dappled patio, and now email and Headline News over coffee—was gradually draining away the anguish of last night's dream.

Her creative engine was starting to rev. Three email requests for information and quotes forwarded from the company web site helped get her juices flowing.

How she loved her work! Nothing else gave her the same adrenalin kick as working with a satisfied client; one who didn't hesitate to tell her how great they thought she was, what an amazing job she was doing for them. Just a few days ago Brandon had stooped to explaining just how shallow he thought that made her. A "validation junkie" he'd called her. "You're only completely happy when somebody's fawning all over you. Even when it's mostly just a bunch of bull." He'd fired that parting shot just as he'd slammed out of her office door, thus guaranteeing himself the last word in their argument.

“Don’t go there.” She warned herself. “It’ll just tick you off again, and you can’t afford to go in with a chip on your shoulder this morning. The conference call with McLean’s people today is going to demand you be at your brightest and best.”

“Damn Brandon!” She said to the sparrow picking toast crumbs from the patio bricks Gathering up her computer and breakfast tray Maddy headed into the house to prepare for another day at the office.





7:15 AM

Bret Rainier stomped hard on the brakes of his classic Jag XKE and swore viciously.

“Watch where you’re going, FOOL!” He yelled at the skateboarder rapidly gliding away from their near collision unscathed. “That was entirely too close for comfort. Damn kid’s got a death wish,” he steamed. Sliding the Jag into gear and easing it away from the curb where it had skidded to a stop, he returned to his mental review of the day ahead.

Brandon could already be in the office when he got there, Bret knew. That fact alone forewarned the confrontation they had barely avoided yesterday afternoon would probably be the first thing on this morning’s agenda.

They had argued over money. Lately they argued over money regularly.

“Not gonna back down on this one,” Bret thought. “Brandon’s wrong. Dead wrong! But he’s not about to climb down off his high horse and admit it.” Which meant Bret would eventually be forced to take the whole nasty mess to Maddy. There was nothing he hated worse than having to drag her into a fight that might dredge up memories of her past, considering all the crap she’d been through as a kid.

The problem with Brandon was his obsessive insistence on having the last word. In this case he was acting like a stupid, spoiled kid over the whole thing. He had already come perilously close to insulting a client, one who could potentially end up as one of the firm’s biggest ever, just to prove his point. Not for the life of him could Bret figure out what the guy was thinking.

“He’s not thinking. Hasn’t been since McLean asked for an update on those cost projection figures” Bret muttered. “Hasn’t been thinking since he started hanging out with that new kid, Mick Evans, from Research and Development. Neither one of those guys have had their heads on straight for weeks.

“So now McLean may take this job to another firm. Last time we spoke he mentioned contacting his attorneys, too.” Bret wondered if he was posturing or honestly thinking lawsuit. It wouldn’t be all that hard to understand it, considering William's attitude.

“Maddy’s gonna freak. Frankly, I hope she fires him. The dumb jerk.”

Bret turned his bright red ‘baby’ into the parking space reserved for MCD’s executive Vice President and killed the engine.

Pocketing his keys he grabbed a well worn tweed jacket, slipped it on, squared his muscular shoulders and started for the side office door.

“Hey Bret, wait for me!”

Looking into the sun, Bret saw her wave and dash across the parking lot toward him. The sun turned her streaky blonde hair into a halo around the silhouette of a face he didn’t have to actually see to picture. A perfect oval face with high cheekbones, a soft sexy mouth and the most amazing smoky blue eyes Bret had ever seen. Maddy Compton’s face was his idea of perfection, and then some. As an added bonus, she had the body to match! The girl was stacked. About five foot six, she weighed in at a curvy one twenty-five or so, and it was all in exactly the right places.

He’d known her for ten years. At first, during the lean years, he worked for her. Six years ago she invited him to be her business partner and together they established a corporation, then elected him Vice President of that corporation. He’d been more than half in love with her since day one.

“Mornin’ Kiddo! You’re here early.” He greeted her.

“Yep, couldn’t sleep.” She grinned as she fell into step with him.
“Had one of those nights.”

Bret glanced sideways at the face he knew so well, noting the strain of the past several days in deep transparent shadows under her eyes.

“Damn Brandon,” he thought. “Why did he turn out to be such a jerk? What he’s done is going to make this hard on all of us?”



7:20 AM

Brandon Williams sat behind Maddy's desk, chair tipped back, elk-hide boots resting on her credenza, ankles crossed. His eyes were slits, his mouth a grim line dragging his normally handsome features into a caricature of frustration.

The reports he was studying showed cost over-runs on the last three projects MCD had completed. Whopping cost over-runs. In all three cases, over-runs the client had complained to Maddy about. Wanting explanations. Wanting reimbursements. Over-runs he, as Chief Financial Officer, had argued viciously with her about on Monday afternoon. It was during that argument Brandon knew he had crossed the line from good friend, trusted employee, and potential lover...to adversary.

He'd come in early this morning so he could check her figures for himself. Oh not the figures Madison Compton Design regularly updated for their clients as every project progressed. And not the figures from the Monday morning reports all team leaders found on their desk until the work was completed. Brandon wanted to check out her private set of figures he knew she meticulously ran on every major project. Figures that included every penny the company laid out for production.

If a team called and ordered pizza while pulling an after-hours design session, the over-zealous CEO called it an expense and

added it to her private cost analysis figures. “Hell, she probably adds in the candy bars and sodas we substitute for lunches.” Mick Evans had muttered during a recent team meeting—a meeting called because of complaints over projected production costs from McLean and Co. – a meeting Madison Compton had chaired in person.

Studying the reports he’d taken out of her file cabinet, after finessing the lock with a slim pick in his handy Swiss Army knife, Brandon was pretty sure Evans cynical comment hadn’t been so far off the mark. The cost projections he held in his hands for the proposed McLean job included stuff like art and office supplies, entertainment, and amazingly even meals she’d shared with him en route to a photo shoot in Carmel-by-the-Sea for the final layouts. But that wasn’t all. There was also a built in administrative bonus for early project completion.

“Well, isn’t that just ducky?” Brandon sneered, shoving himself back from Maddy’s credenza with a kick. “Just what in hell do you think you’re doing here Maddy?”

“My job, Brandon!”

So engrossed in the reports he hadn’t heard them come down the hall, Brandon, nearly jumped out of his fancy handmade cowboy boots. Maddy pushed her office door wide open and glared at him. He realized she was going to chalk this up against him as another huge mistake. And, it wasn’t going to help matters that *Bret baby*

was right behind her, his bulk filling the doorway, blocking any possibility of a hasty retreat.

Brandon, although he would never ever admit it, was a bit intimidated by the man he thought of as Maddy's bodyguard. Rainier, taller and more muscular than Williams, stood about six three, tipping the scale at a fit and trim two hundred ten pounds. His handsome, somewhat rugged, face graced with intense steel-gray eyes and a wide sensitive mouth could turn ice cold and scary in a heartbeat. His slightly graying hair gave him a distinguished mature appearance. People often mistook him for much older than his 36 years. Brandon preferred to avoid any and all opportunities for conflict with the big ex-cop currently backing Maddy up.

Always one with a quick come back, Brandon had learned years ago the best defense was a good offense. He didn't even bother thinking about it—he got offensive.

“Your job? Since when is it your job to keep tabs on every cent as well as every minute we spend prepping for a project. I'm the CFO here! Remember?

“Since when do estimated costs include travel time and personal meals when a photo shoot is, at least in part, a pleasure trip? A date? And what's this *executive bonus* bull? Just who exactly do you think you are here Maddy? Oh, I forgot! Your name's on the door. Right? That makes you the whole enchilada around here

doesn't it? The rest of us are just busting our butts to make the amazing Miss Maddy look good!"

"Brandon!" she stepped forward, fire in her eyes. If he wanted a confrontation she was full well in the mood to give him one this morning.

"Just shut down your thrusters Maddy. Everybody around here is sick and tired of you and your I'm the boss attitude. Everybody...."

"That's enough, Brandon." Bret moved through the door, and firmly pushed a seething Maddy behind him into the hallway.

"Don't say anything to make what you've done worse. Don't put all of us in a situation we won't be able to get out of in one piece."

"Who asked you to step up to the plate here, Rainier?" Brandon was on a roll now. All the guilt and frustration of the past months surfaced, ready to boil over. "This is between Maddy and me. It's none of damn your business. Never was!"



7:24 AM

Down the hall, the phone on the front desk rang. Once. Twice. A third time. Maddy glanced at her watch. Still early. Who would be calling at this hour? The office didn't open until 9. Clients and employees expected their early morning calls to be forwarded to her home office. They knew the answering machine would pick up if she was between phones. Anyone who knew the routine just skipped the exercise and called Maddy's cell phone. It proved a whole lot quicker in the long run. The main office phone rarely rang before Jeanie, the cute client liaison, (she's more than a receptionist, gentlemen) came in at 8:45.

"Probably a wrong number," Maddy thought, aloud. "Guess I'll get it, just to make sure." Besides, leaving the room to answer the phone would give her some time to chill out. She was angry enough with Brandon to flay him alive. As she turned toward the front, the phone rang a fourth time and the answering machine kicked on.

"We can't take your call right now. This is Madison Compton Design. Speak at the beep and we'll get back to you in a few."

"Maddy? Maddy! If you're there pick up. Maddy, it's Mama. I need to see you Maddy. Now! I'm in town, Maddy...."

Shock! Anger. Fear and finally bone chilling cold rolled over Maddy in waves. She'd been only a child the last time she heard that whining voice – calling to her, making demands, telling her to do something NOW. If you didn't count her nightmares, of course. It took a full five seconds for her brain to process the emotion she was feeling. Then she was dashing down the hall toward the phone. Too late. Just as she put the receiver to her ear the line when dead.

“Mama? Mama, where are you? What's your number? Mama, you didn't leave a phone number.”

Maddy braced herself against the desk in the sophisticated and elegant reception area. She was pale as a ghost, gripping the phone in sweaty hands. She stood rooted there for several minutes just staring at the receiver, allowing last night's dream and this morning's argument to play through her brain.

“How can this be happening? Am I really losing control of everything I've worked so hard to build?” she whispered.

She felt Bret step up behind her. Felt his strong hands on her shoulders as he gently began massaging away the tension knots locked there.

“You okay, Kiddo?” he asked.

“Of course she’s okay! Nothin’ ever touches our Miss Compton. Didn’t you know that Bret *baby*?” Brandon had followed them down the hall.

He stepped around the desk, eager to confront her again. Laying his tanned and beautifully manicured hand on her sleeve, he jerked her around to face him.

“Right, Maddy? You’re never gonna let a little thing like a personal relationship with your Mama, or *me*, come between you and your business. Right?”

That did it. He’d just over-played the hand. Maddy’s eyes traveled across the receptionist’s desk, along the hallway and into her own office. Behind her highly polished antique mahogany desk her gaze came to rest on the file cabinet with its still open drawers—the drawers Brandon had jimmied to gain access to her private files.

At that moment, with her mother’s voice echoing in her ears, first from her dream, now from the phone, Maddy realized, if she didn’t want to lose control completely, she was going to have to take control. Quickly.

Two things needed to be dealt with ASAP.

First: Brandon Williams! *He broke into my office this morning*, she thought, certain she’d locked the file cabinet and her door

before leaving yesterday. Plus, he had just gone way over the line with his verbal attack. An attempt to cover his duplicity would be her guess. She'd deal with that right now!

Second: Mama was back! But there was no way of contacting her. Maddy had no address, no phone number and no real desire to search out either. I'll deal with that if and when it became a bona fide problem.

First things first.

"Bret, I'm fine. Thanks. I just need to talk with Brandon for a few minutes. Privately. Then I'd like the three of us to meet in R&D for few minutes, before the office opens."

Touching Bret's sleeve as she spoke, she looked directly into his eyes. She wanted him to know she deeply appreciated his support and concern. She also wanted him to understand that she'd handle this mess, as she handled everything about their business, professionally and with respect for their employees. Even when the employee didn't deserve it. Brandon had just given up his right to be respected as far as she was concerned.

"Brandon. R and D. Now."

She turned on her heel and marched across the reception area toward the back offices.

Half-way down the hall, sensing the true degree of his anger, realizing he would refuse to follow her without further argument, she walked back to where he stood, hooked her arm though his and smiled sweetly up at him.

“We need to talk.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right,” he agreed, now moving with her toward the Research and Development department.



8:15 AM

As Maddy and Brandon walked away from him arm-in-arm, Bret swore under his breath and turned toward his own office. "Okay. That went well," he sighed.

Suddenly he had an urgent need for coffee. Strong and black. Usually someone else started a pot in the break room long before he got to the office. Not this morning.

"Oh what the hell, I can make coffee in an emergency." He swung around and headed for the coffee maker. "This should qualify as an emergency."

It took a few minutes to find filters. He was just measuring out the first scoop of grounds when he heard Maddy's scream. Coffee grounds flew across the counter and covered half the floor as Bret dropped the canister and dashed for the hall.

"If that no good.... If he touched her, I'll kill him. I swear. I'll kill him."

The lights were off in the back offices, the hallway dark. Light poured out of the R&D department doorway and with it the sound of Maddy crying. Bret could see Williams bent over what appeared to be someone lying on the floor under one of the drafting tables.

“Maddy! Maddy what’s wrong? Did he hurt you? Brandon, you son of a....” Bret hauled Williams upright by the lapels of his jacket and drew back a huge fist.

“Bret! Stop! He didn’t do it. Mick was already dead when we came in!”

“Wha.. Mick...? Evans is dead?”

Bret let go of Brandon’s shirt. Williams slipped to the floor beside the body of the newest MCD employee, crawled a few feet away and appeared to be fighting the urge to retch up his breakfast.

Bret knelt to examine the body. Mick Evans lay on the floor, feet and legs under his drafting table, surrounded with blood and drawing materials. A foot long pair of paper shears protruded from his jugular. He was dead, without a doubt. And since the blood was still a rich sticky red, Bret assumed he hadn’t been dead long.

“Maddy! What happened here?”

“I don’t know! I don’t... He was like that when Brandon and I came in. I guess he must’ve come in the back door while we were in my office. His car wasn’t in the side lot when we got here this morning.”

Bret moved to her side and slipped an arm around her waist to support her. He could feel the cold chill of her body through her suit jacket and she was beginning to shake like a leaf.

This wasn't the first time Bret Rainier had looked on violent death. But he left the Denver PD ten years ago hoping he'd never have to look at it again. The last place he'd ever expected to see it was in the offices of Madison Compton Design. Violent death didn't happen in sleepy little California college towns. And it sure as hell didn't happen right under his nose with no warning. "What the devil is going on here," he wondered.

"Kiddo, we need to call the cops now."

"NO. WAIT!" Brandon reared back on his haunches and made a grab for Bret's arm. "No cops. Not yet!"

"Whadaya mean NO cops?" Bret swung away from Brandon's grasp. "Man, have you lost your mind? You KNOW we've got to call them. And fast."

"Maddy... Maddy was holding the scissors, Rainier. Her prints will be all over 'em."

"Maddy? Did you touch the scissors just now? Maddy...did you?"

Eyes glazed over, and still trembling, Maddy looked up at Bret and nodded.

“Oh hell. Why? Why’d you put your hands on ‘em? They’re a murder weapon kid? What were you thinking?”

“I...he... he was hurt. Bleeding. ...so much blood. I thought... thought I could help him. Save him. It was knee-jerk, Bret. Honest. I thought he was still alive. When I heard the back door close I knew he’d only been there for seconds. I couldn’t pull the scissors out Bret. They’re in too deep.”

“Whoa... Hold on a minute. Are you telling me there was somebody in here? Going out that back door? When you walked in?” Bret took her face in his hands and willed her to think clearly. “Listen to me Maddy. If someone left this room as you came in, if Mick was still bleeding, you may have scared off whoever killed him. We’ve got to get the police here now. Maybe they can catch the killer before he goes to ground.”

“You listen to me, Rainier!” Brandon was back on his feet and Bret could tell by the returning strength in his voice, he was ready to do battle again. “If the cops come in here and find Maddy’s fingerprints all over the murder weapon they’ll toss her in the can so fast it’ll make your head swim. They’re not gonna see her as the sweet innocent little angel you see. They’re gonna see a handy murder suspect. What do you think that’ll say to our clients when they pick up tomorrow’s Tribune? I can see the headlines now. ‘Madison Compton Held For Murder’. What do you think that’ll do to her reputation? To her? To our business?”

Bret's fist came down hard on the nearest desk top. "What makes you think the police won't be taking a look at everyone in the building, including you, smart guy? This isn't about losing reputations or business. A man's dead here, or hadn't you noticed?"

"Bret's right. I'm calling nine-one-one." Maddy reached for the phone on Mick's desk and dialed.



9:45 AM

Maddy sat at her desk, spinning an expensive antique Mont Blanc fountain pen, like a top—around and around and around on the blotter.

Brandon Williams paced the floor of her office. Door to window and back—door to window and back again. Head down, hands jammed in his jacket pockets, he was fuming as he paced.

Bret Rainier perched on the corner of Maddy's cadenza, denim clad legs extended, ankles crossed, silently supporting her, but not touching her. Each of them ignoring the others, lost in their own thoughts, they waited for the Detectives from the San Luis Obispo PD to finish their grisly business and return to question them again.

It had taken less than five minutes from the time Maddy picked up the phone till there were three black and whites, a couple of unmarked Sheriff's cars and a crime scene van surrounding the MCD building and parking lot. Red and blue car top lights still flashed reflections through the office window, reminding Bret of other crime scenes, long ago, far away. Detectives and uniformed officers had pounded down the hall to the R&D Department, secured both doors and hustled the three of them in to Maddy's office. There was a uniformed officer guarding that door now, Bret knew. Nobody would be going anywhere anytime soon.

It was amazing to him how easily all the old thought patterns, old training, old police procedures had slipped back into place. From the moment Detective Jorge Ramirez walked into R&D Department of MCD and squatted down by Mick's body, Bret's mind had been going over details. It was almost as if he was reading Ramirez' mind; secure the scene, preserve the evidence, seclude the suspects. Nobody leaves the premises. Nobody enters the Research and Development Department offices except authorized crime scene personnel. Call the county coroner, get the ME on site ASAP. Interrogate the suspects.

Interrogate the suspects.... "Maddy? Honey, you don' better now?" Bret put a hand out, swinging her desk chair to face him. "Are you feeling well enough to talk about what just happened back there?"

When she raised those smoky blue eyes to his face his heart ached for her and the pain he read in them. He'd been thinking she was hanging on by a thread this morning as they crossed the parking lot together, although he wasn't exactly sure why. And now this. She was strong and resilient, he knew. Determination had always been one of the things he admired most about her. Determination and...tenacity, he supposed. She'd hung in when other women would have hung it up. She'd turned a run of crappy luck, starting when she was just a kid, into a pretty damn good life. And, she'd done it without a whole lot of help. He wondered how much more could she take? "I guess we're about to find out." He thought.

“It’s not going to matter much how I’m feeling, is it Bret? Detective Ramirez is going to be back in here in a few minutes and I’m going to have to talk about it. We’re all going to have to talk about it.”

Fixing her gaze on the framed diplomas she’d worked so hard to earn, avoiding Bret’s probing gaze, Maddy spun the chair back toward her desk. It was just too hard to look into his eyes right now. Because she knew what he’d been thinking, been reliving.

Bret had applied for a job during her first week of interviews, during the first week of Madison Compton Design’s existence. He’d come into her brand new office space carrying his brand new resume and practically begged her to take him on.

“I saw your ad on the campus bulletin board,” he told her. “We’re in the same marketing class. I don’t suppose you’ve noticed. But I was really impressed with your report for Professor Torkelson on establishing a business model.”

She’d noticed alright. It simply hadn’t occurred to her to introduce herself to the big quiet guy who was obviously older than most of her classmates. Her plans for the future didn’t include getting to know good looking men from her classes. But here he was, offering her his resume as if it were a dozen roses.

'How lucky can you get Maddy', she thought.

She was nineteen, a student, starting a business with financial help from her foster parents. In truth she was scared to death and doggedly determined to succeed by doing the only thing she'd ever really loved doing.

He was twenty-six, handsome, strong, gentle, and one of the kindest people she ever met. He was only a few months away from a Denver rehabilitation hospital. He'd been there for nearly a year recovering from a gun shot wound the doctors originally thought might leave him paralyzed from the waist down. He was healed up enough to walk again, to relocate to California, to attend classes. But not healed up enough to pick up a badge and gun. He was looking for a job that would start him on a new path, a path that didn't require carrying a badge or a gun.

They'd hit it off in the first five minutes and worked together ever since. They were as close as two people could get without being lovers. They were partners. They both liked it that way.

Bret Rainier was the one and only person Maddy had ever been completely honest with about her childhood. Early in their relationship she told him everything—about the abuse, Mama's drinking, Mama's men, and finally about Mama leaving. He was the only person she ever attempted to describe her goals and dreams for. He was the only person she ever told the real reasons behind her ambitions. And he understood! Not just understood,

but encouraged her, supported her, as she worked toward making those dreams come true.

In return, Maddy made sure she was available to listen as Bret worked his way through the transition from cop to art director, administrative assistant, and finally Vice President of MCD. He was part tough guy, part teddy bear and the transition hadn't been all that easy for him.

Now he was sitting right behind her looking and thinking like a cop. She could tell by the cold expression in his eyes. She knew him well enough to know he'd pick at any loose ends, unravel all the details, keep at it until he made sense of what happened back there this morning. She trusted him to protect their business and both their lives from what this horrible act of violence could potentially do to them.

Brandon stopped pacing and spun to face them. "We need to get our stories straight before they come back in here then. Don't we?" he snapped.

"Get our stories straight, Brandon? What exactly is that supposed to mean?" Bret was up and across the room to within an inch of the other man's face in a heartbeat. "We have no stories to get straight! We have the truth! The truth is all we have. And the truth is all we're going to need. You got that?"

Even at five foot eleven inches tall Brandon Williams had to look up slightly to confront the taller Rainier. Bret knew Williams felt superior to him in every other way imaginable, even with the slight height disadvantage. Since his first day at Madison Compton Design two years ago, Williams had worked to make sure his very presence was intimidating to the older man. After Maddy told him she and Bret were close friends as well as partners, Williams began making moves designed to seduce Maddy away from Bret. To Bret's enduring surprise it never happened. True, she'd invited Williams to her home for dinner a few times. They saw a couple of plays and a ball game together. But that was as far as it went. Much to Bret's delight, Maddy never really took Brandon seriously on a personal level.

Williams knew she checked him out thoroughly with this former employer in LA before she hired him. He also knew she would be unable to check the Kansas City industrial design company listed on his resume. They were no longer in business. He felt sure she respected him on a professional level or he would never have been promoted to chief financial officer (comptroller was the title he preferred) after less than a year on the job. But somehow he just couldn't crack that prickly facade she kept in place with every man around her, except Rainier.

Over the past few weeks he sensed Bret and Maddy working to build a case for firing him over the recent batch of cost over-runs. He'd be damned if he was going to let that happen, just as things

were beginning to really fall into place for him. He needed Madison Compton Design and the very convenient cover it provided for another six months at least. He didn't need cops!

"These hick cops are going to try pinning a homicide on one of us, Bret, *baby*. Or didn't you get that when Ramirez was in here before?" Brandon leaned in a little, pressing his nose up closer to Bret's face and snarling, "Maybe the truth will set you free, buddy, but it just might get your little Miss Maddy here some time on death row. You weren't in that room. I was!"

Maddy's mouth dropped open in amazement. She blinked at him in disbelief.

Bret's fists clenched. Unclenched. Clenched again. He desperately wanted to give in to an overwhelming urge to break Brandon baby's perfectly tanned and probably surgically sculpted nose. Before he could make his move the door opened and Detective Ramirez literally marched across the office. He was followed closely by the uniformed officer who had been guarding their door.

"And while you were in that room, Mr. Williams, what exactly did you see that would lead you to believe Ms. Compton is responsible for Mr. Evans death?"



9:55 AM

The phone on the front desk rang, shattering the resounding silence Ramirez' question had produced. One ring...two. Ramirez motioned toward the phone. The uniform started down the hall to the reception desk. Three rings... four.

"We can't take your call right now. This is Madison Compton Design. Speak at the beep and we'll get back to you in a few."

"Maddy! Maddy, it's Mama. If you're there pick up! Maddy... Where are you? I came by your office this morning. It was all locked up... I have to talk to you. Something has happened...." The machine clicked off.

"Did you speak with your mother this morning Ms. Compton?" Detective Ramirez asked. "Was she here before or after Mr. Evans death?"

"No... No!" Maddy's eyes were huge. Terrified, Ramirez thought. "I haven't seen or spoken to my mother in over seventeen years. So far as I know she's still in a mental health facility in the suburbs of Denver." Maddy said, making finger "quotes" in the air around the words mental health facility.

The jangle of the phone caused everyone to jump. This time Ramirez immediately motioned his officer toward the desk. "Let

the answering machine get it, but if it's the same woman, pick up.” He ordered.

The caller was a woman. Not the same woman.

“Alistair McLean’s office calling to confirm his eleven o’clock with Ms. Compton.” A very efficient sounding female voice said. “Please confirm before ten-thirty. I have tried several times this morning to call both Mr. Williams and Ms. Compton without success. If we don’t hear from you by ten-thirty we’ll assume the office is indeed closed today and you may reschedule the meeting at Mr. McLean’s convenience, through his attorneys, Tanner and McCrea.” She hung up.

“Why not?” Maddy muttered. “Everything might as well turn to crap today.” She was distraught enough to miss the eyebrow Ramirez raised.

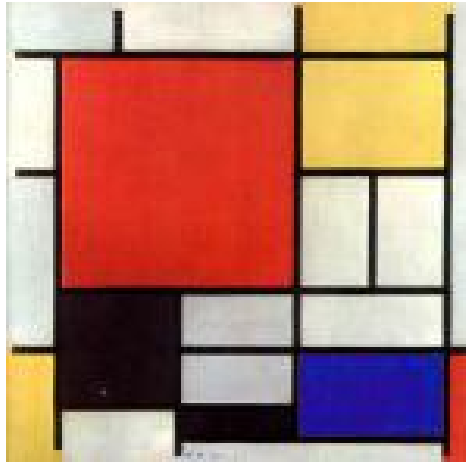
Bret didn’t miss it. And as far as he could tell Ramirez was thinking along pretty much the same lines he had been thinking himself.

“How could somebody who'd just shoved a twelve inch pair of paper shears into a man’s juggler be genuinely concerned by an over-efficient secretary’s over-efficiency?”

“Alright then. Mr. Williams, you were about to explain to me what you heard or observed that caused you to conclude Ms. Compton might be responsible for the murder of Mick Evans.”

Color drained from Brandon’s handsome face, leaving his tan a sickly greenish tone. He opened his mouth a couple of times, reminding the Detective of a fish drinking air, and said, “Er... I...er -ah... didn’t exactly see or hear anything Mr. Ramirez. I walked into the back office a minute or two behind Maddy. She asked me to stop in my office and pick up some reports for her. I heard her scream. When I ran into the back office she was bending over Mick. She had her hands on a huge pair of scissors that were sticking in Mick’s neck. She was crying.”





7:15 PM

Maddy was on the verge of crying again. Everything about the day had been at once frustrating and terrifying.

Mick Evans was dead!

She was suspected of his murder.

So were two of the top people in her firm. Those two people, both of whom she cared for deeply, were circling each other like a couple of strange tomcats, ready to rip each other's throats out.

Her newest client was making law-suit noises.

And Mama was back.

Detective Ramirez had finally released all three of them about 4:30, after questioning them-- collectively, then individually, and collectively again--for hours. At last warning them to “stay available.”

After their release, Maddy had dashed to catch up to Bret as he strode across the parking lot toward his Jag. She wanted to hear his take on everything that went on back there. But when she touched his shoulder and started to speak there had been an ever so slight shake of the head. He turned with a warning in his eyes, wrapped her in a bear-hug, whispered “not now Kiddo” in her ear, climbed in the Jag and drove away.

Thirty seconds later Brandon Williams was headed her way. She could tell from his expression he wasn't yet finished telling her what he thought she should do. Before he could catch up to her, before he got the change to start with her, Maddy unlocked her baby, a red '89 Corvette convertible, climbed in, peeled out of the parking lot and sped away. She watched him in the rear-view mirror, sprinting toward his Beemer. For maybe a second she wondered if he was going to try and follow her. Thankfully his car didn't move. She made a right onto the highway. A few miles west she took the Laurel Lane exit, heading home.

Home was a beloved 1940's Craftsman style cottage. A wide covered porch greeted her arrival facing south toward the street, complete with two inviting swings for relaxing on mild evenings.

Maddy swung the vet into the driveway and pulled to the back of the property. The garage wing, deliberately tucked away at the back of the lot, offered passersby a view of windows rather than garage doors. Shutters and lintels decorated the windows. Just a little, fool the eye enhancement, to make the cottage look more spacious than its neighbors. The second floor dormer featured a half-moon window Maddy had designed to replace the original mullions. Maddy's bedroom and bath took up a large portion of the main floor. The remaining space was divided between the great room, Maddy's kitchen and a cozy breakfast nook. Two bedrooms and a bath occupied the second floor. She used the smaller of the bedroom for storage. The larger room housed the occasional guests. But guests came infrequently and her studio occupied most of the room where large windows offered clear north light, perfect for any artist. It was, in fact, small—a for real cottage. But it was home and perfect for her. She scrimped and saved to buy it when she arrived in California and enrolled in Cal Poly. With help from the couple who'd raised her from the age of twelve, closing the purchase was one the proudest moments in her life to that point. Three years later she'd repaid her foster parents loan, with interest. Maddy loved her home almost as much as she loved her work.

Now, early Tuesday evening, she was curled up on the end of the sofa in front of the fireplace; legs wrapped in a soft cashmere throw, nursing a tall gin and tonic and fighting back tears. A gentle Mozart piano concerto filled the room. Normally she spent

about half an hour here after work, unwinding from the day, and going over its demands and victories, speculating about tomorrow's challenges. But tonight her head was pounding like a rock band on crack and her thoughts were racing. Today had been demanding, no doubt about it. As far as Maddy could see right now there had be no victories. As for tomorrow...who knew?

Her eyes strayed to the Mondrian hanging over the mantel—the bright geometric shapes taking her mind down a different path altogether. At twenty-three, soon after graduation, a cheap department store print occupied the space over her mantel. Tonight it was the real deal. It had always remained the same picture, same artist, same vibrant squares of color. She'd known since high school what she eventually wanted hanging above her mantel. It took a few years to get the mantel, and a few more to fill the space above it with a work of art instead of a poster. That was okay too. She appreciated the painting all the more because of the work she'd done to earn it.

Maddy's personal style had been described as eclectic. A pair of wing-back chairs, upholstered in rich burgundy leather, flanked the fireplace. Simple oak end-tables, bearing antique Mission style lamps by Tiffany and Company guarded the sofa. She anchored the area with a custom-made area rug, woven in soft cream, rose and sage green to mimic the lamp's geometric pattern. It held together beautifully, forming a comfortable and inviting space. A carpenter had been hired to shelve the opposite end of the room

from floor to ceiling. When the space met her specifications she lined it with books. Her desk and home office took up the window wall of her miniature library, providing a view of the garden as she worked. It was a charming cozy room in Maddy's eyes. Most of her friends agreed. They came begging for her help with decorating their own homes using her obvious artistic flare.

A little over a year ago, after Brandon Williams had worked at MCD for about six months, she invited him and Bret by for a drink after a particularly taxing day. Bret graciously excused himself, pleading another commitment. Brandon jumped at the chance to share a drink with her in her private and personal surroundings. She was actually a bit leery of being alone with him, but couldn't figure out how to gracefully back out once the invitation had been issued. She was pretty sure it was going to be a mistake.

After he took one step into her living room, put his hands over his eyes and demanded, "My God, woman! Who pairs an original Mondrian with a bunch of old junk? What were you thinking?" She knew it was a mistake. A huge mistake.

"I should have thrown him out right then and there." Maddy fumed.

Looking back on it now she realized that for several months after Brandon joined the staff at MCD he'd charmed his way through their ranks. He dated Jane, her twenty-two year old customer liaison / receptionist, a couple of times. He then moved on to

Bret's private secretary, Linda. Always smooth, polished, even elegant, he worked his way toward conquering the boss. Maddy instinctively recognized what he was up to. Where he was heading. So it wasn't a surprise when one evening just before Thanksgiving last year he asked her out.

"Want to grab some dinner and catch that new chick flick playing at the Tower, Maddy?" he asked.

She was just gathering up some paperwork, planning to look it over when she got home. She's put in a long, tiring day. They'd all worked late. She knew she needed to pick up a few things on the way home if she wanted to eat supper. She was right in the middle of wooing the McLean and Co. rep. A project that wasn't going so well. Dinner and a movie sounded pretty darn good right then..

"Sure. Why not?" *I can handle you, buddy-boy. You're not as slick as you think you are*, she thought. "Just let me grab my coat and I'll be right with you."

He took her to Rosario's, a little Italian hole-in-the wall not far from the office; then to the Tower cineplex . They watched the latest Hollywood heart-throb, whose name escaped her at the moment, swash buckle his way through a poorly written B movie. Definitely a chick flick—the most recent in a series of adventures featuring the actor's charisma more than his talent, she had been able to lose herself in the action and forget work for most of the 90 minutes. All in all she'd dubbed the evening okay. Not a complete

waste of time. Afterward Brandon dropped her back by the office. He waited in the lot as she dug for keys, unlocked her Vet and settled behind the wheel. Then he raised his hand in salute, swung his car around and drove off, leaving her sitting there alone. Whatever she'd expected from the evening...that hadn't been it.

A couple of months later she found herself alone in the office after everyone else left for the day. It was close to Christmas. The evenings were short, the nights long, the weather cold, even by California standards. The McLean contract was ready for presentation. Brandon, as CFO, had approved the figures and met with Alistair McLean and his money people to finalize the deal. Things were looking good. When this project was in the bag MCD would be richer by a net of about three-quarters of a mil. A nice tidy profit for the company. If everything went as planned, they would not only make money next year, but be able to offer some impressive bonuses to every member of the project team, including Brandon Williams.

Her office door was open a crack, allowing a thin shaft of light to penetrate the darkness of the hallway. Being alone in the office at night never bothered Maddy. She was as comfortable and secure in her work place as she was in her home. She's stopped being afraid of the dark before she was five. There were a great many things more frightening in the day light, than there ever were at night Maddy knew. Mama usually slept at night.

Even so, the sound of a key in the side door startled her. She called out, “Hey you! Didn’t expect you back here tonight. I thought you were headed for LA?” When Bret didn’t answer her, there was a moment’s apprehension. “Bret?”

She slipped into the hall and reached inside Bret’s office door. She threw the switch, turning on the overhead lights. Temporarily blinded, Brandon had thrown up a hand to shield his eyes from the glare and blinked at her like a big owl. “Maddy! I didn’t know you were in here!”

“I gathered that.” *This isn’t right* she thought. “I didn’t know you had a key to this side of the building, Brandon.”

Keys to the administrative side of the building were not issued to just anyone. They had remodeled the office when MCD was incorporated and Bret became VP, dividing the original suite of rooms into two distinct spaces. They hired a contractor to come in, knock out a couple of walls, build Bret an office, enlarge Maddy’s office, add windows overlooking the landscaped green space beside the parking lot, and put in a bathroom. This side of the building they laughingly referred to as the “executive suites”. The entrance from the main hall was keyed to match the side door. They even installed an alarm system. Employees were given keys to the front and back doors, allowing them access to reception, Production, the entire Research and Development area, the Library and break room at any time. After hours the hallway door

to this side of the building was closed and locked. Employees were not given keys to the “executive suites”. So what the hell was Brandon Williams doing standing here in Bret’s office, blinking like a blinded owl?

“Oh... ah... Bret had a key made for me the other day, Maddy. I thought you Okay-ed it.” His eyes were beginning to adjust to the light and he dropped the shielding hand. He still looked extremely uncomfortable at finding her there.

“What were you looking for in Bret’s office?” Maddy asked.

“Oh, just some projections for the McLean deal. Hey! Have you had dinner? How about we try that little French place over near the campus? My treat. I’m starved.”

“Umm... not tonight, Brandon. I’m beat and I still have some more work to do on the figures for Stoddard and Sons before we meet with them Wednesday morning.”

“Well, Okay then. See ya in the morning.” and stepping around her Brandon exited the office, going out the way he came in, through the side door; leaving her with her mind racing and her skin crawling.

Melting ice clinked in her drink like a tiny alarm bell, jarring her out of her reverie. Bringing her thoughts back to the present and the events of the awful day just past—a day that Brandon

Williams had made even worse with his belligerence and his accusations.

As she leaned over to poke at the embers gathering in the fireplace she spoke to the room at large. *"Yep. Should have thrown his behind out right then and there."*



Bret Rainier sat in his driveway; forehead rested against the steering wheel of his prized red Jag KXE. Exhausted. Leaning back, he drew in several deep cleansing breaths.

"What a day!" He moaned. "Everything that could go to hell... went."

Pulling the keys out of the ignition, he opened the car door. Just as he started to step out and head for the house and a good stiff drink his cell phone rang. He yanked it out of his jacket pocket, looked at caller ID and swore.

"Yeah....what now?"

Ramirez had more questions. The last thing Bret wanted to deal with tonight. The voice on the other end spoke for a full three minutes then the line went dead.

"Crap!" Bret slammed the car door, jammed the key back in the ignition and kicked the Jag into a rubber burning reverse.

As the Jag sped away, a plain-clothes police officer in an unmarked vehicle pulled away from the curb half a block back and fell in behind him. "Let's see what this is all about." The cop said to his partner.



Brandon Williams watched Bret speed away, reached for his own keys, still hanging in the ignition, then ducked back into the shadows as the two plain-clothes cops pulled around his parked van and fell in behind Rainier.

"Well, well, well... looks like Bret baby's got himself a tail. Thanks Ramirez. Couldn't have planned it better myself."

With that he reached into the glove box, rummaged around for a small flashlight, pocketed his keys, grabbed a black jacket from the back seat and started across the street toward Bret's driveway. Carefully watching for cars or passers-by, he slipped up on the porch. Taking a couple of small flat picks from the brim of his cap, he let himself quickly into Bret's front door.

Stopping a minute he allowed his eyes to adjust to the dim light in the living room. As his eyes became accustomed to gloom he tried to picture the layout of the house. He'd been here once or twice in his first weeks on the job. He and Rainier hit it off pretty easily at first. Just a couple of bachelors, getting together after work for a

beer. After he moved on Bret's precious Miss Maddy things had cooled off real fast.

"Dumb ass! Thinks she's all sweetness and light. He'll find out soon enough what the illustrious Miss Compton is really all about. Then, we'll see what we'll see." He turned left toward the door to Bret's home office. Swearing viciously when he found that door locked too, he simply used the picks again to gain entry.



9:45 PM

Deedle...eedle...eedle...dah.

Electronic strains of Pachabel's Canon in D echoing from her cell phone on the tabletop woke Maddy with a start.

Her arm was asleep.

The weave pattern of the throw was impressed into her wrist and cheek. She glanced at the clock in the breakfast nook, visible from her sofa corner. Nine forty-five! She'd been asleep for hours. Nearly knocking over the now watered down glass of gin and tonic, she snatched up the phone.

SLOPD the readout told her. "Hello...."

"Miss. Compton? This is Detective Ramirez with the San Luis Police Department." He sounded exhausted, his voice hoarse and raspy. If he hadn't identified himself she wouldn't have recognized it.

"Yes, Detective. What is it? Did you find out what happened to Mick?"

"No. I'm sorry Miss Compton. I'm calling about another matter. Your mother, Miss Compton. There's been another... ah... I'm

sending some police officers to...ahhh....pick you up. Someone's broken into your office building. There's been another death."

A dozen different questions shot through Maddy's mind at once. Her mother? A break in at the office? Another death? Before she could ask any of them Ramirez was speaking again.

"Can you be ready in five minutes Ms. Compton? My officers' ETA is twenty-one fifty. I'll speak with you in a few minutes." He hung up.

"This is insane!" Maddy launched herself from her nest on the sofa and tore down the hall to the bath, stripping off sweats as she ran.

"Two deaths in one day! In my office! This can't be happening!"

She splashed cold water over her face. Rubbed it dry with her sweatshirt on the way to the closet. Yanking a pair of jeans off the shelf, hopping across the floor with one leg in the jeans, she caught her reflection in the closet mirror. Was it really only this morning that her biggest worry had been not facing her inner child?

"This can't be happening." she repeated as she snatched up sweater and socks from a drawer.

The doorbell rang as she was tying her sneakers. Or trying to tie them. Her hands were shaking so badly she wasn't having much

luck. Purse, cell, keys. “Yeah... yeah. I’ll be right there.” She yelled, dashing down the hall toward the door.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when her cell rang again.

Deedle...eedle. She flipped it open, saw Bret’s ID, and reached for the door knob at the same time.

“Maddy! Maddy, don’t let anyone in. NOT ANYONE.”

“Bret! Thank goodness its you. Ramirez just called. Someone else has been killed at the office! He’s sending a car for me. I’ll...”

“NO! Maddy, I’ve got to talk to you. Nothing happened at the office. I just left there. I’m right down the street. Don’t let anyone in. I’ll be there in seconds.”

The phone went silent.

Maddy turned the knob and opened the door.

“Miss Compton? I’m Officer Monroe. This is my partner Officer Sanders. Are you ready to accompany us to the police station?”

“The police station? I thought you were taking me to my office. Detective Ramirez said...”

The woman identified as Sanders, a burly bleached blond, about twice Maddy's size, took a step toward the door. She reached through the narrow opening and firmly grabbed Maddy’s wrist.

Monroe, a tall guy, with closely cropped, kinky hair and huge feet stuck one of those feet inside the door and shoved. Just as he put his shoulder into the door, braced to push it back again, Maddy heard Bret's Jag scream around the corner into Laurel, horn blaring.

Monroe cursed, Sanders clamped down hard, and both of them shoved Maddy backward into her living room. She saw Bret leap out of the Jag. Heard him pound up the walk. Felt him hit the door. She instantly knew if he hit Monroe now, her beautiful Tiffany lamps were goners.

"Where did that come from? People are getting dead and I'm worried about a couple of old lamps?"

She grasped the handle of her purse, wrapped it around her wrist and swung it as hard as she could at the head of the woman calling herself Officer Sanders. It connected with the side of Sanders jaw. If nothing else, it got her undivided attention for a moment. Just long enough for Bret to grab Sanders wrist and twist it up between her shoulder blades. She was immediately dancing on tip-toe and grimacing in pain.

Officer Monroe beat it. Out the door. Down the walk. Over the hood of the Jag and into the neighbor's backyard.

Maddy watched, dumbfounded, as Bret hauled the female into the lighted living room, flipped out his cell phone one-handed, hit

speed dial and yelled. “Ramirez! Get the hell over to 2707 Laurel now! I’ve got the woman. Evans just hopped a fence and is headed west toward the campus.”



While Maddy and Bret waited for Ramirez to show, Brandon rifled through Bret’s house and garage. He was being none to careful about leaving things neat and tidy. Pulling books off shelves, upending desk and file drawers, he tore folders from banker’s boxes and created paper chaos in general. True, he was looking for specific papers. Since he was now certain those papers weren’t in the firm’s offices, he guessed they had to be here. In a way he was sorry for the mess. But deep down inside him was a bitter, jealous little imp who was really getting a kick out of trashing Rainier’s place even a little bit. Truthfully, he sort of wished it was Rainer’s face!

“It’s not here!” Brandon spoke into his cell phone, more than an hour later. “I’ve been through every drawer, file, closet, nook and cranny in the whole damn house. I even checked the freezer. I’m telling you it’s not here!”

He listened to the phone for several minutes; the muscle’s working in his jaw. “Yeah... right! That’s great. Just great.” He jabbed the OFF button and shoved the cell back into his jacket pocket.

“How ‘bout you find it then hot shot?”

He stomped to the door, stepping through it to the porch, yanking off thin surgical gloves as he went. Taking a kick at a potted plant on his way across the porch to the driveway, he spotted the black tire marks on the concrete. They were left there, he knew, by Bret's Jag peeling out of the drive earlier in the evening. As Brandon rounded the corner of the garage, a light suddenly clicked on in his head.

"Wait a minute! Wait just a damn minute." He pulled the cell back out of his pocket and hit redial. "Did you toss the car? Well why not? That's where it's got to be. If it's not at the office and it's not in the house or the garage, then it's damn well got to be in that fancy car he's so crazy about. Get on it! I'll meet you in twenty." He jabbed OFF again and headed for the van.



11:30PM

As the hour approached midnight Maddy realized she was beyond exhausted.

She and Bret had followed Ramirez to the Police Station, waited while he booked the woman, Sanders, into holding. They paced the hall while the Detective spent another thirty minutes making phone calls inside his glass enclosed office. As he stood and motioned for them to enter the room she thought, “Now, maybe I’ll get some answers.”

Bret steered her around him, holding the door for her. He put his hand on the small of her back and rubbed gently, guiding her to one of the two visitor chairs in front of the Detective’s desk.

“Have a seat Ms. Compton. Bret.” Ramirez tapped the front edge of his desk with a black BIC. “I’m sorry to keep you waiting. It took longer to get data from the Lakewood PD than I expected. I forgot about the time difference. It’s one o’clock in the morning in Colorado. The desk Sergeant didn’t want to put me through to his commander this time of night. Can’t say as I blame him.”

Maddy picked up on “Lakewood PD” quickly enough. As questions began formulating in her brain, Ramirez spoke again.

“Coffee anyone?” Both Maddy and Bret shook their heads. “Well then, here’s what we’ve got. Ms. Compton, were you acquainted with the man who was killed in your office today before you hired him to be a part of your Research and Development staff a few months ago?”

“No! I never met Mick before he applied for the position. It was a new title we were creating to shore up the department. We usually promote from within. Why?”

“Ms. Compton, the man who was murdered in your office today, the man you knew as Mick Evans, was in fact Michael Vandiver. He was the youngest son of Harry Vandiver, the man your mother married in 1983. You were about nine at the time of their marriage, is that correct?”

Bret rubbed his hand up and down the denim on her thigh. “Take it easy Kiddo. It’s okay. We’ll work this out. Get to the bottom of it. Just don’t lose it on me now.”

Maddy stared at him with the blank, wide-eyed terror he’d come to associate with victims. It had been years, but he’d seen that look often enough to know what it meant. He grabbed the back of her neck and shoved her head between her knees, all the time soothing in a soft sing-song. “Easy, Maddy. Easy, baby.”

It took a few minutes, but she could finally breathe again. Maddy straightened in her chair and looked first at Bret – then at Ramirez. “You knew.”

It wasn’t a question. “You both knew Mick Evans was somehow associated with my past and you didn’t say a word about it all day.”

“Ms. Compton. I wasn’t absolutely certain until just a few minutes ago.” Ramirez’ gaze shifted to Bret, and his eyes seemed to harden. “Bret brought some papers to me at about seventeen hundred hours this afternoon. He suggested I read through them and then contact the Lakewood PD to verify. The man posing as Mick Evans, who we now know was Michael Vandiver and his older brother have both been living in the San Luis Obispo area for a few years now. They moved here after their father, Harry Vandiver, was killed in 1989. According to the Lakewood PD, they sold all real estate holdings, quite a few stocks and bonds, several vehicles and some jewelry they inherited, to finance their move. Normal enough in and of itself I suppose. What caught the attention of the Colorado authorities was the visit they paid to Evelyn Vandiver, your mother, just before they left the state. Michael Vandiver and his older brother Brad were the last people to see your mother alive, Ms. Compton. Colorado law enforcement agencies have been looking for the Vandiver brothers since April of 2001. I am sorry you had to learn of her death this way.”

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry about, Detective.” Maddy put her hand over Bret’s, whether for comfort or to stop the rhythmic friction of its motion against her jeans, he wasn’t sure. “My mother, Evelyn Compton, died in the accident that took my father away from us when I was four years old. I lost both parents on an icy mountain road when I was just a baby. I resigned myself to that fact when I was fifteen. Everything that happened after the night my father died was because my mother was dead, too. Dead inside. Can you understand that, Detective?”

“Yes. I suppose in some ways I can understand, Ms. Compton. But according to the police reports a few of the things your mother did after your father’s death were pretty gruesome. I was on the phone with a Silverthorn PD officer this evening who told me he’d seldom seen worse.”

Tears welled up in Maddy’s eyes. Bret could feel her stiffen, sense her agitation. “Ramirez, do you really think dragging all that up here will do any good?” Maddy was a child when it happened. Just a baby really.”

“There is one more thing, and this will come as a surprise to you both I’m afraid. We have information that a half-brother, Brandon Rosier, may be in this area also. He would be living and working under the alias of Brandon Vandiver, or possibly Brandon Williams.”

“Brandon Williams!” Maddy shot out of the chair. Clamping her hands on the edge of Ramirez’ desk—her voice shaking and her eyes blazing she demanded, “Are you telling us that Brandon Williams is involved in this? ...is one of my step-father’s sons? The same Brandon Williams who’s been working for our company for the past two years?”

After another half an hour of questions and clarifications, Bret took Maddy by the arm and pushed her toward the door. Turning to Ramirez he spoke with a conviction he was far from feeling, knowing full well if the cop decided to call his bluff they might very well be spending the night in custody.

“She’s had enough for one day. I’m getting her out of here now. Taking her home. You know how to reach us.”



CHAPTER TWO - WEDNESDAY

"Let me tell you this: if you meet a loner, no matter what they tell you, it's not because they enjoy solitude. It's because they have tried to blend into the world before, and people continue to disappoint them." _anonymous



12:45 AM

She was silent on the drive home. Silent but not quiet, Bret thought. He pulled the Jag into her drive, turned off the headlights, killed the engine.

"I'm not leaving you alone tonight, Kiddo. You need to sleep and if I leave you here by yourself, you're going to worry this thing around in your head all night. Got a spare pillow and a blanket for that sofa of yours?"

She just sat there. Hands folded in her lap. Eyes staring straight ahead. When he touched her arm, she flinched away.

“Maddy, listen to me. There was nothing you could do to stop what happened here today. There was nothing you could have done to stop what happened to your mother. Or to change what she did after your father died. Baby, letting this tear you apart solves nothing. Changes nothing. Please, please believe me. Don’t do this.”

He practically lifted her out of the car, gently guided her to the porch, dug her keys out of her purse and opened the door. He settled her in front of the fireplace, wrapped in her the throw and went out to lock the Jag. Before going inside he walked all the way around the house, checking doors and windows as he went. Back in the living room, squatting down next to her wing chair he said, “Okay Kiddo. One o’clock and all’s as good as it’s gonna get. Let’s put you to bed.”

“Bret...I don’t want to stay here. Not after today. Take me to your place, Bret. Let’s go to your place to sleep. Please, Bret. Please.”

“Well that’s a twist.” Not sure where the silly grin he felt spreading over his face had come from, he reached down to pull her to her feet. “It’s been awhile since a beautiful woman begged me to let her spend the night at my place. Okay babe, you’re on. Let’s go.”

“Wait just a sec while I get a couple of things. I’ll be right back.”

Showing more energy than he’s seen in hours, she dashed for the bedroom; returning in under five minutes with an even bigger purse. He could see soft white terry cloth poking out the top.

“Got your jammies, Maddy?” He teased. She’ll make it, he thought.

“Yeah, and a few other necessities, wise guy. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

As he locked her house and unlocked his Jag, the black van rolling to a stop half way down the block went almost unnoticed.



1:30 AM

Bret pulled into his driveway, hit the garage door opener and slammed hard on the brakes.

“What the bloody hell?”

Illuminated in the Jag’s headlights, the interior of his garage looked like a cyclone hit it. Worse, Bret thought, was the sight of the kitchen door hanging half off its hinges and what appeared to be a blizzard of papers spilling out onto the steps.

“Why that miserable son of a....” Slamming out of the car, he started up the driveway on a dead run. Suddenly he stopped cold and swung back to Maddy. “Call the police!” he yelled. “Dial nine one one. Tell them there’s a burglary here. And stay in the car.”

Maddy punched in the numbers. She gave the dispatcher Bret’s address, telling her there was a burglary—possibly in progress—then she followed Bret through the garage and into his kitchen. He was standing stock still just inside the door. The only light in the room came from the Jag’s still burning headlights. Maddy took two steps into the room behind him, pressed her hands to his back and whispered, “Oh Bret! Oh my God, Bret!”

They walked through his home together, turning on lights as they went. Both were staggered trying to take in the extent of the damage.

It was brutal.

Obviously whoever had gone through here wasn't just looking for something, they were making a statement. Lamps and plants were smashed, mirrors and paintings destroyed, furniture slashed open, tables overturned. In the kitchen, a six pack of Corona bottles laid bashed open on the tiled counter, necks turned lethal weapons, like something out of an old-time Western movie. Glass lay showered across the floor, sparkling like grotesque diamonds in the light.

In his home office Bret found the final insult, a half-empty Corona sat beside his computer, a stem of flowering azalea turning the beer bottle into a macabre vase.

They heard voices in the garage. "The police are here. Let's get this over with."

"Mr. Rainier? I'm officer Tovar. Will you show us where there's been damage, sir?"

Another uniformed officer jumped out of his car, cutting the lights and starting up the drive. Jorge Ramirez was right behind him.

4:20 AM

Three hours later, as Ramirez and the last of his officers walked down the drive, Bret turned to Maddy and held out his hand.

“Looks like you’ll be sleeping at your place after all, kid.”

“Make that *we’ll* be sleeping at my place, Rainier. Let’s go home. Give me your keys, I’ll drive.”

“Hah! I’m not that beat, babe. Let’s get out of here.”



4:25 PM

Maddy came to, wide awake, out of a dead sleep. Her muscles all hurt. Her mouth tasted like something had crawled inside and died. She felt apprehensive and disoriented for no reason she could think of. There was nothing of her normal warm, cozy, luxurious sense of having just spent a restful night.

Sun light poured through slits in the blinds and slashed streaks of gold across her big white bed. Somehow she knew something wasn't right here. It took a couple of seconds for her brain to register the light as coming through the east windows. Why was it slanting across her pillow, bright enough to feel as if it might scorch her eyes?

"It must be afternoon. Late afternoon?"

Rolling over to check the bedside clock, she came face to face with Bret. "Whoa! Hold on just a damn minute here!"

Her brain, now fully engaged, rewound to the picture she's gone to sleep trying to drive out of her thoughts. The picture of Mick lying dead under his drawing table. Mick, lifeless, in a pool of his own blood on the back office floor, paper shears grotesquely protruding from his throat. Then it all came rushing back. Hours of questioning by the police. Brandon acting like a complete and total ass. Bret protecting and supporting her through the whole thing.

Standing beside him in his ruined home in the hours before dawn as they were questioned by the police for the second time in twenty-four hours. His only concern throughout the whole miserable day had been for her welfare. They'd come back here to sleep because Bret's house had been obscenely and methodically trashed.

He'd offered to sleep on the sofa. He kept up the appearance of arguing about it for probably thirty seconds before they both simply collapsed on her king-size bed, and dropped immediately into exhausted sleep.

She raised up on her elbow and peered over his shoulder at the clock. It was 4:23 PM Wednesday. They'd slept for nine straight hours. As far as she could recall barely moving at all. Bret was still sleeping.

She eased off the side of the bed as quietly as she could, thinking, "let him sleep as long as he can." She was still wearing yesterday's shirt and socks. Her jeans were on the floor next to the bed. Picking them up, she tip-toed to the bathroom and silently pulled the door shut. She spent a full twenty minutes showering, shampooing, letting the soothing warmth of the water pound her neck and shoulders. Releasing tension. It was delectable. She was halfway to the bedroom closet, wearing a huge white bath-sheet, toga style, when Bret rolled over and opened his eyes.

"Ummm....Yum...Yumm. What a sight to wake up to!"

She thought his lecherous grin was just a little too self-satisfied for her taste but, in light of current circumstances, let it pass.

“How’d you sleep?” She asked, backing toward the closet, holding firmly onto the towel.

“Couldn’t say. I just died.” Everything must have come rushing back to him, as it had for Maddy. “Sorry. That was a crumby thing to say, I guess. I slept. Did you?”

“Like a rock until a little after four. When I woke up I didn’t think I could stand another minute without a shower and clean clothes. Now I want coffee. And food.”

“Yeah, me too. Can I use your shower, Kiddo?” He threw the duvet back, rolled off the bed and started across the room toward the bathroom.

Maddy gasped.

He’d slept in his jeans and socks. His shirt was thrown over a chair beside the bed. In ten years Maddy had never seen Bret without a shirt. When he turned his back toward her she saw, for the first time, the scar left by a gang-banger’s bullet. It took her breath. He’d told her about it, sure. Years ago. But seeing the horrific scar marring his broad, muscular back made it just a little too real for comfort.

“Oh. Hey, I’m sorry. Don’t usually walk around in polite company half dressed. Sucker went in the front, but it left a hole you could drive a truck through when it came out the back.”

When he reached for his shirt to cover the scar, protecting her, even in this, something broke inside her. Without thinking, she was across the room with her arms around him in a heartbeat.

“Don’t be sorry. Don’t ever be sorry with me, Rainier. Remember who you’re talking to here? We’re partners. And after yesterday I’ve got a feeling we’re gonna be partners in a hell of a lot more than designs.”

She felt his pulse quicken. Heard the sharp intake of breath.

“Maddy, don’t. Not unless you really, really mean that. I lost damn near every material thing I own last night. A man I liked and thought I knew is dead, another man I’ve worked with and called friend isn’t who I thought he was at all. My world’s a little out of kilter right now and so is yours. The one thing we can both count on here is each other. Don’t do or say anything that might rock the boat where we’re concerned. I don’t think I could take it.”

Instead of letting go, stepping back, she snuggled closer. Looking into his face, she stood on tip-toe and pressed her lips to his for a moment, then leaned back to look at him again. He still hadn’t moved. His arms hung resolutely at his sides. Fists clenched.

“Oh I mean it alright Rainier. But you’re probably right. This isn’t the best time for us to discuss expanding our options. We’ve got a few other deals on the table right now.” She stepped back away from him and when she did the towel fell around her ankles. Ignoring it completely she walked to the closet and began sliding hangers down the rod searching for a shirt and slacks.

Bret stood there, slack jawed, staring at her beautiful bare backside. Then his mouth twisted in a silent laugh. He was totally...speechless. Thunderstruck! He’d worked with her for what, ten years? Never until this minute, in words or actions had she ever indicated any interest in being anything but business associates and friends.

“Well I’ll be.... Ain’t that just a kick in the butt?” Wearing a huge, foolish grin, he headed for the shower.

“Breakfast in thirty minutes, pal. On the patio,” she fired after him as the bathroom door swung shut.



5:15 PM

Brandon Williams opened his eyes and groaned. He shrugged his head from side to side trying to twist away the crick his neck had acquired from sleeping in the front seat of the van. He rubbed his hands over what was fast becoming “designer stubble”. He was miserable. Longing for coffee, for food. He needed to pee.

His cell phone bing-a-linged. Flipping it open he checked the caller’s ID.

“Yeah.... Naw, it’s still in the garage. He parked it inside when they came over here this morning. Yes, I’m sure. I’ve been watching it all damn day.”

He listened briefly, his expression growing more furious every second. “So you’re telling me Rainier gave the whole package to Ramirez yesterday afternoon, right? Umm.... No... What you’re telling me is I’ve been sneaking around for the last eighteen hours, breaking and entering, sleeping in the damn van, begging to be picked up by the cops and the whole time Ramirez already has the goods on Vandiver. That’s what you’re telling me. Right? Well, thanks.”

He hit OFF. “Ca...rap!” He momentarily thought about hurling the phone through the windshield.

Still muttering curses, he twisted the key in the ignition, shoved the van into gear, and pulled a hard right across Laurel headed for the highway. He was royally pissed but not so irrational that he forgot to keep an eye on the speedometer. What he didn't need right now was some local hot-shot cop pulling him over for speeding. He'd been told the van was clean, but then he'd been told the evidence packet on the Vandiver brothers was still in Rainier's office. No...his house. No...his car. So much for the intel he was being given.

"Crap!" he spat again.

After spending a miserable night watching the car, Brandon was beginning to think somebody didn't have a clue. Somebody was balling this up big time, he was sure. Especially after *somebody* ordered that grab on Compton.

"What a fiasco that turned out to be. He's got me running around making like Mr. Secret Agent Man. If he only knew the whole story."

Brandon flipped open his phone and punched in a number. "Yeah. Thought I should check in before you left for the day. What's new?" He listened in silence. "You're kidding! Then I've gotta get to Denver. Tonight."



6:26 PM

Bret sat in the lingering twilight watching the smoke from Maddy's cigarette curl away from the flickering candle flames. They'd just polished off what he thought was probably the best omelet ever. Served it up with toasted English muffins and real butter it was a testament to Maddy's skill in the kitchen and came as something of a surprise to the man who knew more about her skill in the boardroom than in the kitchen. Along with the omelet they'd gone through a pot of excellent coffee, a bottle of white zin and bowls of fresh strawberries buried in whipping cream. He was a happy man.

"Why do you smoke those things?" He wondered aloud.

"Because I can,"

She smiled at him over the last of her wine. He looked great, she thought, sitting here on her patio wearing an old fisherman's knit sweater she usually wore as a robe. As a robe it stopped just above her knees. On her the sleeves had to be rolled and rolled again so as not to cover her hands. It fit him perfectly, stopping just above his hip pockets, showing off what she considered to be his very extraordinary butt.

'Funny,' she thought, 'I'm not sure I ever really noticed his butt until this afternoon! But those jeans certainly do it justice.'

“What are you grinnin’ at? He crossed his bare feet in the chair he’d pulled up to use as a foot rest. His slightly graying hair, still damp from the shower, curled around his ears. It needed a trim, but she liked it that way. Liked seeing him just a little unkempt. Yep, he looked great alright.

”Just you,” she breathed. “Not sure I ever really looked you over properly before, Rainier. You make a pretty attractive patio accessory. Maybe I’ll just keep you around here awhile. See how you wear.” She stabbed out her smoke and started gathering up the dishes. “Let’s go in. It’s starting to really cool off out here.”

Together they cleared the patio table, straightened the kitchen, started the dishwasher. Then they carried cups, a fresh pot of coffee and biscotti to the little table by the living room fireplace. Maddy put something soft and soothing, by... Chopin, Bret thought... on the CD player. She lit the gas log and curled up in one of the wing-backs.

“Guess we can’t avoid it much longer, can we?” she asked.

“Guess not. But I gotta tell you, sleep, food and a couple hours of not thinking about it sure felt great.”

“Ummm. You’re right. We needed it. I’ve never, in all my life, not even as a kid, put in a tougher twenty-four hours. So...partner? Where do we go from here?”

“Ramirez will be back in the saddle by morning,” Bret surmised. He was on duty for a straight twenty-four, too. I doubt if he even reported for duty today. The paperwork from my *break-in* would have taken him another two hours after we left him. We won’t be able to do much on our own. Cops have probably got surveillance on all three of us. Speaking of the three of us. I think you need to brace yourself for bad news when it comes to Williams, Kiddo.”

“Williams, if that’s really his name, is bad news, Bret. What kind of game do you think he’s playing here anyway?

“Not exactly sure. But I’ll bet you the bonus from the McLean job he’s up to his arm pits in something rotten. He was sweating bullets yesterday before the police got there. Then later when we were waiting for Ramirez, I thought he was gonna jump and run. Way too spooked to be an innocent by-stander would be my take on him.”

“Did you give him a key to the “executive suite?”

“What? *Hell* no. Why?”

“Remember the last time you went to LA? I stayed late to finish up Stoddard and Sons. He let himself in through the side door about 7:30 or 8 that night with a key he said you gave him. It scared me silly. I didn’t say anything to you at the time, ‘cause I thought you two were beer buds. Never wanted to be alone with him again after

that night. Something about the way he acted just gave me the willies”

Maddy reached for the pot to refill his coffee cup. It was the most natural act in the world. But something about the way she leaned toward him caught him right in the gut. He dropped from the chair to his knees beside her, in one fluid move. Taking the coffee pot from her hands, he enfolded her in his arms, laid his face in her hair and just held on. She could smell her soap on his skin. Could feel the soft cotton sweater she loved stretched across his scarred back. Could taste the salt of his tears as they ran down her face.

“God, Maddy. God, I’m crazy about you. Have been from the first. Didn’t figure it mattered a whole hell of a lot though. You had a life. I figured I just needed to get one too. When Williams came on the scene, sniffing around, I almost lost it. Do you have any idea what it means to me to have you say the stuff you’ve said to me this evening? Do you?”

Softly running her fingers up the back of her sweater and into his hair, she laid her lips on his cheeks. First the right then the left. “Yesterday morning I didn’t. No. Tonight I do. I got it this afternoon. Got it in one of those “whole scenario” flashes you laugh over when we’re working. Does it matter to you that I was so not tuned in for so long, Bret? Does it matter? Tonight?”

He picked her up, sat in her chair, holding her on his lap. “Not a bit, babe. Not a bit. Okay if I kiss you now?”

“Umm...Yum...Yumm...”

Nobody said anything for quite awhile.



11:47 PM

Flight 174 touched down on DIA runway five at 11:47 PM. It took Brandon Williams twenty-five minutes to reach the main terminal. Another twenty by shuttle got him to Hertz, where he picked up a rental car. Once settled behind the wheel he made half a dozen phone calls. In less than an hour he was on Interstate 70, headed west toward Silverthorn. It was snowing. Hard.



As Brandon Williams was flying across the Continental Divide, Bret Rainier and Madison Compton were talking again, snuggled together on the sofa, the cashmere throw covering their bare feet.

Brandy snifters glittered on the coffee table, reflecting red and blue gas flames in golden Amaretto. The cozy scene spoke of quite, peaceful conversation between long time lovers.

Looks are deceiving.

Bret and Maddy were talking of violent death and conspiracy. The coffee table was littered with dozens of newspaper clippings, photographs and copies of police reports. Bret still had some connections in Colorado, even after ten years.

“As near as I’ve been able to piece together, the Vandiver boys, Michael and Brad, lived with their step-sister, Stephanie Rosier and her mother growing up. Rosier’s mother was Harry Vandiver’s first wife. Michael and Brad’s mother was his second wife. Your mother was his third. That would be part of the reason you never ran into them. The summer your mother and Vandiver were working on renovating that old resort in Silverthorn the brothers were in Tampa with the first Mrs. Vandiver and her daughter. I found school records for all three kids covering the period from 1982 to ‘87. Vandiver picked up your mom in Denver early in ’83 and took both of you to Silverthorn with him. That would have been the summer you were nine.” Bret tapped a ballpoint pen on the time line he’d drawn out.

“Okay. So that would mean Michael Vandiver, Mick Evans to us, was a little older than me. The older brother would be...what thirty-eight or nine? Maybe 40?” Maddy studied the faded photo of the two Vandiver boys. It must have been taken in Florida, around the time they were in junior high, she guessed.

“Probably. Makes him about the right age to have been in on the shenanigans his old man pulled in Denver in the early ‘80s. He was still a kid. But if he was a smart kid, and by all indications he was, wheeling and dealing in that blazing hot real estate market with millions of dollars to throw around would have been a real kick.”

“Makes sense. But you know, even though the papers say Vandiver was a millionaire several times over, nothing I ever saw while Mama and I were with him said money. We lived in the main lodge building at “The Lake” with nothing much but the clothes on our backs and peanut butter or bologna sandwiches. I’ve told you about it.” Her eyes clouded as the memories poured in.

Bret put an arm around her and pulled her in for a long, soft kiss. “Yeah, you have. And I wish to hell there was some way to keep you from having to dig all those memories up now. But Ramirez will be back on the job in the morning. And Maddy, you can bet your bottom dollar, he’ll dig it all up with a skip loader. We need to be prepared for it.”

“Speaking of morning. What are we gonna do about your house and stuff?”

He picked up on the “we”. It sent a little thrill of excitement zinging through his gut, but he let it pass.

“Call the insurance company in the morning. Let them earn all those huge premiums. Work on putting out fires at the office tomorrow and Friday if the police tape’s down. Give it ‘til Saturday for the dust to settle then borrow the skip loader from our friendly neighborhood Detective and deal with it, I guess. I’m just really glad all this stuff,” throwing an arm out to indicate the photos and clipping, “Was in my safe deposit box at good ole SLO Savings & Loan when Brandon went through my place.”

“Brandon? You think he’s responsible for that mess?”

“Pretty damn sure. There’s one thing I haven’t told you yet, Maddy. Stephanie Rosier had an older brother, too. He disappeared from their Tampa High School in 1989. The year I entered the Police Academy in Denver. He was about 18 or 19. The Tampa PD put out an APB on him. I remember seeing it. His identification photo showed a tall, thin kid with ordinary looks, described as average height, 170, blue and brown. His legal name was Brandon Rosier. After his step-father adopted him that is. But he went by his father’s name - Vandiver. The ID photo also showed him as having a broad broken pugilist’s nose. Tampa PD

thought the old man probably busted it for him when he was a kid. There were plenty of domestic violence calls on his sheet.”

She just looked at him. “Brandon Williams has brown eyes. Bleach could account for the blonde hair? But his nose is defiantly not broad or broken. He’s tall and thin. But so are half the beach bums in town. He’s just another California surfer dude. Isn’t he?”

“I thought so. Right up until he started questioning the costs on the Fernandez job. Thought he got a little over zealous with that one. That's when I decided it was time to take a closer look at our friend. Maddy, not one single thing about his resume checked out after 2001. I emailed one of the photos from our office Christmas party to my buddy in the Denver PD. Can’t be absolutely positive without prints or DNA, but my gut tells me he’s Vandiver, alright. And according to his juvie sheet, he’s one bad dude. Smart and mean.”

“But....”

“Contacts and plastic surgery, Maddy. Think about it.”

“But, that means he and Mick ...Michael are...were brothers.”

“Half-brothers. Same father. Vandiver. Busy guy. Anyway, all of them, Brandon, his half-sister Stephanie Rosier, and his half-brothers Michael and Brad Vandiver were in the Denver area during your mother’s trial. Over the past three years they all

showed up in California. Stephanie was living in Templeton, up toward Paso Robles. Michael and Brandon were here and Brad in LA.”

“And you think two of them ended up working for us? Why?”

The “us” part of her question tickled his gut again. “That’s what we need to find out, isn’t it? But not tonight.”

He picked up his snifter. Downing the last of the golden liquid, he pulled her up from the sofa. “Let’s get some sleep. I’ll take the sofa.” With that he picked her up and carried her and her cashmere throw down the hall to the bedroom.

She giggled when he dumped her on the bed. She watched him strip off her fisherman’s sweater his jeans and briefs then head for the bathroom in his birthday suit. Oh yeah.... Definitely an extraordinary butt.

“Don’t go way. Be right back,” he promised.



CHAPTER THREE – THURSDAY

“Life is like a bicycle to keep your balance you must keep moving”
_Albert Einstein



2:20 AM

Late March might be spring in San Luis Obispo, but it was a far cry from spring in the Rocky Mountains. The “Mile High City” was a wretched snarl of nasty traffic, even at two in the morning. Driving wind and blowing snow cut visibility to nothing and the heater in his rent-a-wreck Ford Escort was pumping out a pleasant stream of cold air.

By the time he reached Idaho Springs, Brandon was frozen, exhausted and going snow blind. He was sure of it. He took the first exit marked with the international symbols: GAS FOOD LODGING. A typical string of tourist trap motels waited along the

old highway at the edge of town. He spotted a VACANCY sign and pulled in. It was snowing harder, and the wind was kicking up as he opened the door. On the driveway, his boots crunched a layer of ice under the newly fallen snow. He strode into the office and hit the counter-top bell a couple of time.

“Need a room, Mister?”

No you stupid old goat, I’m standing here at four in the morning pounding on your damn bell so I can ask directions.

“Yes please, Non-smoking single,” Brandon said, laying out a Visa Gold card.

“Just for tonight?”

“Right.”

The clerk shoved a key and a stack of cheap white towels across the counter to him. “Room 12. Around the corner to your left. Vending machines and ice in the room next to 15. Check out’s at 11.”

“Right, Thanks.” Brandon turned to go

“Oh by the way Mr. Vandiver, you might want to park closer to the lighted end of the lot and walk over to the room. We been having a little vandalism lately. Bet this blizzard’ll keep the little varmints inside tonight. Heh Heh Heh.

“Yeah, I’ll bet. Not fit for man nor little-varmint out there right now, is it? It’s getting worse, too. Thanks again. Good night.”

Brandon dashed the few feet to the Ford. He waited a couple of seconds for the wipers to clear the windshield, then swung away from the office toward room 12.

“Sure, I’ll park right under the damn lights. That way when I get out of the car I’ll be a perfect target.”

Come on B Ease up. “It’s the middle of the night. This is the worst storm of the winter.” The radio in the Ford just said so. Besides there were only one or two people on earth who knew he was headed to Silverthorn. “Gotta get some sleep. Gettin’ punchy here.”

He parked the car directly across from 12, in a dark corner of the lot, and walked the few freezing feet to the door. He keyed the lock, kicked the door open, tossed his parka and flight bag in a chair and headed for the bathroom.

Outside, in the swirling white night, a second customer entered the office. Checked in. The night clerk shoved a key and a stack of cheap white towels across the counter to him. “Room 16. Around the corner to your left. Vending machines and ice in the room next to 15. Check out’s at 11. Busy night tonight. You’re my second check in since midnight. Business must be gonna pick up. Heh Heh Heh”

“Sir, you have no idea. Good night.”

“Oh by the way Mr. Tovar, you might want to park closer to the lighted end of the lot and walk over to your room. Had a little vandalism recently. Bet this blizzard’ll keep the little varmints inside for awhile. Heh Heh Heh

“Oh, sure. Thanks.”

SLOPD Officer John Tovar left the office and walked to his car.

“Dang, Vandiver, what a dump. This the best you could do? Place is one step up from flea-bag.” He slammed the door, dug his cell phone out of a carry-on bag and hit the speed dial. “Bird’s roosted.” Was all he said before he turned the phone off again and headed for room 16.



4:30 AM

Brandon’s cell phone was ringing. He grabbed it off the night stand and jabbed ON, checking the time and the caller’s ID on the display. He groaned. It was 4:30 AM. He’d been asleep less than an hour.

“What?” he snapped.

He listened. Listened for a full five minutes. Occasionally nodding agreement or shaking his head in dissent. When he spoke it was in a thoughtful quiet voice. "Okay...so that would put McLean and his boys smack in the middle of it. She knew him before."

He listened again. "Okay, so she doesn't know he's involved." She's still a helluva long way from being squeaky clean here."

The caller spoke for another ten minutes. While he listened Brandon rolled out of bed. Carrying the cell against his shoulder, tucked under his chin. He pulled on his jeans, socks and boots. He walked to the bathroom to gather up the bottle of Excedrin, a comb and razor he hadn't taken time to use, jamming them into his flight bag.

"Michael's still just as dead isn't he? And Evans is on the run. Plus he knows where I am. For that matter Ramirez probably does too. Hold on a minute." He laid the phone on the bed to pull on his shirt, put on his parka, zip it up.

"Okay. So what are my orders?" he asked as he opened the door of room 12 and stepped back out into the worst storm of the winter.



7:15 AM

Thursday morning. Forty-eight hours and a life-time away from the murder of one Mick Evans aka Michael Vandiver-- Bret and Maddy sat in the breakfast nook, munching toast, drinking coffee, watching rain splash on the patio bricks. They kept grinning at each other over their coffee like a couple of kids playing hooky. They had slept again, finally, toward morning; then showered. Together.

In the shower they had decided to notify their staff the office would remain closed until Monday. Bret changed the call forwarding and voice mail messages for the office and both of their cell phones. He left an emergency number in case any of their clients decided to panic because they were not immediately available. Then he put in a call for his insurance agent.

Maddy made coffee. This morning she used her French press. Last night she'd just been too beat to do anything but flip a switch. She checked her email, set up an account on her laptop so Bret could check his email too, then called Alistair McLean's office to reschedule a meeting for early next week. At Mr. McLean's convenience, of course.

"Well...where do we go from here?" Maddy asked. She didn't really want to go anywhere. Neither did Bret. They had no choice. "Do we have to check in with Ramirez?"

“He said stay available. That means don’t leave town. Not sit by his desk and wait. If he wants us, he knows where to find us. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised to find some of his finest outside in an unmarked car. Probably sucking down coffee and donuts as we speak.”

He tipped his chair back, lifted the window shade an inch or so, then said, “See?” Sure enough there were a couple of guys parked across the street and down a few doors. They were trying to look inconspicuous. It wasn’t working.

“It’s actually sort of comforting to have them out there after what you showed me last night,” she told him. He wasn’t surprised she felt that way. He felt a little bit the same.

“So where do we go from here?” She lifted the shade an inch or so and peeked out herself, tempted to run it all the way up and wave at the officers.

“First things first, I suppose. I want to call Dan Holmes with Denver PD and see if I can run down the names of the other two players in Vandiver’s real estate deal. Then we can go shopping if you want to. I’m going to need a few things before I can move back into my place. Here, I made a list.”

He shoved a scrap of paper across the table to her. There was one word on it. Everything.

“Ya know Rainier, I’ve always thought you were a practical man. This is just extravagant. Especially since I already have most of the stuff on this list right here. Why waste time and money shopping for stuff we don’t need?”

Her lopsided smile touched his heart in a way he found hard to take without bawling like a baby.

“You’re right, kid! Absolutely right. C’mere.” He patted his knee. When she came around the table, sitting down on his knees with her hands loosely clasped behind his head he took a very deep breath. He put a knuckle under her chin and tipped her face to his.

“You sure about this, Maddy? Really sure?”

“Bret, how long have you known me?”

“Since that marketing class at Poly fall quarter of ’94, I guess.” He didn’t have to guess. He knew. He would never forget looking up into the lecture hall seats and meeting her blue eyes looking directly into his. He made up his mind right then she was going to be a big part of his life. He’d been right.

“Has there ever been, so far as you know, any time during those ten years when I wasn’t sure about the important things in my life?”

He had to laugh, “No. I’d have to say no, Maddy. You don’t make decisions without being sure about ‘em. That’s why we’re the best design outfit of our size in the country.”

“Well then why, oh why, do you keep asking me if I’m sure about us? Of course I’m sure. Same way I was sure we’d make great business partners. Got any more questions?”

“Hummm. Just one. What shall we do with the time I have penciled in for shopping?”

Now Maddy had to laugh...”Oh I can think of a couple of things... Rainier. I just bought a killer white teddy last week.”

“A teddy bear. Listen kid... if you think I’m gonna spend the afternoon playing with a...teddy bear....” He could hardly keep his face straight and his fingers were already working their way up the buttons of her shirt.



8:45 AM

The sky was slowly turning from white to blue-gray and it stopped snowing just as Brandon mopped up the last bite of his short-stack with sausage and eggs. In this part of the Rockies there was the potential for a snowy day to turn out fine and sunny, and cold enough freeze your nose hairs.

No place for this California boy. Brandon thought.

A clock faced temperature gauge on the patio outside read “Welcome to Summit County – Ski Capital of Colorado”. The needle hovered just below 17 degrees F. He glanced at an equally garish clock above the diner’s counter. 8:45. The GIS/MIS Department didn’t open until nine. He decided on having another cup of coffee in the diner instead of cooling his heels, literally, in front of the Town Hall.

The Geographical Information System (GIS) office held a public access database of local land information. To quote their web site *“GI System analyzes the connection between place and the associated information to form the basis for many land use decisions.”*

Brandon wanted to access the database first thing Thursday morning. He had maybe four hours to find what he needed, then drive back down the mountain to DIA. His flight back to LA would

take off at 6:10. More snow was forecast for tonight. He hoped and prayed it would hold off until he was winging his way back to sunny California.

John Tovar sat on the end stool at the counter, watching Brandon in the back-splash mirror. Dressed in jeans, cowboy boots, a plaid shirt and shearling jacket, he bore little or no resemblance to the uniformed police officer who'd arrived at Bret Rainier's place with Detective Ramirez. He didn't figure Vandiver would make him. People normally didn't *see* the face behind the uniform. Just in case, Tovar wore a black wig parted down the center, a long braid tied in red yarn fell over each ear. A dirty baseball cap pulled low over his eyes completed his transformation to *local*.

Vandiver never even glanced up as John followed him into the diner for breakfast. He had looked up once when the pretty little red-headed waitress sat a pot of coffee on the counter and said, "Mornin' Mister. Nice weather, huh? Need some coffee to warm you up?"

With that question, every guy in the place had looked up—at her. Tovar doubted any of them even noticed him. They were too busy ogling as she bent across the counter to wipe away a ring of water. She gave the boys such a nice view of the lacy white hankie tucked in her breast pocket.

Tovar was wrong. Brandon made him in the parking lot. Before he even got out of his car. All the careful attention to detail to make

his appearance read local was belied by the “Rental Car” sticker on the bumper of the gray Toyota he climbed out of.

“Hick cop,” Brandon muttered, as he paid his tab, over-tipped the little red-headed waitress and strolled across Center Circle to the Town Hall.

As he climbed the stairs to the second floor GIS office he pulled out his cell phone, hit speed dial and waited. “Ramirez’ boy’s right on my tail. Whadaya want me to do about him?” He listened for a few seconds. “Fine. I’ll be in tonight before 9. Be there.”



1:12 PM

Thursday afternoon, a little past lunch time, Jorge Ramirez toed his chair away from his desk in the SLO Police Department and rolled across the room to retrieve a sheaf of pages humming out of his FAX machine. Finally, the information from Lakewood PD on Evelyn Vandiver nee Compton he'd been waiting for. He stacked the pages together neatly, squaring up the edges. He placed the pile of FAX paper precisely in the center of his desk pad. After a brief search through a couple of desk drawers he located a new black BIC and a small spiral notebook. Reaching for the half full cup of warm coffee close to his elbow, he settled in to read.

Evelyn Marie was born September 10, 1955 to Samuel and Marie Markham in Grand Junction, Colorado. An only child, described by teachers as average, but not social; she attended school in the small Western slope community of Palisade. She had completed grade 11, but not graduated from High School. The family had, by all accounts, lived modestly. Her father held various jobs throughout her childhood, settling into maintenance for a nearby Colorado State Park when Evelyn was in junior high. He retired from the state job in '75 and died in 1980. Her mother was listed simply as homemaker, deceased.

"Nothing outstanding or unusual there." Ramirez mused. He continued reading. Occasionally he paused to sip at the now stone

cold coffee he'd brought back from lunch at La Cafe or jotted notes in the little spiral book..

Evelyn Markham married Alvin Compton in '73 in Idaho Springs. Maddy was born in September of 1975. Alvin Compton was killed instantly when the pickup he was driving careened off a winding mountain road during a blizzard in the winter of 1979.

Evelyn Marie Compton was remanded to custody for lewd behavior and creating a public nuisance in July of 1980 with three prior DWI arrests on her record. Maddy was placed in foster care during her mother's 90 day sentence. There were three reported Domestic Disturbance calls to the Compton residence in 1981 and '82 usually involving Evelyn's current boyfriend. She served a six month sentence in a rehabilitation center in November of '82. Maddy was again placed in foster care?

Maddy's elementary school records showed various bumps and bruises, a broken right ulna, and a dislocated elbow before she was ten. One teacher reported Evelyn to the authorities for what she believed was probably child abuse. Social Services was called in. Counseling was recommended but Maddy was left in her mother's care. "Another kid who got dropped through the cracks of the system." Ramirez muttered.

In 1983 Evelyn Compton met Harry Vandiver in a Denver dive on East Colfax. They were married in May and moved, with Maddy, to Silverthorn. In December Vandiver pressed charges and had

Evelyn committed after she sliced him open like a Christmas goose with his own Buck knife. He denied any knowledge of what provoked her to attack him. Maddy was again placed in the foster care system. She was ten.

Ramirez scanned the rest of the police reports. Noting a few more highlights. Evelyn was in and out of counseling and rehab until she split from Vandiver the winter of 1987. She got an apartment and a job. Her record remained clean for several months. Early in 1988 she petitioned the court for permission to take Maddy out of the foster home where she had been living for the last two years. Based on her current situation and the clean record, the judge granted her request, on a probationary basis.

In April of 1989 someone sliced Harry Vandiver's throat from ear to ear, put him behind the wheel of his shiny new Cadillac Seville and pushed it off a hill above Red Rocks Amphitheater in Golden, Colorado. Evidence pointed to Evelyn. And although it was mostly circumstantial evidence, she was arrested, tried and ultimately convicted of his murder.

Maddy was once again backin foster care. She was twelve the week before her mother was sentenced to spend 50 years to life in the criminal lock-down ward of a State mental facility in Lakewood, Colorado.

"Hell of a way to raise a kid." Ramirez tapped the papers back into a tidy packet, dropped them in a clean file folder, tucked his notes

in on top and locked them in his desk. He picked up the phone and dialed Maddy's cell number. Voice mail. "Ms. Compton I need to speak with you and Mr. Rainier. Before end of shift today if possible. Please give me a call when you get this message. I'll be in the office until about six.

"Now, where the hell is John?" He dialed Tovar's cell again for the third time in two hours. "He shouldn't be out of range, unless that blizzard knocked out the whole grid? Come on, Tovar. Call in."

Ramirez swung his chair around and stood up, looking at the cork board set up behind his desk. He walked over and re-pinned a couple of the photos in different order. A story board of the case was beginning to take shape.

"Something about this smells rotten. Stinking, sour, rotten."

Ramirez toed his chair back again, far enough he could lean back and yell out the door. "Officer Shelton, please see if you can get the ME on the phone. If they try to dance you around, remind them I know how busy they are. Remind them this is a murder investigation!"

With that, the Detective opened a fat file folder from his stack labeled "Psych Evals. – E. Compton."

Gonna take awhile he decided. "Shelton, any of that awful coffee left out there?"

4:20 PM

Officer John Tovar came to slouched over the steering wheel of his rental car. His had a killer headache. Touching his forehead, tentatively, he felt sticky blood and a nasty gash. He reared back against the seat, trying to gather his wits. It was almost dark out now. Still freezing cold and snowing again. Then he remembered.

He'd followed Brandon Vandiver to the Silverthorn Town Hall. He'd ducked out of sight, into an unoccupied office as Vandiver turned, heading for the second floor. He'd then waited and watched for him to come back down. Pulling off the black wig as he waited, he shrugged out of the heavy shearling jacket and put his cap on again. Backwards this time. Rolling the wig inside the jacket he crammed both down inside a souvenir "Ski Colorado" knapsack picked up in the diner's sleazy, four-by-four Gift Shoppe he'd spotted as he paid for his breakfast.

"Do these people really think every tourist who walks through the door is a complete moron? Gift Shoppe, my butt."

Still he shelled out his own cash to cover the outrageous price. He needed that knapsack.

Still hiding in the empty office, Tovar watched Williams/Vandiver (who ever the hell he was today) come down the stairs carrying what looked like a ream of photocopies. Brandon walked past without so much as glancing his direction. He left the Town Hall,

sauntered across Center Circle and climbed into the Ford Escort. John waited a couple of seconds, then headed for his own car.

He followed Brandon's Ford, hanging back a half block or so. Still sure his suspect hadn't made the tail. When the Ford took the I-70 EAST on-ramp heading back to Denver, Tovar closed the gap a little. Just making sure he didn't lose it in the snow and heavier traffic. He drove carefully, keeping the Ford in sight most of the way down the mountain.

As he passed the exit announcing Buffalo Bill's Grave John was thinking, "My god. I'll bet that reels in the tourist morons and relieves them of their excess cash during the summer."

Glancing in his rear view mirror he spotted a beat up Nissan pickup weaving from side to side in the lane behind him. Coming fast. Trying to keep Brandon in sight, while keeping an eye on the hippie, Tovar changed into the outside lane. He was tough California cop through and through. And he knew there was no guarantee, even on icy roads in swirling snow, the driver was operating his vehicle with only bacon and eggs under his belt from breakfast. Assuming was a always big mistake. The guy could be loaded to the eyeballs with weed or worse. He saw it when the hippie in the Nissan hit the gas. Watched with trepidation as the pickup pulled up beside him. Then, with a sharp jerk of the steering wheel, the hippie looked over at him and smiled as he simply turned into the side of John's car! The highway was wet.

Not icy. But snow was beginning to accumulate. Tovar swung the wheel hard into the skid. Fighting to regain control and avoid the edge. Just when he thought he had it going down the road the right way around the idiot in the Nissan rammed him again. He felt his tires hit the six-inch high asphalt safety strip. Jump it. Then he was careening down a steep hillside between huge rocks. The car slammed, nose first, into the snow covered embankment of the frontage road. His head hit the windshield. Bam.

No airbag, And he went out like a light.

With the memory of his bone jarring ride down the hill still playing in his aching head, Tovar inventoried for other injuries. He was thankful to find the only casualty in the wreck was his cell phone. He located it under the brake pedal. Somehow, during the wild ride off the Interstate it must have bounced off the seat onto the floor. He'd stomped it under the break. Stomped it o death.

"Well hell."

The driver side door of the rented wreck was a wreck for real now. Just a mangled mess of twisted metal and broken glass. He unfastened his seat belt, collected his gun and weapon harness off the seat and painfully climbed toward the passenger door. Outside the snow flurries were turning to a snow storm. Walking all the way around the downhill side of the car, testing out his legs, just to make sure, he unlocked the trunk. After retrieved his flight bag and brief case, he dug his heavy jacket out of the stupid tourist

knapsack. He shrugged the jacket on over a shoulder he knew was going to be sore as hell in a few hours, tossed the knapsack with the wig and cap back into the trunk, and started the slippery climb toward the highway. He wasn't going to be back in sunny California tonight.



Brandon stood with one boot hooked over the railing of a faux cowboy bar inside DIA. He finished off his Corona. Put the empty bottle on the bar. Signaled for the bartender to do it again. He flipped open his cell. Punched in a number. Waited.

Asked, "Get him?"

Nodded. Said, "Good." And hit OFF.

There was a satisfied smirk on his face as he shoved a five across the bar in exchange for his beer. He still had a half hour to kill before boarding his flight.



3:20 PM (PST)

Bret put his hands on Maddy's shoulders and turned her to face him. "Here... lemme do that." Buttoning her shirt, sporting a silly grin she found very endearing, he kissed the end of her nose.

"I undid them, after all."

She hadn't lied. Her white teddy was killer, He had thoroughly and absolutely appreciated it. Even though she'd only spent about two minutes modeling it for him before it landed on the floor.

She tossed his shirt, still warm from the dryer, to him. "Ya know, we should probably go shopping this afternoon anyway. Unless, of course, you plan on wearing those jeans and my sweater indefinitely. "

"Yeah." His dejected tone made Maddy wish she hadn't brought up the state of his wardrobe, "I'm gonna have to go over to the house and find out what's left.

"The bedroom looked like my armoire blew up. I didn't spend any time checking to see if he shredded my clothes or just threw 'em all over hell and back. Scum-bag made a helluva mess. That's for sure."

"Bret, what was the point? I mean...okay...so you think he was looking for the stuff you've accumulated on him. On his family. I

get that. What I don't get is, why the vandalism? Because that's what it was. What was there to gain by trashing your place like he did? Why not just get in, get the stuff, get out. You might never have known he'd been in there."

"I think he wanted to make a statement, baby. I'm not for sure on this. And I hope to God I'm wrong." He reached up to brush a few strands of hair from her eyes. "I think he's jealous of you. Maybe of us. Of me being here with you like this. He's decided to make it personal, Maddy. Even more personal than killing Evans in our back offices."

She shivered. A chill of apprehension running up her spine. "That fits. I wish it didn't. But it fits. Bret, what's he after? What have we, either one of us, got that he's after?"

"I've been thinking about that one, too. Maddy, the first time old man Vandiver had your mother committed, after she took a swipe at him with intent to slit his throat, what was the real reason. The police report doesn't exactly clarify what prompted her attack on him. Vandiver testified it was completely unprovoked. I find that a little hard to believe. Do you remember any of what went on?"

"Do you mean before or after Mama caught the son-of-a-bitch with his hand up my skirt?" Her voice was fierce. Hushed. But fierce.

“He touched you? Your mother caught him with his hands on you?” He could tell by the tears brimming in Maddy’s blue eyes that was exactly the reason for Evelyn Compton’s attack on her husband of only a few months. She’d discovered he was molesting his nine year old step-daughter.

“Oh baby. I’m sorry! I never knew. You never told me!”

“I never told any one. Not the police. Not the social workers. Not the judge. No one!” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “Mama told me it was my own fault. She said it only happened because I was a bad little girl. She said if I hadn’t been going in the cabins after she told me not to it wouldn’t have happened. She made me believe it was my fault.”

Anger, quick and hot, flashed in Bret’s eyes. “C’mere,” he said again. Taking her hand, he led her to the living room. He settled her in a chair and knelt in front of her? “Maddy you know....”

“Of course, I know. It wasn’t my fault. Bret, I think on some level, I knew when it was going on it wasn’t my fault. But I was a child. A child with a mentally disturbed mother. I had no father, and a pervert for a step-father. What was I supposed to do?”

He watched her struggle for composure. Hurting for the child she had been and the woman she was. She had put all of this behind her. Very successfully behind her once. But here it was again.

“That day, when Mama caught him and attacked him, was only the second time he tried anything. Both times he found me exploring in the cabins. Where I wasn’t supposed to be. “

“He called 911 after Mama stabbed him. They sent an ambulance for him. And the police. The police took Mama and me away. Her to jail. Me to social services. The court put me in a foster home.”

She was shivering as though chilled to the bone. Bret tucked his arms around her more tightly. She went on. “I suppose if things had been different... if I had been available to him longer, he might've eventually raped me. I know it happens to kids. I was probably one of the lucky ones. The older couple, who took me in —my foster parents—were really nice. They did their best to give me a good home. I was in and out of the system from the time I was nine. But somehow I always managed to be sent back to the Lamberts. They were my family. The only real family I guess I ever had. After Mama’s trial, I never saw her again. I don't think I was ever sorry.”

They both jolted when the phone rang. Bret went to her desk, picked it up, checking caller ID. “It’s Ramirez again. We ignored him earlier. Guess we better see what’s up?” She nodded.

“Yeah? Rainier here.” Looking toward the fireplace, he watched Maddy as he listened to Ramirez. She worked to rub away her smeared mascara. Straighten her hair. She drew some deep

breaths then sat up very, very straight. He could picture her at nine, going through the same motions. It hurt him to watch her.

“Yeah, okay. We’ll meet you there in twenty.” He hung up.

Putting on what he hoped was a encouraging smile Bret walked back and took a seat on the coffee table facing her.

“He wants to ask us a few more questions. Wanted to know if we’d meet him at my place. Apparently he’s got a couple things he wants to check out there before I start shoveling it out. You gonna be okay with that?”

“Sure. Are you?” She reached over and squeezed his knee. “You haven’t been back in the daylight yet.”

“Hey, everything irreplaceable is right here. My Jag’s safe and sound in your garage...” he caught the flash of fire in her eyes and hurried on. “And you’re safe and sound in my arms.” He stood, pulled her up against his chest, lifting her toes off the floor, kissing her thoroughly.

She laughed when she could breathe again. “Well let’s get going, then.”

Fifteen minutes later Bret hit his garage door-opener and climbed out of the Jag. Inside it looked worse, if that was possible, than it had the night before. He bent, picking up the carpenter’s level

from his father's toolbox. With the glass smashed and the liquid gone, it would never be the same. And it could never be replaced. It was at least sixty years old. They didn't make tools like that today. Maddy was right. This was vandalism. Vicious, senseless vandalism. Bret had never been especially finicky about his surroundings. He didn't have to put tools back in exactly the same place every time he used them. But he knew where everything was, approximately. Most of the time. Looking around he realized, nothing, not one damn thing, was where he'd left it. And this was only the garage.

"Hardly wait to see my office," he muttered, heading for the kitchen door.

A white car pulled into the driveway behind the Jag. Ramirez and another man got out. Bret made him as a cop before he took five steps. Ramirez headed for Bret. Stuck his hand out. Shook hands with him warmly. The other man hung back, taking in the Jag, Maddy, the garage with a sweeping, calculating glance.

"Afternoon, Bret. Ms. Compton. Thanks for meeting us here." Ramirez turned, indicating his passenger. "This is Lieutenant Chambers. He's going to be working with me on the Evans murder. I brought him along today because," he looked into Bret's eyes, exchanging a silent message, "I agree with you Bret. What happened here ties directly into our investigation."

Bret and Chambers also shook hands. Exchanged how-do-you-dos. Sized each other up. Lieutenant Chambers' cold, somber, hazel eyes told Bret he was all business. He had to look up at Bret's face, being a few inches shorter. Five foot eight or nine maybe. A stocky build and square face, with a broad, serious mouth and a Caesar's cap of snow white hair. His was an impressive presence all around. And he wanted everyone present to know it.

"Left you a nasty mess, didn't he?" Chambers started for the kitchen door. "Mind if I look around inside?" He didn't wait for an answer.

Ramirez laid a hand on Bret's elbow to detain him. "Wanted you to know I asked for him on this case. Chambers. He's the best we've got. If we missed anything in there, he'll pick it up. Started out in the LAPD. Moved up here to get his kids out of the city. We're lucky to have him. I tried to wade through the psych evaluations on Ms. Compton's mother this afternoon. Got nowhere. That stuff's all way over my head. Asked Chambers to take a look at it. Has Ms. Compton ever mentioned any abuse, other than her old lady slapping her around on a regular basis, to you?"

"You think there may have been more?" Bret was careful to keep his eyes cold and non-committal.

"Lieutenant Chambers thinks so. Thinks it might explain a couple of things. Like why the old lady took a knife to Vandiver a few months after she married him. Like why she never really fought to

have the kid in her custody instead of foster care until after they were separated.”

“Huh. He might have something there. I’ll ask her,” Bret turned toward Maddy. Ramirez gripped Bret’s arm again. “Chambers also wondered if Vandiver’s boys spent much time with him during the time they were married.”

“Maddy told you Tuesday they didn’t! She said she didn’t know Vandiver had kids. Why would she lie about a thing like that? She had no idea Mick Evans wasn’t who he said he was. She had no idea Brandon Williams isn’t either.”

Bret was really getting steamed at his line of questioning. Ramirez could tell. “How about you, Bret? When did you pick up on Williams’ true identity?”

“I told you Tuesday. When he started jerking around the cost analysis on our big projects. I wanted to know if he was padding the accounts and pocketing the over-runs. When the third client in two months complained, I decided to go to LA and check out his references personally. The Human Resources gal at the firm where he worked down there was willing to show me his application.

“He’d given an outfit in Denver as his last place of employment on the LA application. He didn’t mention Denver at all on our application. Said he’d worked in Kansas City for the last five years. After I learned everything he’d told Maddy when she hired him

was bogus except that last job in LA, I decided to dig a little further. I called a friend of mine in the Denver PD and he identified a photo of Williams I sent to him as possibly being Brandon Vandiver. It was just a little too much of a coincidence for my liking. Maddy's mother convicted of killing his father. Then he ends up working for MCD. Under an assumed name. Next thing we know, his half brother turns up dead on our office floor. That's when I decided to give everything to you and let you sort it out."

"Ah... Detective, may I see you in here for a minute?" Chambers was standing in the kitchen door with several sheets of paper and a manila file folder in his hands. When everyone started for the door, he coughed slightly. "Just the Detective, if you don't mind Mr. Rainier. Ms. Compton. Please wait in the garage. We'll be right back." He abruptly returned to Bret's kitchen followed by Ramirez.

Maddy walked up behind Bret and touched his shoulder. "What was that all about?"

"Hard to tell. Don't worry, babe. My guess is we're in capable hands here. I like Ramirez. Trust him. And he says he trusts Chambers. Let's just sit tight and see how it plays out."



4:00 PM

Bret and Maddy had been standing in his garage, waiting to see how things played out for over twenty minutes. Bret was poking through the scattered odds and ends on his decimated workbench. He was starting to get really antsy, Maddy could tell. She been antsy from the second Lieutenant Chambers and Detective Ramirez disappeared into Bret's kitchen, giving orders for them to wait until they were summonsed.

"Ms. Compton, step in here for a moment," Chambers said from the kitchen door.

Not an invitation, another order, Maddy noted. She turned to find Bret, raising an eyebrow in question. At his reassuring nod, she stepped into the kitchen. The Lieutenant took her elbow, guiding her down the hall to Bret's home office. As it had in the garage, daylight revealed the full extent of damage. It too was vicious and systematic. She had a quick imaginary flash of a cartoon dump truck filled with papers and office supplies upending its load on the floor of the room then zooming away, the driver laughing manically.

"Dear God. What a mess!"

"Ms. Compton, how well do you know Mr. Rainier?" Chambers asked.

She blinked in disbelief. "As well as I know myself, Lieutenant. We're partners and friends. I've worked with him for ten years. Why do you ask?" her tone taking on a defensive air.

"Were you with him all evening on the night of the murder?"

"No. I went home to rest. So did Bret. We told Detective Ramirez all of this on Tuesday, Lieutenant.

"Were you with Rainier when he allegedly discovered the vandalism here inside his residence?"

"Allegedly? Maddy's hackles were rising rapidly. "I was with him when he walked into this disaster for the first time, if that's what you mean. Yes."

"At that time you called nine one one to report a suspected burglary at this address. Is that correct Ms. Compton?" With each question his tone became more cold and calculating.

Matching his cold tone with one of her own, Maddy snapped back.

"That is correct, Lieutenant."

"You called from a cell phone, not a land line."

She nodded.

"You were not inside the dwelling with Rainier at that time? You did not observe the damage yourself at that time. Is that correct?"

“That is not correct Lieutenant. When we drove up to the house Bret used the garage door opener while we were still in his car. The door went up and the headlights hit the interior of the garage. We both observed exactly what you saw when you walked up the driveway a few minutes ago. Bret did not go into the house until after I called the police. I was only a step or two behind him when he did go inside. We observed the damage at precisely the same time.

"Don't give me attitude, lady," Chambers was snarling now. "Did you personally observe Mr. Rainier's movements from the time you entered the dwelling until the police arrived, Ms Compton?" Chambers voice had gone from cold and flat to accusatory. And nasty.

What the hell is he playing at here Maddy thought. When she answered again the anger in her tone was no longer veiled.

"I never left his side. We held hands as we walked through the house. I don't know what you're suggesting here, Lieutenant. The extent of the damage, the vandalism, in his home was devastating to Bret and, as such, to me. You sound as if you think one or the other of us might be responsible for this mess. I can assure you neither of us is. Perhaps you should talk to Brandon Williams about it."

Maddy was thoroughly pissed now. She was ready and willing to do battle for Bret and for herself. Battles where nothing new to

her and she'd learned long ago how to go toe to toe with nasty authority figures and come out just fine.

“We spoke with Mr. Williams earlier today, Ms. Compton.”

Detective Ramirez interjected, hoping to retain control of the conversation. “He was out of the state.”

“So he says,” Bret spoke from the hallway.

Chambers looked around, glowered, as Bret entered the room, and lifting an arm to point toward the garage, snarled, “Please wait out....”

“Oh. So sorry to interrupt your little divide and conquer ploy here, guys. Chambers, I don't appreciate what you're implying. I also don't appreciate having Miss Compton treated like a suspect.”

Bret moved to Maddy's side and slipped a protective arm around her waist.

“And, here's a little tidbit you may have missed by coming aboard this investigation so late in the game, LT. I saw Williams drive by Maddy's place on Laurel Lane after he stopped in here to leave his calling card.” He let go of Maddy's waist long enough to indicate the interior of his office with a sweeping gesture.

Ramirez took a step to position himself between Bret and Chambers obvious fury at having his authority or his procedure questioned.

“Yes, Bret did mention he thought Williams drove by Ms. Compton’s late Tuesday night, shortly before they came here and discovered the B and E.”

“He thought? Were you unable to make a positive identification, Rainier?”

“Come to think of it, I saw him, too!” Maddy put in. “He drove by in a black van instead of his car. He didn’t wave or acknowledge us at all. I wondered what was going on but I was still so furious with him after the way he behaved earlier. Everything had been crazy all day and I was just so beat I didn’t mention it to Bret. I didn’t think it was important. I forgot all about it until just now.”

Chambers lifted an eyebrow and one corner of his upper lip in a spiteful sneer. “How convenient, to have your story corroborated so quickly, Rainier. Tell me...has it occurred to either of you how inconvenient being charged as an accessory to murder might be?”

“Now just a damn minute, Chambers.” Bret took a step forward, stopped only by Ramirez’ hand on his chest. “You seem to be forgetting who the victims are in this.”

“Rainier, I suggest you pull in your horns and listen to me, very, very carefully.”

Chambers was slapping the papers he still held rhythmically against his thigh. His eyes were hot, his voice barely controlled.

“I walked in here today expecting to verify your story and see if I could turn up any evidence as to who made this mess.” He pushed the papers toward Bret and waved them slightly, “I found evidence all right. Evidence that implicates you in the murder of Mick Evans. As for the man you know as Brandon William or Brandon Vandiver, I am personally acquainted with him. If he says he was out of the state on the night in question, trust me, he was out of the state. I spoke with him not three hours ago. He denies any knowledge of vandalism to your residence. I believe him. What I’m not yet sure of is why a man like you, an ex-cop, would turn his own nest inside out and upside down to implicate somebody else unless it was to prove his own innocence.”

“Bret didn’t do this!” Maddy turned to Ramirez, taking a step forward, touched his arm. “Detective Ramirez, you know Bret didn’t do this! He couldn’t have. Tell him,” she indicated Chambers with a wave.”

As she was speaking the enormity of what he’d just said soaked in. Her mouth remained open as she processed it then her eyes were, suddenly, snapping fire. “He didn’t kill Mick Evans either. Officer Chambers. He was making coffee!”

“I didn’t suggest he was the killer, Ms. Compton. What I said was he may be an accessory to the murder. The information in here,” he waved the papers under her nose, “indicates you may both be involved. How long had you known Mick Evans before you brought him in to work with you?”

“I didn’t know him at all. I never met him until he interviewed for the job just before Christmas.” She turned to Ramirez again for confirmation. “Tell him, Detective. You know what happened. You know where we were. You know we couldn’t have been involved in Mick’s death in any way.” Now she put her arm around Bret, taking the same supportive stance he had taken with her a few moments earlier.

Chambers silenced the Detective with a slight shake of the head. “I’m going to have to ask you both to accompany Detective Ramirez and me to the police station for further questioning.”

He reached back under his jacket, and brought out a pair of restraints. “Rainier, you know the drill. Cuff him, Ramirez. Put your hands behind your back, please Ms. Compton.”

Maddy opened her mouth, caught Bret’s eye, saw the message there, saw him shake his head to stop her from saying anything more. Seething, she put her hands behind her back as Chambers restrained her wrists.

10:20 PM

Six hours later they were back in front of the fireplace in Maddy's living room.

A tray of martini's sat on the coffee table.

She sat in Bret's lap.

"I think I'll have one of those nasty cigarettes of yours, Kiddo," he said. "I doubt if gin's gonna be enough to take the edge off the burn I've got going on. That arrogant, obnoxious, son-of-a...."

"Not in here you won't. We don't smoke in the house. Bring your drink and let's go out to the patio." Maddy slipped off his lap and headed for the fridge, "it's chilly enough out there tonight to cool you right down."

He reached up and grabbed her hips, pulling her back to his lap. "Huh uh. Too much trouble. Besides, you haven't smoked since Wednesday. You're almost over the worst of quitting. Far be it from me to corrupt you again."

He grinned at her, that little lopsided grin she'd seen all too frequently in the past few days. The one that hurt her heart because it said, all too clearly, he was hurting.

“Have you ever decided what the real deal is here, Bret?” She snuggled back into his lap, took the pick from her glass and offered him the two fat green olives impaled on it.

Chambers had questioned them individually, Ramirez had questioned them individually. Then Chambers and Ramirez, working together, had questioned each of them individually while the other waited. They’d gone over and over and over the same questions. They’d gotten the same answers over and over.

Finally, when everyone was exhausted, Chambers demanded a “group” session so he and Ramirez could question Bret and Maddy together. Nothing changed. Eventually they were allowed to go, but were told, again, to “stay available.”

“I wish I had some idea,” Bret said, rubbing tension knots from her shoulders and neck. “Pulling us in and grilling us for six hours was a colossal waste of time. What I’d like to know is why the hell they’re spinning their wheels with us when Williams is so obviously the one they should be looking at for this.”

He munched the pungent olives.

“And what is this crap Chambers is dishing out about knowing Brandon?”

“Yeah. If he says he was out of the state... she quoted in a deep baritone impersonation of Chamber’s voice “he was out of the state. What is that all about?”

It ticked her off again, just remembering.

“Dunno, babe. Wish I did. But,” he put his glass back on the tray, put Maddy on the sofa and began turning off lights, “we’re hanging it up for today. I’ve had enough and so have you. We’re turning in. I’ll take the sofa.”

“That’s okay. I’m here. And I’m too tired to move,” Maddy told him. A coy little smile was playing around her mouth. She rolled from his lap and stretched out, as though preparing to sleep where she landed. She was tired. In fact she couldn’t remember ever being so tired. But somehow, surprisingly, she found the energy to play the ‘sofa game’ with him.

“You take the bed tonight.”

“Au contraire, ma chère.”

Laughing he picked her up again, tossed her over his shoulder and headed for the bedroom.

“Did you forget? You made your decision about our sleeping arrangements yesterday.”

"I did. Yes," he could feel her shaking with laughter. "There are, however, one or two details we have yet to work out."

She worked to keep her tone serious, businesslike.

"Bret, this may come as a shock to you, but I don't normally sleep in old sweats, such as you observed earlier in the week."

"Oh...? And you're thinking that will be a big disappointment to me? That little white number, what'd you call it, a teddy? If that's your norm it's not gonna be a disappointment. I can promise you."

He put her on her feet next to the bed and watched, fascinated with her attempt to lighten the mood despite her obvious exhaustion.

"No. Not a teddy. Not a T-shirt or a nightgown."

She stepped out of her jeans and pulled off her sweater revealing lacy undergarments about the same shade of blue as her eyes.

Bret worked at controlling his breathing, making an effort to anticipate where she was headed with this so he could continue to play along. He watched as she strolled into the bathroom, asking what he could only hope was the appropriate question.

"Okay Maddy. What do you normally wear to bed?"

She stepped out of the smoky blue lace panties and dropped her bra on the floor next to them. Picking up a cut glass atomizer from the counter she turned to face him, spraying a fine mist of something reminiscent of a sunny forest clearing enhanced with citrus blossoms into the air. As she walked toward him through the mist an impish grin played around her mouth.

“This, Rainier. Just this. Do you like it?”

He did. Noticeably. But he tried valiantly to utter an affirmation of some sort. It sounded more like a moan than anything else.

“Good. That’s great. ‘Cause to my way of thinking, the only thing more luxurious than Egyptian cotton sheets next to my bare skin would be your bare skin.”

She was closer to him now, tugging at his shirt in an attempt to pull it over his head.

“So...that means no more sleeping in T-shirts for you either, my love. Deal?”

He moaned again. She decided it must be another affirmative answer because he toppled them both onto the bed, making further conversation impossible with a sublimely passionate kiss.



CHAPTER FOUR – FRIDAY

It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are. _E.E. Cummings



10:30 AM

Brandon sat in the back booth of a dismal, seedy pool hall in East LA with the man calling himself Mick Evans.

Evans had been waiting for Brandon when his flight from Denver landed at LAX Thursday night. They worked their way through the throngs of travelers in the terminal, picked up Evan's car and pulled out onto one of LA's larger parking lots, commonly referred to as freeway 105. They traveled, at a snail's pace, through late rush hour traffic toward their destination. Neither man had much to say. Brandon watched as they moved through an off-the-

beaten-path neighborhood where most of buildings hadn't seen paint in the past three or four decades. The streets were littered with broken down vehicles, broken-down humans, and gang bangers. Lots of gang bangers.

Evans pulled up in front of one of the dirtier buildings, where a neon sign flashed the invitation, "_OOL H_LL - C_OR_ _N TAP" Brandon shuddered and managed to stifle a groan when Mick cut the engine, climbed out of the car and said, "Come on. Let's eat."

They each ordered a burger, fries and a beer. The burgers were huge, the fries were thin-cut, hot, and surprisingly, not greasy. Really not bad at all.

As the evening wore on they ordered a few more beers and exchanged a lot of information. Around eleven they checked into separate rooms in a sleaze-bag motel for the night. Brandon was tired enough that any flat surface looked good.

"Even this dump's better than sleeping in a vehicle or on an airplane," he thought.

He hadn't showered in two days and the itchy stubble of a beard was driving him nuts. Besides, there was no way he was going to let Evans pick up on the fact that he was reluctant to be in this part of town, let alone eat and sleep here. He had shed his clothes, climbed into the shower and turned on the tap, anticipating the usual motel trickle of lukewarm water. Another pleasant surprise

waited for him. The water was hot and there was actually enough of it coming out of the shower-head to give him a satisfying twenty minutes of solid comfort. He had opened the bottle of Excedrin he'd been carrying since leaving home and popped three, washing them down with murky water from a paper cup. Turning back the ratty looking bedspread he was amazed to see crisp, if somewhat threadbare white sheets and a clean blanket. He fell face first into the bed and slept the sleep of the innocent, or the utterly exhausted.

Now Brandon's watch told him it was 10:30 AM, Friday morning. They were waiting for one of Alistair McLean's henchmen to report in. He was late. Thirty minutes late and Brandon was starting to get cranky in spite of eight hours of sleep, a shower and a shave.

Brandon, cranky, was not something Evans wanted to deal with. Last time he'd seen Brandon get cranky the goon who'd pissed him off ended up needing stitches to fix a split lip, and a sling for the arm that accidentally got twisted up between his shoulder blades.

"Relax, Brandon. He'll be here."

"When?" Brandon snarled.

"I think maybe that's him now," Evans brightened up as a couple of Hispanic gang-banger types slouched through the front door,

blinking to adjust their eyes from daylight to smoky pool hall gloom.

“What’s the deal? He was supposed to be here half an hour ago. Alone.” Brandon started to stand up. He was way past cranky, Evans could tell.

“Chill, man,” Evans laid his hand on Brandon’s arm; then removed it quickly, remembering who he was dealing with. “These are some mean hombres. We don’t want to start something in here we can’t finish. We’re on their turf.”

“Screw turf,” Brandon snarled. “I came in for this meet on McLean’s say so. If these punks work for him, they’re as far off their turf as we are.”

As the two “punks” got closer to their table, Evans was thinking Brandon just might be right. Neither one of them was wearing “colors”. Neither had any visible tattoos and their scalps were pasty white under the closely cropped hair. Indicating their buzz cuts were very recent. “You think they’re playing dress up?”

“If they aren’t, my instincts are shot all to hell and gone.”

“Good morning gentlemen,” the punk on the right said. He spoke with a slight lisp, but no accent. He sounded more like an accountant than a gangster. “May we join you?”

“Sit,” Brandon stood up and indicated the punk should take a seat next to the wall. There was no way in hell he was going to be boxed into a booth by these thugs.

He’s either very trusting or very stupid, Brandon thought as the smaller of the two sat down next to the wall. Brandon sat again, close to the edge of the seat, with his foot braced for a quick take off if one was called for.

“You boys want a beer?” Evans offered, making an attempt to ease the tension a little. Neither did.

“Okay, so what’ve you got for us?” Brandon asked.

“Mr. McLean sent this.” Punk number two reached inside the leg pocket of his over-sized baggy pants. The hair on Brandon’s neck bristled. He knew those huge pockets were meant to conceal all manner of nastiness, some type of automatic weapon being the most likely choice.

“We’re expected to return with your reply within the hour.” He laid down a linen-weave business envelope, the McLean and Co. logo embossed on it, pushing it toward Brandon.

When Evans reached for it, Brandon put one finger on his wrist. The cold steel in his eyes had Evans pulling back instantly. With Evans back in his place, Brandon picked up the envelope, ripped

off one end, blew in the opening to expand it and pulled out a single sheet of expensive looking letterhead.

“I’ll be right back,” he walked to the bar, leaving all three of the booth’s occupants blinking after him in surprise.

Hooking the heel of his boot over the bar rail, he raised a finger ordering a beer. “You got my back friend?” he asked. To the men in the booth he appeared to be speaking to the barkeep. He was, in fact, speaking to a homeless guy sleeping off a few too many beers on the sidewalk across the street. At least that’s what it looked like he was doing. The wire he was wearing was carefully concealed in his ragged jacket. Just as the wire Brandon wore was carefully concealed under the turtleneck sweater he’d chosen for this meeting.

“Yeah, B, I got you. But be careful, man. Evans ain’t as stupid as he pretends and the goons left backup in the Hummer they rode in on. Looks like two...maybe three more of ‘em in there. We’re seriously outnumbered here, amigo.”



11:20 PM

Brandon sat behind Maddy's antique mahogany desk. His boots were propped on her cadenza. A file folder marked '**Confidential** – **McLean**' rested on his thighs. He turned to face the door and spoke.

"It's not in here I'm telling you. I've been through every file. Looked at every scrap of paper. It's simply not here. Hey man! Don't turn those lights on in there! Somebody will see 'em from the street."

The homeless guy from east LA was striding away from the receptionist's desk, down the hall toward Maddy's office, his brisk pace and rigid posture belying the story told by his wardrobe.

"So if it's not here...and you didn't find it when you tossed Rainier's place, then where the hell is it?" he asked, entering Maddy's office and taking one of the visitor's chairs facing her desk.

"Damned if I know!" Brandon spun the desk chair around to face him. "The thing is, the more we find out about the Vandiver boys and their deal with Evans and McLean, the less sense it makes for Maddy and Rainier to be involved at all."

“Yeah. I’m beginning to think we missed the boat by looking at her in the first place. And, if she’s not in it, Rainier sure the hell isn’t.”

Brandon’s cell phone bing-a-linged, causing both men to jump. Pulling it out of his pocket and flipping it open, he announced, “Here we go! It’s McLean. Right on time.”

He pressed ON.

“McLean?”

As he listened to the caller, his mind ran back over the meeting with Evans and McLean’s boys earlier in the day. Nothing went down there to give us a clue as to who’s really calling the shots, he thought. It could be McLean. But he could be answering to somebody higher up on the food chain, too. His messenger boys delivered his demands and laid down a deadline. We’ve already over shot that deadline by another... He glanced at his watch. It was half past eleven. ...twelve hours. This call was the first contact since the pool hall.

“Yeah...yeah...yeah...McLean. I get that you’re burned. So what?”

He listened again.

“Well the people I answer to aren’t prepared to turn over all their cards at this stage in the game; so breaking my kneecaps won’t get

you what you need any faster. I'll get back to you in the morning.”
He jabbed OFF, and shoved the phone back into his pocket.

“Idiot!”

He shoved away from the desk and headed down the hall toward the side door.

“Come on. Let's get out of here before the cops spot us.”

“I think we may have stretched our luck a touch on that score, amigo.” His homeless friend suggested.

Since, as Brandon exited through the side door and immediately saw his friend in the grasp of one Lieutenant Frank Chambers, he had to agree.

“Out a little late tonight, aren't we boys?” Chambers asked his voice oily with triumph.

“Chambers! What the hell...?”

Brandon laid a hand on Chambers arm encouraging him to release the homeless guy.

“He's mine. Mahoney... Chambers. Chambers... Sean Mahoney. And we aren't the only ones out late tonight. What are you doing back here?”

“Same as you I imagine. Hoping the perp will return to the scene. Nice threads, by the way.” Chambers gingerly fingered the filthy sleeve of Mahoney’s jacket. “Man, how do you stand these rags? You stink!”

“You get used to it,” Mahoney grinned. “And it normally provides a little clearing around any op I’m in on. Most people give me a nice wide berth when I’m under in this outfit.”

Chambers nodded. He could see why. He was tempted to step a few feet back himself.

“Of course,” Mahoney continued, “I have to admit, a shower and a change looks mighty good right now. I’ve been under since B called me in on this late Wednesday night.”

“Step over here a minute, will you.” Chambers moved out of the circle of light near the building and into deeper shadows, indicating Brandon and Mahoney should follow him. “So, have you got anything you want to share with me on this? I keep hitting one brick wall after another; and there are more damn leads going nowhere than there are in my kid’s game of Clue. Ramirez is convinced Compton and Rainier are clean. He’s almost got me convinced, too.”

“We were just tossing around that same theory.” Brandon agreed.

“The thing is, I keep turning up evidence that points directly to them.” Chambers paused considering how much of his case to reveal. “Like the files we found in Rainier’s home office. You missed those, buddy-boy.”

“You found files at Rainier’s place that implicate him in Evans’ murder?” Brandon took a step closer to the Lieutenant. “I told you. I went through there with a fine tooth comb. There was nothing pointing, even marginally, toward him or Compton.”

“A fine tooth comb, huh? It looked more like you used a machete and a sledge hammer.” Chambers tone implied a degree of disgust at what he’d found.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Brandon took another step toward Chambers and raised both hands in question.

“Come on. You trashed the place. Way above and beyond the call in my estimation. That was no simple in and out recon. Poor sap doesn’t have a dish, a chair or a shirt left. Does he?”

“Wait a minute. Wait just a damn minute.”

Now Brandon had his hand on Chambers arm. A very intense expression darkened his already dark brown eyes.

“I went into Rainier’s place on Wednesday night looking for anything that might point to his involvement with Evans, McLean

or Vandiver. I did a through, by the book, search leaving everything as close to the way I found it as I felt was required. I'll admit I was pissed at Rainier and in a hell of a hurry, so I may not have been as careful about leaving it pristine as I would normally have done. But I did not trash his place. No way! No way in hell. When you mentioned it was vandalized I thought you were talking about the files I dumped and the books I tossed around. I didn't give a damn if he knew somebody was looking at him. I thought it might shake him up enough that he'd make a mistake. It didn't. But you can rest assured I did not damage his personal property in any way."

"Well...well...well. Maybe we just caught a break boys."

Chambers smiled at Brandon. "I thought that mess was a little over the top, even for you B. I believe you. If you say you didn't make it, you didn't make it, but somebody sure as hell did. It interests me that whoever it was also felt the need to leave a nice tidy packet of incriminating evidence for the police. So what say we try and find out who? And why."

"Now you're talking. That's something I can get behind." Brandon turned, walked away a few feet and fished out his cell. He flipped it open, pressed a number and waited.

"Yeah, I know what time it is. Listen. I just crossed paths with the locals on the Evans murder again. Somebody was inside Rainier's house after my search on Wednesday. They trashed the place. Big

time. Planted some stuff that points to him being involved in the case.”

He listened for a beat, then continued.

“So I’m thinking maybe we’ve got another player here. I’m gonna ask Chambers to haul Compton and Rainier in for some more questions Monday morning and hold on to ‘em long enough for you to have a look see. Maybe get some prints. Find out if there’s any trace evidence.”

Listening again, he turned to Chambers and asked, “Did your guys dust for prints in there?”

“No need. You said you were inside. We figured you just got carried away. Maybe evened up your beef with Rainier over cutting in on your time with the lady. I knew you were gone on her the first time we talked.” Chambers answered with a sleazy smirk. “Like I said, I thought it was overkill, even for you but to each his own.”

Brandon ignoring the personal aside, turned back to his cell.

“The local cops didn’t bother to dust inside. They fingered me for the vandalism as a result of some personal business between me and Rainier. It worked out just great for whoever followed me in.”

He was watching Chambers with speculative eyes as he listened again.

“Known...? Besides me? Rainier, Compton, Chambers, Ramirez, a local cop name of Tovar.” He turned to Chambers, “Anybody else been in there leaving prints and crap?” Then back to the cell, “That’s it. They haven’t cleared the scene so Rainier hasn’t hired a cleanup squad yet, thank God.”

He glanced at Mahoney, cocked an eyebrow toward Chambers and gave an almost imperceptible twitch of his head indicating *distract him* then spoke again in a whisper. “Get a team in there now. Tonight. Before the locals know we’re on it.” He pushed OFF and shoved the cell back in his pocket.



CHAPTER FIVE - MONDAY



If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything. _Mark Twain

7:45 AM

On Monday morning Maddy carried her breakfast tray to the patio as usual. For years she'd maintained this satisfying ritual to pamper and prepare herself to face the coming day.

This morning there were a few changes in the routine. The tray was set for two, there was no sign of an after-breakfast smoke, and Bret was waiting for her at the table.

Seated in the dappled shade, he was drinking fresh grapefruit juice and checking his email on her laptop. Her heart gave a little hitch

just looking at him. He looked so damn sexy sitting there barefooted, his silver hair still damp from the shower, one elbow resting on the table, juice glass in hand. Yes indeed. The changes in her routine were comfortable and very, very pleasant. It thrilled her to realize exactly how simple it would be to fit her daily rituals around his presence in her life.

Their weekend together had been exquisite. Early Saturday they shopped for food and some essential clothing for Bret. For the rest of the weekend they cooked together, ate together when they were hungry and slept together when they were tired. It was a romantic time of really getting to know each other intimately, with no interruptions or inhibitions.

Before breakfast this morning they'd made up a to-do list for the day while enjoying a hot, fragrant, shower. Together. The first item on their list was finding out, if possible, how much longer the police planned to hold onto the crime scenes. Clean-up and restoration operations on both the office and Bret's house needed to get underway as soon as the cops would give them the okay to go back in.

MCD needed to get back to business. Before they opened the office again Maddy wanted to re-carpet the back rooms. An evaluation by local 'carpet care professionals' assured her there would be no stains left "*after a thorough cleaning.*" She didn't even want to think about it. The very idea of looking at the same color carpet in

there sickened her. Knowing it would always be speckled taupe Berber with a spreading pool of sticky red in her mind's eye made the decision easy. Bret agreed. Today they would pick out something new.

Even though he hated to think about it, Bret needed to get back to his own place, too. If only to figure out what he was going to do with it. Frankly, the ease of being here with Maddy surprised him. Friends considered him a confirmed bachelor. At thirty-six, he tended to agree with their assessment. Funny thing was, the last few days had pretty much convinced him he could get used to this partnership with no problems at all. He watched as Maddy refilled her juice glass then reached for his. "Jeez," he thought. "We fell into this together arrangement like we'd lived in the same house for years." It was true. And in a way, except for the really amazing sex, they had.

"Nice bonus though."

"What?" Maddy, smiled and touched his knee. "What's a nice bonus?"

Bret hadn't realized he'd said that out loud. His knee-jerk answer would normally have been 'nothing.' Instead he told her, "You. You're a nice bonus. Best one I ever got. Think we can play hooky again today? Maybe play with that teddy of yours some more?"

Little imps of delight danced in her eyes.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Rainier. Honest. But you need to understand that teddy is just the first in a long line of toys I have to share with you. We can play later."

She'd made up her mind to do her best at keeping it light while still focusing on their plans to get down to business.

"Let's go see if the party decorations are still draped all over our office. You know, that lovely yellow "do not cross" tape, Ramirez and his boys used to show us how in control of this party they really are."

Bret could tell she was working at showing him a positive point of view, keeping things up-beat. He also knew her mind had already changed gears. She was back in the CEO saddle and he had little choice but to saddle up and go where she led.

"I'm almost certain Ramirez will be reasonable about the length of time required to release both scenes, Maddy."

Chambers... he wasn't so sure of. He thought telling her that right now would probably go a long way toward poking holes in her bubble of optimism. Instead he said, "Chambers may be able to restrict access to the murder scene but..."

Before he could finish putting thoughts into words, the kitchen phone jangled.

Maddy stepped into the kitchen, picked it up and checked caller ID.

“Speak of the devil,” she carried the phone out to Bret. “SLO PD. Smart money is on either Ramirez or Chambers.”

“Rainier.” Bret was all business as he answered. He stood and carried the phone back inside, looking for something to write notes with. He listened while the caller identified himself, explaining the reason for the call. A dark scowl shadowed his face, turning his mouth down and his eyes cold. When he spoke again his voice was ice.

“How many more questions can there be Lieutenant? You grilled us for six hours on Friday. The answers haven’t changed over the weekend.”

They spoke for a few more minutes. He jotted down a phone number and a meeting time. When he put the phone back on the base it was none too gently.

“Damn!”

When he looked at Maddy, who’d followed him into the kitchen, his eyes were filled with a combination of irritation and sympathy.

“You heard?”

She nodded.

“Most of it. He wants to question us some more,”

Rather than going directly back to the table on the patio, she stopped at a ledge of flowers growing along the wall. Poking through a potted azalea, nipping off spent flowers, keeping her back turned to him so he wouldn't see the fear she was feeling.

“Today...?” she asked

“This morning. As soon as we can get to the police station. Says he'll be happy to send an officer to escort us if we can't make it right away. Very threatening, in an I'm in charge and don't you forget it sort of way. The slimy cretin.”

Bret drained his coffee cup and reached for the pot to pour them both a refill.

“You know, I'm not usually as put off by authority and rank as I am with this guy. He rubs me the wrong way every time he opens his mouth. I guess he's just doing the job, but...”

“Does he have to be so official about it?” she finished for him, joining him at the table and reaching for her coffee.

“Yeah. That. And the implication that tells me he thinks we're guilty until we can prove we're not. I was on the job for almost six years and in all that time I never met a cop who refused to treat the victims of a crime with respect. Until now. Until him.”

“Bret, maybe he honestly doesn’t think we are the victims. Friday he questioned us like he believes we hired somebody to murder Mick Evans then went over and trashed your house to divert suspicion away from ourselves. I’ve wondered about that all weekend.”

She pushed the last of her toast around on the plate—no longer eating—just worrying.

“What connection to my past do you suppose brought two of Harry Vandiver’s sons to San Luis? To our office? To our business? And why was one of them killed here? There has to be one, doesn’t there? A connection I mean.”

Bret took her hands gently in his, to stop the fidgeting, and the worrying.

“Maddy, I’ll admit I’ve been steering us away from stuff that might remind you of Vandiver or your mother wherever possible. But I’m starting to think there’s no way we can figure out what’s going on here without you taking a trip down memory lane. I’d give anything I own, and this morning I own considerably less than I did last week,” his face twisted in that ironic little grin she’d come to recognize, “to spare you from having to go back there. But until we figure it out we’re flying blind.”

“Believe me. I’m not thrilled about going there either. But until I do, until we know what Chambers is digging for, we can’t hope to

win whatever game he's playing with us. You know how I feel about going into any deal without the cards stacked in our favor Bret."

She turned her hand over to clasp his and give it a reassuring I'll be okay squeeze.

"So let's say we take a trip down memory lane. Let's try forcing you to revisit your childhood. What happens if we come up empty? You were only a kid Maddy. What happens if you can't remember anything except the horrors? Hell, I can't remember most of what happened to me in high school, much less elementary school."

The idea of asking her to awaken the memories of unhappiness, abuse and, ultimately, murder gave him cold chills. It was unthinkable to ask, knowing she might go through it for nothing.

"Ya know?" she could sense his reluctance. She got the feeling he might back away from the idea altogether just to spare her discomfort. "I've been thinking about the information you gathered on Brandon Vandiver. I didn't see a single newspaper article or letter from Silverthorn. Every clipping you showed me came either from the Rocky Mountain News or the Denver Post. All those records were dated prior to when we moved to the Lake."

Bret studied her for a moment, thinking back over the reports and data his friend in the Denver PD had helped him accumulate.

“You’re right! Absolutely right. And I never even thought about it until just now. There would have been local news and gossip in the Silverthorn or Summit County papers when Vandiver bought The Lake, and again when your mother was convicted of his murder. Those would have been monumental events in such a small community back in those days.”

“Would they archive issues as far back as 1989?” Maddy asked, glad to see him pick up the red herring she’s tossed out.

“Sure. Maybe even online. Lemme take a look.”

He grabbed her laptop and typed in a search for ‘Summit County news’. With a few clicks he shook his head, “Nope. Earliest thing here is 2001. Doesn’t mean they don’t archive on microfilm or something. I’ll make a few calls.”

“Sounds like a plan. Why don’t we run downtown and get Chambers off our case before we start?”

Maddy was a firm believer in getting the most unpleasant task of the day out of the way early, then moving on to the fun stuff. She was a little dubious as to what might be considered fun stuff on the list they had laid out for today.

“Okay babe.”

As she stood and started clearing breakfast dishes to the tray Bret grabbed her and pulled her into his lap.

“But before we do that, I’ve got an idea that may take some of the sting out of the rest of today’s agenda.”

He started slowly nibbling his way up the side of her neck toward her lips.

“How’d you know what I was thinking?” she laughed, intrigued at the parallel line their thoughts took.

For Bret to be completely in sync with her during a business deal was something she’d learned to expect. To be on the same wavelength here, now, was a reassuring and exciting bonus. For a few minutes they concentrated on simply losing themselves in the bonus.

"Oh yeah. You too." Maddy was laughing again as soon as she caught her breath. "You're my best ever bonus, too."

Back in the kitchen Maddy started loading the dishwasher. Bret stowed away the toaster. He was in the process of putting away bread, butter and jam when a painful grimace passed over his face. His expression was so dramatic Maddy stopped and turned to him.

“What?”

“Something I didn’t mention when Chambers called.”

She could tell it was something he didn’t want to mention at all. “I figure I can guess what is.”

“Brandon,” they said in unison; each nodding agreement.

“Another unpleasant subject we’ve been avoiding.”

Maddy put in the last plate and glass then reached for the dishwasher liquid under the sink.

“And another subject I’m certain we would both rather avoid indefinitely. But Bret, we’re going to have to deal with him sooner or later.”

“It’ll have to be sooner Kiddo. Chambers told me he’ll be there too. This morning. I’ve been wondering why he wasn’t included in our little session on Friday. Apparently today we won’t be so lucky.”

And if he tries pointing the finger at you again I’ll for sure have to break his pretty face. Bret thought.

“We’re going to let him go, aren’t we?”

Maddy’s question sounded both hopeful and fearful. It was a combination of emotions so totally out of character for her Bret crossed the kitchen and took her in his arms.

“Yeah, babe. We’re gonna fire his ass. If not at the station this morning then the first time he has the nerve to show his scheming, traitorous face at MCD again. Nobody pulls the crap he’s pulled and gets by with it. Not to mention the fact that I’m still convinced he’s up to his conniving neck in Evans’ murder.”

“Don’t hold back, Rainier.” Maddy laughed. “Tell me how you really feel.”

She skipped out of the kitchen just ahead of his bare toes as he aimed a playful kick at her backside.



8:50 AM

Detective Ramirez paced his office, coffee cup in hand. The murder board he'd set up with photos of the Evans/Vandiver murder now had a fairly hefty section devoted to shots illustrating the destruction of Bret Rainier's house and garage. The file folder and papers found inside by Lieutenant Chambers were scattered across his desk. He'd sort of borrowed them before Chambers got to his office this morning. He'd just spent the better part of three hours going through them again in minute detail.

A little over an hour ago Lieutenant Chambers had stopped by his office to say Rainier, Compton and Williams would be back in interview about ten.

"Of course, I'll want you to sit in on the session."

His parting smile was nothing if not patronizing.

"Yeah. Of course. I'll be there."

Somehow Ramirez had managed to cover the sarcasm and make his acceptance sound businesslike and congenial. What he really thought was more along the lines of, *Yeah, right. You take over my case, cut me out of the loop. Shovel all the grunt work off on me and now you're willing to have me sit in on your interviews. Interviews I should be conducting. Of course, I'll be more than*

happy to watch and listen while you lap up another commendation for solving my case, Lieutenant.

Ramirez shuffled the stack of papers back into their folder, grumbling to the empty room.

“Thought I respected him. Thought he was top-notch. Brought him on board because I trusted him. And now? I’ll be damned if I don’t think he’s gonna screw me over for the glory of another collar.”

As he stood and reached for his briefcase, a sticky note floated away from the folder and fluttered to the floor. He bent to retrieve it. There were half a dozen words scrawled across the note. As he read them his eyes widened and his breath quickened.

“Well I’ll be go to hell! Wouldn’t that just frost ya?”

He opened his desk drawer, drew out a clear plastic evidence envelope and ever so carefully placed the little yellow sticky note inside, touching only a tiny corner.

“Okay Jorge. Let’s go sit in on the Lieutenant’s interview session.”

He was almost skipping as he headed down the hall toward the appointed room.



9:15 AM

Brandon, and Sean Mahoney—who was now dressed in clean jeans, a white T-shirt and smelled fresh as a daisy—were sitting at one end of a long table in a conference room at the SLO Police Department. They were waiting for Ramirez, Rainier and Compton to show.

Lieutenant Chambers sat at the opposite end of the table, evidently the end he considered the head of the table. Brandon was watching him with an expression that might have chilled the blood of a man with a lesser ego.

“So, when they arrive, I’ll do the talking.”

Chambers continued with his briefing. His instructions and the explanation of his agenda had been going on for the past twenty minutes.

“You two will offer nothing, unless I indicate differently and then only what is relevant to the immediate point. Is that clear?”

“I heard you Chambers.”

Brandon was twisting a Styrofoam cup half full of cold coffee around and around in his elegant hands. With each turn he made a small indentation in the rim with his thumbnail. Mahoney was wondering if each small puncture was an imaginary gouge in one

of Chambers eyes. Both of them had about reached the limits of their tolerance, and Mahoney knew from experience his tolerance far outreached Brandon's.

"When they arrive," Brandon glanced at his watch, noting they were well past the time he had been told to expect the interviews to begin. "If they arrive. We'll let you run the show. You go ahead and ask your questions. We'll even let you make believe that we're here to support you. We'll fill in any blanks you need filled. We'll be good little boys and only speak when we're spoken to. But remember this." He shoved the militated cup aside and half standing, bent forward across the table, bringing him nose to nose with the Lieutenant. "I've been working this op for well over two years. I've turned over every rock you're looking under. Most of them more than once. I have an investment in this case. And I don't enjoy having someone, anyone, walk all over the evidence I've gathered. You could muddy the water enough to put us damn near back to square one. So be careful. Be very, very careful."

Chambers squared up his shoulders, worked up an indignant growl, and prepared to engage in—what anyone who knew Brandon well could have told him would end up being—an old fashioned pissing contest. One that he would lose. He cleared his throat and opened his mouth. And before he could belabor his point, the door opened to admit Ramirez.

Bret and Maddy were only a few steps behind him.

“Saved by the bell.” Mahoney breathed.

“Good morning Lieutenant. Gentlemen” Ramirez was bouncing on the balls of his feet, anticipation and adrenalin visibly pulsing around him.

“You’re late,” Chambers snarled.

The air in the small room was electrified with narrowly averted conflict. All three of the newcomers could sense it. Each read it in a slightly different manner...one with apathy, one with dread, and one with downright rebellion.

Brandon sat back, crossed his arms over his chest and smirked. There could be no other word for it. Mahoney moved his leg under the table just enough to nudge Brandon’s knee. A gesture between comrades that clearly said, “Here we go!”



10:15 AM (MST)

That Monday morning, as Detective Ramirez went bouncing into the conference room in San Luis Obispo, Officer John Tovar was being released from the Lakewood Colorado Jail, where he'd just spent the weekend.

He was beyond tired. He ached all over. His clothes smelled of bodily fluids he was pretty sure were not his own, and he was thoroughly irritated. He had just put in the worst 72 hours of his life.

Once on the street he hailed a taxi and directed the driver to take him to Denver International Airport, "and step on it." As the cabbie threaded his way east across the still snowbound city, Officer Tovar rested his head on the seat back, lost in thought.

"How the hell did I end up in the can?" He muttered.

"You say somethin' Mister?" the cabbie asked over his shoulder while swerving across lanes to miss a lumbering City Bus making a wide right in front of them. John didn't see the bus, didn't hear the cabbie. Instead he saw himself clawing his way up a snowy embankment away from the wreckage of his rental car.

Remembering...

After freeing himself from the wrecked rental car he'd accumulated his gear. His head hurt. He knew he'd never get back to Denver in time to catch his flight home. Instead, he'd have to climb up to the road, hitch a ride down I-70 to the airport, catch a later flight back to California; then report in with Ramirez. Let him deal with the smashed up car. With just a little luck he could spend the night tucked in his own bed for a change. He had no way of knowing how wrong he was or what forces were conspiring to waylay his plans.

By the time he reached the Interstate the wind was gusting at what felt like 50 or 60 miles an hour. It cut through his heavy jacket like a hot knife through butter. The snowflakes had turned into blinding, razor sharp ice crystals. He had to figure the wind chill at about twenty below zero. He stumbled east along the outside edge of the road, waving and holding up his thumb to every passing vehicle. It looked to him like there were precious few vehicles passing and it was getting dark fast in spite of being early afternoon. He recalled walking what seemed to be miles, but was in reality only a few blocks. His boots were soaked through, his feet freezing. He was not dressed for winter in Colorado, at least not for hitch-hiking to Denver in a blizzard. The wound on his forehead was throbbing violently. He was fighting to keep from losing consciousness again.

The next thing he could remember was waking up in an Emergency Room somewhere surrounded by people he'd never

seen before. There was a doctor holding two blurry fingers in front of his face and asking him to count them. He was diagnosed with a mild concussion and spent Friday night hospitalized ‘under observation’.

On Saturday morning, sporting the headache to end all headaches, he was questioned by cops from two counties. Apparently he had been dropped off in front of St. Anthony’s Medical Center about midnight Friday by a person or persons unknown. He had staggered inside and asked for treatment. At first he was considered just another drunk looking for a nice warm bed to sleep it off. The night staff called the police. In the meantime he was able to convince someone to take a closer look. When his head injury was discovered he was admitted, but he was unable to produce any form of identification. His wallet, badge and gun were gone. No one had seen his flight bag or briefcase. He was admitted as a John Doe.

By noon Saturday the rental car registered to Officer John Tovar had been reported stolen. According to the SLO PD, Officer Tovar was considered missing. He'd tried desperately to explain who he was and how he ended up at St. Anthony’s, although he was, admittedly, a little fuzzy on that last part. He claimed to be the missing California police officer, but without identification he had no way of proving it. He suggested they run his prints. They told him to shut up and take a seat. They told him they’d get around to it.

When he tried explaining where he thought his rental car was run off the highway, he was told CHP and snow removal crews along that stretch of I-70 never reported an abandoned vehicle. He was getting nowhere fast. And apparently nobody wanted to be responsible for simply picking up a phone and verifying his story.

He was transferred from the hospital to a holding cell in the Lakewood police station and basically forgotten for two days. He yelled about making his one allowed phone call. He yelled about his civil rights. He yelled about wanting an attorney. He yelled for hours on end and was simply ignored.

Until this morning. Then suddenly everyone was offering ‘ah shucks, John’ apologies.

Arrangements for a flight to California were made. He was handed forty dollars in cash the ‘ah shucks’ boys had collected as a peace offering. And he was free to go! Just like that.

As the cab careened along the icy streets, Tovar racked his brain, trying to figure out how it was possible, in the information age, to be completely cut off from anyone who could identify him. It was as though he had simply been ‘put on ice’ for the weekend. He wanted to know why. He wanted to know what the hell was going on.

Once inside DIA Tovar found the appropriate airline counter, picked up his ticket, and made his way to the departure gate. With

an hour and a half to kill before take-off he spent ten bucks of the forty in cash he carried on a taco and a beer. The taco was greasy and tasteless, the beer pee-warm. It didn't matter. His mind was not on food.

Where were his wallet, badge, weapon, computer and flight bag? Was some 'Rocky Mountain wild-ass' walking around with his driver's license, credit cards, Police ID and a gun?

He wanted some answers, and he didn't want to wait until he was back in California to get them. The only person with answers was his commanding officer. He needed to call Ramirez. The problem with that was, he also calculated he would need every penny of the thirty dollars he had left to hire a cab from SLO Regional Airport to the station. With no ID he sure couldn't rent a car, and he'd be damned if he was gonna try hitching a ride.

"Ah the hell with it." he exchanged some bills for coins and walked across the concourse to a bank of pay phones. He dialed Ramirez' personal number, listening as it rang three times. He was about to hang up rather than pay for talking to voice mail when the Detective answered.

"Tovar here sir." he was making a real effort to keep from relaying the stress of the last several days to his commanding officer. He wasn't sure it was working. He sounded pissed, even to his own ears.

“I wanted to report directly to you, sir. And ask if you could send a car to meet....”

He bit off the rest of his request and listened to Ramirez until a computerized voice cut in with “deposit two dollars and forty five cents for the next three minutes, please.”

He was fishing out change to make the required payment, when he heard Ramirez speak quickly over the computer. “Call back in ten. Collect. We need to talk.”



9:25 AM

Detective Ramirez excused himself and left the conference room for the second time in five minutes. Chambers had raised an irritated eyebrow when the cell phone rang, interrupting his line of questioning. He had shown both frustration and anger when Ramirez interrupted him again to say he needed to make another call and would return briefly.

Back in his office, Ramirez closed the door and locked it, something he rarely did. He wanted privacy for this conversation. He unlocked his desk drawer and took out the file folder holding the little yellow sticky note in its plastic protective covering. Reading the single scrawled sentence again, he experienced another jolt of excitement.

When his phone rang he accepted the collect call from Tovar and snapped off the officer's questions gruffly.

"Listen John. I've only got a few minutes here. I need to know a couple of things about your trip. You followed Brandon Vandiver to the Silverthorn land office without him making your cover, right?"

Tovar answered, "Right."

"You're absolutely sure of that?"

“Yeah...?”

“Think carefully, John. Were there any civilians in on the process that landed you in jail for the weekend?” Ramirez listened as Tovar listed doctors, nurses, hospital staff.

”No. No. No. After the hospital. When you were taken into police custody?”

Tovar told him about the two suits who rode along in the black and white that had transported him from the hospital to the station then sat in while they questioned him.

“I thought it was funny at the time because nobody identified them as cops and neither of them said a word the entire time.”

“That’s the way I had it pictured,” Ramirez nodded and fingered the plastic cover. “Don’t come to the station when you get back to town John. I’ll pick you up at the airport myself. Don’t accept a ride from anyone else. Wait for me! I’ve gotta go back. I’ll explain when you get here.”

Without waiting for a response from Tovar, he clicked his phone OFF, replaced the note in his desk drawer, locked it and strode down the hall to rejoin the meeting.

When he opened the door Chambers was standing, slightly bent forward, hands on the edge of the table, eyes fierce and combative.

Brandon was talking.

“...and like it or not what is going to happen will happen. Oh. Come on in Ramirez. You’re gonna want to hear all of this,” he finished.

Chambers glared at the Detective. Turning his attention back to Brandon, he snarled, “This is unacceptable. The information you are about to divulge is classified. In my judgment opening it up to civilians and police personnel in general will do nothing to further the investigation. It may in fact, jeopardize my entire operation.”

Brandon kicked back in his chair; a self-satisfied grin crossed his face. Bret and Maddy recognized his posture from their previous experience in critical meetings. He had just shifted the focus away from the head of the table. Often, when this occurred, the chair was not appreciative of his innate ability to accomplish it so easily.

“So. As I was saying. My associate,” he indicated Sean Mahoney with a gesture in his general direction “and I, are not here this morning to be interviewed by the Lieutenant as you have been led to believe. We are here in a supportive role to the officers of the San Luis Obispo Police Department.

"First, I suppose it would be appropriate for me to introduce Special Agent Sean Mahoney. Agent Mahoney and I have worked closely together over the past four years. First in Los Angeles, more recently, here in San Luis Obispo. We transferred here from

Denver during the course of an ongoing investigation. Said investigation ties into the murder of Mick Evans. Which we are gathered here this morning to discuss.

"Lieutenant Chambers and I crossed paths about three years ago while we were still on assignment in LA. Our case at the time touched on another of his investigations. As a result he recognized me here. Not as Brandon Williams or Brandon Vandiver. But as Senior Agent Benjamin Merrill, Colorado Special Assignments Bureau."

He glanced briefly at Bret then at Maddy. His cool eyes calculating their reaction to his statement. Rainier was good, he thought. Barely a flicker. Maddy, on the other hand was seething. In another minute there might be smoke pouring out her ears. He stifled a chuckle, nicely covered by a slight cough and continued.

"Specifically Agent Mahoney and I are members of a task-force established to provide assistance to local law enforcement agencies. We participate in investigating suspicious deaths, missing persons, organized crime, prostitution-related offenses and crimes against children. We also provide assistance in "cold cases". Our main priority is resolving unsolved homicides originating in the state of Colorado.

"Our involvement here stems from an ongoing investigation pertaining to one Harry Vandiver. To his associates Alistair McLean and Michael Evans, and their various children and heirs."

He glanced at Maddy, noting that her mouth was hard, a thin disapproving line, and her eyes were blazing.

“To give you a little background on the Vandiver ongoing...in the early ‘80s Harry Vandiver, Alistair McLean and Michael Evans, Sr. formed a partnership, doing business as Tri-County Realtors. The scheme was to take advantage of construction plans for a new airport that would replace the old Denver airport, Stapleton International.

“There were rumors around Denver at the time the project could cost upwards of a billion dollars before it was completed. It was to occupy fifty-three square miles of farm land, encompassing small communities, personal and commercial real estate and some government lands. The final project costs actually weighed in at just a bit under five billion dollars.

“Tri-Country Realtors counted on cashing in on the largesse. They were also banking on the state’s burgeoning tourist industry. Real estate in the mountains west of Denver had started to gain international appeal. An hour from Denver, Summit County was developing four world-class ski resorts; Arapahoe Basin, Breckenridge, Copper Mountain and Keystone. That meant thousands of acres of surrounding lands would be developed into year-round recreation areas. Plus. the state was seeing a huge influx of industry and. Therefore. population along the entire Front Range, from Pueblo north to Larimer County.

“There were, literally, hundreds of millions of dollars to be made given the right connections and an insider’s advantage.

“Vandiver and his partners worked smart and they worked hard. They played politics. Put key people in place wherever the wealth of information available would do them the most good. They bought land and properties for pennies on the dollar. Some say by using intimidation and violence. Others say by more horrendous methods. There were rumors.... They then sold at huge profits. One transaction alone closed for close to fifty-million dollars.”

He paused for effect, “In cash.”

“The Bureau started looking at Vandiver and company in connection with some of their more atrocious methods of persuasion. We have at least twelve unsolved homicides with threads leading back to these guys. But that cash deal was to prove the beginning of the end for them.

“As the Broker, Evans’ job was to schmooze with the country club set trolling for marks. He hit on one mark too many, a tough old bird from the crème of Denver’s social register. They tried to bilk her out of her family’s ranch east of Denver, and a collection of ancient gold coins dating back to the Caesars, plus odds and ends of art and jewelry. The whole deal was worth somewhere in the neighborhood of \$450 million. She smelled a rat. Went to the Feds. They worked out a sting operation. Setting the boys up to take payment for a prime parcel of real estate in cash. They

marked the bills. But the boys outsmarted ‘em. Appears they stashed the cash, instead of spending it. No proof, no arrests.

“Long before DIA replaced Stapelton in 1995, all three had amassed enormous fortunes, dissolved their partnership and crawled off into the shadows.

“Vandiver ended up dead, allegedly killed in 1989 by his then wife Evelyn Compton. McLean relocated to San Francisco and was known to have ties to organized crime both there and in the LA area. So far as we can determine, although he’s now based out of LA, his circumstances have not changed dramatically in the last decade. We know that Michael Evans, Sr. was killed in an automobile accident in the French Alps in early 2001. That brings us to the children and heirs,” he paused and looked around the table.

Chambers was still glowering. His displeasure at having lost control of the situation all too evident. The glow of anticipation had slowly seeped out of Detective Ramirez’ eyes as Agent Merrill, aka Brandon’s narrative unfolded.

Bret had moved his chair a few inches closer to Maddy and put his arm protectively around her shoulders. His face was a study in conflicting emotions. Maddy’s face was strained. Her eyes now locked with Merrill’s. He could read the questions in them, but dared not acknowledge the pull he felt to protect her from what he knew was yet to come.

“Go on Ben. Don’t stop now. We’ve come this far, you might as well screw up the whole operation.” Chambers voice was tense... his attempt at irony out of place and infuriating.

Merrill shot him a contemptuous glance, then prepared to continue.

The low electronic tone of Mahoney’s cell phone cut through the room like a laser. Special Agent Merrill gave a fractional nod... once up, once toward the door.

Mahoney stepped out to answer the call. He kept one hand on the knob, leaving the door open a crack. “Yeah. Bring him in. We’ll wait.” He closed the phone and returned to his chair. He was thinking, saved by the bell again.

He stepped into the room, returned to his seat.

“Our boy’s back in town. He’ll be here by eleven.”

Brandon continued, now fully taking charge of the meeting.

“Lieutenant Chambers, Detective Ramirez, I would like to give everyone a short break. Bret, Maddy. There are vending machines...”

“We know where the machines are, Special Agent,” Maddy’s voice told him everything he wanted to know about how she was going to take his revelations. It was cold as stone and all business. There

was fire in her eyes. “What time would you like to have us report back here?”

“Give us until eleven fifteen would you Maddy?”

He flashed his most charming smile at her, attempting to smooth over an extremely awkward moment for both of them. Judging by the speed with which she moved out of the room and down the hall, he had to guess it wasn’t going to be so simple to smooth out her ruffled feathers.

“Okay. Well what did you expect B?” he muttered to himself.



10:45 AM

Maddy stood, shoulder to shoulder with Bret, beside the vending machines in the hallway at SLO PD. Both of them silently contemplated Styrofoam cups of a vile black liquid masquerading as coffee. Neither could bring themselves to take a drink of the stuff. Even the smell was overpowering. Bret was running his free hand softly up and down Maddy's spine, hoping the contact would soothe and comfort her. He was very much afraid this day would be getting worse before it got better. It wasn't hard to sense her mood. To quote an old Colorado cowboy buddy of his, she was "stretched tight as barbed wire and about twice as prickly". Trying urgently to think of something to say that might ease her emotions was getting him nowhere. Then, suddenly, she turned on her heel and walked a few steps away from him. He let her go, figuring she must need to take a minute to just get it together. The battle going on inside her was tangible. He could do nothing other than watch her in silence.

She stood motionless, staring at the floor for nearly a minute. Then she straightened and walked back to him with her head held high and her face free of all animosity and hesitancy .

"That was some show he just put on in there, wasn't it?"

Amazingly, she was grinning.

“I always knew there was more to him than your friendly neighborhood accountant could offer. Somehow he just never did fit the bean counter mold for me.”

“So I’m not gonna have to beat the crap out of him for you?” Bret sounded relieved. And the relief had a smile starting to creep into his eyes, too.

“Nah. Wouldn’t be worth your time and effort. Line of work he’s in, somebody else will do it for us. Probably happens on a regular basis anyway.” There was laughter in her voice and it felt good to both of them.

“Well he’s mighty glad to hear it, lady.”

Brandon... Benjamin... B... stepped around the corner and threw an arm over each of their shoulders. His action was a little tentative, but his brown eyes were laughing. It was a huge relief to know he wouldn’t have to give up two people he considered real friends in order to finish this job.

“Let’s get back in there and wrap this little gathering up, shall we?”

With his arms still draped over their shoulders the three of them headed back into the conference room.

Two new faces had appeared at the table during the break. Officer John Tovar was seated next to Ramirez and Mahoney was talking

with a slim, long-haired hippie, dressed mountain man fashion in faded jeans, a worn plaid flannel shirt and soft suede vest.

“Tovar,” Ben spoke in a friendly yet authoritative manner. He moved across the room and offered to shake hands with the officer. “Sean’s filled you in? You’re up to speed?”

Tovar accepted his outstretched hand and nodded.

“Yeah. You could say that. But I’ve got to tell you, man. Briefing me on your op and trusting me professionally would have been a hell of a lot more neighborly than putting me on ice for the weekend. I’ll get even with you for that Agent Merrill. One of these days. When you least expect it.”

The threat was delivered with a sly grin giving Ben the impression Tovar was probably joking.

Probably...

“Accepted,” Ben grinned and pumped his hand. “I’d feel the same. Let’s get on with this then.”

“Before you begin, I have a question.”

Chambers was still standing behind his chair. The look on his face said if he didn’t like the answer he might walk out.

Merrill nodded, indicating the Lieutenant should go ahead and ask.

“How many more mouths are you going to fill with information about this ‘top-secret operation’ today, Merrill?”

“As many as I deem appropriate, Lieutenant. Now are you going to have a seat and work with us here? Or am I going to pull enough strings to get you put on ice until we wrap this thing up?”

The tone of his voice was light. The hard glint in his eyes was not.

Chambers walked around his chair and sat down with a thud, like a sulky child who hadn't gotten his own way.

Ben ignored it.

“Good. Then to continue. Between the three main players; Vandiver, McLean and Evans, we have a total of six possible heirs. Brandon and Stephanie Rosier, Vandiver’s children by his first wife. Brad and Michael Vandiver, children from his second marriage. And you Maddy. Although you are technically only a step-daughter we had to consider the possibility that you were in possession of certain information crucial to our investigation.

“Evans also had one son, Michael Junior or Mick. You’ll recognize the name as the alias Michael Vandiver chose when he decided to

infiltrate MCD a few months ago. Not exactly imaginative. From what we've seen the boy wasn't long on brains or imagination.

"McLean has been married twice, but there were no children from either union.

"I'll give you a quick overview of our findings on each of the heirs, just so you'll know how the players stack up. We've looked carefully at each of them. Primarily to see if they were living large or had a few million salted away in off-shore accounts.

"Brandon Rosier aka Brandon Vandiver has lived in a small village in Tuscany since shortly after his father's death in 1989. He was just a kid when he went over there and he hasn't been back in the states in fifteen years. He has a profitable Tuscan winery, an Italian wife and a couple of kids. Nothing about his life or his business gives us cause to believe he is in possession of one third of the forty-seven million dollars in cash purportedly divided between Vandiver and his partners before they split.

"Brandon's absence from the country and our similarity in stature made it relatively simple for me to adopt his identity as a cover when a few of the marked bills showed up in Vegas four years ago. Those bills, identified by the feds, had the effect of moving the investigation from 'cold case' to hot property. Most people assumed that with a little Rhinoplasty and dark contact lenses Vandiver could pass as Brandon Williams. Or me. That's exactly

what we wanted them to think. It worked nicely on your buddies in the Denver PD, Bret.”

Rainier shrugged and shook his head. “Nice job, pal,” was all he had to say

“Michael Vandiver came to work at MCD directly from a stint in a Florida prison for vehicular man-slaughter as a juvie. He got wasted one time too often and wiped out an SUV filled with rah-rah girls when he was fifteen. It earned him ten to twenty. Financial status is similar to the others. We aren’t certain why he chose to adopt the name Evans as an alias. It may have been because they hung out together some as kids. They were about the same age and their fathers were partners in crime.

“Stephanie Rosier lives and works in the Paso Robles area. She was in touch with Michael regularly, even after he came to work for us. You. After he came to work for you,” he quickly corrected. “Again, nothing in her life-style gives any clue of extensive wealth. She lives moderately and fits into the community seamlessly.

“Mick Evans is a small time hood who runs numbers and cracks knee-caps for McLean in east LA. Bret, you and Maddy met him the night of Micheal’s murder. He was dressed up to look like an SLO police officer. They made a grab for Maddy, on orders from McLean or someone in his organization. We know that, since we’ve been in touch with him recently, using the Brandon Vandiver cover. Even though he probably met Brandon when they

were kids they never met as adults, so my cover held. Nothing pops on him either.

“So, that leaves big-brother Brad, who dropped off the radar two or three years before his old man was killed. We’ve never been able to trace him. He remains an enigma. And then there’s you Maddy.”

“And that would explain why we scored such a highly qualified accountant on the first day our ad ran. Your agency was watching me to see if there were a few extra shekels in my coffers, too. Right?”

Ben nodded, “Un-huh. We couldn’t prove anything, one way or the other, until recently. We were about to move you to the bottom of our suspect list when Michael Vandiver aka Mick Evans turned up looking for work in your office and Bret baby... Sorry Rainier, old habit.”

Bret waved it off, “Think nothing of it... Ben...”

“Okay. Thanks. So anyway, with Mick on staff at MCD and Rainier poking around in the Denver area for information on Brandon Vandiver there were all kinds of red flags popping up and the Bureau moved Maddy back up a few notches on the short list.

“We caught a couple of breaks around Christmas and so were willing to allow things to work themselves out in their own sweet

time. After all it's been more than two decades since this thing started, but then, Lieutenant Chambers spotted me, Alistair McLean contacted us.... You... MCD.... Michael Vandiver was killed and all hell broke loose.”

“McLean is the only one of the original three still alive. CSA's had him under surveillance for years. He's got plenty of money there's no doubt about it. But he got it the old fashioned way, running cons and breaking heads. Problem is, he always flies just below the radar. We've never found a way to nail him. Nothing we've ever seen indicates he's got an extra fifteen or sixteen million lying around gathering dust. He's not the type to sit on it. He'd want it earning interest, at the very least. Given that much cash and his ego he'd buy into a casino on the strip in Vegas or do something equally splashy. I'd say he's a high roller wanna be from way back. We'll get him eventually.

He sat back in his chair, looking from face to face. Studying each of them in turn and pushing an empty foam cup around, smearing its wet ring into a little puddle.

“So? Anybody got any questions?” he finished.

In the buzz that filled the room he picked up on several questions he felt deserved immediate answers.

“Tovar. Your gear is all accounted for. Everything will be returned to you as soon as you go over the inventory with Agent Jacoby here.” He jerked his head toward the hippie-mountain-man.

“Steve, take Officer Tovar over to see the watch commander and get his badge and gun back on him, will ya. Take it easy on Steve. Okay, Tovar? After all, he nudged you off that mountain on my orders and he nudged gently. He also hauled your half-frozen butt down the mountain to the ER when your headache turned nasty.”

He stuck out his hand. Tovar stood, accepted the hand shake and turned to leave the room.

“You’re a good man Tovar. Another cop might have lost me, accidentally on purpose, in that blizzard and saved himself the misery. We just couldn’t afford to have you arrest me.”

“Bret, although you have no reason to accept my word today, I give it to you as my bond. I did not vandalize your home. I did enter, in your absence, and search the premises, but when I left there was nothing damaged. I may have left a few file folders and books scattered on the floor.” He grinned somewhat sheepishly. “You also have my word as a friend, when we catch up with the idiot who did wreck the place, I’ll personally help you kick his sorry ass.”

Bret stood and stuck his hand across the table toward Merrill.

“I’ll hold you to that Ben *baby*.”

His tone was joking. His smile and firm handshake establishing they could work out any differences they might have successfully, leaving their friendship in tact. He sat down and put his arm back over Maddy’s shoulders.

Merrill looked at Chambers, then Ramirez.

“Officers, will you require anything further here today?”

Before either had a chance to answer in the affirmative he dismissed them.

“Fine. In that case, my written report will be available to you before end of shift. Agent Mahoney will brief you on our plans for the ongoing operation. Please meet him in Detective Ramirez’ office in ten.”

Chambers clearly thought they should engage in some further discussion, but the firm pressure of Merrill’s hand on his elbow, guiding him out the door and into the hallway, was sufficient to change his mind. Ben’s nod toward Mahoney had him following quickly behind them.

Left alone in the conference room with Bret and Maddy, Merrill looked long and hard into Maddy’s eyes.

“Give me another minute or two here, will you?”

Ben understood he would be dealing with them in a completely new capacity after today. His guess was whatever he said now would be the foundation for any future relationship they might have.

He also guessed all bets were off on his chances with Maddy. A blind man could see she and Rainier had moved way beyond mere business partners over the past few days. Chambers was, at least partially, correct when he took that jab at me about having personal feelings for her, he thought. *If things had been different I would probably have made a serious attempt at convincing her I'm partner material myself. Oh well. Linda and I are probably a better match anyway.*

"Maddy..." he wasn't exactly sure where to begin. To be at a loss for words was unfamiliar ground. "Bret..."

Rainier spoke before he could go on.

"If we terminate your employment at MCD today—we blow your cover. Firing your ass and blowing your cover as Brandon Williams, mild mannered accountant, slash Brandon Vandiver, hard-core bad guy undermines years of work on an operation that could, potentially, come to a head any minute. Does that about cover it?" Bret couldn't help but chuckle as Merrill blinked a couple of times and then nodded.

“You nailed it! I want...no. I need, to keep the Brandon Williams/Vandiver cover intact, at least until we can put McLean and Evans, Jr. under wraps. We’re close. I can feel it. Agent Mahoney is tying up the loose ends with the local cops right now. Only Chambers, Ramirez and Tovar are aware of the CSA Bureau involvement. We think they’ll cooperate willingly. If they won’t...” he shrugged, letting his intentions trail off unfinished

“I wanted to handle this, with you two, personally.”

He turned to Maddy again. This time he reached forward and touched the back of her hand very gently.

“Maddy, I’m sorry.”

She started to speak. He held up a finger to stop her reply.

“I’m sorry for the times you’ve felt confused, afraid, angry and most of all betrayed during the course of this investigation. Two years is a long time to spend working with someone, getting to know them, calling them friend, only to find out you don’t know them at all. Can you, can we, continue as though nothing is different?”

She could see the intensity of his question burning in his dark eyes.

“We’ll have to go on working together without tipping anyone at the office off to the fact that there’s been a change. Can we do it?”

“If we can’t,” Maddy stood and walked from one end of the narrow room to the other, “If I can’t it will put your operation, and possibly your life, in jeopardy. Won’t it Brandon?”

She stood up, walked around the table to where Merrill was still seated and resting one hand on his shoulder, continued.

“Last week, Tuesday or Wednesday, I would have said ‘no way’. Earlier today, I would have said ‘no way in hell’. But, yeah. I can do it. I need to do it. I need to help you finish this.”

She continued her circuit of the room, returning to the chair closest to Bret. Putting her hand on Rainier’s thigh, connecting them in a show of unity, she finished.

“We can do it. Just tell us what you want us to do?”



Special Agent Sean Mahoney stood gazing at the cork board where Ramirez’ painstaking outline of his work on the Evans/Vandiver murder was displayed. Photos of Ben Merrill, labeled Brandon Williams/Brandon Vandiver, occupied a prominent position beside the victim and two other suspects, Compton and Rainier.

Mahoney knew Ben was depending on him to get the local police on board. Their cooperation meant they stood a much better chance of successfully wrapping this case up and moving on. He was reasonably sure Tovar and Ramirez would play ball, even with Tovar's weekend in the Lakewood jail figured into the mix. Chambers would be the fly in the ointment. Mahoney felt certain they were going to be getting nothing but flack from the Lieutenant.

One of the many reasons Sean Mahoney and Ben Merrill worked so effectively together and played off of each other so well was their diametrically opposing styles. Ben was intense, hot-headed and thorough. Sean was easy-going, detail-oriented and the consummate diplomat. Sean knew he'd drawn the short straw for dealing with this little gathering because his style was the best fit.

As he studied the steps Ramirez had taken so far he was also listening to the discussion going on among the other three men in the office behind him.

Chambers was doing his best to regain control, trying to maneuver the Detective and Tovar into seeing things his way, thereby accepting subordinate rolls. *And not only because he outranks them*, Mahoney thought. *This guy's an ego, with legs. He wants what he wants, when he wants it. Plus, he's of the opinion everybody should agree with him, just because he is who he is. No wonder he and Ben butt heads. If he keeps pushing his*

authority he's gonna end up exactly where Ben told him he would. On ice, for the duration. But I'll be the one to put him there. Ben won't have to.

Well. Let's get this show underway. Mahoney turned to face the others.

"Gentlemen, if I could have your attention for a few minutes." He waited for the Lieutenant to relinquish his hold as the center of attention, noting it was done with considerable resentment.

"I'm sure we all realize we are now in a rather delicate phase of our joint investigation."

He cut off the comment he could see Chambers was about to make by simply turning sideways and touching a photograph of Michael Vandiver's body.

"I know you can agree our priority here is to apprehend the person or persons responsible for this murder. In so doing the Bureau hopes to tie up most of the loose ends in the ongoing investigation Agent Merrill briefed you on this morning.

"Detective Ramirez, so far as you know, besides the three of you, are there any other San Luis police officers with knowledge of Agent Merrill's true identity?"

Ramirez shook his head.

“No.... I’d have to say no. We’ve been careful to keep a tight lid on it within the Department. But, it is my belief, his cover’s been compromised.”

Mahoney raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“How so Detective?”

Ramirez took keys out of his pocket, unlocked his desk drawer and withdrew the little yellow sticky note safe in its plastic protector. He shoved it across the desktop directly into Sean’s hands, neatly bypassing Chambers attempt to intercept.

“I found this during a review of the evidence taken from Bret Rainier’s home office,” he offered.

“Brandon William aka Brandon Vandiver aka Benjamin Merrill, CSAB” Mahoney read aloud. He raised the eyebrow again.

“Interesting. Do you recognize the handwriting Detective?”

“I’m not familiar with it. No. And while I’m no hand-writing expert, it appears to have been written by the same person who made other notations in this file implicating Rainier and Compton in the murder.”

Ramirez gaze never left Sean’s face. He wasn’t about to catch Lieutenant Chambers’ eye right now. Until this moment Chambers had not been aware he was reviewing this particular file.

It doesn't take a detective to figure out what's going on here, Mahoney thought. These two are squaring off over territory like a couple of alley cats. Could work in our favor.



8:45 PM

Late Monday evening, Ben Merrill stood at the bar in *The Library*, a half-decent saloon and eatery just off the Cal Poly Campus. He was watching the cute little brunette bartender fill orders with a rhythm and efficiency he had to admire and waiting for Sean Mahoney and Steve Jacoby to join him.

He was half way contemplating asking her when her shift was over. That short crop of dark hair and a Betty Boop face was intriguing.

But his real concentration was on playing back over the brief meeting with the MCD partners. All and all it had turned out better than he'd hoped. Both Maddy and Rainier had offered help and support in maintaining his cover. It was a pretty good bet they would make every effort to keep the rest of the MCD staff from picking up on the change in circumstances. He was comfortable with the progress he'd made today. Now all he needed to do was get Jacoby on a plane back to Colorado and find out how Mahoney's meeting with the local cops went.

The look on Sean's face as he walked up to the bar, pointed at Ben's beer, and held up two fingers to let the brunette know they needed another round was noncommittal.

“So...? How’d they take it?” he asked, reaching for the beer and drinking a quarter of it in one gulp.

“Went better than I thought it was going to. How about Chambers and company” Ben asked. “Think they’ll play ball?”

“First let me say, thanks a bunch for sending me to sort through all that crap. I can’t remember when I’ve seen as much posturing, politics, and small mindedness wrapped up in one package. It’s no wonder Chambers got out of LAPD and went looking for a small town department. He needs a place where his ego can flourish comfortably. He is some piece of work!”

“Got under your skin, did he?” Ben chuckled. He finished his first beer and reached for the fresh one. “That’s why you went in there, amigo. The temptation to bust him in his smug chops might have overwhelmed me. Especially after fending off his superior attitude all morning. So did you charm him? Will they keep a lid on my cover and play along until we can put this thing to bed?”

“I think so.”

Mahoney knew from experience his diplomacy usually went further than Ben’s in-your-face demands.

“Good. Where’s Steve. I want to send him back to Denver tonight. I’d like to buy him a beer first. He did a heck of a job with Tovar even if, as it turned out, it mostly got us nowhere.”

“He’ll be along in a few. Oh, by the way... You know the papers Chambers found planted in Rainier’s house after you searched it?”

“Yeah. What about ‘em?” Ben had several theories regarding how that stuff might’ve ended up in Bret’s place. Any new information on it had his full attention.

“Apparently, Chambers didn’t want to share. Tried an end-around on Ramirez. The Detective didn’t appreciate his tactics. Somehow got his hands on the file without Chambers say-so. Spent several hours going over it and found a sticky note inside that named you with an aka for both Brandon Williams and Vandiver. He thinks your cover’s compromised in spite of our best efforts to keep it contained.”

Ben downed the last of the second beer and contemplated the news for a full minute before he asked, “Okay? So who does the Detective think wrote the note? Chambers or the person who planted the packet at Rainier’s? Or does he think they are one and the same person?”

“Ah hell, Ben. I didn’t think of that!

“I’ve been thinking of that for awhile. Guess we’ll just have to go back to work in the morning as if nothing has changed and wait to see how it plays out. Here’s Steve. How about ordering us another round, my friend. I’m not going to think about it any more tonight.

No matter how many beers it takes. "Think I'll find me a job somewhere as a real-life accountant and get out of this game."

"Sure you will, Ben. Sure you will."

Sean signaled for another round. He planned on helping his friend forget the double dipped undercover troubles he was still juggling, even if it meant getting blotto with him..



CHAPTER SIX - THURSDAY

There is nothing worse than aggressive stupidity.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe



September 15 - 6:45 AM

The passing of spring and summer were, surprisingly, routine and uneventful.

Labor Day came and went. Things at MCD were pretty much business as usual. In the six months since Michael Vandiver was murdered in MCD's back office, however, a number of things had changed.

Bret and Maddy had cleaned up the mess in his house as soon as the police released the crime scene. They salvaged what they

could, moving the rest of his stuff to Maddy's. He continued to be a little in awe of the speed at which his personal life had done a one-eighty.

In April, after some decorating and updating, he put his house on the market. Because of a great 'location, location, location' it sold within sixty days.

They'd talked about selling her place too. Maybe looking for another house. Something new to both of them. It didn't take them long to decide they both really loved Maddy's little Craftsman cottage. With a bit of furniture rearranging and some fresh paint it would fit them perfectly. So they sold a couple of her pieces, including the wing back chairs in the living room, and shopped for furniture together instead of shopping for a house. Her Mondrian still graced the fireplace wall. Two of his Monet prints and an antique French armoire, inherited from his Grandmother, blended beautifully into the bedroom. They were comfortable and happy with their new living arrangements. They were planning to be married at Christmas time.

Now, the second week in September, a touch of autumn could be felt in the early morning air if you used your imagination. Bret and Maddy were sitting on the patio, finishing their breakfast coffee and talking about the weather.

"...too early in the season for rain. Today's supposed to get into triple digits again."

He was checking email, News and Weather on his new laptop.

“Oh Goody! Won’t that be fun? For the sixth day in a row, too. I don’t know how much more of this kind of fun I can take.”

She was only half joking. High summer heat was her least favorite part of living the California life-style.

Brandon Williams continued in his position as Chief Financial Officer at MCD. Interoffice gossip said the upheaval at the “executive level” last March started because the original partners refused William’s bid to buy into the company as the third partner. There was some speculation that part of the friction came about when Bret and Maddy decided to be life-partners as well as business partners, especially since she had dated Brandon for awhile. The girls in the front office thought he was much more serious about her than she had ever been about him. After the Evans murder the gossip mill had new grist to grind, relegating their imagined “love triangle” to the back burner. Brandon, Maddy and Bret remained close friends and some of the stress observed at the executive level had apparently smoothed out.

During the spring Brandon had started going out with Bret’s secretary, Linda. They dated casually for a month or two. By Memorial Day they were an item for the office gossip mill. When everyone gathered for the annual office Bar-B-Q in August it was understood they were exclusive. “Don’t they make just the cutest

couple?” the girls were asked by the new receptionist. It was agreed they did.

This was exactly the reaction Bret, Maddy and Brandon worked to elicit from MCD’s staff. Ben Merrill’s cover as Brandon Williams, CFO remained solid. He traveled on company business a bit more frequently now but it wasn’t considered unusual.

All three agreed he would remain in character as Brandon Williams at all times, even during the occasional private meetings and dinners they shared.

“Not so confusing. Less chance of thinking Brandon and saying Ben if you never start calling me by another name,” he told them. They both knew he was right.

“I’ve heard Agent Mahoney call you B,” Maddy mentioned.

“Yeah. We fell into that when we added the second Brandon. It keeps it from getting too complicated. It works for us, but nobody at MCD thinks of me as B. If you start calling me that it will cause speculation. Is it a nickname? Has their relationship changed? Should we be threatened? We don’t want people to think about it any more than necessary.”

So for the past six months they had simply continued to think of him as Brandon Williams.

“Brandon is going to LA again this weekend,” Bret said, folding his linen napkin and putting it back on the tray.

“Is he going to...?” She started to say play Vandiver this weekend, but changed her mind, “you know? Visit his friends in east LA?”

“Not sure. I didn’t ask. He didn’t say. Speaking of the weekend, what say we take a run up to Carmel-by-the-sea on Friday? Get away from this heat. Stay over and come back Sunday afternoon?”

“Sounds great!” Maddy beamed. “You know I love Carmel. Cooling off up north would be heavenly. There are a few things we need to pin down today and tomorrow, but it shouldn’t be a problem. Want me to call for reservations?”

“Already did, babe. I sort of anticipated your answer, so I called yesterday.”

He gathered up their plates and headed for the kitchen wearing a self-satisfied little smirk. As the door closed behind him, the phone rang. He sat the tray on the counter and picked it up.

“Rainier.” He listened to the caller for several minutes. A myriad of emotions played over his face. Then he simply said, “Okay” flatly and hung up. He walked to where Maddy was already loading the breakfast dishes for washing. He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him.

“Maddy, that was Sean Mahoney. He called here because for some reason he can’t reach Brandon. Agent Jacoby was shot last night. He’s in critical condition. Not expected to live. They want Brandon to come to Denver this morning.

“Someone answering the description of Brad Vandiver shot and killed the half-sister, Stephanie Rosier, in Idaho Springs yesterday and then got away clean.

“Jacoby was working the Silverthorn area, using the same hippie cover he’s used up there for the last couple of years. The Bureau is fairly sure somebody, maybe Brad Vandiver, made him. Tried to kill him, too.

“Mahoney asked me to try and locate Brandon. He and Sean need to be together for this one. He wants you and me to stick with our normal routines, stay close to home and be really cautious about any new clients, strangers, or unusual repair-people-types. If it is Vandiver, Sean thinks he may be coming after Brandon next.” He didn’t add ‘or you’. But Mahoney had.

Dammit, here we go again, he thought, watching as all color drained from Maddy’s face. She gripped his arms and he could feel her shaking.

“Oh no! Bret! Another of Vandiver’s kids dead and Jacoby....”

Bret could all but hear the pieces falling together in her head. He wanted to wrap her in his arms and protect her, keep her from having to think about it, keep all of it from touching her again.

“Maddy, I’ve gotta go see if I can find Brandon before he takes off for LA. It makes no sense that he’s not answering his land line or his cell. Mahoney’s really worried. For that matter, so am I.”

“I’m coming with you.”

She turned and dashed for the bedroom, ripping off her robe as she went. She hit the closet running, grabbed jeans and a T-shirt and was hopping on one foot, pulling on sneakers, when he pinned her arms at her sides and drew her into his chest.

“Listen, Kiddo. I really don’t....”

She knew what he was going to say. She didn’t want to hear it.

“I know you don’t. But I’m coming. We can waste time arguing about it or we can go find him, Bret. Let’s just go!”

He shook his head, exasperated. They would waste time arguing. If he knew one thing about his partner he knew when her mind was made up, as it was now. Wasting precious time by trying to change it would accomplish nothing.

“Okay. Let’s take the Vet. Where are your keys? I’m driving.”

She grabbed a purse, upended it on the bed, tossed her keys to Bret and stuffed her cell phone in her hip pocket. As if on cue, it rang.

Deedle, ee.

They both jumped. She flipped it open, checking caller ID.

“Out of the Area. I don’t recognize the number.” She shoved it back in her pocket unanswered. “Don’t have time for this! Let’s go!”

They were half-way through the kitchen door into the garage when the phone on the counter rang. Once...twice. Bret hesitated.

“Maybe we should see who it is. Could be Brandon.” He turned to go back. Three rings...four.

“You’ve reached the Compton - Rainier partnership. Tell us you called. Leave your number. We’ll get back to you.”

“Maddy? Maddy, it’s Mama....”

Bret took two giant steps, yanked the phone off of its base and yelled “Who the hell is this?”

There had been a couple of similar calls during the week of Michael Vandiver’s death. With all the fall-out from the murder

nobody thought too much about them, especially after they learned Evelyn Compton was dead. Now Mama was back?

Bret didn't think so.

The only answer to his question... a pulsing dial tone.



7:35 AM

Brandon Williams swung down the hall of the executive suite toward Bret's office. There were still several things he wanted to close up here before he left for LA. With a modicum of luck he would have everything wrapped up before the staff started coming in. He didn't have the time or the inclination to put on his office persona this morning. He was in a hurry and he was worried.

About twenty minutes earlier, just as he pulled into the parking lot behind the office, his cell phone rang. Caller ID told him it was Mahoney. The display also told him the battery was, as he suspected yesterday, shot. He'd left it charging all night but it was showing almost no charge now. He punched ON and spoke,

"Sean? Hey. Make it quick, my phone's about to crap out on me."

Too late. There was no sound. He crossed the parking lot, cursing as he watched the tiny screen slowly fade to black. Inside, going directly to his desk, he dialed all the numbers he had for Mahoney. No answer on any of them. Out of habit he hesitated to call the Bureau offices from MCD, a safety measure to protect his identity. He threw the dead phone on his desk and put together the papers he wanted to leave for Bret.

Now, as he turned on the light in Bret's office and headed for the desk to leave the file folder he was carrying, the sound of someone

rattling the knob of the side door brought him up sharp. He glanced at his watch. Way too early for Bret or Maddy. The three of them carried the only keys to that door. Out in the hall he heard a couple of strange clicks that told him the lock was being picked. Before he could get back into the hall the door opened. *Damn gun's in my office*, he realized. He flattened himself against the wall behind Bret's door, breathing through his mouth to assure silence and listened as the intruder walked toward the open door to Reception.

"Light's on in this office. Think somebody's here?"

He recognized that voice! And there were at least two of them. He looked around for anything that might serve as a weapon. A pencil? A golf-club? Forget it. He moved into the doorway and spoke.

"Morning Evans. You're up bright and early. Mind telling me what the hell you're doing in here."

"Well, if it isn't Special Agent Merrill in the flesh." Mick Evans stood to his right, between him and the side door, blocking any idea he might have of making a break for it. There were two low-lifes to his left, between him and the reception area. He was well and truly boxed in, and his cover was apparently blown big time.

"How are you this morning Brandon? Or is it Mr. Williams. No. Make that Mr. Vandiver. Oh what the hell Ben,"

Mick Evans was advancing toward him, his eyes filled with glee.

“Let’s cut the BS and get this over with.” Evans pulled a taser out of his baggy pants and pressed it against Merrill’s neck.

Ben knew the cheap stun gun packed about 600,000 volts. If Evans fired, all that electricity would be dumped straight into his nervous system scrambling each and every one of his circuits. His brain, he knew, would instantly lose the ability to communicate with his muscles. Taking a hit from a stun gun depleted the blood sugar by converting it to lactic acid. His sense of balance would be fried. He would be confused and too weak to move for several minutes. If Evans applied the current for an extended period of time he would be a dead man. *Now why in hell did I recall all that information at this particular moment*, he wondered.

“Atta boy, Ben. Nice and easy now. Don’t do anything to make me hurt you, buddy.”

Evans had always been more than a little intimidated by Brandon Vandiver, but he had the upper hand now and he planned on getting some of his own back before he delivered this arch-enemy to McLean.”



7:50 AM

Bret and Maddy reached Brandon's place in a hair-raising ten minutes. Maddy was out of the car and headed for the front door before the Vet stopped rolling up the driveway. Using the key he'd given Bret as a backup measure, she was inside before it occurred to her there might be someone else in there besides Brandon. She stopped, called out and when no one answered, crossed the living room toward the back of the house. Bret dashed across the porch and was right behind her in a matter of seconds. She might not be afraid, but he was afraid for her, for all of them. Mahoney had been very graphic in describing Steve Jacoby's wounds. Somebody beat the hell out of him, shot him twice in the back, and left him for dead. The last thing Bret wanted to do was run into that somebody when he was unarmed and Maddy was with him.

The house was empty, with no signs that anyone except Brandon had been inside this morning. There was a coffee cup and plate with some toast crumbs on it in the kitchen sink. The morning's newspaper lay scattered across the coffee table. The bed wasn't made and there were some dirty clothes tossed on the bedroom floor. A razor and various toiletries decorated the counter-top. Damp used towels were thrown over the shower door in the bathroom. Otherwise the place was clean and orderly, reflecting Brandon's always elegant taste.

“He musta left in a hurry. Everything looks okay though,” Bret headed for the front door. “C’mon, let’s try the office.”

He destroyed the speed limit again on the way downtown, screeching the tires when he turned off Foothill into the parking lot beside their office.

“Look! Brandon’s car is here.” Maddy pointed excitedly toward the Beemer setting at the back of the lot.

“Yeah. And if he’s inside he went in the side door and left it wide open behind him. That’s not like him. Something’s wrong!”

Bret popped the trunk and searched for the tire iron he sincerely hoped was in there.

“Maddy, stay here. Please.”

He put one finger to her lips to stop the argument he could see coming.

“Please don’t. I can’t watch my back and worry about you at the same time. There’s not even a nail file in here to use as a weapon. I need to know you’re right here. I’m pretty sure you’ll be safe. Please Maddy. We don’t have time for this.”

“I’ll wait. Do you want me to call nine one one...or? “

But he was almost to the open door. He shook his head and yelled over his shoulder, “Not yet.” Damn fool thing to do, he thought, charging in here with no weapon and no backup.

Inside, the lights were on in his office. Beyond the reception area he could see lights in Brandon’s office, too. He walked through the building, turning on more lights as he went. Within a few minutes he’d checked the whole place. It was empty. He didn’t know where his friend was, but he knew they had serious trouble. Not only was the Beemer in the parking lot, but the cell phone Brandon never went anywhere without was lying on his desk with a dead battery.

Bret walked the length of the office, stood in the side doorway and motioned for Maddy to come inside.

“He not here, but his cell phone is. The battery’s dead.”

“So what are we gonna do now?” Maddy wanted to know.

“Call Mahoney first,” Bret pointed at her jeans pocket, “Gimme your phone.” When she handed it to him, he flipped it open and using his thumb, pressed in a string of numbers.

“How do you do that?” she sounded amazed.

“Wha...?”

“Remember phone numbers without writing them down or programming them in?”

“Just one of my many tal....

Yeah? Sean, Rainier here. Ben's not at home and he's not at the office. But I can tell you why you weren't able to reach him on his cell. It's on his desk. It's totally dead. Thing is, his car's at the office. It was when we got here. I'm pretty sure he'd been inside. The door was standing wide open.”

He listened, then asked, “So you want me to contact Ramirez?” Another few seconds and, “Okay. I'll let you know. Same number?” He was headed back to Brandon's office. “Fine. Keep me posted, man.”

“Maddy, can you call SLO PD from the phone in your office and ask for Detective Ramirez? Don't talk to Chambers. Only talk to Ramirez. If you reach him, ask him to meet us at our house just as soon as he possibly can.”

As he talked he picked up the dead cell phone and stuck it in his pocket.

“I'm going to make a couple of calls from in here.”

Before Maddy turned to go down the hall to her office she watched Bret spin through the old-fashioned Rolodex on Brandon's desk, choose a card and dial the number.

It took a full ten minutes on hold before Ramirez voice broke into her thoughts. As the hypnotic drone of the ‘please hold’ elevator music soothed her pumping adrenalin, she started playing back bits and pieces of various conversations from the past spring and summer—fitting them together, first one way then another—trying to bring the details into focus. She had the nagging feeling she was forgetting something important, she just wasn’t able to put her finger on what it was.

“Ms. Compton?” Ramirez voice shattered her collection of thoughts and jarred her back to the urgent message Bret wanted delivered. “How can I help you?”

“Detective Ramirez, I’m calling about our mutual friend Brandon Williams. He’s in trouble! Can you meet Bret and me at our house to discuss it?” Her voice sounded close to panic. “Without alerting the Lieutenant?” she added as an after-thought.

“Lieutenant Chambers is no longer an issue, Ms. Compton. He moved his family back to LA in July.” The pleasure in his voice negated his next words. “We were sorry to lose him. About our mutual friend. Yes. I can clear an hour or so with you. Would nine be too late?”

“Whatever you can manage will be great. Thank you, Detective. We’ll see you shortly.” Maddy hung up and headed back to let Bret know Ramirez was on his way. He was still on the phone when she entered the office.

His voice was flat, non-expressive as he said, "So, Mr. McLean won't be available at all for the remainder of the week?"

He waited.

"Can you see that he receives a message?"

Another pause.

"Fine. Please tell him Lieutenant Chambers has been in touch with Mr. Vandiver and now needs to confer with him at his earliest convenience. He can reach me at the usual number."

"What was that all about?"

Maddy, now perched on the arm of his chair and twirling a curl of his hair through her fingers was looking over his shoulder at several Rolodex cards stacked in front of him. She started to pick them up, "Who are...?"

"Not now. We need to get out of here. Were you able to set up a meet with Ramirez?"

The sharp tone of his voice caused her to blink and flinch away. He never spoke to her in his 'cop' voice; not even when they argued.

"Okay? Yeah, Ramirez will meet us at the house about nine."

"Come on, let's get back there. I'll fill you in on the way." And together they locked the office and headed for home.



8:55 AM

Ben Merrill's mind was racing. Putting together the hundreds of small bits of information stored there over the course of nearly three years working the Vandiver case, sifting through the evidence stored in his mental files, kept him from thinking about the nylon ropes, tightly binding him now.

Mick Evans and his two low-life pals had forced Ben into the back of a panel van, hog-tied him and gagged him with a swath of duct tape. He was lying on his side, knees bent, arms behind him, wrists and ankles half-hitched together. His muscles sang in pain. If he'd ever been more uncomfortable in his life, he couldn't remember when. He twisted his body, trying to ease the pressure on the ropes a little, hoping to regain some of the circulation in his limbs. Scooting around on the carpet didn't help much. All he accomplished was adding to an already nasty rug burn on his cheek.

This is a helluva a mess you've gotten yourself into amigo, he thought. Don't know how I could have screwed up so thoroughly.

He tried piecing together exactly where he had gone wrong. He was sure no one had given McLean or Evans even the slightest clue to his true identity.

Playing back the events of the morning he decided there were at least one or two things he could be sure of. True, he was miserable. But, happily, his circuits weren't all fried. He could find it in his heart to be thankful Evans had not make good on the threat to zap him with that stun gun. And, they were headed south, toward LA. According to his internal clock they'd been on the road for close to two hours . LA meant McLean's territory. He was reasonably familiar with the layout down there. That might work to his advantage.

"You awake back there Agent Merrill?"

Evans, who was riding shotgun, turned, reared up to look over the second row of seats and gave Ben a nasty smile.

"We're almost there. Sure don't envy you the rest of this ride."

The oily threat in Evan's tone was not at all reassuring, especially since Ben's limbs were numb and tingling. No amount of wiggling would completely restore his circulation after two hours trussed up like a Christmas goose. He knew it would take precious minutes before he would be able to move when and if they untied him. The van slowed and turned right, bumping across what felt like railroad tracks, then came to a stop.

Evans and his pals piled out and came around to the wide cargo doors to unload their defenseless passenger. Two of them moved him by grasping an elbow and a knee apiece and dangling him

between them, face down. He tried to look around, see if he recognized any landmarks, but he couldn't raise his head far enough to see above the knees of the low-lives.

He was carried across a span of dirt or decaying concrete, then into some sort of dark hallway with a filthy wooden floor. From what he could see they moved down the hallway, past several doors, then crossed a threshold onto a carpeted area that was, if possible, even more filthy than the hallway. There they dumped him unceremoniously on his face. Evans walked across the room to his side, drew back his foot and kicked Ben, hard, in the side. It had the desired effect of rolling him over so he was facing up. It felt like he'd cracked a couple of ribs.

When Ben got his breath back and his eyes stopped watering enough so he could see again, he was looking at four expensive shoes, topped by four legs in even more expensive suits. Possibly couture silk suits. With a real effort he was able to turn his head enough to look up. What he saw caused him to gasp against the duct tape. With no way to speak, all he could manage was to blink in astonishment. He had expected McLean. Evans told him as much. He had not expected Frank Chambers to be standing by McLean's side.



9:09 AM

Detective Ramirez was as good as his word. a few minutes after nine he knocked on the front door. Bret let him in and cut right to it.

“Thanks for coming, Ramirez. Brandon... Ben Merrill, is missing! His partner called me this morning and asked...”

“Take it easy, Bret. Merrill’s not missing.”

The Detective studied Bret’s face for a moment in an attempt to judge the impact of his words, then he continued.

“He’s been abducted, but he’s not missing. Officer Tovar is, as we speak, outside the warehouse in north Ventura County where our friend is being held. He called the Ventura County Sheriff’s office requesting immediate backup about Oh eight hundred.”

Bret gave the Detective a questioning look, thought about what he’d said for a couple of seconds, then asked, “Tovar’s been tailing Merrill again?”

“No. There's been a tail on Frank Chambers, in cooperation with the CSA Bureau boys and the Feds ever since he went back to LA in July. When he left here he told the Chief it was to rejoin the LAPD. We thought it was a little funny, after all the noise he made about getting out of LA and needing to be in a smaller community,

work for a smaller force, blah, blah, blah. So we did some checking. He went back to LA alright. He went straight to McLean's mansion in the Hollywood Hills, where he stayed for about a month. No sign of a wife or kiddies. Just a Lexus convertible and a high-priced blonde on his arm. In August he moved again. This time into a mansion of his own. In Bellaire!

"As the reports kept piling up, the Chief decided he'd been played. He got pretty steamed. As a result we ran some very in-depth background checks on Lieutenant Chambers. Turns out those checks should have been run when they brought him on board sight-unseen and made him one of the top-brass. Chief Reynolds stewed about in-house ineptitude and stupidity for a couple of hours, then got on the horn to CSA and the Feds.

"Last night about twenty-three hundred McLean and Mick Evans paid Chambers a visit at his playpen in Bellaire. The task-force was on it with eyes and ears. The meeting broke up a little after midnight. Since it involved most of the known cast, they split the tail on Chambers three ways too.

"The Bureau boys tailed McLean home. There he apparently had a night-cap and did a few lines of coke with a couple of bimbos then turned in for the duration. The bimbos split but he stayed put until about seven this morning. Evans, on the other hand, made a quick swing into his old neighborhood in east LA, picked up a pair of gangsters and headed for San Luis. When he hit the county line,

CSA called us in. Tovar tagged them at the city limits and stayed on 'em.

“They broke into your office about a quarter to six this morning, grabbed Merrill, knocked him around a little, tied and gagged him, tossed him in their van and headed back toward the city.

“We contacted various local law enforcement agencies along their expected route for possible backup, just in case they stopped somewhere along the way. We tried to contact Agent Mahoney, but he was out of the loop. Guess one of his boys got hurt pretty bad yesterday. I plan on trying to run him down again when we finish up here. He’s going to want to know Ben’s okay.

“As it turns out, McLean and Evans are, in fact, scum. But we figure they’re bottom feeders compared to Chambers. Now that we got all three of them en route to what we figure will be a high level meet, it’s a fair bet we can wrap 'em all up together. Nice and neat and tidy.

Bret nodded,.

“So you’ve got it added up the same way Mahoney does. McLean and Evans aren’t the top of the food chain?”

“Far from it. But this morning an even bigger shark swam into the pool.” Ramirez voice was cool; his eyes were glittery with excitement and he wore an extremely smug smile.

Maddy had been hanging back, leaning in the doorway to the kitchen listening to their exchange. Now she took a step closer to Bret, looked at Ramirez and surprised them both by saying, “Brad Vandiver’s the biggest shark of all. Isn’t he?”

Ramirez blinked once. Dumbfounded.

“We believe the man calling the shots is Brad Vandiver. Yes. But how...”

“And Brad Vandiver killed his brother Michael last spring in our office.”

She moved another step or two closer to them.

“So that must mean he killed his half-sister yesterday and tried to kill Agent Jacoby, too.”

Bret put out an arm to draw her close. There was something going on here he didn’t understand. He knew her moods and the inflections of her voice. He’d held her when she was happy, when she was sad, and when she was afraid. In ten years he had never seen her cold with rage and filled with hate as she was at this moment. She shrugged off his offer of support and faced Ramirez full on.

“Brad Vandiver also killed his father and my mother.”

Her voice was hushed. She was going pale and starting to shake as she continued.

“If Tovar doesn’t get there in time, he’ll kill Ben Merrill this morning. He plans on killing me, too.”

“Ms. Compton.”

Ramirez raised a hand to indicate his sympathy for what she was feeling. She took a step away from him, avoiding any physical contact.

“Brad Vandiver trashed Bret’s place last spring and planted the evidence he hoped would put us both in jail for murder. He’s been playing the SLO Police Department and the CSA Bureau for years! How long have you known, Detective?”

“How long have you known, Ms. Compton?”

“Known WHAT?” Bret was watching the exchange with growing frustration. His conversation with Mahoney earlier had him convinced Lieutenant Frank Chambers was the man they were looking at for everything Maddy had just accused Brad Vandiver of doing. Somebody was missing some pieces here. He was beginning to get the unpleasant sensation he was that somebody.

“Since he called me again this morning,” Maddy told Ramirez.



9:30 AM

“So. We meet again Merrill.”

Chambers stepped over to where Ben lay and squatted beside him.

“I’d tell you it’s a pleasure, but I’d be lying.”

His eyes were cold and his lips, when he leered at Ben, were peeled back from his perfect teeth, reminding Ben of a wolf about to lunge. Ben could smell his expensive yet over-powering cologne and the leather of his finely crafted loafers even through the dust rising from the filthy carpet.

“You!” Ben flinched away as Chambers prodded him hard in the chest with an immaculately manicured finger. “Agent Merrill, have been a thorn in my side for a number of years. Today, I shall pluck you out.”

He poked Ben again. Leered again. Ben's eyes furious eyes told him if not for the small inconvenience of being bound hand and foot he would be eating his own finger. Arrogantly, purely for the satisfaction of doing so, Chambers poked a couple more times.

“Pick him up! Untie him and put him in that chair.”

He indicated an old side chair with solid oak back and arms.

“Leave the gag.”

He turned to face McLean.

“Alistair, old friend, how is it that you so carelessly mistook this rent-a-cop for my long lost half-brother? They look nothing alike. Such errors are unforgivable.” And with less concern than another man might show over squashing a cockroach, Chambers drew a small caliber hand gun from his jacket pocket and shot McLean squarely between his terror stricken eyes.

Chambers flicked a finger at Mick Evans, “Bring that chair,” he pointed to a second side chair lying upended near the wall, then to the floor facing Ben, “here. And wipe the dirt off of it.”

Evan scurried, Ben could think of no other word that would describe the man’s movements in his rush to follow Chambers’ orders.

“And now, Brandon, dear boy. No. We’ll make that Agent Merrill. Shall we discuss the misfortunes that plague our little reunion today?”

Chambers’ eyes were wide maniacal wells of hatred and arrogance as he seated himself in the now dustless chair, crossing his legs and carefully arranging the crease of his trousers on his thigh.

Evans and company hovered, obviously petrified, on the periphery of the action. It was easy to see nobody wanted to attract Chambers attention while he was in this frame of mind. It was

clear to everyone in the room—one wrong move could get you shot. Dead.

“Have you figured it out yet, Merrill?”

Chambers flicked a speck of dust from his cuff then examined his manicure as though waiting for Ben to answer.

“No I didn’t think so. Well, no matter. You aren’t the first nor, I imagine, will you be the last to die without having a clue as to who they were dealing with.”

He turned his gaze to Mick Evans, gestured with his index finger toward Ben without lifting his hand from the knee of his trousers and said, “Kill him.”



Tovar and his backup team surrounded the dilapidated warehouse, anxiously awaiting any sign Ben Merrill was still alive.

Every cop on the scene had been carefully briefed on the hostage situation going on inside. As each of the eight cars rolled silently to a stop, Tovar quickly passed out photographs of the CSA Bureau agent they’d come to rescue and of the known criminals suspected to be his kidnappers. Instructions were, “Use any means necessary to bring Agent Merrill out alive. All suspects are to be considered armed and extremely dangerous.”

When Tovar heard the report from a small caliber weapon inside the building he barked into the two-way clipped on his shoulder. “Gun fire! Let’s get in there.”

Police and sheriffs officers, in full riot gear, poured through all five entrances to the warehouse. With no impression of Merrill’s exact location, they worked in pairs, checking doors and systematically moving toward the heart of the building. The first pair to enter the deserted office, where Chambers sat demanding Evans carry out his orders, saw Merrill loosely bound to a chair in the center of the room. A well dressed man lay on the floor a little distance away with a gunshot wound in his forehead. In another chair, facing Merrill was the man identified as Frank Chambers, former SLO PD Lieutenant. Three others stood off to one side. One of them had his weapon pointed at Merrill’s head.

As the cops burst through the door Chambers, cold as ice, spoke with authority.

“Officers. Right on time. I am undercover with the LAPD. This man,” he waved a hand toward Merrill, “is in my custody. I’ve arrested him for the murder of...”

Tovar moved into the room, taking in the situation within seconds. Catching Ben Merrill’s frantically shaking head and taped mouth.

“Shut up Chambers,” he commanded. “Just shut the hell up!”

He strode across to Ben, grimaced, and yanked the duct tape off with one swift jerk. He watched tears spurt from Ben's eyes and sympathized with his pain.

"Sorry man."

Merrill rubbed the back of his hand over his lips.

"Watch him Tovar. He just killed McLean. He's carryin...."

Before Ben could finish Chambers drew the gun from his pocket aiming at Tovar's back. A shot echoed through the room. John Tovar turned, blood splattered over his face. And Frank Chambers pitched forward onto the floor. The officer restraining Evans held his weapon at shoulder height, pointed directly to the spot where Chambers face had been a split-second before.



10:45 AM

“...but Merrill’s okay?”

Detective Ramirez sounded relieved. He listened as the caller verified Merrill’s condition, nodding his approval.

“Excellent work John. I’ll contact Agent Mahoney and let him know. We’ll see you back here this evening, then?”

He finished the call and pocketed the phone. “

Officer Tovar, reporting in,” he said, unnecessarily. “Agent Merrill is fine. A few bumps and bruises, possibly a cracked rib or two. Other than that, none the worse for his ride south this morning.

“The men who abducted him are in custody and singing like the Vienna Boy’s Choir. Both McLean and Chambers are dead.”

Some of the excited light went out of the Detective’s eyes. His voice was calm and professional now.

“John will be back up here later today. I expect Ben will come with him. Bret, as a professional courtesy, will you please call Agent Mahoney and tell him his partner is safe and sound?”

Bret nodded, and headed for Maddy’s small library desk to make the call. Ramirez turned to Maddy.

“Ms. Compton, you didn’t get an opportunity to tell me how you knew Frank Chambers was Brad Vandiver.”

Bret stopped cold.

“WHAT!”

He whirled and started back to the living room.

Ramirez was leaning toward Maddy with a gently questioning expression in his dark eyes.

“Make the call Bret. This can wait a little while. I’m not sure we should keep Mahoney in the dark any longer. He’s got one friend on the critical list already. No doubt he’s worried sick about Ben.” Ramirez smiled at Maddy. “A few more minutes won’t change anything now. Agreed, Ms. Compton?”

“Call Sean, Bret.” She was beginning to get her color back. Her voice was stronger. She was pulling herself up into that spine stiffened posture he knew meant she was back in control.

“Ask him if Jacoby’s any better if you get the chance. Okay?”

“Yeah. Okay...” Bret went back to the desk thinking Frank Chambers is Brad Vandiver. How the hell can that be? Is *anybody* who they say they are? This is nuts.”



7:30 PM

John Tovar and Jorge Ramirez were seated in front of the fireplace in Maddy and Bret's living room. A tray of drinks and snacky stuff occupied one corner of the coffee table. Ben Merrill occupied another corner nearer the gas log fire. They were holding what could only be termed a *debriefing*. Although technically, naming it as such would be considered highly uncommon, and possibly illegal.

Maddy was talking. The four men were giving her their undivided attention, riveted by her words.

“So just as we were about to leave the house to go looking for you,” she spoke directly to Ben now, “the phone rang. Bret thought we should answer, ‘cause it might be important. We waited just long enough for the answering machine to kick on. That's when this falsetto voice said, 'Maddy its Mama.'”

“The same woman called last spring around the time Michael Vandiver was murdered.” Bret spoke slowly, trying to recall the exact circumstances surrounding each of the other calls.

“We were in the middle of an argument because Ben was searching your office for evidence. That was the morning we found Michael's body. She called again just as Ramirez was...”

Maddy was shaking her head slowly from side to side.

“No. What?” Bret wanted to know. “No it wasn’t the same woman?”

Maddy continued the negative signal, but added a funny little quirk of her lip.

“No. It wasn’t a woman!” Ben offered.

“Right in one.” Maddy pointed at him. “And that’s what finally caused it all to fall into place for me. Remember me swearing up and down I’d never met any of Vandiver’s kids?” Her question was directed at Ramirez now.

He nodded. Suddenly he thought he could see where this was going.

“Well I was wrong. That summer we spent in Silverthorn Mama and Vandiver were supposedly remodeling that old tourist resort. About the first week we were there he brought his nephew out from somewhere back east. His name was Bradley, and he was an out and out little monster. I was nine. He was a teenager—a mean one.”

Ben looked at her, trying to fit his imagination around what it must have meant to be a nine year old girl, forced to keep company with a man like Vandiver and a male teenager such as the sociopath Bradley must have been. He’d never spent much

time with little girls, he had brothers and nephews, but the very idea of what she might have endured chilled his blood.

“He discovered really quickly that Mama was over the edge most of the time. He watched her pound on me regularly whenever I was within reach for a few days. Then he started sneaking around trying to scare me. He’d come up behind me, when I was playing or running an errand and say, ‘Maddy? Maddy it’s Mama. Where are you Maddy, I’m gonna kill you this time you worthless little brat,’ in a sick sing-song falsetto voice. I found a kitten in town one day when we went in for supplies. Somehow I managed to convince Mama to let me take it home. He took it away from me the first day and bashed its head against a rock while I watched. Mama and ‘Uncle Harry’ blamed me and refused to believe anything I said against him.”

As she spoke her voice grew more hushed, the color draining from her face. Every man in the room would have spared her this if it was possible. Bret moved closer to her and snuggled her up against his side.

“We tried to dig some of this out last spring. It was buried too deep, I guess. She’s never remembered all the crap that went on back then, until now.”

“Anyway. When I heard that voice again this morning, something snapped free in my memory. Suddenly I could see Bradley Vandiver. Hear his voice. Remember his eyes.”

She shivered involuntarily.

“It took awhile, but when you,” she nodded toward Ramirez, “said to me, ‘Chambers is no longer a concern’ it all snapped into place.”

She cuddled under Bret’s arm, running her hand up and down Bret’s thigh, the motion making little swishing sounds on the denim of his jeans.

“Uncle Harry said almost exactly the same thing to me the first time he caught me playing in one of guest cabins and put his filthy hands up my dress.” She was shaking now, from fatigue and emotion. “They sent Bradley back to hell, or wherever he normally lived, after he killed a neighbor’s German Shepherd with his air rifle and the neighbor called the cops. ‘Bradley is no longer your concern, Maddy dear. It is a man you should be concerned with now. Not a boy.’”

A single tear coursed down her cheek.

No one spoke for a few minutes. All were picturing her as a terrified and abused child.

“You said Brad killer his father, and your mother. What makes you think so?” Ramirez was actually relieved to be able to change the subject to something less horrible than child abuse. In his mind murder filled the bill.

“Mama spent most of her trial claiming she was innocent and that Brad killed his father.” Maddy wiped the tear away with the back of her hand, straightened against Bret’s arm and answered.

“She was so far gone mentally by that time no one took her seriously. Sometimes it takes me a while to get things. Often when I do they come in what Bret has always called ‘whole case scenarios’. Suddenly I’ll just get it. For whatever reason, it all just comes crystal clear in an instant. I had one of those flashes this morning. Mama may have been mad as a hatter, but I don’t honestly believe she was capable of killing Harry Vandiver. Someone slashed his throat, lifted him and put him into his car, then drove him off a mountain. I find it hard to believe a hundred and thirty pound woman who couldn’t make up her mind when to eat or bathe could have accomplished something quite so well planned and physically demanding.”

“If Bradley Vandiver and Alistair McLean were already partners in 1990, and everything we know says they were, it wouldn’t be a stretch to assume they bought a few witnesses and jury members. Maybe even a Judge.” Tovar interjected.

“So Evelyn Compton, mentally challenged and down on her luck, was simply a convenience. The means to an end. Framing her made it possible for Brad Vandiver to skate free again. To avoid paying for another of his crimes.” Ben Merrill was rapidly shifting

puzzle pieces now. Things he'd questioned for years were suddenly beginning to fall neatly into place.

"She was in the funny farm, doing twenty to life for a murder he committed. When Brad heard she was getting healthy and still professing her innocence to anybody who would listen, he and little-brother Michael paid dear old mom a visit. They slipped something in her oatmeal just in case somebody decided to listen to her."

Ben's cell phone, now in working order, rang; interrupting his thoughts. He flipped it open, glanced at it then answered, "Yeah? Sean! What's up amigo?"

He listened for quite a while before he smiled and said, "Man, am I glad to hear that. Give him all our best will ya?" They spoke for a few minutes longer then he pushed OFF and pocketed the phone.

"They think Jacoby's gonna make it. He rallied this evening. They've raised his condition from critical to guarded. He's still in ICU, but his doctors are hopeful he'll make a full recovery. There was no damage to his spinal column so there'll be no paralysis."

"That's great!" Bret reached out and slapped Merrill on the shoulder. "I know he's got to be relieved to get that piece of news."

“Nobody could know better, buddy.” Ben clasped Bret’s arm and squeezed. It was a gesture of not only relief, but camaraderie as well.

“Detective? I’ve got a couple of questions. About Chambers.” Maddy turned to Ramirez and looked directly into his eyes, emphasizing her point.

“How was it possible for a known criminal, or at least the son of a known criminal to infiltrate the Los Angeles Police Department and the San Luis Police Department? What about fingerprints, DNA? Whatever. It would seem to me, probably to most people, someone with his background and psychological tendencies could never become a police officer.

“Ms. Compton, may I call you Maddy? After today the Ms. Compton seems very formal.”

She nodded, and he continued.

”Anyway, as I told you we ran some very deep background checks. Too late, but we ran them. Apparently, Bradley Vandiver was able to accomplish what few other serial killers ever tried, or for that matter would want to try. He bought his way into the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department shortly after his father was killed. It was a perfect cover, giving him a way to keep current on the investigation into Tri-County Realtors dealings. He would also have access to records on all criminal activities nationwide. In the

process of the investigation we learned that McLean and Evans still own a couple of District Judges and a few highly placed police officers in and around Denver even after DIA opened in '95. It pains me to admit it, but given enough money, even Judges and law enforcement officers can be bought or blackmailed under the right circumstances.

“Alistair McLean, Michael Evans and Bradley Vandiver played the game of politics very well. They bought or blackmailed anyone they felt might be useful to them. Anytime they came across someone who couldn't be bought, or wouldn't sit still for blackmail, they simply killed them and paid to have their tracks covered. With all those millions of dollars at their disposal they had almost no problem spinning any situation to fit their needs.

“My job is usually simpler when I start out by remembering that old saw, ‘Follow the money.’ In this case we simply didn't pick up on the money until it was almost too late.”

“He killed McLean today like I would squash a bug.” Merrill shuddered a little at the memory. “There are probably bodies scattered behind him like bread crumbs. We may be finding them for years. We'll never know for sure why he was killing off the Vandiver siblings. If Michael was with him when he killed Evelyn, he'd need to wipe that slate clean. As for the rest, if I had to make a guess, I'd say it was to get rid of anyone who might identify him

or claim any portion of the fortunes he considered his own. There must be enough money to last several lifetimes.”

“Part of it has to be he’s just plain crazy,” Maddy put in. “He probably killed because he enjoyed it. I know he enjoyed killing small animals. He liked torturing them. And he got a real big charge out of tormenting little kids, like me.”

Her voice was weary and Bret could feel her trembling next to him.

“What say we wrap this up for tonight?” He checked his watch.

“Make that this morning. We’ve all had a long, tough day.”

“I’ll second that.” Merrill shifted and rubbed at his taped ribs.

“Bed’s gonna feel real good tonight. Thank God it’s Friday!”

Tovar and Ramirez stood; shook hands all around and where headed for the door when Ramirez turned and looked directly at Bret Rainier. “Too bad you’re so good at Industrial Design, my friend. We could use a cop like you on the job here at SLO PD.”

Bret laughed. “That’s not even funny, Ramirez. Besides, if Brandon goes back to Denver, I’m gonna be left with my job *and* his to do.” He threw his arm around Ben Merrill’s shoulders asking, “What d’ya think Brandon, baby. Can I qualify as a bean counter?”

EPILOG

December 20 - 2:45 PM

It was a gorgeous morning in December. It was a morning filled with promise. Bright sunlight poured through stained glass windows, dancing a prism of color across the alter steps of a tiny church facing the Pacific ocean a few miles from Los Osos.

Bret Rainier stood on the top step facing a small gathering of friends waiting to offer their encouragement and support. Anticipation was pounding through his system. His upper lip and palms were damp with sweat.

Ben Merrill stood slightly behind Bret, and to his left. Inside his jacket pocket he anxiously twisted a small diamond encrusted band between his fingers. He kept glancing at Linda and wondering if he was ready to take the big step himself. She was sitting with three other girls from MCD. And she looked amazing. She sent a loving smile his way every time she caught his eye. Maybe I'll do it, he thought. Maybe I'll just buy a ring and Christmas Eve I'll pop the question.

Each man had faced threatening situations before. Neither could remember facing one that made him so nervous before this. Both felt as if they had been standing in the same spot forever. In reality, they had been waiting only a few minutes. Now, hearing

the first strains of Mendelssohn's wedding march, all eyes turned toward the sanctuary doors, currently held open with tall baskets of pine boughs and poinsettias, awaiting the arrival of the bride.

Maddy stepped through the doors, hesitated a moment, then moved toward them, down the aisle between the pews.

The bright December light illuminated her simple ivory silk suit.

She has never looked more beautiful, Bret thought.

Radiant with excitement, she stood still at the alter steps for another moment. She stood alone, as she had been for so many other important occasions in her life. Then she raised her eyes to his.

"I'm not alone anymore," she told him, when they talked about who would accompany her down the aisle, 'give her away'. "I haven't been alone since the day we agreed to be partners ten years ago. And I haven't been lonely for a single hour since you moved into my heart and home in March."

The music swelled. She smiled gloriously, stepped forward, took his outstretched hand and stepped up to stand beside him. This morning, she thought, we become partners in the eyes of God and man. Deep in her heart this ceremony represented only the public announcement of a partnership they'd formed on that dreadful yet wonderful Tuesday night last March.

After the ceremony Bret and Maddy hosted a small gathering at a local hotel. Their invitations simply stated, “Join us to celebrate our partnership.”

Jorge Ramirez, John Tovar and their wives sat at a table with Steve Jacoby and Sean Mahoney. None of them mentioned the pending trial of Michael Evans or the events leading up to it. This was neither the time nor the place. Everyone present had heard the stories surrounding the murder of Michael Vandiver in MCD’s office last spring, but no one felt like talking about that today. The conversations were all upbeat. Congratulatory. Positive and cheerful.

After almost an hour of good conversation, excellent food and liberal libations Ben Merrill stood to make another toast. All eyes turned toward him. Everyone was wondering what could possibly be left to say. Ben waved toward Bret and Maddy, motioning them to stand beside him.

It was Bret, who lifted his glass and offered this. “Friends, another toast.”

Maddy lifted her glass and continued, “To the best Industrial Design House on the West Coast. And the strongest partnership in the business.”

Bret picked it up again.

“And to our newest partner, Brandon Williams. No. Wait. Make that Ben Merrill. Who will be coming back to MCD on Monday in a permanent capacity. Not only will Ben be returning as a senior partner, he’ll be taking back his role as head bean counter. Thanks be to God.” Bret concluded laughing.

Bret, Maddy and Ben raised their glasses, clinking the rims. “To partners!” they toasted together.

