

Prologue

My windshield disintegrated a nanosecond after the shotgun blast. I spilled from the driver's seat looking for the targets. The first responding uniforms were down and out. Their cruiser had blocked off the escape route of a shiny "pimped up" red Mustang. They had done something right. The two guys who had clipped the convenience store didn't want to leave their ride - idiots. The Seven-Eleven hit was not a new act for them. They had hit five places in the last three weeks. I was looking for two of them – maybe more – one with a cut down semi-automatic 22 - the other a sawed off sixteen gauge shotgun.

They had split up to close on me when the smart thing would have been to run like hell. I caught the guy with the 22 as he rounded the rear of my car. He got three slugs into me before punching out. This didn't look good. I had to move. The guy with the shotgun pressed for time but aware that his buddy was out of it slowed the action. Wrong move - I popped up between the fence and store and caught him under his eye as he swung around. The blast from his shotgun was deafening. I slumped against the wall and waited - my Glock held loosely in my lap. Elapsed time five seconds – two bad guys dead – one cop – dead – two cops almost.

Crazy Things Happen In Paradise

“So you used to be a cop in Canada?”

“Yeah, in another life a long, long time ago.”

I was talking with a cute young waitress named Mia at the Clearwater Beach International House of Pancakes – IHOP. I had started to come to IHOP regularly for my main meal of the day, and Mia was the reason. The other two places that I used to go to were nearer to my room, but the chance to see Mia had made walking the extra distance seem worthwhile. I hadn't really said anything of consequence to her for the first week or so. I just enjoyed watching her. As the days passed, she seemed to take an increasing interest in me. I wanted to believe her attention was the result of my innate charm. More probably, her interest had grown in proportion to the generous tip I always sacrificed for her.

At first, when we finally did more than the serve and volley of ordering a meal, we made casual conversation - the weather – hurricanes and evacuation routes, Clearwater events, tourists and fishing. A week or so into that routine, she accidentally placed the wrong order in front of me. She apologized profusely claiming she had other things on her mind. Her embarrassment was evident. I teased her about being a blonde and having a mind to have other things on. And the verbal exchange started. She passed off my blonde insult with a quick wry smile and a verbal shot about single males eating alone every day at the IHOP - round one to Mia.

From that first short exchange, we began a daily ongoing banter that I thoroughly enjoyed. It was innocent. We were having fun.

Example: Did you hear about the two blondes who decided to drive to Disney Land? When they saw a sign that read “Disney Land left”, they turned around and went home.

Mia seemed to look forward to our verbal sparring as much as I did. Often, when I arrived for my meal, she would have an opening quip about tourists or Canadians. I soon realized that my stock of blonde jokes was running out pretty quickly. I made a quick visit to the local library's Internet service, and my cup overflowed. There were enough jokes to keep me going for years.

Very soon, I began to consider my meal at the IHOP as the highlight of my day. I eagerly anticipated my walk along the beach to talk with her. The meal became almost incidental. No matter, I thank God that more than pancakes and waffles were on offer. I also realized that I really missed Mia on her days off.

On one memorable late afternoon, the relationship took a turn. It was rainy - cooler than it had been for over a week. There were not as many people in the restaurant. Mia took her break and arrived at the side of my table with a mug of coffee in her hand. She asked if she could join me. This was a first. Our interaction had always been "on the fly". We had never sat down and looked at each other while discussing anything. I could see no harm in her sitting with me. In fact, I felt a tingle of fearful excitement at the prospect. Living alone can be lonely. I nodded and mumbled that sure, she could join me. She sat down. At first, there was an awkward silence. There were no jokes, no shots, just silence.

We just sat there like two very different beings from very different worlds considering those many differences as we looked at each other across the Formica tabletop. For whatever reason, confronted with the mental fantasy that I had created through the recent weeks, I did not know what to say. Perhaps it was the mutual awareness that we had just transcended some invisible boundary and moved into the new territory of a relationship that kept us quiet.

I smiled.

She smiled.

She was better at that game than I was. Too quickly, I began to feel even more embarrassed and awkward. Maybe this hadn't been a good idea after all. I didn't know what she expected. Flip banter was one thing; intelligent and meaningful conversation was another. Finally, just as I was about to say something about the weather, she broke our uneasy silence.

"You know that my name is Mia," she said quietly as her sharp blue eyes found something to intently study on the tabletop. She didn't smoke, so she picked up her coffee cup and took a silent sip. I realized that although I knew her name, I had never said it to her.

“I know that,” I said nodding to the small plastic nametag attached to her waitress smock above her right breast. “And I’ve heard other people call you that.”

She took a quick glance down to the tag and nodded and looked back capturing my eyes, “Oh yeah, after a while you kind of forget it’s there. So what’s your story Joe? You can’t be a tourist unless you got a lot of money and are here for the season. But if you had a lot of money, I don’t think you’d eat here as regularly as you do - unless there’s something here more than the food.”

“Probably not,” I said smiling at her and wondering how she knew my name, “but you guys do make a very good waffle.”

“I guess, but after a while you can hardly even look at one. And the smell almost makes me gag.” She made a face, and took another quick sip from her coffee cup. Her intelligent blue eyes never released me. “So again, if you don’t mind too much, what’s your story?”

“I don’t mind at all I guess. I’ve been in Clearwater for almost three weeks now, and the only person I have had a sustained conversation with is the guy who works for the property management company that checks up on the old house where I live. The woman who owns the place, Mrs. Reilly, according to the property guy, is a bit of a flake. She still lives in the house, but I don’t usually know she’s there and even more rarely actually see her. The fishing boat owner I work for from time to time is not what you’d call a conversationalist unless fishing is the topic. I know squat about fish or fishing.”

I realized that I was rambling – a nervous habit. Still, I blabbed on, “And the security work I sometimes do on Sand Key is pretty lonely stuff. You just sign rich people in and sign rich people out. Every so often, you walk around the property. But if I tell you my story, you have to tell me yours. Agreed?”

“Well, that will be a short one sure enough, but yeah, okay, I agree.”

So I told her.

“Why Clearwater?” she asked.

“I visited here before when I was a kid. My folks brought my brothers and me to the area a few times. And I liked the place. It’s warm. I like the beach and the gulf. That’s gulf not golf. No snow, no ice. It’s kind of a nice change from home.”

“So what kind of cop were you? Traffic, a motorcycle or cruiser cop or what?”

“No, I was a detective attached to the Major Crimes department. I was moving along through the ranks - taking courses - that kind of stuff.”

“So why did you stop being a cop? Were you undercover and the bad guys found out you were a cop and now you have to hide out?”

She seemed to know about as much of how police forces work as someone who spent too much time watching too much television.

I smiled. I guess I could have shown her the scars, but I shrugged that one off.

She would have made a pretty fair interrogator. Her eyes never left me. But she was way too fast to jump to wrong conclusions.

“Yeah, well, maybe I’ll save that mystery for another time. But I will tell you that I was married in another life – no kids. And here I am.”

But she was tenacious. For the next fifteen minutes she conducted a succinct Q&A. She got most of my life in a nutshell, but I held back the stuff about my brother as well as how my chosen career came to an abrupt end.

“What about your story now?” I asked.

“I got to go back to work,” she said with a quick smile as she rose from her chair with her empty coffee mug. “If you really want to hear my dreary story, I get off at nine. I’ll meet you right outside. Oh yeah, your bill is at the cash register. And I still want to know why you aren’t a cop anymore.”

I quietly finished what I could of my now cold meal – chicken strips – hot or cold, they taste about the same. It’s difficult to eat and tell your life story at the same time. I felt strangely discomfited by the abrupt ending to my meeting with Mia, but there was nothing I could do about that. Her quick smile was a warm touch. I watched her as she started serving another table.

It was as if I didn't exist and our conversation had never happened. There was no doubt about it. She had certainly surprised me. Then I had to ask myself - Was this a date? I didn't know whether I would return to meet her at nine or not. Yes I did. Was she just messing with me or was she sincere? I mean I had to be at least ten or twelve years older than her - maybe more. Did she want something from me? Was she setting me up for something? And if this was a set-up, what was that all about? All the innate cop suspicions that I believed had died long ago rose up in me with cynical lone wolf wariness. I wasn't afraid. I was curious. I dropped a generous tip on the table and went to the check-out counter.

The overweight middle-aged woman, who managed the restaurant, was usually a naturally pleasant woman. She most often greeted me with a friendly smile. This time, there was no smile. She mutely looked at me as if part of my meal was still stuck to my face. She handed me my check. I paid; thanked her - nothing - and left.

Something to Think About

Even though it was overcast with a steady fine drizzle of rain falling, I decided to walk along the beach. The long wide strip of white sand was ripe with the warm smell of the sea salt and the partial remains of a decaying fish. There were only a few other people walking or jogging along the shoreline. Mainly tourists, I thought dismissively as I ambled quietly along the packed sand near the churning surf. A lone grey gull screamed protectively overhead and then swooped down upon the rotten fish carcass. Nature's garbage men!

While I walked, I remembered the first time that I met Mia. She had greeted me at the entry to the restaurant, flashed that radiant smile with those brilliant blue eyes and led me to a table in her section. Mia was by nature gregarious. Our relationship had been built on those short, often humorous, verbal exchanges while I ordered my meal. To me, it seemed that she, like so many waitresses, young or old, was a natural flirt. I had watched her play with other customers in a similar manner - the Pretty Woman/ Cinderella dream of whores and waitresses everywhere – some good looking guy with more bucks than brains will come along and take her away from all this misery.

The banter between us had always been harmless and frivolous. There had not been anything sexual or suggestive in our exchanges - no hard line come-on. I had not seriously expected or even dreamed - well, perhaps I had fantasized a little - that anything would come of it. She had become a very pleasant diversion in my otherwise pretty ordinary day. She was the all-Canadian girl next door, but maybe not so innocent – and definitely not Canadian - the stereotypical tanned, blond, blue-eyed young beauty with the firm fit petite body of a cheerleader or gymnast that every adolescent male dreams about at some time in his teens. Those days were a distant memory.

But I felt that there was something more to her - something beyond her obvious physical attractiveness. She seemed to me to be an intelligent individual with a quick wit and a neat sense of humour. It was only her eyes that tipped me to the fact that she had seen a more of life than might be guessed at first glance. Shortly after we met, I found myself wondering why someone

like her would have to take a job at IHOP. Now, after her invitation to meet her at nine, maybe I would find out. Or maybe I was reading more into her invitation than was actually there. If she thought I was the Richard Gere to her Julia Roberts, she was going to be disappointed.

Throughout my meander towards home, I continued to play the various scenarios in my head. Whatever it was, I was already looking forward to meeting her again that night.

I had a few hours before I had to start back over to the IHOP. I wondered about driving over in the Jaguar. That would impress her. Too Richard Gere – the Jag would stay in the garage. I had a shower and a fresh shave, the second of the day, a personal record. I wondered what I should wear. I realized that I was more alive than I had been in more than a decade. Perhaps alive was not the word. More like curious or intrigued. Then, I as I was wondering if this was going anywhere, I also realized I was being more than just a little bit silly. I mean there had been nothing more than an invitation to meet her after work so that she could honour her side of our agreement. She would tell me her story. I would make some appropriate comment and then, thank her. She would go home. I would go home - end of story. And tomorrow the Florida sun would shine and nothing would be different in my life or hers. Boy! Was I ever wrong!

A First Date in Paradise

I reached the restaurant at ten to nine. I wondered about going inside, but then I remembered the stone faced manager when I paid my bill earlier. I decided to wait outside. It wasn't raining anymore although the darkening sky was still overcast with heavy cloud cover. No starlit night tonight. As I stood there, I mentally re-played the various scenarios I had developed through the late afternoon. I actually laughed out loud at myself. I must be losing it - becoming delusional. Maybe spending too much time alone in the sun isn't such a good thing.

"Do you often laugh like that when there's no one around?" she asked smiling at my obvious embarrassment.

"Er - no, actually I was thinking of a joke someone told me recently."

"Really - it must have been pretty good. Tell it to me."

Caught again - damn. "Well, it really wasn't a joke - er - it was more like a humorous incident."

"I'm listening. It sounds even more interesting." She was still smiling at me. Evidently, she had recognized my discomfort. She was enjoying herself.

"It was nothing," I confessed. "I was actually thinking about this."

"This? What's this?" She was really into it now. She was laughing at me. And then I was laughing with her.

"Okay, so where do you want to go to tell me your pitiful story?" I asked. "I mean that's what I'm here for - right?"

"That's right, and pitiful is a pretty good word for it," she replied lightly - almost as if somehow she had forgotten that was supposed to be why I was here. "Let's go somewhere that's not too noisy."

"Well, we could go to this charming Waffle House I know about. It's off the ground floor of the new Holiday Inn - used to be the Ramada. The food is pretty good if you like pancakes or waffles. The waitresses there are like waitresses everywhere - kind of goofy - and they often smell like syrup and waffles."

The former Ramada Inn was about two hundred yards back in towards the loop. It was the IHOP's main competitor in the open twenty -four hour a day mid-priced food group.

"Goofy?" she playfully hit my arm and then did a quick sniff of her jacket. "Who was standing here laughing out loud to himself a minute ago? Do I really smell like a waffle and syrup?"

"No, you smell great," I said as we started walking down the street towards the sound of the gentle surf washing up onto the beach. So much for romance! I had just told her she smelled great. God, I'm an idiot. "I was just kidding about going to the Waffle House. There's a fairly quiet coffee place slash bar just along Gulfview. It's supposed to be okay."

The place that we went into was really about as upscale a restaurant/bar as you can find anywhere on the beach. That's not saying much. It was called Frenchy's South Beach Cafe. Everybody, who had been on the beach for more than a week, just called it Frenchy's. In some upscale urban areas, the joint would have been summarily condemned to a quick meeting with a large wrecking ball. In Clearwater Beach, Frenchy's was considered quaint.

The interior was darkened and the red and white checked vinyl covered tables were candle lit. There was some quiet elevator type music – Kenny G, I think - playing softly in the background. A jockey size maitre d' led us to a quiet table near the back corner of the almost empty dining area. The dinner crowd had finished and moved on. The drinkers would start arriving after ten o'clock the miniature maitre d' said haughtily, as he handed us black plastic covered menus. He was responding to my observation about the shortage of people in the restaurant.

Mia didn't even open her menu. I did and made a mental note to return sometime in the future. "Want a dessert or something more than just coffee?"

"No, you go ahead though," she replied with a fleeting smile. Something was on her mind. It wasn't romance, and it had to do with me. Still a cop I thought as I continued to do a quick scan of the menu.

The little guy returned with a Bic pen and a small spiral note pad held primly in front of him. He looked like a public school teacher about to give a spelling dictation. If he was expecting to take a nine-course meal order, he was going to be disappointed. And he certainly wouldn't need the order pad. "What can I get for you lovely folks tonight?" he asked in a voice that oozed deep-south.

I nodded to Mia. "Just coffee for me."

The waiter made a quick head bob and looked at me. "Diet Pepsi on ice with lime and this dessert here - Death by Chocolate - with two forks or spoons – whichever works best."

"Very good, Sir," and he turned quickly and disappeared immediately in the direction of the kitchen.

"Two forks?" Mia said smiling at me again. She was relaxed. Her mind was made up. "You must be a dreamer."

"Not my worst sin," I said. "Besides, when you see this dessert, you may want some and, like any good boy scout, I'll be prepared."

She just laughed quietly and took a quick look around.

"So," I continued, "now you owe me your story. So let's have it."

"Yeah," she said, "but I have a few more questions for you."

"Cheater," I said shaking my head. I was starting to feel more comfortable with her. "You can ask me your questions after I hear your story. But only if I can ask you some more questions as well. Agreed?"

"Well, my story is pretty short. I'm not that old you know?"

"I was a cop. What are you - about twelve?"

"Right," she smiled sweetly and went on. "Up front - I am twenty seven. I was born in Tampa, so in a way, this is my home area. I quit school and left home when I was fifteen. Even though I have taken some night courses, I haven't graduated from high school, and that's why I can only get work as a waitress. My folks still live in the area. Well, my Mom and step Dad do. I don't know where my biological father is. He left my Mom, and my sister and me when I was

about eight or nine. I came back here two and a half years ago when my sister died. And that's about it."

"Whoa! Fifteen to twenty seven – that's a few years unexplained there Round Eyes. Why did you quit school and leave home at fifteen? What happened then? And how did your sister die? Come on. I was a cop - remember? I need details - just the facts ma'am."

Just at that moment, the waiter arrived with our drinks and a large white ceramic bowl filled with chocolate ice cream, covered with chocolate syrup and teaspoon size chunks of brownies. Hershey chocolate bar pieces were generously sprinkled on top of three dollops of thick whipped cream. He placed the calorie packed dessert on the table mid-way between the two of us with two long handled silver spoons.

"Enjoy!" he said with a quick smile and left us alone - my kind of waiter.

"You're going to eat that?" Mia asked leaning back from the table her eyes wide open. She pointed at the large chocolate concoction. "It's a heart attack in a bowl."

"No, we're going eat that," I said reaching for one of the two silver spoons. "Dig in and fill in the rather large gaps in your life while you're at it."

"How do you stay so fit looking eating something like that? If I had even a small bit of it - I mean a person could get fat just looking at it. You must have some great metabolism Joe!"

"I won't eat anything tomorrow. Or I'll jog longer. This is really good." I said licking my lips and rolling my eyes. "You're missing a once in a lifetime!"

"Well, maybe I could try a little - but just a bit."

"Good eh - now fill in the blanks."

"I left home cause I couldn't get along with my step dad. He is not a very nice man. To this day, he still frightens me. Anyway, I drifted up to Ocala and worked at a horse place for around six months during the winter. A lot of wealthy farms from up north send their horses to the Ocala area for the winter. There were a number of spreads from Canada wintering there. Anyway, there's always lots of work to pick up then. From there I moved to Orlando and worked for a few months at Disney and Sea World for minimum wage. Then, a guy saw me and hired me

to work in his club. Things kind of went from there. I started to drink too much. I worked as a dancer in clubs up there and then moved up into Georgia. I lived with a guy there for a few years. Just stuff like that.”

Mia stopped talking and took another spoonful of calories.

“And...?” I said prodding her to continue.

“And about three years ago, just around Christmas, I phoned home. I talked with my Mom and my sister for the first time in about eight years. My sister was almost fifteen years old by then. She was six when I skipped out. After that, I would phone once every two or three weeks mainly to talk with Vickie. That was my sister’s name. She wasn’t really bright, you know. I felt sorry for her. She always had trouble in school – special classes – but not like really retarded. Do you know what I mean?”

I nodded. It was enough. Mia continued.

“And she was a really nice kid too. I felt bad that I had left her there with my step dad. When we talked, she didn’t actually say it; she’d be afraid to, but it sounded like she was having a lot of problems living at home. I really felt for the poor kid. So, in my head, I kind of made her my project. But before I could help her, I had to get myself straight. I stopped drinking and started to save some money. Sometime in the late spring that year when I phoned, Vickie told me that she really had to get away. She wanted to visit me. I said that was cool cause I had been trying to get up the nerve to come home to visit her. We set up a time. I was going to meet her at the bus terminal in Orlando, and she was supposed to stay with me for a week or so. She never showed up. When I phoned home the next day to see what had happened, my Mom told me that she didn’t know anything about Vickie coming to visit me.”

“Did you believe her?”

“I had no reason not to. I figured that Vickie must have been afraid to tell her.”

“So, in a sense, Vickie was planning on running away.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, my mom told me that Vic was missing. A few days later, maybe a week, she was found dead off to the side of a dirt road that leads to the local make out

spot. She'd been strangled with her own panty hose. I came home for her funeral, and I ended up staying. But in a weird way, you see, Vickie actually saved my life. And that's it - end of story."

Mia looked up at me. Her eyes had started to brim, but she was almost defying me to ask for more. When I said nothing, she scooped the last spoonful of our dessert.

"What happened to the guy who killed her?" I asked. Cop curiosity. There were still all kinds of gaps, but that one seemed the easiest to fill.

"Nothing, they never caught him - if it was a him." I could see the hook. It was baited very nicely. But still I went on.

"When we were talking earlier, you knew that I had been a cop. Do you remember? I don't think I've ever mentioned that to you. How did you happen to find out about that bit of my history?"

Just a little hesitation - a bit of color - maybe more if the light in the bar had been better.

"I must have heard it from someone."

"I see," I replied knowing that she had just lied to me - waiting. Watching her face reflect the mental calculations she must have been doing. I had not taken the hook - yet - still waiting. The Kenny G recording had been replaced with a string of Jimmy Buffet songs. I think the one playing was called *Why Don't We Get Drunk?* Or maybe it was *Cheeseburger in Paradise*. It didn't matter. After a while, most of them sound like *Margaritaville*.

"Okay," Mia said, "so I asked around after you came in to eat a few times. You looked like a nice guy, and I was curious. I'm not dating anyone right now, so I asked around a bit okay. Someone told me that they had seen you over by the docks working for one of the fishing charters. I know a few guys from over there - customers who come in for early breakfast, so I asked a few of those guys. One of them said you sometimes went out with the Frankie Donner boat. He said you were an ex-cop from Canada named Joe Holiday."

Mia looked over to the door and stopped talking. It seemed that the colour drained from her face. She mumbled something that I couldn't hear. I became vaguely aware of a minor disturbance somewhere behind me near the bar's entrance.

We Have Visitors

Wondering if I was falling for one of the oldest tricks in the book, death by distraction, I took a quick glance over my shoulder. Two guys who looked as if they had already spent too much time in bars today were uncertainly making their way towards our table. I didn't recognize either one of them, so I turned back to Mia.

"I see," I said again. There was more to her explanation. I could be patient.

"Mia! I thought that was you. Long time no see babe. You're lookin hotter than ever." It was one of the young drunks. "How ya doin babe?"

The two guys stopped at our table and one of them - a guy who looked like he could do stand in stunt work for Arnold Swartzenegger in his prime - leaned heavily on the edge of our table. His beery breath was enough to make me edge back in my chair. "I heard you were working somewhere out here. They got a strip club on the Beach now for all the old farts?" He laughed loudly and looked back over his shoulder to see if his buddy was enjoying his incredible wit. His buddy smiled weakly but looked around nervously. This wasn't the kind of bar he was used to - no country music, pool tables or any other stumbling drunks.

"I don't do that anymore Billy Ray," Mia said anxiously. "I told you that before. I haven't done it for a few years now."

"Maybe you could do a little private show for Sammy and me? Show us what you got. We won't tell no-one. What you say to that babe?" he asked as he pushed hard in over Mia. She shrank back in her chair while looking over at me for help.

"Maybe you've had a little bit too much to drink there buddy, eh? And you've forgotten your manners too - yeah?" I said quietly while slipping my hand over the long handled silver spoon that still had a bit of melting whipped cream dripping from its tip.

"And who the fuck are you?"

"Just a friend of Mia's - I really don't think she wants to talk with you anymore right now."

"Well, fuck you and the horse you rode in ...

That was about as far as he got. I swept his arms and kicked the table out from under him hoping that Mia would react fast enough to get her legs out from under the collapsing table.

Gravity took over, and Billy Ray crashed to the floor in an awkward drunken sprawl of legs and arms. His friend, Sammy, made a sudden lurching move towards me. As he did, I wheeled around and rammed the spoon up under his chin. He hadn't seen my weapon, so he was probably wondering if I was about to cut him a new mouth. Billy Ray was working awkwardly to get his legs under him when I kicked him in the face - hard. He went out like a cheap light bulb in a power surge.

The diminutive waiter arrived on the run anxiously trying to make sense of the scene in front of him.

"We'll be leaving now," I said to a stunned Sammy. "You and Billy Ray here can look after the rest of the damages." I quickly peeled off three twenties from my money clip and handed them to the waiter.

When we were outside and moving quickly back towards the IHOP, Mia grabbed my hand. "I'm parked at the back of the lot. Are you okay Joe?"

"Yeah," I replied looking back to see if anyone was following us. There was no one.

When we reached the back of the IHOP parking lot, Mia led me to an older model dark coloured Honda Civic that had definitely seen better days. The relic looked as if it might have been in a few recent fender benders – maybe more than a few. Even in my adrenaline driven rush, I remember thinking, "This woman might not be a great driver." Mia unlocked the doors, and we got in.

"Why did you have to kick him?" she screamed as she fumbled to get her keys into the ignition.

"Did you see the size of the guy? He had to be six three or four - maybe two-forty to two-sixty - and drunk to boot - and with a friend almost as big!" I replied incredulously. My voice was too loud. The adrenaline pump was just starting to ease off. I made an effort to lower my volume hoping that she would follow suit. "Me - I'm six one - maybe one ninety - one ninety-

five if I eat too many Death by Chocolates. You really don't believe that I should have fought fair – Marquis of Queensbury shit? Drunk or not, that big mother would've killed me.”

“I guess so,” Mia replied quickly as she fired up the reluctant Honda.

“What was that all about anyway? The one guy, Billy Ray, obviously knew you.” She started to pull the car out of the parking space without checking her mirror or anything else.

“I went out with Billy Ray once or twice just after I came back here to live. He's a friend of my brother, Terry. They hang out at the same gym. At first, he was kind of nice to me. I didn't know too many people around here anymore, so I thought – what the hell! On the second date, I found out what a jerk he is. He said he wanted to take me shopping which sounded kind of nice. And then he took me to a porn joint out by the dog track. He wanted me to pick out a few sex toys and then sleep with him and his friend. He's a pig. He also thought it might be a great idea for me to hook for him – maybe make some home fuck and suck movies. I told him to get lost. I haven't seen him in months. If I ever do see him coming, I usually take a quick hike in the other direction real fast.

The End of My First Date in Paradise

We pulled away from the almost empty parking lot heading back towards the loop and the Memorial Causeway. The streets were quiet, not much traffic of any kind, and no sign of Billy Ray or his buddy, Sammy. Mia drove by Crabby Bill's restaurant and the marina docks and continued north along Mandalay Avenue past about ninety-four souvenir shops selling everything from suntan oil and bathing suits to jewellery and assorted sizes of hollowed out alligator skulls. We had not talked. Mia seemed to have become absorbed in her own thoughts which might have explained her reckless driving - but probably not. It was as if I wasn't there.

Finally, she snapped out of her trance and cleared her throat. She made a wide right hand turn and another left and stopped on Poinsettia in front of what was once a Tru-Value hardware store – now an empty space for rent. The whole friggin coast of the Gulf of Mexico to park, and she picks the front of a former Tru-Value hardware store. I knew there wasn't any romance in the air tonight.

Mia turned off the Honda's ignition. The old car chugged a few times and died noisily. Before the car's last wheeze, she had pivoted in her seat to face me. There was no light from the hardware store shell and the streetlight on the lamppost across the road made it relatively difficult for us to see each other. Maybe Mia wanted it that way.

"Do you still want to hear the rest of my fucking pathetic life story?" she asked quietly. There was a sense of urgency in her voice that had not been there before. Her frustration was almost palpable.

"Sure," I replied. I knew that I was soon going to have to make a decision. The information about her murdered sister that she left out for me earlier was the reason I was sitting here now.

"In the time that I kind of skipped over," she smiled weakly, took a deep breath, and started uncertainly, "I did some pretty trashy stuff and a lot of stupid things. Things I'm not proud of. I am not a good or even a nice person. Even as a kid, I did things, and things were done

to me, that should never have happened. I'm not going there, so please don't ask me to. But you have to know, right from the get go, that I'm not a nice person."

"I usually make those kind of judgments for myself," I interrupted. "And I don't usually judge too harshly. Life sometimes bites you and you bite back. Even as a cop there were things I did then I might not do now. You have to learn to forgive yourself – and as a sideline I write for a Chinese fortune cookie company."

Mia laughed lightly, and that was a good sign. "Okay, to me you are a good guy, and I don't want to see you get hurt. I don't like seeing anyone get hurt. Anyway, when I contacted my family – that was maybe just a bit more than three years ago - I was about to bottom out. The dancing that I had started out doing in strip clubs had gone to escorting and then, finally, just outright hooking. I was drinking and partying too hard. I wasn't happy. In fact, I couldn't even remember what happy felt like. Killing myself seemed like a reasonable solution – the only solution. I even had enough pills to do it I think. But when I talked with my sister, Vickie, she sounded like I did when I was her age. I decided that I wanted to come back here when I was feeling better and help her to avoid the mess that I had fallen into. Maybe even get her to move in with me and I could take care of her. I felt that if I could do that, my life would have served some purpose. Does that sound weird?"

I shook my head - no. To tell me these things was not easy for her. The inner conflicts, the fears and memories could be read on her shadowed face. Her blue eyes were dark and shiny as they looked quickly at me and then hastily strayed back down towards the floor.

"Okay, so when she was found dead, I came back home for the funeral. I talked with the police a lot. At first, I felt like it would only be a few days before her killer was caught. Now, here it is three years later, and they're not even trying anymore. The head detective in the investigation, a gruff old cop named Langdon, has retired. No one cares about what happened back then except for me – and maybe my mother. Everyone else has gone on as if nothing ever happened – as if Vickie had never been on this earth. That's not right. My sister was a real person. She may not have been real smart, but she had dreams and hopes. She deserved to have a

real life. I can't just throw her out with yesterday's garbage. So when I found out you were an ex-cop, I kind of developed this plan in my head to seduce you into helping me find whoever murdered Vickie." Mia stopped abruptly and raised her eyes to look at me. "Does that make any sense to you?"

"I guess," I said, "but I must have slept through the seduction part unless you thought the encounter with Billy Ray and his bud, what's his name, took care of that."

She laughed again. That sounded good. "No," she smiled at me and captured my eyes. "The Billy Ray thing was an unforeseen and unfortunate accident. In my original plan, I allowed a couple of weeks to find out if you were smart enough to be able to help me. I wanted to get to know you. I thought that maybe after you fell for me a bit, I'd ask you to help me find Vickie's killer."

"Pretty sure of yourself around the falling for you stuff there Sweet Cakes. What if it turned out that I was a gay caballero and not turned on by your clever little seduction slash manipulation plot?"

"It never crossed my mind," she said as she dropped her small tanned hand onto my thigh. "But I guess I might have asked someone like Billy Ray to seduce you then. Are you?"

"Are I what?" I was suddenly having trouble concentrating on our conversation as her hand moved softly toward my knee and then gently back up my inner thigh.

"Gay?"

"Certainly not - who told you that?" I said finding my deepest voice.

Mia laughed and her eyes lit up. She took her hand away. I tried to get focused again on her proposal about what I thought she expected me to be able to do. It wasn't easy getting that directed.

"So you think, because I got away with my life when we met Billy Ray, that I am the ex-cop for the job – and that is ex-cop? Mia, you don't need muscle; you need brain. Three years after the fact with no co-operation coming from the local cops and no status to approach anyone

for information, you'll also need an incredible amount of luck - which from the sounds of it, neither of us has in any quantity."

In spite of my effort to keep it light and yet sound reasonable, Mia cowered back into the driver's seat of the Honda as if each of my words was a stick hitting her. Her blue eyes had started to brim when I had started my reply. Now, they were flowing freely. I silently cursed myself for always having been a sucker for tears. I sat there and watched her. I didn't know what she would do if I reached out to comfort her, so I did nothing. I waited.

Finally, she stopped crying. Well, not quite, but the odd snuffle can't be counted against her. She slowly reached towards the car key still in the ignition. "So you won't help," she stated quietly. It wasn't a question; it was a statement of fact. "I'm sorry I bothered you Joe. I'll take you home."

I sat there feeling like a total waste of skin. She had bet on me, and I had failed her.

Mia must have found out more than my name and where I sometimes worked. She drove unerringly towards my rooming house. As she pulled to a stop at the curb in front of the old bungalow I share with my crazy landlady, I gave up.

"Mia, I didn't say I wouldn't help you. I said to be successful, to even stand a chance of finding out who killed Vickie, we would have to have an incredible amount of luck. Up front and to be honest with you, I don't think we'll be able find the killer. But if you want to try, I guess I could help - for a little while. I mean it isn't as if my social calendar is crammed with events. But, and I'm telling you this right now, if this gets too hairy - you know - dangerous - we go directly to the cops. Pass go; do not collect two hundred dollars. Do you agree?"

She turned towards me and said nothing. She stared at me with glassy eyes that were penetratingly sharp. I guess the deep stare was her form of bullshit detection. I knew right then that her life had taught Mia the importance of cynicism. How many times had men lied to her to get what they wanted from her? Had I just capitulated because I wanted this relationship to develop? Yes! I tried to hold her stare. I wondered if there was a chance in hell that I could do something here - probably not. She must have sensed my self-doubt.

“Okay,” she said quietly and leaned forward to kiss me gently on the cheek. “Thank you. What do we do now?”

“We do nothing just yet. It’s late, and I have to catch up on my beauty rest,” I replied. She smiled and then laughed. I was beginning to love that laugh. “I go to the library tomorrow and do a search on the Internet and the stacks. I’ll put together a list of the information we’ll have to find. I’ll also create a whole batch of the questions that we’ll need answers for. Once that’s done, and as soon as you can get free from work, we’ll sit down and figure out where we go from there. Does that sound fair?”

“Yes. And thank you,” Mia said simply.

“No problem,” I said. Who was I kidding? There was nothing but problems. “Are you okay to get home on your own?” I added as I reached for my door handle.

“I do it every night Bub,” she replied lightly. “Tell me tomorrow at the restaurant when you want to meet again.”

“Yeah, okay, but listen – don’t tell anyone about what we’re doing just yet. It could be dangerous, and we don’t know who the good guys and who the bad guys are.” Prophetic me.

Mia looked a bit confused. But she promised that she would keep this whole plan our little secret. Then, she put her junker in gear and drove off leaving me beside the curb watching her taillights flicker from view. “I must be nuts,” I said as I turned to go to my room. I believe I may have had a big smile on my face.

I'm A Cop Again – Well, In A Way

My arrangement with the Donner Fishing Charter was pretty loose. Frankie Jr. could call me if he needed an extra body to keep the charter guys in beer, chips and bait. As well, I was expected to fill dead air with friendly chatter about the trivia of Clearwater and Gulf of Mexico. I knew where Hulk Hogan lived and where John Travolta had built his mansion. I could talk about the value of local real estate but not Scientology – or Tom Cruise. Stuff like that. I was free to accept or reject the offer of the day's work without any hard feelings. Frank had the same arrangement with five or six other retired guys who would go along on the excursion for bare minimum wage. When I entered my room after watching Mia drive away, I checked my answering machine. Although I could have used the money, there were no requests for my services. I could go to the library the next morning and do what I had promised Mia.

The next morning was classic Clearwater Beach for me. The sun was bright and hot. The sky was incredible iridescent shades of blue with not a cloud in sight. There was only a puff of wind, and the fresh morning air around my head was a fine salty blend of gulf water, tropical vegetation and my coconut butter tanning oil. Six or seven screeching Wild Parakeets were squabbling over the nesting rights in the Foxtail Palm behind the garage. That palm, that anchors Mrs. Reilly's little backyard garden, and her garage are right across from my bedroom window. Damn, I love Clearwater Beach. Every morning, I wake up glad to be alive. Most mornings like this, I'd grab a book and my breakfast and sit in one of the two blue and white striped lawn chairs in the small yard doing little more than working on my tan. Not this morning though. Today, I had to start my investigation for Mia.

The Clearwater Beach library is on Mandalay Avenue just up the street and across the road from the Hilton Hotel. It shares a small pink strip mall with an ice cream joint, a souvenir shop, a gym and the headquarters for the Jolly Trolley. For a buck twenty five you can ride the entire beach from north to south as well as the Island Estates, Clearwater and Sand Key. You want to ride all day on the trolley? It's the same price – a buck twenty five. One of the drivers, a young guy on a disability pension from the army named Sam Langford, told me about a woman

on her honeymoon. She had had a fight with her new husband at the Hilton Hotel. The angry young lady got on the trolley with a picnic hamper and two library books and rode the open bus all day. Her husband had thought that she had been mugged and called the cops.

Because there are not a large number of actual permanent residents on the beach, the library is minor league by any standard. It is a satellite of the new main, very large and very expensive, City of Clearwater Public Library. Most of its lending business is done in the prime season – February to May. As it is has only limited shelf space, it is minimally staffed and supplied. The available space is divided into a small office for the librarian on duty, tiny - his and her - washrooms, and the main floor where the books are shelved. There is a bank of four older computers with Internet connection. As well, there is a smaller bank of in house computers used to maintain the accounts of its borrowers. On these computers, you can check the availability of the various titles stocked on the shelves and reserve new books just out. There are two substantial worktables with four chairs at each table. Near the washrooms along the back wall, there is a single row of four study carrels each with its own hard wood armchair. The operation was a pretty standard and simple and almost never busy.

One of the two things that made this library distinctive from others I have visited was the display of “on sale” art painted by local artists. Almost all of the framed pieces were done in the airy pastel shades popular with the west coast Florida painters. One of the best artists is a very talented woman named Helen West. She and her husband can be found, on almost any evening, selling copies of her work on Pier 60. I have one of her prints hanging over the headboard of my bed. Almost all of the canvases on the library walls were for sale at reasonable prices.

The other distinctive feature was the prevalent aroma of incense. When I visited the library the first time to take out a membership, I had asked about the pungent scent. The librarian smiled at me and admitted with a soft chuckle that she regularly listened to the Beatles and burned sandalwood incense in her office. She claimed it helped her to concentrate. I wondered if she sometimes she used it to disguise the odor of marijuana. It’s the way a cop is taught to think.

During my most recent visit, I had been looking for more blonde jokes. The on-duty librarian, on that occasion, had been an older, gray haired lady who was tanned to the shade of an over ripe banana. My impression of her then had been that she regarded all libraries as sacred places where only incredibly reputable and scholarly people toiled in total silence. She, in turn, took her few responsibilities in the small library seriously.

This time when I entered, the same gray haired lady did a quick take on me and bit her upper lip. Maybe she remembered that I was the guy who had been looking for all the blonde jokes that he could find. This time I realized immediately that she did not like what she saw. Maybe my appearance led her to believe that I was there to be a pain in the ass again. I had the feeling that rubber flip flops, ragged blue jeans, and a decade rust coloured T-shirt declaring my love for Clearwater Beach were not, in her opinion, the attire suitable for serious scholarly work.

When she had been on duty that cool rainy afternoon that I had spent looking up blonde jokes, she had had to remind me four times that laughing was not permitted in the library. She had forcefully asked me to leave on that occasion. Now I was back.

This time out, I figured it might be a good idea to have her on my side. I quietly claimed a place at a vacant worktable. I pulled out one of the hard wooden chairs neatly spaced around it and placed my worn backpack on another. I slowly approached the elder lady with feigned trepidation. I tried to imagine how a slightly retarded grade ten high school student might ask his brilliant mathematics teacher for help doing quadratic equations. It didn't matter; the old doll was reserved in her response.

"Can I help you sir?" she asked professionally.

I explained what I was looking for. She gradually became interested and then warmed to my genuine request for her assistance.

Maybe she was bored or maybe she believed that she could get me out of there faster if she helped me. Whatever her motive was, after I explained to her what I needed, we were soon talking like old friends.

The librarian's name was Ida May Thornberry. She was from a small town in upstate New York where she had been the local public school librarian. Her husband, a former fireman named Eugene, "his friends called him Guy", had gone to fight his big fire in the sky - cancer. But, during the course of his life, he and Ida May had put aside enough money for the two of them to fulfill their adult dream of living in Florida. Her two daughters now visited her with their families once every winter. She lived in a small apartment building in the City of Clearwater – "not the beach, far too expensive". She rode the local bus to her job every day that she had library duty. I guess she was lonely. I got all that information without even asking.

As soon as I told her that I was looking for anything and everything that I could find on the murder of a teenage girl in Pinellas County three years ago, Ida May hit the computer like Sherlock Holmes on "crank". If she had believed that I was demented from our first meeting, her assessment of me was probably confirmed when I could not even tell her the last name of Mia's sister. I had forgotten to ask. So much for all those finely honed police skills flooding back. I'd not even managed to get the dead girl's full name.

Mrs. Thornberry was not in the least deterred by my lack of information. She started with obituaries in the St. Petersburg Times and Tampa Tribune. She then hit the smaller weekly papers like the Belleaire Blabber. In a very short time, we were building a fairly comprehensive file on the murder of Mia's sister - Victoria Anne Doulton.

From the obituaries, Ida May and I tracked back through the newspaper reports. We generated a time line from the moment Vickie was reported as an unidentified body found partially clad in a small field to a final statement offered by one of the investigating officers. One of the more dedicated reporters had come up with a standard yearbook thumbprint photo of Victoria Doulton. The grainy picture was of a thin blonde youngster with vacant eyes and a weak smile. Ida May enlarged the photograph on her computer's Canon three in one printer, scanner and copier. I studied it carefully and then added it to my growing file. The final article that we found was dated just over three weeks later when Sergeant Stuart Langdon, the detective in charge of the case, announced that while the investigation would remain open, there were no new

leads to pursue. He assured the reporter that it would be only a matter of time before the guilty party or parties were brought to justice. Translation - the investigation was at a dead end.

Nothing else could be done until the killer hit again – if he killed again.

The date on the final newspaper report was three years earlier. There was nothing further. We had the when, what, where and the first part of the - who – the victim. We were missing the - who's - second part – the killer - and also the why. I thought that if we were able to figure out why Vickie Doulton was murdered, we might be able to determine who the killer was. Of course, the assumption I was making was that the victim knew her killer. A random killer with no real motive but his own self-serving agenda would be impossible to apprehend now. I wondered if the Sergeant Langdon had finally concluded that Vickie Doulton had met up with a modern day Jack the Ripper whose method of killing was strangulation. If this was a wrong place – wrong time murder, our chances of finding the killer were non-existent.

I recalled the good advice given to me years ago in the thick Scottish brogue of my training officer, Detective Sergeant Ian McGregor, “Aye, watch where the pennies go and answer your five ws laddie, and you’ll solve yer crime every time.” I was teamed with McGregor during the last two months of his career on the force. I had just made detective and been transferred to major crimes. I learned more about police work in those two months with that old curmudgeon, McGregor, than I did in all of the police courses I ever took. Given the lack of scientific and technological resources available to him that exist today, the guy’s solve rate was incredible. Ian McGregor “ate his gun” three months after he was compelled to take mandatory retirement.

Okay, I had some of the ws, so I knew where to start. I thanked Mrs. Ida May Thornberry for her help and gathered up the copies of the news articles she had printed for me. I placed the news items, arranged chronologically, in a manila folder. I then stuffed everything into my backpack. The kindly librarian almost seemed disappointed that our search had ended.

“Probably just enjoys doing research and talking with people,” I thought as I securely fastened the zipper and straps of the pack.

Just as I was about to leave, I remembered to ask her to say nothing to anyone about the research we had done. I tried to make it seem like it was pretty mysterious stuff a la James Bond or Jason Bourne. Let her feel that she was part of a big mystery.

“Mrs. Thornberry, if anyone should ask you about the murder of Vickie Doulton or even about me,” I said to her in hushed tones, which was kind of silly as there was no one else within twenty feet of us, “see if you can find out who they are and let me know. I’d really appreciate it. And thank you again for all the help you have been to me. I’ll be back here soon enough – but no more blonde jokes - I promise.”

“I’ll do that Joe,” she said with a friendly smile. She was taking her own quick survey of the library - checking to see if the enemy was close at hand. “Mum is the word - you try to look after yourself Joseph Holiday.”

Killing Time

I didn't feel like going back to my room, and I was getting hungry. I checked my watch. I had been in the library for almost five hours. Time sure flies when you're having fun. No wonder I was hungry. Death by Chocolate can only take you so far. I walked back towards the loop and ducked into a Subway sandwich shop. For the next half hour, I sat and worked my way through a sandwich and a Diet Pepsi. As I munched and sipped, I worked methodically through the material that Ida May had copied for me. As I had expected, I had background. I still had far more questions than I did answers. I sat quietly and tried to figure out the best way to go about doing the impossible. The scene of the crime was as good a place as any. Yeah right, like three years later I was going to find out all kinds of things. What was I thinking? And I should have checked to see if similar crimes, done in the same manner, had been committed subsequently. I continued writing down the things that I needed to find the answers for. As I was jotting down the things that I should do, the kid behind the sub counter asked if I wanted anything else. When I replied – No thanks – he gave me a hard look. I got the message. Scram Mac. I gathered my papers and left.

As I walked past the Hilton Hotel, I checked my watch again and realized that I had a few hours before my meeting with Mia. I decided to head over to the marina fishing docks just along from Crabby Bill's restaurant. Some of the all-day charter boats would have returned with their catch. That would mean that there would be a lot of people and activity. I needed to be a part of that for a while, but at a distance. Some hard wooden public benches had been set out along the edge of the sidewalk back from the docks. The marina benches were only one of a number of favourite basking in the sun locations the three or four Clearwater homeless guys frequented before the cops found them and drove them back across the causeway. Surely, I could find a seat somewhere there where a sandwich making kid with a rotten attitude wouldn't bother me. I found the bench I wanted about three quarters of the way up the main dock.

Hungry Brown Pelicans and Herring Gulls swooped around or sat on their perches waiting for fish guts and heads to be dumped from the anchored boats and cleaning tables. A

number of Ring Billed Gulls strutted on the cement pier pan handling crumbs from the tourists. Their efforts resulted in limited success. There were signs posted asking people not to feed the birds. The afternoon sky had been invaded with small, elongated puffs of white cloud. A gentle warm breeze wafted the fishing and ocean smells. I closed my eyes and listened in case the gods wanted to share any insights about how I might manage the impossible task of helping Mia get closure on the death of her sister. Apparently, the gods were out to lunch. No inspiration at all.

And then for no particular reason at all, I wondered about Mia leaving home when she did and the attitude she had towards her stepfather. Before my promotion to the elite major crimes squad, I had made a number of fact gathering trips, usually with a female officer, to the Metro Children's Aid Society. Invariably, as I sat listening to a crying child divulge the sordid details of an abuse done by some twisted perpetrator, I had felt sick. It was inconceivable to me how callous these guys could be in their behaviour. In many instances, the victims were their own children. The story Mia had told me of her life from the time before she left home at fifteen sounded sadly similar. Her fear of and disgust for her stepfather was the stereotypical attitude of the abused kid who becomes a runaway. I was almost certain that her concern for Vickie had been based upon her fears that her not so bright sister had become the target of similar abuse. It was something to think about anyway. Could I open a discussion about sexual abuse with Mia? I didn't think so. Not yet. She had been very clear last night – "don't ask me to go there".

For the next two hours, I mentally played with the problem of Mia's history and what I should do next and how. Once again, I went over the information I had. While a few possible avenues had opened up for me, my sense of hope had not really increased at all. If the prospects for any resolution of this case were slim and nil, I would have given odds on nil.

As I walked back along the length of the marina main dock, I exchanged a few friendly words with some of the charter owners I recognized. Then I spotted Papa Smurf and Kickstart sitting outside the marina store doing some subtle panhandling. These two guys were two thirds of the homeless contingent that I called the three stooges or the three blind mice depending upon their state of sobriety. They occasionally drifted over from the mainland to scam tourists. You

could generally recognize one of them because they carried all their worldly possessions in a backpack. I carry a backpack as well. When we first met, they took me for one of them. They were well known by most of the locals and all of the police. I had talked with them a number of times before. I hadn't seen Papa for a week or so. He had been nailed with an open container and got jail time.

"Hi guys, where's Larry?" I asked. Larry was the youngest and sneakiest of the three. He was also the one most prone to violent behaviour.

"Foodguy, how ya doin?" I was Foodguy because I gave them food instead of money.

"Good Papa. What's with Kickstart?"

Kickstart looked pretty rough. He was holding his jaw. When he took his hand away to answer, I saw that he either had a Spaulding Three golf ball in his mouth or one hell of an abscessed tooth.

Kickstart uttered gibberish for twenty seconds. I looked at Papa for a translation.

"Larry beat the shit out of him cause he said Kick fucked him over on the money we got. Kick thinks his jaw is maybe busted."

"Not nice eh - you should maybe get that looked at Kick. You guys going to be here for a bit?" Duh, silly question - their backpacks were stuffed under the bench they were sitting on. They were here until someone in authority told them to bugger off.

Papa just nodded. I ducked into the marina's small souvenir store and bought two packs of nuts, two Cokes and an Almond Joy and Snickers bar as well as a small tin container of Extra Strength Tylenol. At least they would have something solid in them.

After I wished the guys good luck, I checked to see if the Frankie Donner charter had returned. It hadn't. I was starting to feel like a Clearwater native in spite of my clearly tourist "I Love Clearwater Beach" T-shirt. I wandered down through the park with its small playground and its tribute statue for the first Greek to land in the area. I was heading to Pier Sixty. When I reached the loose warm white sand, I scuffed off my flip-flops and crossed the hundred and fifty feet of loose beach sand to get to firmer cooler surface close to the surf. I then headed off south

towards IHOP and Mia. I wanted to go over what I thought we should do. Give up was the best option. I could never tell her that. Maybe she wouldn't want to spend any more time with me.

Interdigitating

I entered the IHOP wondering what my reception would be like from the woman who managed the place. When I had left there yesterday, she had definitely been as chilly as a penguin with frostbite. I didn't have to worry; she wasn't there. Neither was Mia. At least, I couldn't spot her right away.

A short, chubby, black waitress named Janille ambled over to the checkout counter where I was standing doing my impression of a stork with its head out of the sand.

"How many?"

I quickly checked behind me. There was only me. I smiled – black humour – I get it. "Perhaps none - I'm looking for Mia."

"She's on her break – probably out back in the parking lot in that piece of trash she calls a car," Janille said in her syrupy southern drawl. She turned her broad back on me and waddled off in the direction of the kitchen.

"Thanks," I said to her retreating swinging backside. She just waved a stubby hand over her thick shoulder and continued waddling.

I turned and left the restaurant heading for the parking lot. As I turned the corner at the back of the building, I spotted Mia in her white blouse, black slacks IHOP outfit walking slowly back from her car. She saw me at about the same time and flashed me a wide smile as she hurried over.

"Hi," she said, "How are you doing after all the adventure of last night?"

"Just fine - and you?"

"I'm good. Did you get anywhere at the library this morning?"

"Yeah," I replied uncertainly, "For the first little while, I got really hung up in the section on erotic lesbian literature of the Victorian Era – just for a few hours really - quite stimulating actually."

"You what?" Mia asked as she came to a full stop and looked up at me. There was anger and surprise in her tone, but her blue eyes sparkled. We were playing. It was fun.

“Well, maybe not for hours, maybe just long enough to make me look at English cucumbers in an entirely different light.”

She laughed. “You may very well be the weirdest guy I’ve ever known.”

“Weird is good.” I love it when she laughs. “And then I read all the reports from a few of the newspapers that covered the story. A nice old lady – not a lesbian but maybe a Victorian - helped me out. I have a few ideas, but I think I have to tell you all over again – this may really be almost impossible. Don’t get your hopes up too high.”

Her lingering smile vanished and the light went out in her bright blue eyes. There was a bite when she said, “Now, are you saying that you won’t help me?” Her disappointment and anger were clear.

“Not at all,” I replied quickly. We had started to walk to the IHOP again and then we stopped. “I’m just saying – I don’t want you to get your hopes too high. When are you off? We should sit down together. I can go over some of the stuff with you that I think we might consider. There are also a lot of questions that we need to find answers for.”

Mia gave me another weak smile and then took a quick peek at the slim gold digital watch that she wore on the inside of her left wrist. “I work another two hours. Why don’t you come in and eat, then go for a walk and come back for me. We can sit on the beach then and watch the sun set.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said. I really wanted to just stand there and perhaps hold her, or hear her laugh again. Instead, I fell into step beside her. “What’s good on the menu today?”

“Same old, same old - knock yourself out Hon,” she replied slipping her slim hand into mine. Her touch was electric. It came as such a surprise to me that I looked down to do a quick reality check. She looked up at me, smiled and then gently squeezed my hand. “You don’t have to leave me a tip, but try to be cool in there. I don’t want you drooling all over the menus.”

“Drool – me? I think not. Drooling doesn’t run in my family. You wrong me.” My heart just pounded twice as fast when she took my hand. And I started babbling.

I followed our plan to the letter – some plan. I think I recall tasting the food, but I can't recall what it was. I tried not to stare at Mia for any longer than thirty seconds at a stretch. That was difficult to do. I dropped a generous tip, paid my bill and left casually. Mr. Cool; No drool!

I walked at a leisurely pace along the beach towards Pier 60 where the buskers and artisans would be plying their trades for the tourists. The gulf waves were almost non-existent. I skipped a smooth shell eleven times across the water's surface before it sank quietly. Not my personal best record, but not bad.

When I got up to the pier, I sat down on a vacant public bench overlooking the beach and the gulf. I wanted to clear my mind. Sometimes, by switching my focus away from a problem to something innocuous – like the number of times I can skip a stone or shell across a relatively flat surface – I can return to whatever the conundrum is puzzling me with a fresh perspective.

Near the pier on the north side, I watched a few little kids laughing and flying multi coloured kites. On the south side, some teenagers were playing a loud game of pick up beach volleyball. There was lots of arguing, but they were having a good time. I wandered out onto the pier and watched as an oriental artist drew a caricature of a little girl in a pink bathing suit. He was quite good. For fifteen bucks, mom and dad had a memory. I checked Helen West's work and chatted with her husband. We watched as Helen discussed technique with an art teacher from Michigan. I wanted to get another of her prints for my room, but I'd have to wait for a while. After a few minutes of quietly doing nothing, I slung my backpack over my shoulder and headed back down the surf line towards Mia.

At the parking lot, I sat carefully on the rusted trunk of Mia's old Honda Civic. As I sat waiting for her to get off work, I thought about what I had gotten myself into. I realized that my life had changed in a matter of a little more than a day. And then I knew that I felt great. Better by far, at that moment, than I had in a very long time.

After a short wait, Mia emerged from the back entrance to IHOP and started walking slowly towards her car. Her head was down as she was desperately probing the innards of her large straw bag. She was looking for something hidden in there – a full-grown German shepherd

perhaps. She had changed from her standard IHOP get-up into a casual outfit consisting of faded, form fitting, hip hugger blue jeans, a loose white cotton peasant blouse and white and baby blue thong flip flops. She was a Florida native. No way would she be caught wearing an I Love Clearwater Beach logo T-shirt. There was a delicious gap between the bottom of her blouse and the top of her low-slung jeans. At a distance, she looked like a kid. Hell, she was a kid. Her tight tanned midriff was punctuated with a diamond butterfly inserted in her belly button. When the sun hit the diamond just right, her stomach was a blinding sight to behold. I guessed that the piercing was a hangover from when she was working the strip clubs. Mia and I were very definitely of different generations and life styles.

With her shoulder length blond hair done up in a ponytail, secured by a soft pink cotton band, her soft even tan and her trim athletic build, she looked like the petite version of the all American dream girl. Well, maybe without the piercing. I guess the only thing missing in that picture was the All American Dream life that she had most certainly not enjoyed.

I had started walking towards her when I saw her leave the restaurant. When she finally found what she was looking for in her bag – her keys - she looked up and spotted me. We met about half way across the parking lot.

“Hi,” I said. “You look pretty spiffy this evening even though you are really quite fetching in your knock out IHOP outfit.”

“Oh yeah?” she said.

“That black and white IHOP get up is quite a sensual turn on for me if you want to know the truth,” I whispered as I bent towards her ear.

“You really are nuts Joe,” she laughed. “Even Angelina Jolie would look like crap in one of those IHOP costumes. But thank you for saying so. Now, are we going to walk along the beach or do you want me to drive us somewhere? Where do you want to go? I really want to hear what you found out today.”

“The beach sounds good. We can find a quiet place to sit with no people close by. I need maybe about a half hour to go through what I’ve been able to come up with.”

We started north back up Gulfview Boulevard to the public parking lot adjacent to the beach. I left my hand unmoving at my side. She didn't take it. She was telling me about some customer who had sent back a waffle twice saying it wasn't done right – a waffle. Can you believe it?

“Talk about being a jerk eh?” she said huffily as she finished her story.

“Yeah, as my grandmother used to say though – it takes all kinds. I could understand it if it was a pancake, but a waffle – geez, that's pretty hard to comprehend. Oh, by the way, do you only interdigitate once a day?”

She stopped and looked up at me. She was mentally replaying what I had just said to her. “What did you say?” Indignant - wondering if I just had been incredibly rude to her. She was getting ready to be really ticked off. Short fuse was a side to Mia I had only guessed at.

“I asked you if you only interdigitate once a day?” I replied innocently working hard to keep the grin off my face. She obviously did not know what the hell I was talking about, but she was not ready to let me know it. I started walking again. She stood still for a moment and then scurried up beside me. We walked for another few yards before I asked again.

She hesitated and then grudgingly – as if she had committed some major sin - quietly replied, “No, I've not set any limit on that. Should I?”

“Oh no,” I replied, “I kind of enjoyed holding your hand earlier, but when you didn't take mine a minute or so ago, I wasn't sure if you had set some sort of personal daily limit.”

She started to giggle and then punched my shoulder - hard. “You are truly nuts – one of your oars is clearly out of the water – and that's a fact.” And she took my hand. “Where did you get that word? What was it?”

“Interdigitate,” I replied. “The first time I heard the word was when a kid in my sex ed. class – his name was Jerry Piels, I think - asked our female sex ed teacher if she thought interdigitation before marriage was morally wrong. The teacher, Mrs. Smedley, – an older British woman who talked as if she had about twelve plums in her mouth, and truly did believe sex was only for procreation, was shocked. None of us knew what the hell Piels was talking

about but guessed that it probably had to do with some form of deviant sex act. The entire class went silent. I mean - you really could have heard a pin drop. Like the rest of us, and you just now, old Mrs. Smedley didn't have a clue what the hell the word meant. She hemmed and hawed. She talked about the Latin derivation of the words "inter" and "digit" and then did a rationalization quick step about the sanctity of marriage and the consensual nature of adult couples. Finally, after a lot of verbiage, she admitted that she had never heard of the word. She asked Piels what it meant. When he told her it meant holding hands, the whole class broke out laughing. And she gave him a detention. It was one of the highlights of my grade ten year."

By the time I finished my explanation, we were walking along the beach beside the incoming waves in full interdigitation mode. I was happier than I could remember for years.

"Did I say that you had one oar out of the water?" Mia said holding my hand tightly, "Joe, your whole fucking boat is out of the water."

"Nice of you to say so - though I'm curious; what did you think interdigitate meant when I asked?"

Mia went silent. I looked down at her as we walked. I imagined that she was trying to figure out how to answer my question without being crude.

"As you say - some deviant sex act." And Mia actually blushed. It was nice to see that her earlier life had not totally robbed her of modestly or some kind of innocence.

I laughed too. "Here's a good place. Let's sit here."

Although the beach had been pretty crowded earlier, most of the sun worshippers had headed home. There were still some last minute tourists walking and waiting for another incredible Clearwater Beach sunset. And there were the regular fitness freaks running along the beach, but there was no one sitting within twenty or thirty feet of where we flopped to the ground. The sun had tightened into a hazy orange ball as it prepared for its descent below the gulf's western horizon. Its fingers of heat and light slid over us as we settled onto the warm white sand. There would be some gradually fading light for the next half hour or so. We sat still

beside each other and took in the view. I experienced an overall sensation of complete happiness. I was catching yet another glimpse of paradise.

Another First and Options

Finally, I slipped my legal pad and the manila folder holding the newspaper reprints out of my backpack. I looked over to where Mia was sitting. Her eyes were closed and her face was turned to the sun. I wasn't certain that presenting the graphic details of Victoria's murder would serve any useful purpose. I slid the folder and its contents back into the bag. I could get by using the scratched notes that I had made on my yellow newsprint legal pad.

"Beautiful evening, eh Joe?" Mia sighed whimsically. "Red sky at night: sailor's delight - red sky in the morning; sailors take warning."

Mai had shifted so that her arms were wrapped around her legs. We watched as the excursion boat, Little Toot, returned to the inland waterway from its last dolphin-viewing excursion. My legs were stretched out in front of me. I rested the legal pad and my pen on my lap. I sat leaning slightly back supporting myself with my arms extended behind me. I had burrowed my hands into the still warm sand. I turned my face to catch the warmth of the sun's last fading rays. I didn't want to break the spell with the ugliness of a murder. I waited. After a few quiet moments, Mia slowly turned her face to look at me. I became aware of her attention. I turned to look her. My heart went to jelly. I couldn't help it, and she didn't want me to. We kissed. Her lips were soft and yielding. She reclined slowly onto the warm sand beside me. We kissed again - this time more deeply.

"Okay Bub, enough already," Mia said pushing me away suddenly. "We'll have time for that later - without an audience."

I rolled away from Mia. Four feet away, gawking at us, were two little red headed, sunburned, four and five-year old sisters with blue plastic pails and yellow shovels. They were giggling like we were the funniest things they had seen since Spongebob Squarepants tried to get Gary the Snail to take a bath. Both kids were wearing floppy white sun hats, about three sizes too big for them, and matching pink and blue polka dot bikinis. The girls' parents were calling out to them to hurry and catch up. Mom and dad were fifteen feet farther along the beach and had just realized that their daughters had lagged behind.

“Sorry,” their father called back to us – far more embarrassed than his kids.

“You should be,” I thought uncharitably. I just waved at him – the universal signal that all is okay. His two little kids turned and scampered away. They were still giggling. Maybe we did look kind of funny if you’re only five years old.

Mia and I exchanged glances and laughed as we watched the family dynamic play out along the surf line. Mom had run back to retrieve her kids. She swept up the younger one and grabbed the hand of the other. We watched her trying to explain to the two little girls that it wasn’t nice to point and giggle at people kissing on the beach.

I thought about picking up where we’d left off, but that was wishful thinking. The spell was broken for Mia.

“Okay, so what are your ideas about how we can do something to find out who killed my sister?” Right down to business.

“Well, I’m not certain it serves much purpose, but I guess we should try to visit the crime scene at least twice. We should get to it once around the time of the crime and another time during the daylight hours. I don’t really mean crime scene. I mean where Vickie’s body was found. From what I read in the reports, the police believe that she was dumped at this location late at night. Honestly, I don’t expect to find anything, but at least there will be a context to the crime. Ideally, we should try to get there before the estimated time of death and stay for a while. If you don’t want to go with me, that’s okay, but you’ll have to give me pretty specific directions on how to get to the exact location. Once I’m away from the Clearwater Beach and Sand Key area, and even with the GPS, I don’t think I can locate – dirt path leading to make-out area – somewhere in Tampa.”

“No, I’m okay with that. I’ll go with you. Sergeant Langdon was absolutely certain that Vicki was killed somewhere else and then left there. If I recall right, he said they were thinking she had been killed an hour or so before she was actually dumped where they found her. I don’t remember him telling me how they figured that out.”

“I’m not positive about how they might have done that either – the forensic guys have a whole bag of tricks and charts – lividity, decomposition – that sort of thing. Doesn’t matter, where her body was found is still important. You have to ask yourself - Why was it found? And then, why was it found there? With all the swamps and accesses to water, there’s lots of ways to make a body just disappear. Did the killer want it found for some reason? If so, what reason? Or did the killer panic and just went for what was expedient? We may never really figure that out. But I guess we have to start somewhere – and that’s as good a place as any.”

“I understand,” Mia said, and I believed that she did. It was all business now. She was totally focused.

“Also, it would be a good thing if I could chat with Langdon. He has no reason to want to talk with me, but if we could get anything from him, it wouldn’t be time wasted. We should try to find out if there were any other similar crimes before or after Vickie was killed. Then, I should talk with her friends from school. Find out if she had a regular boyfriend. I need to meet with your Mom and step dad and anybody else who might be able to help us get an idea of what happened during that last day. If she went to a church or youth club or dance club, I should talk with the people there. If her doctor will see me, I should visit him or her. If I could, I’d love to review the police reports, because most of that stuff I just mentioned would be in the notes made by the investigating officer. And it would have been recorded when recollections were fresh. If I could review those reports, we would save days and days. That’s another good reason to talk with this Langdon guy if we can. Realistically, that probably isn’t going to happen in this lifetime. And maybe it’s good to go back to ground zero - sort of the fresh perspective approach.”

We Make a Connection

“I could contact Langdon for you. He seemed to be a sweet old guy in a grumpy old fart sort of way. He was always nice to me. Maybe, he could get you copies of those reports,” Mia stated quietly. She was processing what I had just suggested and suddenly seemed a little distracted. Something was bothering her.

“What’s not to be nice to you?” I commented idly. “The old cop probably thought he was in love, but I still don’t think he’ll help us too much. Helping us might put his pension at risk – depending on the agreement his bargaining group has with the city. But I guess it’s worth a try. What about the others I mentioned. Do you know many of those people?”

“Here’s the thing Joe,” Mia said looking down at the sand in front of her, “my Mom – no problem. I think she’s still hurting and needs to get this thing behind her. I mean she kind of let herself go during the year after Vickie died. In some weird way, I think she blames herself. My stepfather, Ted, and step-brother, Terry, – I don’t think you’ll get anything there.”

“Why’s that?”

“I’m not sure. It’s like it never happened. They don’t even want to talk about it. Both of them have told me more than once, and told my mom a lot more than that, that it’s done. Get over it; get on with your life. I don’t understand why, but it’s like they don’t care anymore.”

For the second time, a red flag went up in my mind about Mia’s father - and now her step-brother. This was the same guy who was friendly with Billy Ray. Maybe step father and brother want it to go away because somehow one or both of them were involved. Mia was perceptive. She must have heard the same little voices I did. De Nile – a river in Egypt. I wasn’t ready to go there with her yet. I wondered briefly if Mia had ever gone to a therapist - probably not. Maybe at some point in the future, she would trust me enough to open up that particular area of her life. For now, she was still dealing with those demons alone.

“Okay, Mia, so let’s not bother telling your Mom and step-dad about what we’re doing. It would probably just piss them off and create more problems for us than we already have. Let’s concentrate on finding this retired cop, Langdon. We can see where it goes from there.”

“Alright, let’s get a phone book,” Mia said. She ascended gracefully to an upright position. She looked down at me as I struggled to get my feet under me. Graceful is an adjective seldom used to describe anything I do.

“So much for a quiet romantic evening viewing a perfectly beautiful sunset with this incredible woman,” I thought as I finally managed upright. “Instead, I have to go find a phone book.”

“What are you – some kind of acrobat? How did you get up like that?” I asked looking at her as she stood waiting.

“Just cross your legs at the ankle and stand up. It’s not hard at all. Remember I used to be a dancer of sorts. I still do yoga sometimes.”

“Great. Mia the elastic lady,” I grumbled. “You’ll have to show me that trick again sometime. Who knows when I might be sprawled out on some forgiving surface – like a bed - with a beautiful woman at my side and want to stand up in under a nanosecond?”

Mia ignored my beautiful woman and bed compliment, laughed, grabbed my hand and dragged me back towards the street. “I think there’s an old public phone booth in the parking lot of that Surf and Sand souvenir shop. Let’s go.”

An open phone booth lit by a single fluorescent light sat at the front corner of the small parking lot. Large moths and other flying insects, big and small, attracted to the light, had claimed the area as theirs. I flailed my arms crazily in a futile attempt to drive the little buggers away. They weren’t going anywhere.

We scrunched over and quickly moved in to get to the ravaged phone book inside its hard gray plastic cover. The book and cover were hanging from the booth’s scratched aluminum corner shelf at the end of a six-inch plastic covered link chain. We did a quick search for Langdon, S. in the uncertain light. There were three in Tampa, two each in Largo and St. Petersburg and one in Clearwater. We agreed to try the Clearwater Langdon first.

“I need your cell,” she said.

“Good luck – I don’t have one.”

“I don’t believe it. I hook up with the one guy left in the world who doesn’t have a cell,” Mia exclaimed. “How do you survive?”

“Who am I going to call?” I asked reasonably. “And where is your cell if you are so twenty first century?”

“I don’t have any minutes left.”

We huddled together in the limited space with all the nasty flying creatures. Mia did the talking. She knew the guy – or at least had met him. I jammed in as close as I could to her when she had an answer. Her perfume was intoxicating. I wanted to kiss her neck. I didn’t. I continued unsuccessfully to beat away the random attack of the flying night stalkers.

“Is this the residence of the retired police officer, Stuart Langdon?” There was a nervous quaver in Mia’s voice. Maybe it was excitement.

“Who wants to know?” the replying voice was deep, female and grated on the ears like a slightly rusty rasp going over a hollow metal bar.

“Sergeant Langdon investigated the murder of my little sister almost three years ago. Her name was Victoria. It’s really important that I talk with him if this is his home.”

“It is – but he’s er drunk. Just a sec; I’ll see if he wants to speak with you.”

There was the sound of a telephone receiver hitting something solid and then nothing. Mia waited. After a minute, she looked at me and shrugged her shoulders. I realized that she had started to shiver.

“Give it another minute,” I said.

We waited and just as Mia started to make a move to hang up, there was that raspy, grating voice again. “He’ll be right with you.” Thunk – the receiver banged the wall one more time.

“Pleasant woman,” I commented idly, “probably a big fan of midget wrestling and the opera.”

Mia giggled. We waited. Two minutes passed. Finally, “What do you wan?” said as only a guy with a massive load on could say.

“Is this Sergeant Langdon?” Mia asked quietly.

“No – it’s Mr. Langdon. I ain’t a cop no more. What do you wan lady?”

“It’s me – Vicki Doulton’s sister, Mia. We met and talked a few times when you were following up on her death. How are you?”

“I think I’m between drunk and hung over, and I don’t know since when – maybe Viet Nam. I repeat - what do you wan?”

“I wondered if a friend of mine and me could meet you and talk about your investigation into the death of my sister.”

“I toll ya, I ain’t a cop no more. There’s nothing to talk about. I didn’t get the guy that did it. So fuckin sue me.”

“I know that, but I wondered if we could talk with you anyway. Maybe take you to lunch somewhere. It wouldn’t take long.”

“Listen Missy, I did everything I could to find your sister’s killer. It’s not my business no more.”

“Okay, I understand that, but could you at least meet me and my friend? Have lunch with us? My treat - bring your lady friend if you want.”

“That would be the frosty fuckin Friday in August,” the cop muttered followed by a goofy kind of chuckle. Then, for no apparent reason, he relented. “Yeah, okay, if you leave me alone now – Crabby Bill’s in Clearwater Beach – you know the place - just at the end of the Memorial causeway?”

“Yeah, I do,” Mia replied - excitement creeping into the edge of her voice.

“You and your friend – noon tomorrow - your treat.” Thunk. He missed the phone base. “Shit!” Picked it up and dropped it again. This time it landed in the right place and the connection was broken.

“He’ll meet us,” Mia said to me.

I nodded. “Yeah, I heard. Tomorrow, noon, Crabby Bills, your treat! Do you think he’ll remember? He sounded like he was kind of out of it. He also didn’t sound like he’d win too

many Mr. Nice Guy contests if you know what I mean. I don't think I'd be counting on too much support from this guy. But at least, if he shows up, I can get a read on how competent he was in conducting the investigation."

"Yeah, well, he was always a bit of a diamond in the rough - even when he was a working cop - maybe because he was a cop. Retirement hasn't mellowed him out any I guess. So what do we do now?"

I looked over my left shoulder to where the sun had crashed below the Gulf of Mexico's horizon ten minutes earlier. "Well, we'll follow up and meet him tomorrow. For now, it seems that we missed the last of the sunset. I guess we could go back to the beach, and you could show me that speed rise levitation thing you do. Or you could take me home and introduce me to your mother, or we could drive over to where your sister was found. Maybe we could get something to eat if you're hungry - any or all of the above."

"How about checking out where they found Victoria, and then, if we still feel like it, getting a bite to eat someplace. But no more Death by Chocolate! Jeez it's got cold all of a sudden eh?"

It was true. When the sun goes down at this time of year in Florida, the night air can cool off pretty quickly. Tonight, with a gentle wind coming in off the Gulf, there was an unexpected chill factor. I thought I was finished with that term - wind chill. Like when the weather guy in Ontario says, "It's zero degrees outside folks, but with the wind chill factor it will feel like minus twenty five." I realized that I didn't miss Canada at all.

As Mia turned to look at the Surf and Sand, a sleek black Mercedes slowed to a crawl on Gulfview Blvd. in front of us. The car's windows were darkly tinted. I couldn't be certain, but somehow I felt the driver was studying us. Then he rocketed away. I looked at Mia, but she seemed not to have noticed.

Mia and the Jaguar

“Okay,” I said. “We’ll check out the location where Vickie’s body was found, and then I can always come back to the spot later during daylight hours if I still need to. Right now though, let’s explore this Surf and Sand. Maybe get you a cute little alligator skull and something warm for you to put on.”

“I’m okay. I have a jacket back at the car,” Mia said.

“Okay, then let me go inside and get an alligator skull and something warm for me to put on. You never know when you might need one of those cute little skull things.”

Ten minutes later, we were back on the street. We took a pass on the alligator skulls, but we were both wearing new sweatshirts, and Mia was carrying her new red thong bikini in a very tiny bag. I looked around wondering if I might spot the black Mercedes again. I didn’t, but I did see a Jolly Trolley moving towards us from the south. I stepped onto the road to flag it down. Incredibly, the driver pulled over. I found two loose one-dollar bills in with my change and paid the two fifty fare.

“Cool night eh?” the driver said as we sat in the seats behind and to the right of him. There was no one else on the trolley.

“Yeah, and getting colder. Thanks for stopping,” I replied.

“No problem,” he replied, “company policy. Help the tourists spend their money. Where are you going?”

“Just getting warmed up and enjoying the sights.”

Mia slipped her hand into mine, leaned close and whispered, “You do know we’re going in the wrong direction - right Joe?”

“Really?” I responded as if I had not a clue. I do thoroughly confused quite well sometimes.

“Some boy scout you are. Be prepared, my eye. Get a compass is more like it,” Mia muttered angrily. I wondered briefly just how short her fuse was.

“It must have been seeing you in that tiny red bikini. You got me all discombobulated.” I said as if I was still thoroughly lost. Then I smiled. I wasn’t prepared to find out about fuse length on such a lovely night. “Actually, I thought we could go and get my car for the drive to the crime scene. Then if you’re hungry, we can get something to eat. After that, I’ll take you home to your place, and then pick you up tomorrow morning in time to get back to Crabby Bill’s. We meet Langdon at noon right? What about your job?”

“Look at this guy!” the driver said loudly. “That the third time he’s swung along here like that. And there’s a white Escalade doin the same thing. I hope the cops nail em soon before they kill someone – or each other – although that might serve them right.”

I looked out the open window to catch sight of the black Mercedes heading north.

“I don’t start tomorrow until two in the afternoon.”

“What?” I said.

“You asked about when I work tomorrow. I start at two,” Mia said.

“Oh, okay, so that works. Are you okay with leaving your car at the IHOP parking lot?” I was still thinking about black Mercedes and white Caddy Escalades.

Mia nodded and snuggled into my side. “I don’t think anyone will steal it. I wouldn’t be that lucky. I didn’t even know you had a car.”

“I keep it a secret. Sort of like the Batmobile.”

“You’re a bit messed up aren’t you Joe?”

I thanked the trolley driver again when we got off at the library stop. The walk to my rooming house was a quick one. It seemed to have become even cooler. I opened the garage and started the Jag. Mia had to wait for me on the narrow, gravel driveway. There was not enough room inside the garage for her to get into the passenger side of the car. I slowly backed out. When I was clear, Mia pulled down the garage door, hurried back and slid through the door onto the passenger’s side tan leather seat. I had already turned on the heater, but, from experience, I knew that it would take a while for the vehicle to warm up. I turned on the car’s sound system, and the CD, Moby Music, pounded loudly from the eight speakers. I turned down the volume.

“Nice wheels,” Mia said as she did a quick visual survey and then settled. “Are they yours, or did we just commit a grand theft auto?”

“Mine – all mine,” I said proudly. “It used to belong to my Dad before he died. He left the car to me because he knew how much I liked it, and I think he wanted to piss off my younger brother. So what’s the fastest way to get to where we’re going?”

“Cross the causeway. I’ll give you directions from there. Why did he want to piss off your brother?”

In the dim light of the XJR’s interior, I shot a quick glance over to where Mia was comfortably sitting. She was watching me intently. She really wanted to know. “My brother didn’t visit my mother once from the time she had to go into a nursing home with Alzheimer’s until the day she died. He said he couldn’t stand to see her that way, but my Dad wasn’t buying it. So the old man gave the car to me for a buck about three weeks before he died of prostate cancer. That way, it wouldn’t be part of the estate. My brother doesn’t talk to me too much anymore – but we stay in touch from time to time.”

“Families eh?” Mia muttered quietly.

“I guess,” was all I could say. I was still checking my rear-view mirror for any sign of that black Mercedes or white Escalade. Call me paranoid.

We Visit the Scene of the Crime

For the next thirty minutes Mia gave me directions that took me on major roads that I recognized. The next few minutes after that, I spent on back streets that I did not even know existed. I was no longer certain which municipal district I was in, but I guessed that we were somewhere within Tampa. It was closing in on 11:30. That was alright, because it was around that time Vickie's body was dumped according to the newspaper reports. Finally, we turned from a darkened stretch of road onto a narrow gravel lane. It was barely wide enough for two cars to pass going in opposite directions. We crept along very slowly for about a minute before Mia told me to stop.

The place was eerie. If there had not been very meagre ambient light, we would have been in absolute darkness. Just sitting there - the Jag's engine and CD player off and the windows up - was disquieting. There was no traffic. There were no buildings or streetlights. Nothing! It seemed to me that we could well have been in the middle of the fifteenth fairway of a Louisiana golf course or at the very bottom of a South African diamond mine. I cracked the front windows a fraction. The cool night air seeped into the car's warmth. I shivered. Maybe I'm back in Canada, I thought before I closed the window. Mia and I sat and listened carefully. Slowly, I became attuned to the night noises of insects and frogs and then, the very faint sound of the night traffic that we had left minutes behind.

"This stretch of road is where Vic was found," Mia said quietly. "Do you want to get out?"

"No," I answered quickly. "Let's sit here for a few minutes, but I don't think that I'm going to get any sense of this place. It's too dark. I'm going to have to come back here in the daylight. I didn't even bring a flashlight."

"So much for the context of the crime," I mumbled as I sat there. "I might just as well put a blindfold over my eyes and listened to a "sounds of the everglades CD."

At that moment, a vehicle approached from up ahead. Its high beams were on. For a brief few seconds both sides of the roadway were brightly illuminated. The oncoming car slowed

appreciably and then, politely, dimmed its lights. The road seemed barely wide enough for two cars to pass even though I had pulled as far off to my side as I guessed was safe. The oncoming vehicle had to slow almost to a stop as it passed by us. As soon as the driver was clear of my car, his high beams were back on, and he quickly accelerated away.

“That may have answered one question,” I said to Mia as I re-started the Jag and turned on its headlights. “Where does this road lead? What’s up ahead?”

“About a half mile along, the road just ends, and there is this fairly big open field. Some people call it a park, but really it’s been the local “make out” site for the area high school kids and lots of others for years – as long as I can remember anyway. You would be a wealthy man if you had a buck for every kid who lost her cherry in there. The road was originally going to be developed into some sort of a by-pass with access to the Inter-state, but that idea got bogged down in a red tape legal action at city hall. That was probably twelve to fifteen years or more ago. So here it sits. What question did it answer?”

“Well, it’s dark, no real traffic to speak of. I bet this cop, Langdon, really dug into this parking area looking for his guilty party.”

“That’s what the cops told me. They figured that Vic went in there with some guy, something went wrong, very wrong, and he killed her. As he was driving out, he dumped her here because there was no traffic. The cops thought the guy wouldn’t want to risk getting back onto the streets with a body in the car, so this was convenient.”

“That’s a pretty fair guess,” I said as I thought about the possibilities. “Maybe, he planned on getting her body into that thicket over there.” I said pointing vaguely across to my left. I’d spotted a small growth of trees and brush on that side of the lane when the high beams of the car leaving the area had passed us. “Maybe he thought that no one would find her there. Then maybe, a car came along, and it spooked him enough to just drop her where he was and take off.”

Just then another car came toward us from the direction of the field ahead. We sat quietly as it too slowed down. It was a white Cadillac Escalade. It passed carefully and then quickly accelerated away. It looked as if the only way I’d be able to turn around to get back out was to

drive forward into the park. I didn't want to take the risk of getting stuck on what appeared to be a non-existent shoulder. It would be a good idea to see the field anyway. I could do my U turn there. I put the Jag in gear and edged back toward the middle of the gravel lane. Mia's guess of a half mile ahead had not been accurate. The distance was barely a quarter of a mile. As I completed a wide U turn in the field, my headlights briefly illuminated the foggy windows of at least fifteen or sixteen other vehicles. Some salacious thoughts about Mia darted through my little mind.

“Mia, unless I'm missing something, this case should have been a slam-dunk. Whatever the reason, Vicky pisses off Mr. X, the boyfriend, who then, accidentally or not, kills her and then dumps the body on his way out of lover's lane here.”

“How can you say accidentally?” Mia scoffed mildly.

“Well... I began.

Then that short fuse thing cut in and something snapped. She got angry. Her voice grew harsh, and she went on the attack. “What the fuck are you thinking about Joe? She was found with her own goddamn panty hose wrapped around her neck. How can that be some fuckin accident? She was murdered and her body left to rot. That's not an accident.”

Mia's Short Fuse

“Easy Mia - cool your jets okay. Jeez! I didn't say it was an accident. It probably wasn't. But when I was a cop, I investigated a case with my training officer where a guy strangled his wife. He claimed it was by accident - a mistake - like I didn't know the gun was loaded. Hell of a story, bad alibi though. But then it came out in court that she and her husband had found out about this sexual asphyxia on some documentary channel on cable – maybe Sex TV - and thought they'd give it a try. The deal was that the wife would get her rocks off by having her oxygen deprived as she was getting screwed. The lack of oxygen to her brain was supposed to heighten her orgasm. Or, at least that was the theory. When the case was over and the details of the defence hit the press, some of her less sensitive friends said that she got screwed to death.”

“You're kidding me right?” Mia said incredulously. She was still angry, but the fire was controlled.

“No, swear to God. Do you remember that Wesley Snipes and Sean Connery movie called *Rising Sun* from quite a few years back now?”

“Yeah, I think I saw it on video or maybe a part of it. Why?” There was still a trace of anger in her voice but curiosity was winning the race.

“Sexual asphyxia was the key to the crime committed in that film. There were a lot of pretty dumb kids trying that stuff out – even in Canada for quite a few years after that movie was in the theatres – maybe more after the video was released. Anyway, I'm not saying that Vicky was into that, but maybe Mr. X thought he'd like to try it. Maybe, somehow he convinced Vickie to go along – or maybe he surprised her. Maybe the guy panicked and couldn't get the panty hose free – particularly if he had tied it. It doesn't really matter. This case should have been a relatively easy solve. If you can find out who she had been with during that evening, you're looking at a pretty good suspect. Did she ever tell you about a boyfriend because he would be at the top of my list of people to talk with?”

“Not really,” Mia replied a little absently. She was still thinking about what I had said and its possible implication. Her anger had thoroughly dissipated. She shifted in her seat and re-

focused on my question. “She told me that there was this guy that she thought she kind of liked, but that he was going with someone else.”

We had left the darkened gravel laneway and were coming back into a residential section of an obviously poor section of town. Off to the left, there was a long strip of warehouses and light manufacturing buildings in various stages of disrepair and outright ruin. On the right, there was a series of squat worn out apartment blocks with a number of old residential streets feeding off between them. Up ahead, I could see a bright neon light. With luck, there would be some kind of twenty-four hour fast food restaurant somewhere along the small strip mall. I was hungry – and needed a washroom.

I got lucky. There was one place open. It was a twenty-four seven Burger King lit up at the far end of the otherwise dimly lit parking lot. I parked the car as close to the overhead lighting of the restaurant as I could get. I made a dash for the can while Mia found us a place to sit. There were only three other people in the place, and two of them were employees. Mia ordered me a Diet Pepsi with ice and lime and a burger with fries. She had a black coffee.

As I was making my way through the Burger King to where Mia was sipping her coffee, it dawned on me that I might have made two potentially dangerous assumptions – maybe three. I remembered the words of my old Scottish training officer, Sergeant McGregor. “Laddie boy,” he would say, “If you assume in this job, you will probably end up making an ass out of u and me.” Not exactly original, but his point was made and valid. I had naturally assumed that Vickie would know whomever she went to park with - but what if she didn’t. Worst case scenario that I wouldn’t be presenting to Mia any time soon – what if she was hooking to make a few bucks? Or maybe the guy could have been a total stranger who grabbed her off the street. If that was the case, this was a virtual no solve as it had been for the cop, Langdon. I wasn’t going to discuss this possibility with Mia either. Not tonight anyway.

The other dangerous assumption I had made was also a logical one. I had assumed that the body was dropped off on the way out of the field. I now wondered if that had also been the position taken by the police during their investigation. But just what was the true implication if,

instead, the body had been dropped off on the way into the park? Then the solution to the crime wasn't such a slam-dunk after all. I made a mental note to ask Langdon on which side of the road the body had been found. And then I remembered that Mia's sister was supposed to be getting on a Greyhound bus to join Mia in Orlando. What was she doing with anyone in that park - voluntarily? This was not looking too good. Cops hang around bus stations regularly - why? - To catch the bad guys about to do or doing bad things - like enticing young girls.

When I sat down at the table across from Mia, I explained how I might have been incorrect in saying the case should have almost solved itself.

"I don't understand; why is which side of the road important again?" she asked as she took another sip of her hot coffee.

I borrowed a pencil from a waitress who definitely could have benefited from a few months intensive study at a charm school. I drew a line on a paper serviette and put a circle at the end of it.

"The circle is the field; the line is the road. Suppose I'm coming out of the field, which is what we were basing our earlier judgment on. I'm the killer, so I'm driving and the victim is in the back or more likely, if it went down as I said, in the passenger's seat. The passenger's door opens to the right side of the road. Why would I risk dragging or carrying the body across the road in front of the car with headlights on? If I have half a brain, I wouldn't - just in case another vehicle comes along from either direction. Look at what happened when those two cars came along and passed us as they were going out. Anyone dragging a body across the roadway would be caught like a deer in headlights. No, I'd want to stay in the dark shadows. Given that either side of the road could be used to dispose of the body, we might determine whether the car was going to the field or coming from the field by finding out on which side of the road Vickie's body was found."

"So if she was found on the side going into the field, it could pretty well be anyone who knew about the place but didn't want to risk being seen for any length of time in the make out area?"

“Bingo - and you got to remember what these people are doing back in there. They’re parked. They will probably look up if lights hit their car. They may not want to be too forthcoming about anything, but the killer can’t take that risk. In the worst-case scenario, I mean in terms of trying to solve this thing, it was a total stranger who somehow ambushed and then murdered her. When he needed to get rid of her body, he just lucked off the main road and found himself on that quiet stretch of gravel. It’s dark, so he drags her out of the car and dumps her where her body was found. That serial killer - Ted Bundy – I think he worked that way on one or two occasions. We definitely have to find out from Langdon which side of the road her body was found on. Sometime soon, we have to go back there in the daylight. Maybe we’ll be able to see if one side of the road offers significantly more advantage to the other side for anyone trying to hide a dead body.”

By the time I had led Mia through the side of the road explanation, we had finished our drinks and I had half a burger and cold fries in front of me. Mia looked morose. All that impersonal dead body talk was okay for me. I could be detached. A corpse was simply an abstract part of an equation to be solved. But Vickie had been her flesh and blood. I returned the borrowed pencil to Miss Congeniality before we headed back to the car. I checked my watch. It had been a long day. It was well after midnight.

“There is still the question about why she wasn’t on that bus to meet up with you unless the whole timeline is screwy,” I said still thinking out loud.

Mia Leaves Home

“I guess I’d better take you home,” I said as I started the car. “There’s not much more we can do until we meet with Langdon at Crabby Bill’s tomorrow. I hope he is at least a little bit helpful. If he gets stubborn, or he just cannot help us, we’re in big trouble.”

I looked over at Mia and realized how bleak a picture I was painting. We needed some positive spin and distraction. “I guess we should consider ourselves lucky that he was willing to meet with us at all. How do I get to your place?” Now there’s a distraction.

For the next ten minutes, I again followed Mia’s directions. From the perspective of notable sights, we seemed to be heading deeper into an even seedier part of Tampa. Forty minutes earlier, I would not have believed that that would have been possible. Mia asked a few questions about what help we might expect or hope to get from Langdon. I could give her the questions that we could start with, but I couldn’t give her any answers to satisfy her. I just didn’t know what to expect from the old ex-cop – who might have been “drunk or hung-over since Viet Nam”. Finally, she lapsed into giving me simple directions – turn here - left at the light – that sort of thing. I knew she wasn’t happy that we hadn’t learned more. She was also worried because I simply couldn’t assure her that Langdon was going to be really helpful. Perhaps it had become apparent to her what our chances of success were.

Actually, if I was in Langdon’s shoes, I didn’t know how forthcoming I would be. I mean what has he got – a foreign ex-cop turned obituary writer for the last five years and an ex-stripper turned hooker trying to find a solution to an unsolved crime involving the murder of the ex-stripper’s younger sister. It was almost laughable. But for Langdon, helping us was also a “lose - lose” scenario. We could get our hats handed to us by treading where we shouldn’t go. If that happened, the police department would be giving him some hard looks because now they have some more dead bodies - ours. Or we could solve the thing and make him and the major crimes unit of the Tampa City Police Department look like a bunch of incompetent schmucks. Was I missing something here?

Around eight minutes after we left Burger King, we pulled up in front of a shabby low-rise apartment building in an entire neighbourhood of run-down buildings just like it. They might have been all the rage in the mid-forties, but I doubted it. They were depressing enough at this time of night when I could barely see them. I guessed that they would be even worse in the light of day. The magic phrase “housing slum” and all its attached connotations jumped to my mind. A call out to investigate a crime in the infamous Toronto’s Regent Park housing slum was something like going into an Afghanistan battle zone and, if at all possible, devoutly to be avoided. Tampa cops probably felt the same way about this neighbourhood. I sat and said nothing. Reluctantly, I killed the headlights, and I turned off the car’s ignition. Mia just sat there - her head bowed – not moving.

“I’ll walk you to your door okay?” I said after a few quick moments of hesitation.

“Your Jaguar might be gone by the time you get back,” she mumbled followed by a short mirthless laugh.

“I was thinking that myself,” I replied absently as I set the location into my GPS. Then I realized how hurtful my reply had been. I smiled weakly trying to disguise my gaffe.

“You’re right Joe! It’s pretty dismal isn’t it? It’s sometime called Little Beirut and not because it’s an Arab community.”

“Looks can be deceiving,” I bluffed.

“Not in this case,” Mia replied sadly. Then she suddenly brightened; inspiration had struck. “I’ve got an idea. Why don’t I just run in and pick up some stuff? I can go back to the beach with you and then we can go together to meet Stuart Langdon at lunch. That way you don’t have to drive all the way back over here tomorrow morning. You probably wouldn’t be able to find the place again anyway unless that G.P. thing really works.”

“I guess,” I started to reply uncertainly, “but my place is kind of limited ...”

“We’ll think of something,” she replied quickly as she jumped from the car and hurried up the minefield of broken walkway. The cramped doorway to her building was not lit. I lost sight of her almost immediately as she rushed to the front of the worn out apartment building.

I sat there in the dark staring into the void where she had disappeared. I was quietly wondering if I should go in and help her or at least meet her to walk her back to the car. Then, I became distracted thinking about how I could accommodate her in my small rooming house. I recalled my first conversation with the rental agent – no overnight guests he had said. “No problem,” I had replied. “I don’t know anyone here anyway.”

Suddenly, something slammed into the passenger side of my car.

The End of an Almost Perfect Day

Without me noticing him, a rag tag old drunk had approached my car from the rear. He had been reeling along the sidewalk when he had suddenly collapsed against the side of the Jag. I jerked away involuntarily and then, realizing that he posed no threat, watched as he slid silently along the hood trying to find his footing. Then, just up ahead, I spotted three young gangbangers slide, like hungry sharks in a murky sea, from the deep shadows of an apartment building. They angled cautiously towards the drunk and my Jag. There was no rush – easy pickings. I watched as they jacked each other up in their black hoodies and low slung baggy jeans. One kid had a length of bike chain sticking from his pocket. All of them were doing quick visual scans for witnesses or bigger sharks. But really – who was going to own up to seeing anything in this place? This was an easy – two fer – the Jag and a drunk - thank you Santa Claus. They appeared to be in no hurry as they got ready to make their move. The drunk wasn't going anywhere, and they hadn't spotted me slouched behind the tinted windshield of the low slung car.

When they had closed to within eight feet or so, I started the Jag's powerful engine and flashed on the car's high beams. The young guys were surprised, and that more than anything else, made them turn and run – animals from fire. The drunk was just as surprised, but he was in no condition to do much about it. He must have spotted the kids when I flashed on my lights because he started back in the direction from which he had come. The old guy shot me an uneven finger as he wobbled past the passenger's side window. He had no sooner managed to navigate himself to the small open parking lot off to the front and side of Mia's apartment building than she was jumping back into the car with yet another large straw bag filled with God knew what.

“Let's go,” she said followed by a wide smile. The apparent despair of earlier had been entirely replaced by a fresh and unexplained excitement. Her mania was so extreme, that, with the cynicism of an experience cop, I wondered if perhaps she was on drugs. An “upper” taken in her apartment would have done the trick. That kind of thinking is clearly the downside of being a cop. Inherent optimism is too quickly replaced with cynicism, sensitivity with callousness. Maybe getting all those old cop feelings back wasn't such a good idea.

“What about the drunk?” I asked reasonably. I was still puzzled by her new attitude.

“What drunk?”

I told her about what had happened while she had been looting her apartment.

“Nothing you can do - unless you want to baby-sit the old fool all night,” she told me pointedly. “Those young guys will roll him for any money he still has, but I don’t think they’ll really hurt him – he’s probably related to at least one of them. He won’t be able to get as drunk for a few days, and that will probably be good for him. I think it is called survival of the fittest.”

“Okay then Ms. Pragmatist, I guess we should just get the hell out of here.” I really didn’t want to get out of the car - let alone babysit some crazy old drunk.

As I pulled slowly away from the curb, I could just make out the shapes of the kids reassembling for another foray into the street. There was nothing I could do. The old guy was toast - buttered on both sides.

“Okay Short Cakes, let’s go, but I have to tell you that my rooming house, as Clearwater Beach quaint as it may be to me, is no royal palace either.”

“Well, maybe we could go to a motel for tonight and worry about the other stuff later.”

“I may be a bit slow,” I said quietly as I weighed the meaning of what she had said, “but is the motel idea you just mentioned - is that like the seducing me into helping you that I heard about only last night? Is it also the - we can get back to that later when we don’t have an audience – you mumbled to me when we were kissing on the beach earlier?”

“I do believe it was,” she said and laughed as she watched me respond with my own wide smile. The Jag suddenly picked up speed.

Bulls in the Pasture

Earlier in the evening, I had been impressed by Mia's ability to levitate from sitting to standing faster than a speeding bullet. I was left breathless by the activities of my first night in bed with her. Never before had I considered making love an Olympic contact sport. We located a Howard Johnson's Motel with a brightly illuminated parking lot just off the Interstate 275 within about ten minutes of leaving her old apartment building. We checked in, paying cash, as Mr. T. and Mrs. J. Smith (Tarzan and Jane). Not too original but then no one really cared anyway. The third floor non-smoking room was the standard variety that you expect with the motels designed for the economy minded. But it served its purpose well – very well. Nine point five for artistic merit! A perfect ten for enthusiasm!

“Do you think we have time for another little adventure?” Mia asked as she emerged from the steamy bathroom looking totally refreshed after a long hot shower. She was wearing only a small white towel wrapped around her head - a kind of weird turban.

“Nooo,” I groaned from beneath the single wrinkled sheet I had pulled from the stained carpeted floor in an attempt to maintain some semblance of personal dignity. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She was truly amazing. Just looking at her standing there was enough to jump start my depleted hormones back to life. I was feeling painfully aware of our age and fitness difference. Until that night, I had thought that I was in pretty good shape and not half bad in the sack.

She just laughed and hit a provocative pose. The sight of her standing there naked made me think maybe another “adventure” might just be possible. I seemed to be rising to the occasion, before I remembered that we were supposed to be at Crabby Bill's in forty minutes.

“I'll just take a quick shower and a total transfusion of all my bodily fluids, and we'll be on our way,” I said. “But I'd really like a rain-check on that little adventure idea.”

“You got it Joey – how about if I just come in and help you wash your back?”

We were a quite late getting to Crabby Bill's. My shower lasted longer than I thought it would. I was a little worried that Langdon would have given up on us and taken off. I dropped

Mia as close to the restaurant as possible and went off to park. By the time I was led to a small booth in the back corner of the second floor, Mia was busily talking to the ex-cop. He looked pretty much like a worn out old man. In some ways, he reminded me of Papa and Kickstart with a little bit more money. She was nervously sipping cold lemonade through a bent white plastic straw. A Diet Pepsi, ice and lime, sat waiting for me in front of the vacant seat beside Mia.

The ex-cop, Stuart Langdon, sitting across from my co-adventurer, wasn't exactly what I thought he would be like. But he was close, very close. Before I was within ten feet of the table, I could tell that the guy was a lifetime smoker and boozier. Only God knew what else he was. His nose would have put Rudolph the Reindeer's to shame. If my glass count was accurate, he had already finished three beers while he had been waiting for us, and he was smacking his lips in anticipation of his fifth. His loose gray skin sagged. His complexion was sallow. That's a neat trick in Florida. What little hair he had left was unkempt and had been badly dyed an orange flavour. I figured the guys he had put on death row would look better than he did – even the ones already executed. Langdon was wearing the standard detective attire of a decade earlier. I guess what they say is true - bad habits are hard to break. Today's offering included an off the rack lightweight charcoal gray suit, white button down collar shirt and loosely knotted black and gray striped tie. Although I couldn't see his shoes beneath the tabletop, my bet would have been on the classic thick-soled black wingtips of the variety all the old detectives and military guys liked.

Langdon didn't offer to shake hands, but he tracked me with watery blue eyes like maybe I was a rip off artist about to swipe his life savings. I moved along behind Mia and sat down. Langdon's lack of a sunshine greeting was reciprocated. As I glanced over at Mia to acknowledge what she had been saying, it was evident that she was anxious about the receptiveness of the ex-cop. Her left leg was pumping. I turned my attention squarely back onto Langdon. His eyes were red rimmed and deep set. He looked like he regularly wore glasses for reading. I also caught a quick glimpse of a cunning intelligence there as he completed his quick appraisal of me. Maybe this hadn't been a total waste of our time.

“So you’re the disabled cop from Canada Mia has been telling me about. Sorry about your wife. Nice to meet you,” he said in a cheerfully mocking tone. His voice confirmed the heavy smoker assessment - low and raspy. His eyes locked on mine to evaluate my response to his opening shot. He had revealed a lot about his investigative skills. The death of my wife wasn’t exactly a secret but it might require some ability to connect dots. I did a quick check of Mia. I hadn’t told her anything other than Annie and I had separated. I would have some “splaining” to do later Lucy.

Obviously, Mia must have told the old guy a bit about me while they waited for me to park the car. His gruff tone and off-hand comment didn’t come as a total surprise to me. That he knew about my wife did. And he knew he had got to me a bit with that shot. It’s an old cop trick. Gain the upper hand while making the other guy feel like a schmuck. I’d have to be a bit more careful in moving ahead. Langdon was old school. I’ve been told that the younger cops today go in for a more confidential “we’re just the best of buddies shooting the breeze” technique. As my grandmother used to say – it takes all kinds.

Mia hung her head and muttered to me, “Sorry.”

“And you’re the cop who couldn’t find out who killed Mia’s sister,” I replied looking back at the old guy and flashing a wide smart assed smile. “It’s nice to meet you too.”

Langdon just sat there with a kind of fixed glare and a false smile. Beyond that, he didn’t respond at all. He said nothing. The next few seconds would tell me how we were going to do here. Finally, Langdon’s weak smile slid from his wrinkled pale face, and he seemed to go somewhere deep inside himself. I’d seen this act a few times before too. McGregor had been pretty good with it. Sometimes it wasn’t an act.

Finally, he looked up at me. He still did not reply. He slowly extended his thick coarse hand across the table. I grasped it and nodded. He tried, unsuccessfully, to break every bone in my right hand. Then, it was my turn. Even after the physical demands of the night with Mia, I could still punch this old guy’s ticket.

“Fuck,” he said as I released my grip. “There was a time when you could never have done that to me.”

“I believe it,” I said - not believing it for a second. “Have we finished with the two bulls in the same pasture stuff yet?”

“Yeah,” he said and made a hacking phlegm filled rumble that was his version of a laugh, “so what do ya want to know Junior?”

“Everything,” Mia bubbled.

Langdon gave her a quick glance and rolled his eyes like he couldn't believe it. Then he focused his gaze back onto me.

“There are a few things that we could use some answers for,” I stated simply. I wasn't certain just yet how reliable what the old cop would give us might be. Maybe he would just shine us on for a while and then, tonight or some time later on, have a few laughs at our expense with his pals at the legion or local cop bar. “Like which side of the road the body was found on – stuff like that that the newspapers didn't get.”

“She was found off the left hand side of the road as you drive out of the field. I gather that you have seen the place.”

Pretty good so far.

“Not during the daylight hours. In fact, it was pretty late and very dark last night when we were there.”

“There's a small woods that starts about twenty feet back from the road. We figured the guy was trying to get the girl's body in there. If he got lucky, no one would find it for months, maybe years. But we figured something spooked him. He dropped the kid and just got the fuck gone. Or he was in bad shape or hurt and couldn't drag her any further. You get the idea. A lot of guesses – nothing for certain.”

At that moment, a thirty something dark haired waitress in navy blue shorts and a white sleeveless blouse sporting the Crabby Bill logo arrived to take our orders. I hadn't even picked up my menu.

“Chowder, big steak medium rare, fries, rings and two more beers,” Langdon said quickly. “The treat is on the little lady here - right?”

Mia nodded and smiled at Langdon and then gave the waitress her order - fish and chips.

“The same for me,” I said.

After the waitress had verified the order and flashed a parting smile, I picked up on what Langdon had been saying. “So did you figure that the killer dropped the body off on the way into the lover’s lane area?”

“No,” Langdon said as he picked up his almost empty glass of beer. He seemed to be inspecting something in the bottom of it. “This is almost empty. Why do you say that the guy was coming into that sex pit?”

“Did you go in there at night?” I asked trying to seem reasonable while knowing that Mia wanted to show off. She wanted to tell Langdon about what I had shown her the night before. I took her hand beneath the table hoping she would get the message.

“Didn’t have to,” Langdon replied grouchy. “Forensics got us all we needed, and we knew she wasn’t killed where her body was found. She was brought there and dumped. We figured she got in with the wrong guy or guys went parking up there and managed to get herself killed. The guy – whoever he was – and believe me we looked at a lot of guys in her part of town – just disappeared from the face of the earth.”

Mia started to say, “But there’s a ...”

“Just a second,” I said quickly cutting her off and gently squeezing her hand again, “was there any evidence that indicated how much earlier she had been raped? She had been raped, yeah?”

Langdon hesitated. His sharp eyes flashed to Mia and then back to me. He may have suspected that I had deliberately cut Mia off, but he said nothing. The waitress arrived with Langdon’s clam chowder and beers. I thanked her. Langdon switched his interest to the server briefly, nodded and offered a small grunt – a true gentleman. The waitress nodded at me and quickly moved away.

“Well?” I asked, as the cop prepared and then tasted his chowder. Mia was quiet – my message - like a swift kick in the shins - had been received. She was perceptive enough to know that we could not let Langdon into that particular loop just yet - maybe never.

Langdon's Condition

“Well, what?” Langdon replied as he savoured his first spoonful of the chowder. I wondered if he was retreating into a defensive shell and this interview had all but ended.

“Well, was there any evidence to suggest how much earlier Vicky had been raped?” I repeated.

“Yeah, the forensics came back and indicated that she had engaged in sexual activity sometime during the five to eight hours prior to her death. No one said raped. There was no evidence to support a rape – we call it sexual assault now - charge. But there was enough to know that she was fucked sometime before she got fucked up. Remember, she wasn't a real fresh puppy when we found her. Hard to be too much more exact.”

Mia flinched at the insensitivity. I hurried on, “What about any evidence of physical trauma aside from what you might find with strangulation?”

“You're a regular Amazing fucking Kreskin aren't you pal? Are you sure you didn't do it”

“Sorry, still in Canada at the time. What did you get?”

“The victim had suffered a significant blow to the back of the head. Not enough to kill her, but enough to turn out her lights for a little while.”

“Thanks sergeant,” I said sincerely hoping a little polite brown nosing at this stage would keep him feeding us the information we wanted. “Is there any chance you kept your case file notes, and we could get to go through them?”

Langdon looked up as he pushed the empty chowder bowl away from in front of him. He was about to say something when the waitress arrived with the rest of our order - smiles all around. Assurances given that everything was fine. We were alone in our world again.

“Maybe I need to hear more about what the fuck you think you're doing here,” Langdon grumped as he splashed Heinz 57 steak sauce all over his meal. “Cause I'm not saying another fuckin word until I know exactly what it is you think you're up to.”

“I thought Mia made that pretty clear when she phoned you,” I replied shortly.

“Yeah, well, I was a bit in the bag at the time, so refresh my memory.”

This seemed to be the time for Mia to use her female wiles, so I gave her a quick nudge. She took the hint and did everything except bat her eyelashes, flash her boobs, and call the guy a big stud muffin. She explained why we had wanted to talk with him and what it was she had asked me to do.

Given everything he had already told us, Langdon suddenly became more like the hard sell I thought he was going to be from the very start. For the obvious reasons, the request that he share his personal notes on the crime had raised a danger signal. He was re-trenching. We weren't going to get much more from him. I mean if he threw his personal notes out, that was one thing. If he turned them over to the guy who replaced him in the investigation or left them in the official file, that was another. We ate in silence while he weighed his options. The food was excellent for what it was, but I doubt that Mia tasted her meal any more than I did mine. I listened carefully to her as she made her pitch for Langdon's help.

As I sat there listening to Mia, I found myself surprised at the degree to which I had bought into this quixotic joust at forgotten windmills. Langdon was patiently trying to explain to Mia the odds on finding Vickie's killer.

“Listen kid, after so much time has passed, the likelihood of finding the scumbag who killed your sister are slim and not at all,” Langdon said shaking his head like it was an apology. I believe he was sorry that she couldn't accept the truth.

I found myself agreeing with the old cop. I was still betting on not at all myself.

“Okay,” Langdon said looking squarely at Mia. She appeared about ready to start crying. “I'm not buying this horseshit about you just checking to see if anything more can be done to find the killer. I know you and junior ranger here are going to try to solve this thing. And, you know what Missy? I can understand that. If my brother got whacked, I'd want to get the slime ball that did it too. So here's the deal. Let me try to find my old notes and think about what else I can do to help out. You go off with Joey Junior here and play detective and house for a little while. If you can find even one new thing that I don't got in my notes, I'll try to help you. And

that's a promise. Phone me – no better yet – meet me here in another two days for lunch – your treat. If you don't show up, I'll figure you got smart and gave up, and I'll have a beer and go home and forget all about this just like you should do right now. Is that fair?"

Mia nodded agreement. I sat there wondering if it was the prospect of Mia's tears that had softened the old curmudgeon finally or if maybe there was something else. I didn't see Langdon as Mr. Sensitive, so there had to be something else.

Lunch was over. Langdon pushed back from the table and extended his gnarly hand first to Mia and then to me – a normal handshake. Our eyes locked. He smiled. "You remind me of someone I once knew Sunshine. Me, when I was a kid. Take care of the little girl here. Thanks for lunch. Maybe I'll see you in two days."

I couldn't help but check out his shoes as he walked away from us. I smiled. He was wearing the thick-soled lace up black leather variety I expected. Once a cop always a cop, and Langdon was definitely that.

I picked up the bill and left a nice tip – not quite as nice as I usually left Mia at IHOP – a guy can't be too careful. Langdon's meal had cost more than twice as much as my lunch and Mia's together. No wonder he was willing to meet us here for lunch in two days – your treat – my ass.

I Get Back To Work

“What time is it?” Mia asked suddenly aware that she had a job to get to.

I checked my wristwatch and then the wall clock. It was 1:50 p.m. She was supposed to start work in ten minutes. We hurried to the Jag and pulled into the curb in front of IHOP three and a half minutes later. Not a land speed record, but close.

“Meet me here at nine okay?” Mia said as she started to get out of the car then turned back to me and added, “gimme a little kiss big boy.

Who could refuse such a request? If it was a quick peck on the cheek I expected, was I in for a surprise. Mia mashed her lips against mine in what was a long passionate probing affair before she broke away. “I’m going to be late,” she gasped. “And I want to find out more about your wife – the one the old cop said he was sorry about.”

“I thought you might. See you at nine,” I mumbled as I worked at getting my lips, brain and Jag back into gear. “As opposed to the other wives,” the little voice inside my head said – a bad joke and the timing - worse. Forget it.

Unlike the earlier dash to get Mia to IHOP, I drove at a leisurely pace back to my boarding house and parked and locked the Jaguar in the garage. I didn’t really know what to do about those two monster straw bags Mia had brought with her. Side by side, they filled the back seat. I decided to leave them right where they were. I could get them to her later if I needed to. I re-checked that both the car and the garage door were securely locked before heading to my room. I thought that I would spend the next hours reviewing what I already knew, go over what Langdon had said and perhaps make a few more notes. Perhaps things would fall into place, and I would find the clincher that would bring Langdon on board. The notes that he made during his investigation would be invaluable.

“Hi Doc - how have you been?”

“Jesus, you scared the crap out of me Max,” I said to Frank’s bodyguard slash killer - when necessary.

“Sorry about that Doc. I thought you might have noticed the Caddy parked out front. I’ve been worried about you.”

“Too small, I guess I missed it,” I said as I glanced over at the big white Escalade. “You’re looking pretty spiffy there in your golfing togs Max. I didn’t know you played. How is Frank? And what are you doing here?”

Frank is my brother and the one who didn’t get the old man’s Jaguar.

“He’s good. He sends his regards. He’s a bit worried about you. He’d like you to give him a call. The stuff in Toronto is starting to wind down. He needs to talk to you about certain disbursements – and some other stuff.”

Max was a guy I’d known for quite a few years. Frank inherited him from Dad with the same job description. He was the type of person you never wanted to turn your back on even though when he applied himself he could be quite charming.

“I’ll get around to that Max just as soon as I get some sleep. I’ve been working overtime.”

“Anything I can help you with Doc?” he said as he extended a Blackberry cell phone. “The numbers are all entered. Sooner rather than later I think.”

“Thanks, but no Max. I’m good for now,” I said as I took the phone.

The Doc name goes back to when Frank and I were little kids playing cowboys. He was Wyatt Earp and I was Doc Holliday – why not? My name was Joe; his was John. Frank was nothing like Wyatt unless you wanted to start counting dead bodies.

“Then I guess I’ll leave you to it Doc. Stay in touch. My number is on the cell too. Call me if you need anything. I’m going to down this way for a bit.”

I watched as Max smiled and returned to the Escalade. I could see the outline of another large person in the passenger’s front seat – probably Max’s bodyguard slash killer.

This was another complication I didn’t need in my life right now.

Langdon had said that if we turned up even one thing that he had not found during his work on the case, he would give us any and all the information that he had. I wanted to believe him. I thought my theory about the location of the body and the side of the road on which it was found might sway him a bit. But I needed more than that. In a flash of optimism, I believed that if we could get all the files the old cop had recorded on the case, there might even be a snowball's chance in hell of finding out what had actually happened to Vickie on that fateful night three years ago – even if we never found the guy.

Sooner rather than later Max had said. I sat on the side of my bed and called Frank.

“Talk to me.” Frank saw that in a movie and has used it ever since.

“Hi Frank. How are they hanging?” That's what I always have to ask so he knows no one is holding a gun to my head – or it isn't Rich Little doing an impression of me.

“One behind the other for speed - what's up?”

“I just had a visit with Max. He said I should give you a call.”

“Yeah, I got some stuff we need to go over about Annie's estate, but the timing is bad just now. Can you call in about two hours or so?”

“Sure – no problem ... dead air. Frank had hung up.

After last night's bedtime adventure at the Howard Johnson's Motel, I now also had to figure out what my relationship with Mia had become and where it was going. My intentions were good. I had fully intended to work throughout the afternoon and evening while Mia worked her shift at IHOP. I wanted to be able to pick her up at nine with some fresh ideas. The spirit was willing but the body was weak. Within fifteen minutes of lying down with the Xerox copies of relevant newspaper articles and all my notes spread out on the double bed, I was dead to the world. My night with Mia had wiped me out.

The Storm

Thunder was crashing and rain was beating hard upon the tile roofing when I snapped out of my deep sleep. I looked around and momentarily tried to recall where I was. Paper was strewn all around me. When I sat up, more spilled off the bed onto the floor. The single bulb of the overhead light flickered uncertainly, made a valiant effort to revive and then simply died. Almost immediately, there were several sharp raps on my interior door. The door knocking startled me more than the thunder. I had forgotten all about the woman who owned the place. The noisy crashes of thunder and flashing lightening and finally the electric power outage must have frightened her.

“Joseph - Joe are you in there?” her voice quavered. This woman was really frightened.

My landlady and housemate, Mrs. Reilly, was a relatively well-off widow who must have been somewhere in her late fifties or early sixties. My impression of her, during the few times I had actually seen her, was that she was very fragile – and most probably - a total ditz. She was not much more than five feet tall and could not have weighed more than a hundred pounds in a lead lined dressing gown. During one of our few conversations, she had informed me that she was a vegetarian and a health food addict. I knew that she took more supplements than Bayer has aspirins. She only wore clothes that were white, lavender or lilac and always with a single strand of cultured pearls. Her shoes invariably were white low heels. When she went outside on a sunny day, she wore white gloves – on a cloudy day, black gloves. Her thin curly brown dyed hair was always neatly coiffed and seemed to suggest that she was expecting a date or important company or perhaps getting ready to go to church. The few words that we had exchanged had been stiffly formal but always quite pleasant. We respected each other’s privacy – at least until now.

“Joe, Joe...” tears seemed imminent.

“Yeah, I’m here er ...” What the hell was her first name again? “I’ll be right there.”

I struggled in the dark to my interior door – the one I used only when I needed to shower in the larger bathroom across the hall- and opened it. Mrs. Reilly was standing in the corridor shaking. She was holding a moulded yellow rubber nine-volt, high intensity lantern. The bright

light almost blinded me as I swung open the door and took its full blast in my face. I blinked a few times. Then, she was in my arms.

“I’m so sorry, but these kind of intense electrical storms still terrify me,” she mumbled into the bottom of my chest. “My home in Michigan burned to the ground when I was a little girl during a lightning storm just like this. My youngest brother, Seth, died in that fire.”

Florida in the late summer and fall would not be my first choice as a place to be if you want to avoid thunder and lightning storms - to say nothing of the crazy hurricanes.

“It’s okay,” I said quietly. “We’ll be fine Mrs. Reilly. With that thousand-watt beacon you have, we’ll be able to find lost ships at sea. We’ll be the heroes of Clearwater Beach. They’ll write heroic stories about us for years to come. The storm will pass soon.” Prophetic me - the lights flickered on again, off again and then held. Power restored. “I’m sorry Mrs. Reilly; I’ve forgotten your first name. I don’t see you often. And I guess the storm has frightened me too.”

It sounded lame, but the truth was that I always entered my room through the exterior door on the garage side of the house. The room had its own en suite washroom – which was the typical real-estate hyperbole to describe a toilet and a sink and shower in a four by five foot closet. I was away from the place as much as possible. And when I was home, I rarely remembered that Mrs. Reilly might be haunting the other rooms of the house. The property management guy had told me that she was harmless, just a little off the wall and quickly losing whatever marbles remained. I didn’t bother her; she didn’t bother me. The only time I invaded her space was when she went out gardening or to do her morning walk. Then, I would sneak across the hall wrapped in a towel and take my morning shower in the larger bathroom. It was a functional arrangement.

“My name is Phyllis Reilly. You weren’t home last night,” said Mrs. Reilly, who had finally backed away from me and was trying unsuccessfully to turn off her mega-watt flashlight. Her peevish tone had just enough accusation in it to somehow make me feel guilty.

“No ma’am. I’ve met a very nice young lady, and I spent the evening with her. I guess I’ll have to move out soon because I’ll want to spend more time with her in the future.”

“Why would you do that?” the tiny woman asked plaintively looking up at me. Phyllis Reilly’s eyes were penetrating black dots.

“Well ma’am ... you mean spend time with her or move out?”

“Don’t call me ma’am. My name is Phyllis or Mrs. Reilly.”

“Yes ma’am ... er ... Mrs. Reilly,” I said realizing that maybe the woman wasn’t as weak-minded as I had been lead to believe.

“Alright, so again, why would you move out?”

“Well, the property management guy, Mr. Franklin I think his name was, he told me that I could not have guests when I took the room, and I haven’t. But that was because I really didn’t know anyone here when I arrived. Now, well that I’ve met Mia – that’s my friend’s name - now it’s a different story.”

“I’m happy that you have met someone female. I was getting worried that you were a bit, you know, light in the loafers - some kind of a fancy boy. In any case, that management gentleman is an idiot. He had no business telling you such a thing. This is my home; I still make the rules.”

Mrs. Reilly’s recuperative abilities were amazing - from quivering violet to a very much together middle-aged woman in a flash. I briefly wondered if perhaps Mrs. Phyllis Reilly had simply been looking for a good hug. But the way she had been shaking – even an incredibly talented actress could not have pulled that one off. Could she?

“I took him at face value,” I said weakly.

Mrs. Reilly looked at me in disbelief. Who is the ditz now?

The thunder had ceased, and the heavy downpour had moved off taking the muggy late afternoon humidity with it. The golden sun was just beginning to shine through the weakening vestiges of cloud. The air was pure with the cool fresh fragrance of the gulf and the late spring blossoms. The evening looked promising in more ways than one.

“In fact Joe – I can call you Joe correct?” – I nodded agreement – “I was about to ask you to watch my home for me as my sister, April, up north – the last one still alive besides me – has

become ill. Our family seems to die young. Some families are like that. Anyway, I would like to visit with her before she passes on. If you respect my home as much as you have thus far, and you wish to have a female guest, I would not object. I intend to fly out in a day or so. Would you be willing to look after things while I am gone?"

"Certainly," I replied – an answer to my need to be with Mia from the thin lips of Mrs. Phyllis Reilly. I could have kissed her. She may have liked that.

"Thank you Joe. We need not tell anyone of my fear of electrical storms."

Who was there to tell? "No ma'am – Phyllis. Thank you. I promise that I will make sure everything is A-okay here while you are away."

"If your guest visits before I leave, I would like to meet her. That is, if you would care to introduce her to me. Is she a Christian girl? Does she take her vitamins and eat properly?"

"Yes, Mrs. Reilly, I think she eats the right stuff. I'd like you to meet her, and I'm sure she would like to meet you also," I replied respectfully. I deliberately avoided any direct response to the Christian girl part of Mrs. Reilly's query. I was remembering my previous night of sexual athletics with Mia in the motel room. Nothing in that fond, fresh memory invoked in my experience the notion of Christianity unless you count – it is better to give than to receive. I also thought it wise to neglect telling Mrs. Reilly about Mia's past as a stripper and an escort. Sometimes, ignorance is bliss. Let the lady believe whatever she wanted.

Mrs. Reilly nodded quickly and with a light snuffle turned and left as quickly as I had ever seen her move. I stepped into the hallway and said thanks again. She was still trying to turn off her lantern when I closed the door. I smiled as I thought about my good fortune. Sometimes you can't lose.

It was almost seven thirty, and I still had not done a thing about trying to meet Langdon's criteria of finding a new scrap of evidence. Then I remembered that I was supposed to have called Frank three hours earlier – oops.

"Talk to me. But I'm not here. Leave your number."

Succinct – “Frank it’s Joe - big storm here – sorry I missed you – call me,” Two can play at terse.

I decided to tidy up a bit and then walk down the beach to meet Mia at nine. She could drive me back here and pick up her straw luggage and go home, or she could meet Mrs. Reilly and stay for a while. Forever, if I had my way.

Before I left the house a half an hour later, I went around and knocked on the front door. Mrs. Reilly greeted me as if nothing at all had happened earlier. I told her that I intended to return shortly, and my friend, Mia, might be with me. If we weren’t too late, would she still like to meet her?

“I certainly would Joseph, and thank you for telling me where you are going. I’ll stay up until eleven. After that, I would prefer to meet your lady friend at another time.”

“Is there anything I can bring in for you Mrs. Reilly?” I said before I left. I felt as if I was talking to my mother again.

“I’d love a Snickers bar.”

“Really? I said, “I can do that.”

Sometimes, Life Is Excellent

As I set off, the sun was still far enough above the horizon for me to feel its warmth. The air had cooled with the heavy wash of rain, and for the moment, all seemed very wonderful in my universe. I crossed the public parking lot near the south side of Pier 60 to get to the beach and, at the surf line, I started heading down toward the IHOP. The thoughts of all that had happened in the last few days totally absorbed me. I stopped to skip a few worn flat shells across the dead gray surface of the water. My best effort was only nine skips. “Must still be in a weakened condition from last night,” I mused quietly.

When I got to the parking lot where we had left Mia’s car the night before, I spotted a folded piece of paper stuck under Mia’s windshield wiper. I thought that perhaps Miss Knock My Socks Off had left me a message. When I read the note, my heart did a small flip. In large black magic marker, it read – The bitch will get you killed. Disappear. – I looked around the lot. No one was watching. There was nothing out of the ordinary. I walked to the flat cement break wall nearby and sat down. The paper wasn’t soggy from the earlier rain, so I guessed it had been left in the last few hours. Was this an example of Mia’s humour? I didn’t think so. Was this someone else’s idea of a joke? Pretty sick if it was.

At some level, I knew that there was nothing funny about this. Someone was threatening me. I remembered Billy Ray and Sammy. Was this the action of a jilted and jealous lover? Could be. I looked around again and crumpled the paper. I knew that I wasn’t going to mention the note to Mia. She already had too much on her plate. As I stood and started to walk towards the Honda, I spotted a similar piece of paper pasted to the ground beside the car. I picked it up and carefully opened the fold. Same message badly streaked and blotted – The bitch will get you killed – Disappear. Persistent I thought. The guy had written this before the rain, realized the storm would mess it up and returned to write a new one.

I went back to the break wall and sat down. I considered how to respond. There was nothing that I could do. A message wasn’t going to scare me off. So I guess I’d just wait and see what developed. I thought about how tired Mia must be. She was working a seven-hour shift

lugging heavy trays of food after so little rest the night before. I also realized that she must be on a bit of an emotional roller coaster given the lack of any meaningful commitment from Langdon unless we met his criteria of coming up with even one new piece of information or evidence. No way was she going to hear about this threat.

“Hi yah sailor - new in town?” She was suddenly sitting beside me on the wall. How does anyone move up and down so gracefully and silently?

“Yes siree Bob thar little lady, here to see the sights,” I drawled out in my best southern accent - which probably wasn’t very good at all. I wanted to play along with her scenario just to find out where she wanted to take it. “Just got off the HMS Singapore and I’m looking for the meaning of life.”

“I might be able to help you out with that one big boy if you got enough coin,” Mia whispered conspiratorially. She looked all around carefully as if trying to spot a sly ninja blending in with the blacktop of the parking lot. Or maybe to see if a KGB assassin was sighting his laser scope in on her forehead at that exact moment. Seconds passed.

Satisfied that we were all alone, she casually placed her small tanned hand on the middle of my lap and smiled.

“Ah,” I moaned realizing the game had taken on a new, albeit, very nice twist, “that would be the meaning of life according to the Zen Buddhist postulation on the moment of satori.”

“Um,” she murmured and squeezed me lightly.

“Aha, do that anymore, and it will be a fine mess you’ve got in my pants Stanley.”

She laughed lightly and gave another gentle farewell stroke. “You really don’t have your oars in the water do you Joe? What the hell are you talking about? Who is Stanley and what is that sat thing?”

I explained the concept of satori as quickly and simply as I could and followed that with a short identification of the Laurel and Hardy comedy team of the twenties and thirties. I had seen them countless times at my grandmother’s when my family visited her for Sunday dinners so

many years ago. Mia looked at me as if I had three heads. Maybe my oars really don't reach the water. If the guy who wrote me the note had anything to do with it, I'd be dead soon, and it wouldn't matter anyway.

The sun was just beginning to sink below the horizon in a vibrant crimson sky splashed with wisps of darkening cloud. We sat quietly holding hands and watched. No wonder some people call this part of Florida paradise.

"Okay Joe, what did you get done today?" Mia asked as soon as the sun had dropped from view – the pragmatic romantic.

I lied shamelessly. "Oh, I immersed myself in all the material again and came up with a plan for tomorrow."

"Good, cause tomorrow, guess what? I got the day off."

"That's great Mia. I also talked with my landlady about moving out because of this young lady friend I've recently met who I sort a, kind of, a, you know, like really like."

"Oh yeah," Mia smiled as she did her levitation act to the standing position, "let's get to my car. It'll get cool soon. So, do I know this young lady friend you find yourself really ah liking?"

"I don't know," I replied while awkwardly trying to get my feet under me. "She's kind of a plain little thing I found slaving away at the IHOP a few days back. I felt sorry for the poor little creature. Kinda pathetic if you know what I mean."

I had just managed to find the upright position and whack – she sucker punched me in the shoulder hard enough for instant numbness to spread like a flash of lightening through my entire shoulder and arm. I believe in the N.F.L. such an injury is called a stinger. They'd be right! With the damage done, she scurried for her car only ten feet away and jumped in. I tried hopelessly to maintain my dignity as I strolled painfully to the passenger side of the old wreck rubbing my bruised and numb shoulder. Damn, the woman could punch.

"Get in," she said as she reached across to roll down the window and opened the passenger side door. "I'll give you a ride to your rooming house, and we can sort stuff out from

there. And we can talk about your wife.” I made a big deal about getting my floppy injured arm into the car – the old limp fish routine. She couldn’t help but notice my apparent discomfort. “Poor baby - did I really hurt you?” she asked with genuine concern seeping into her voice. “I’m sorry. Sometimes I get carried away and the old karate self-defence stuff takes over.”

“Oh, I’ll be alright in a week or two,” I grimaced while seeming to put on a brave front. Actually, the sting had passed. I was now into the realm of pure fakery. “I have another arm. Please don’t feel badly about rendering me crippled. I’ll get by - I guess.”

She smiled – I think she was on to me - and said, “Can I kiss it better?”

“It’s not that sort of injury. I don’t think that would help at all, but if you really want to try ...

When Mia started the car twenty minutes later – I’m a slow healer – I suddenly remembered about Mrs. Reilly and her request for a Snickers bar. I told Mia about my encounter with my bird like landlady and the offer of the use of her home while she was away. I told her I’d like her to meet Phyllis Reilly before we unloaded her stuff still sitting on the Jag’s back seat. Mia had no problem with the idea of meeting my landlady, but was worried about how she looked in her IHOP outfit.

“For Mrs. Reilly’s eyes, I’d say your IHOP outfit is a lot better than in your new red bikini.” I said remembering her question about Mia being a Christian girl. “But if you really want to try that damn bikini on again, I guess I could judge how well it fits you again later tonight.” Then, I dashed into CVS Drugstore.

CVS, like any Walgreen’s, might more appropriately be called an everything store. The one just up and across the road from the Hilton Hotel stocks just about anything a person might need to live happily for a very long time. I found the biggest Snickers bar that they had and hurried to the kid at the checkout cash register. As I was about to leave, Billy Ray’s friend, Sammy, slid up in front of me. The last time that I saw Sammy, he had a gob of melting whipped cream dripping down his throat.

“You’ve been warned asshole. Disappear.”

I smiled sweetly, and fired the hardest short jab of my life right into the middle Sammy's heart. He gasped once and folded up like a cheap accordion. "Have a nice night scumbag."

Joe – two – scumbags – zero.

I ran back out to Mia and her beat up Honda.

Mia and Phyllis – An Odd Tag-Team

Mia parked her junker out by the garage behind the house. As we walked around to the front of the old bungalow, I started to wonder if this introduction was really such a good idea. What if Mrs. Phyllis Reilly didn't like Mia and wouldn't let her stay with me? Not Christian enough. I'd have to find another place to crash – and that was not – in my lifetime – going to be Mia's dump. Too late now - we proceeded up the short cracked cement walkway leading to the front door, I whispered to Mia, "Please don't punch me in front of my nice little old landlady."

She threw a wild air shot to my shoulder making me skip away. She was still smiling broadly when Mrs. Reilly slowly opened the door a few seconds later. Maybe, she had been standing just inside the entrance waiting for us. It was just before ten o'clock – a little late for fashionable visiting with middle aged ladies of property.

Mrs. Reilly was the perfect hostess. She received my Snickers bar gift as if it was a large floral bouquet and an extra-large box of the finest chocolates. Maybe we were the visitors she had been waiting for all these years. She offered us tea and tiny biscuits that we both happily accepted. I hate tea. I suddenly had a momentary mental flashback to one of my grandmother's other favourite old movies, *Arsenic and Old Lace*. In that film, the old ladies poison all their male houseguests. I dismissed the memory quickly. Phyllis Reilly seemed to be in her glory. She wanted to know all about how and where we had met. She was interested in everything about Mia. For her part, Mia had successfully set about charming Mrs. Reilly out of her socks. At some point during the inevitable zigzag course of our polite conversation, Phyllis learned that I had been a police officer. She positively gushed over that tidbit saying, "I'll feel so much safer now that I know that I have a policeman living with me."

After a very pleasant half an hour of inconsequential conversation, it became evident that it was past Phyllis Reilly's bedtime. Her meds must have been wearing off. She was having difficulty keeping her eyes open. Twice, she nodded off in the middle of her sentences. We genuinely thanked her for the tea and cookies and conversation. I again told her that I would be

pleased to look after her home while she was away. Mia helped Phyllis carry the tea tray, biscuit plate and empty cups to the kitchen.

Minutes later when Mia had not returned, I forgot about red bikinis dancing in my head and started to worry. I had just taken a step towards the kitchen when the two very different women – prim, proper and middle-aged Mrs. Reilly and – none of the above - Mia returned. They were laughing together quietly - sharing some big female secret. We said our goodbyes again and left Mrs. Reilly's front door to walk around the house to my back entrance. Somehow, that seemed more proper than just walking through her home and using the interior door to my room.

As we walked around by the garage, I asked Mia what they had been talking about.

“Oh, you know, just girl talk,” she replied coyly.

“Come on Mia, spill it,” I urged her. “You two seemed to get on pretty well. What did she say?”

Mia laughed again and then said, “She wanted to know if you were a good lover.”

“No!”

“I'm not fooling. Straight up, that's what she asked me. She wanted to know if you were caring and considerate and met all of my female needs?”

We were back inside my room.

“This is it. What do you think?” I asked making an elaborate sweep of my hand. “And how did you answer her?”

“I cannot tell a lie. A bit cramped isn't it? I told her the truth.”

“Which is?”

“Not bad, but room for improvement,” she giggled and rolled onto my bed.

“You must be talking about my room,” I said as I made a wild grab for her.

The Dream

When I finally slept, and a few hours had passed, the nightmare returned. I had ducked it successfully for almost two weeks, but it happened that night. In that horror that is so real I can hear the freezing Arctic wind slashing at the bedroom windowpanes. I groan and pull the blankets tightly around me. There is a woman lying beside me - dead. The frozen north winds roar steadily while whipping the empty streets and house roofs with an unrelenting barrage of stinging ice pellets.

The woman beside me is my wife. She is the woman I loved when I was younger and who I married when it seemed the right thing to do. On that frozen morning, I realize that our life together has changed. My perceptions about living and people are different from the ones that we had shared when we were younger. We have changed – not in a bad way or a good way – just changed. She has become someone who I no longer really know or understand. Yes, we live in the same space and often sleep in the same bed, but somehow, through the years, our once exciting and growing intimacy has dwindled. We have slowly but inexorably grown apart. We have become a habit.

Flash to a dark night and a convenience store parking lot. I am off duty when I respond to a “shots fired” call. The two responding uniforms are down when I get there. I am in a running gunfight with the two guys who have just stuck up the store – not their first by a long shot. They are armed with a sawed off, double barrel, Winchester sixteen-gauge shotgun and a cut down, Marlin Model 990, semi- automatic twenty- two-caliber rifle. They are young, reckless – high on crack. Shots are fired and returned. When it’s over both of them are lying lifeless on the garbage strewn surface of the parking lot. I am propped stupidly against the wall of the store. My empty, standard issue, Glock 27 is still grasped loosely in my numb hand. Just before I black out, I remember wondering where all this blood is coming from.

Blend into the ambulance guys telling me to hold on and then the blinding overhead lights of an operating room. I see blurred shapes hovering. I hear voices. One is female the other male. The male is severe as he loudly gives instructions. The language is almost foreign but I

hear that I've been hit three times. The kid with the twenty-two had hit me twice in the knee area and again in the shoulder. The guy with the shotgun had sprinkled enough buckshot through my anatomy that the doctor says that he has taken enough metal out of me to start a lead re-cycling business. There is a sprinkle of laughter and then again - everything goes black.

Flash to a hospital bed. A high ranking uniformed police officer informs me that I am about to become the recipient of the police department's medal of valour for exceptional service in the line of duty. I should be proud. Then I'm reading a letter notifying me formally that my injuries are of a nature that I am no longer fit enough to be an active police officer. Following the award ceremony, I can retire and start to receive my disability pension. Oh yes, and I have the sincere good wishes of the Metropolitan Toronto Police Department. Frank is laughing crazily. And then there is a fiery explosion. I wake up trembling.

The dream is real and only five years old. And I'm tired of it, but it won't let go.

The Next Day – We Take A Drive

When I woke at eight the next morning feeling a bit shaky but almost ready to take on the world, I casually reached over with my left arm to find that Mia had gone. I did a snappy visual check. Yep, she was not there. Her two huge straw bags were on the floor beside the bed? How had she got them from the back of my car into the room without waking me? Some of the contents of one of the sacks had spilled out upon the floor. Lots of what my grandmother would have called young lady's unmentionables, but no Mia. I remembered the written threat and my meeting with Sammy. I checked in the bathroom. How careful can you check in a room measuring five feet by four feet? No note – nothing. I washed quickly and pulled on my shorts and flip-flops and made my way outside. The garage door was open and the Jag had been backed out into the driveway. I checked and found the car locked up again. Mia's car was parked in behind it and almost hanging out into the street. How had I slept through all this? I was about ready to turn back to my room and phone the Mounties when I heard a loud, "Hey Joey!"

And there she was - running at a very fast clip towards me – too fast. At the last second, she sprang at me like a frenzied lion attacking a confused Tarzan. Thank God that she was only slightly more than five feet tall and a hundred pounds wearing dumbbells. And, that I was almost semi ready - almost. Mia was oblivious of the risk. She smacked into me like a human cannonball and planted a sloppy wet kiss on my not so ready for kissing lips. At the same time, she wrapped her lithe sweat soak legs around my waist.

"Christ on a crutch Mia," I muttered as I staggered uncertainly in an attempt to stay upright. "It's a damn good thing you're only just bigger than a dwarf. You could have killed both of us."

"What's this dwarf crap?" Mia demanded still clinging to me like a starving koala bear on a fresh eucalyptus tree.

"You're short Mia - short – vertically challenged. And it's a damn good thing too cause if you had been even half the size of a normal person, I'd be dead."

“I’ll have you know Mister Joseph Holiday that I’m just over five foot two and a half inches and weigh a hundred and seven pounds, and I don’t seem to recall too many complaints in bed last night when you told me to roll over and ...

“Okay, Mia okay. I apologize. I was mistaken – wrong – very wrong. How could I think such a thing? Why, you are a veritable giant among woman – an Amazon of incredible proportions and a paragon of ...”

“Joe? Joe?”

“Yes Mia.”

“Shut up! You really are messed up sometimes.”

“I’m sorry. Where have you been, and why didn’t you wake me up? I’ve been worried.”

“You were sleeping so peacefully,” she said sweetly as she disengaged her legs and slipped lightly to the ground, “that I didn’t want to wake you. Tomorrow, you can go for a run with me. Okay?”

“Oh yeah,” I replied looking down at the fresh residue of sweat all over the front of me. “I’ll most definitely look forward to that particular form of early morning torture. How far did you run?”

“About five or six miles - and now I need to grab a shower and then we’ll get going. You said last night that you had a plan. And I want you to meet my mom. How about filling it in for me over breakfast?”

“I can do that.”

“Oh, and Phyllis slipped a note under our door just after six this morning. She wondered if we could give her a lift to the airport later. She’s on stand-bye. Her sister took a bad turn during the night.”

Our door – that had a nice ring to it.

“I can do that too.”

I showed her where the shower was in the bigger bathroom across the hall and, with my hand placed softly on her taut backside, offered to help her. The effort was a valiant one, but the

shower stall was just too small for the both of us. I left Mia soaping herself and happily singing off key. Unfortunately, she only knew the words of the first line of a song I didn't recognize, so after she had repeated the words – all eight of them - about sixteen times, I quietly slipped outside. I went around to the front door to tell Mrs. Reilly that we would be available to take her to the airport whenever. Phyllis told me that she had just been given a confirmation on a flight that wasn't due to take off for another three and a half hours, but because of airport security, she was supposed to be there at least two hours early. I told her we could be ready to leave in about forty minutes.

Just before I turned away to rush back and tell Mia that we had to get a move on, Phyllis Reilly grabbed my arm and pulled me closer to her. “You know that girl is damaged goods Joseph?”

“What do you mean?” I replied almost afraid to hear what I guessed Mrs. Reilly was about to tell me.

“She has had a bad life, and the bad parts started when she was just a child. It will be quite difficult for her to keep her act together for long. You have to be patient with her and good to her Joseph. You may be the only man who ever will be.” And then, Phyllis Reilly let go of my arm and turned to go back into her house. “I'll be praying for you two,” she said as she closed the door.

I stood quietly for a second or two. Was I ever wrong! My landlady was no ditz. She was a very perceptive woman. I ran around to the back of the house to tell Mia we had to be ready to leave in a few minutes.

Mia totally surprised me. She, unlike me, was ready to go. She had on her pale blue flip-flops, short-short faded cut-offs, and her diamond navel stickpin. I had actually studied that little decorative item. It wasn't a single diamond, but rather a serious number of small diamonds embedded in a gold butterfly. To top that off she had on a pink T-shirt cut off about five inches above the butterfly. I wondered if Phyllis Reilly would break out in a chorus of Onward Christian Soldiers when she saw Mia's outfit of the day.

“Might get cold Mia,” I mumbled trying not to offend. “Why don’t you wear that fetching white sweatshirt I bought for you at The Surf and Sand souvenir shop a few nights ago?”

“It’s going to be a beautiful day. Why would I do that? I mean I’ll take it with me if you want, but I don’t need to wear it.”

“Let the chips fall where they may,” I muttered anxiously as I dressed in a hurry.

In fact, Mrs. Reilly told Mia that she looked lovely on this beautiful spring Florida day. “Fetching” was her actual word. She also told my shower soprano that, in her day, she had been very much like Mia. That caused me to do a double take. My landlady then gave me a quick once over and said nothing. Sometimes, you just can’t win.

After we had made certain that Mrs. Reilly was in good hands at the St. Pete-Clearwater Airport, we headed off to have brunch. Our first intention to meet with Mia’s mother in the early afternoon had run into a bit of a snag. The former Mrs. Doulton, now Mrs. Elise Bullock, was getting her hair done at the Crescendo Health and Beauty Spa. Mia informed me that she would go there too - just after she made her first million. Crescendo was the - indulge yourself because you can afford it location- for the rich and famous. From the tip of your toes to the top of your head – Crescendo did it all.

Mia thought that letting her Mom meet me was necessary. Maybe, she wanted to show off the new boyfriend – me. I admit that I was more interested in seeing her step dad and brother because of the red flags they raised in my mind. Mia said if we told Ted, her step-dad that we were coming, he would probably be somewhere else. We discussed what we were going to try to accomplish with this short visit. Not much. Just let me see who they were and how they acted. We agreed that if her step father or her step brother, Terry, were at home, we would go easy on the questions about Vickie and her last few days at home. Mia’s comment that both men really had little interest in any additional inquiry into the murder begged the question. Why?

Well – That’s Interesting!

Because we were going to have to wait for Mrs. Bullock to get beautiful, we decided to go back and visit the crime scene in the light of day. The park was a fair drive from where the Bullock family lived, but we had lots of time to kill. I drove the Jaguar slowly up the narrow lane leading to the open field, the late night passion pit to the entire community. I again realized just how difficult it would be for two vehicles to safely pass each other going in opposite directions. One or both cars would have to stray onto the shoulder. I pulled over and parked off to the side of the lane when Mia told me that we had reached the spot adjacent to where Vickie’s body had been found. I don’t know what she had used to identify the spot, but I estimated that we parked about two feet away from where we had stopped in the pitch black a few nights earlier.

We got out and looked around. Not much. In the light of day, I saw that the road’s shoulders were just wide rough expanses of high cut grass. That fact had not been evident during our night visit. I remembered what Langdon had said about a small woods being the spot where they believed the killer intended to hide Vickie’s body. We walked over to a scruffy cluch of second growth trees. Was that what the old ex-cop had meant by a small “woods”? Eight mid-sized trees surrounded by scrub brush and waist high weeds were a “woods” in Florida. Whatever it was called, it was twenty feet back from the edge of the trail on the driver’s side, going out. In other words, if the guy had been coming out of the park, he would have had to drag or carry the body across the road in front of, or behind, his car. The distance was about thirty feet from the center of the path.

On the other side of the road and back towards the field, there was another very small clump of trees. It was about twenty-five feet off to that side of the lane. To me, this would have been the more logical place to hide a body for someone driving away from the field. Langdon and his detective colleagues had apparently based their investigation on the reasonable supposition that the actual murder had taken place in the field. I wondered if forensics reinforced that assumption. It was easy to imagine this as a crime of passion. And I guess that conclusion

would seem reasonable given the state of the victim. Partially clad, panty hose wrapped around her neck would normally add up that way.

But I was still bugged. Why would anyone want to risk dragging a body across the roadway when there was even a remote possibility that he would be caught in the lights of any car leaving or, for that matter, coming into the field? It was too risky - particularly when there was an equally good hiding place only a few feet further in from the safer side of the road. I wanted to believe that if we properly presented that argument to Langdon, it would be enough to convince him to give us the help he had promised. Somehow, I doubted it. The weak part of my argument was – if the shoulders were mowed and the killer wasn't worried about scratching up his car, or if his vehicle was a SUV, he could drive up as close to the “woods” as he wanted and dump the body. But what if the shoulders had not been cut down three years ago? That led to different considerations.

We walked around the area not really knowing what we were looking for. Then I remembered our trip in here two nights earlier. At that time of night, I had no way of knowing how safely I could move over onto the shoulder. So, unless the killer was familiar with the place, possibly by driving it during daylight hours, it was unlikely he would stray too far away from the trail. I had to find out if the grass on both sides of the path had been mowed three years earlier. That was another question for Langdon. For no particular reason I still believed that someone coming into the field had dumped Vickie's body expecting it to be found quickly.

Finally, we drove ahead into the open make out area where, according to Mia, so many kids had had their very first adventure into the wondrous world of sexual fun and games. It was a fairly large level area looking out over the industrial section of the city. In the far distance, we could see the gulf. There was plenty of evidence, even to an untrained eye, to suggest that this was indeed a popular place to party. A budding entrepreneur could get started by selling condoms on the way in and handy wipes and Kleenex on the way out. Strangely enough, like the edges of the lane coming in, the grass covering the entire area had been neatly cut. There were even a few of those heavy wire mesh wastebaskets located around the perimeter of the place.

Perhaps the local politicians didn't have the nerve to close it. Perhaps, the land was considered on their zoning maps as parkland. I smiled - sort of an adult playground without swings or slides. It wasn't important. We had seen enough. Mia had become strangely quiet from the moment we had driven into the field. Maybe she was recalling too many memories of her own youth.

"Let's go," I said as I turned to walk back to the car. "We'll drive back over to Crescendo, and I can meet you Mom."

"Okay Joey. Do you think Langdon will buy our argument now?"

"No way to know that until we meet with him."

When I started the Jag to pull away from the field, Mia put her hand on the back of mine. "Joe, tell me the truth. Do you think Langdon will help us at all?"

"He might if we can convince him to seriously consider our theory about the killer being someone dumping Vickie coming into - not leaving - the field. It's hard to figure though. I always thought that Langdon was going to be a tough sell. It would really help if we had something else - something really concrete. Or maybe I could just talk with him alone. Get him to co-operate." I was thinking about sharing my thoughts about step dad and bro - a path I was certain had been thoroughly explored during the initial investigation.

"How would you do that?" Mia asked with a hint of hopefulness in her voice again.

"I don't know," I said with a laugh. "Maybe beat the crap out of the old fart. Anyway, let's pick up your Mom and talk to people there. Maybe we'll get lucky." I didn't believe that for a second. Training officer McGregor had steadfastly maintained that luck was almost always an allusive quality in any murder investigation. During the time that I knew him, my Scottish friend was seldom, if ever, wrong.

Just When You Think ...

“Want to know something kind of personal?” Mia asked quietly as we drove away from the park.

“Only if you want to tell me,” I replied.

“This was where I gave it up for the first time.”

“Oh yeah, how old were you?” I said thinking back to the parking areas of my own youth.

“Fourteen – no, maybe thirteen I think. If I knew then what I know now ... jeez - I was lucky I didn’t get pregnant. We came here a few times. I don’t think the guy ever even used a rubber.”

“Who was the guy?”

“Oh, just a sixteen year old kid from the neighbourhood. His name was Chance. I think we thought we were in love – whatever that means. That we would get married and have lots of money and two kids. He borrowed his dad’s old Chevy. I’m not sure if he’s even still alive. He joined the navy.”

“Thirteen’s pretty young isn’t it?” I asked wondering if this was an opening to discuss the sexual abuse I suspected. “Did you know what you were doing?”

“I’d seen movies – some of them were pretty raw. My brother, Terry, and my step-father, Ted showed me some videos. I don’t think I want to talk about it anymore. Let’s go.”

No sense pushing it I thought. Exposure of the abused youngster to porn by the abuser – it was classic.

Mia had to give me directions for the next four minutes until we pulled on to a major throughway. We followed it for another fifteen minutes before we turned off onto 686. We were heading back towards Belleaire when I became aware of a white Escalade flashing its headlights in my rear-view mirror.

“Double damn,” I said as I pulled over. “Stay here – “I’ll just be a minute.”

I walked back to the Escalade as I knew Max wouldn't be interested in letting Mia see him.

"Max ..."

"Doc ... Having fun? Nice looking girl! Did you lose the cell I gave you?"

"Er – no, but I don't seem to have it with me."

"Did you call Frank with it?"

"Yup – I did Max." I was starting to feel like the village idiot.

"Did you turn it off after you left your message about the storm?"

"I guess."

"Well then Doc – how was Frank going to call you back when you didn't call him?"

"Duh, I have a phone in my room."

"But it's disconnected Doc – I know because I was just there," he said as he handed me the Blackberry for the second time in two days. "Sooner rather than later – yeah? Have a nice day Doc."

"Thanks," I said as I walked slowly back to my Jag. This was a complication and an explanation I didn't need in my life right now.

"Who was that and what did he want?"

"Max – and he wanted to give me a free cell phone - neat eh?"

"And I'm the tooth fairy!" Mia said. "The guy just waved you over and gave you an expensive cell phone – and I'm supposed to believe you?"

"The guy is an acquaintance of my brother Frank. My brother would like me to call him about certain personal matters, so he gave me a secure throw away cell."

"So he stops you in his monster hundred grand SUV and hands you a cell worth three or four bills so that you can make a phone call to your brother – and then maybe throw it away? Am I missing anything here? And does this have something to do with your wife – who we have not yet talked about – even though you said we would. What's the story here Joe?"

I started the Jag and tried to figure out the best way to deal with what could be the end of our relationship. The truth was one option – but not the only one.

“Okay Mia – let me think for a minute while I find a place to park,” I said in an effort to buy time.

“So you can make up some story...”

“Hold on Mia will ya? The guy just told me that he had picked up the cell he gave me yesterday in my room and beyond that - my land phone is disconnected. That means he let himself into my room. Max is good at that. We won’t notice a thing out of place. But that’s not the most interesting part. How did he know exactly where to find me unless he has a tracking device on my car – or me? And then how do I use that?”

“Who is that guy?”

“Just who I said - Max is a friend of my brother – maybe a bit more.”

I pulled into a vacant parking spot in a small strip mall lot.

“Ask away Mia. I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

“Is your wife really dead?”

“Yes. She was killed by a bomb blast that took out some big name politico from Iraq who was supposed to become a major player in the re-unification of that country when Saddam went down. You may have heard or read about it. It happened five years ago at a television station in London. Despite strict security, a suicide bomber got close enough to take out the honcho and almost everybody in the studio. My wife was on of the unlucky ones.”

“I’m sorry. Where were you when all this happened?”

“I was at home in the Toronto area probably writing an obituary. When I started as a cop, Annie, that was my wife’s name, started her career as an investigative journalist. We were both young and just out of university. She was good at her job and her popularity grew first in print and then on radio and television. She was attractive, intelligent and personable. The public liked her. When I had to leave the police force, she already had a growing national reputation. She was making really good money working for the CBC – that’s the national television network. She

also had her faith. She was a closet “born again” Christian. Her future career potential could not have looked brighter. So, as she was finding her niche in life and a strong faith in God, I guess I was losing mine.”

“You told me about the gunfight that ended your being a cop, and I’ve seen all the scars, so what were you doing while your wife was making the bucks as a journalist?”

“I was sort of a journalist too,” I said recalling too vividly the despair I had felt during those years after thriving as a cop. “My career as a budding journalist started almost by accident a few months after my physiotherapy ended. I knew that a disability pension wasn’t going to keep me going for long. I was still young. I needed to be doing something. I didn’t want to rely on my wife to support me – just as I don’t want Frank’s handouts now. I was bored. I guess I could have, should have, returned to university and finished my masters. I scored in the one forty five range on the I.Q. test administered as part of the hiring process the cops use. The psychologist assessing my chances of success as a law officer had subtly questioned my sanity when he suggested I might use my intelligence to better advantage by going back to university. In essence, he said – “Are you fuckin nuts? With what you have, why do you want to be a cop?” But, at the time, I just wanted to be earning a legitimate income, any income.

I asked some friends around the neighborhood about any available jobs. Frank tried to put me on his payroll to learn the business, but when I refused, he told me about a minimum wage position working as a junior reporter for an area newspaper. Later, just before I came south, I learned that he owned the rag and was using it to launder money. It sounded better than working at Burger King or Wal-Mart, so I took it. In my case, the reporter or journalist description was and remained hyperbole.”

“What do you mean?”

“Perhaps in my mind’s eye this job would be the first stepping-stone into the world of big time journalism – like Annie. It wasn’t. Oh sure, I wrote. I wrote wonderful obituaries and occasionally I put together a book or movie review for the Intelligencer. That was the grandiose name of our struggling community newspaper. But mainly, when I wasn’t hassling delinquent

customers for payment, I flogged advertising space to soon to be bankrupt businesses. When I wasn't doing that I was trying to get paying customers to re-new their subscriptions. The step to the big time in journalism never happened. Maybe I was too lazy. Or just maybe I was bitter about what had happened with my police career, and that bitterness made it impossible for me to do more or better. I don't know. So while my wife was reaching the top of the success ladder in her chosen profession, I remained stuck in the bargain basement of my accidental one."

"So what's the story with this guy Max and your brother – Frank?"

"Frank took over my dad's businesses. Even though the old man didn't approve of some of the things Frank was involved in – and left the Jaguar and money to me – he knew I wasn't going to be interested in taking over for him."

"Why was that Joe? I mean you're a smart guy. What was his problem with you?"

"My father didn't approve of my career choice as a cop. In fact while I was one, he never talked to me. He actually ran a number of businesses but only a couple of them were legitimate. Frank was really better suited to take them over. Max is as much Frank's enforcer as his friend."

"Okay. Tell me why he handed you the phone?"

"Frank wants me to call him. He has looked after – at least his pack of lawyers have – the law suits involving insurance companies and Annie's murder, my dad's estate problems with Revenue Canada, the sale of my home and maybe even you. Take your pick. But he wants me to call him and because of the type of business man he is, he is paranoid to the extreme. I even have to give a catch phrase when I call him or he will think I am being held at gunpoint by an enemy. Frank is a bit of a flake. He also sees himself as my protector even though I have told him countless times I'm okay on my own. I actually believed I had escaped from his influence down here."

"How would he know about me?"

"Max – and a huge number of resources - I learned early on to never under-estimate Frank."

"That's some story Joe. Is it all true?"

“Yup, oh yeah there’s one more thing. Frank and the people who know me back home call me Doc.”

“Why?”

So I told her that story too.

“You’re a whole different guy – aren’t you Doc?”

“Not really,” I answered as I pulled the Jag out into traffic.

I Meet the Parents

“I thought we were going to pick up your Mom at the hair salon. This is the way back to Sand Key. I thought she lived in Tampa.”

“We are,” Mia said. “But it’s not just any old beauty shop. It’s her spa trip. You know where rich people get their total bodies pampered as well as their hair done,” Mia said looking at me curiously. “She’ll likely drop over eight hundred bucks there for the four hours she’s there.”

“So where do Mom and step dad live? For some reason I thought they lived somewhere in Tampa. Maybe it was something Langdon told me.”

“Well,” Mia said, “they lived in Tampa when Vickie was with them. And most of Ted’s businesses are in Tampa, but they live in Belleaire Beach. They moved there a couple of years ago. Bought the big house and boat and are living the good life.”

“Whew – that’s money big time.” The cheapest place on that strip overlooking the gulf probably weighed in at a million and a half plus.

“Yeah, you’re going out with the step daughter of a rich guy.”

“So it would seem. So why do you live where you live?”

“I can’t stand Ted,” Mia said. “And I like my own space. And sort of like you Joe, I don’t want their handouts. The less time I spend with Terry and Ted, the happier I am even though I live in a dump.”

“That hurts – my room isn’t a dump. I think of it as quaint.”

“I was talking about my apartment – your oars Joe – keep them in the water. Ted doesn’t have a great sense of humour.”

“Sometime, maybe we could talk about the Ted part. Okay?”

“No,” Mia snapped.

“Or not,” I back-pedaled.

When the 686 intersected Gulf Boulevard, I turned left through the Beach and on into Sand Key. As we drove along, I noticed that Mia’s left leg had started to pump. She was worried. On the inland waterway side of Sand Key, there was a strip mall with a liquor store, a couple of

expensive restaurants and boutiques and an exclusive designer clothing store. A Bank of America as well as The Crescendo sat in the central location of the mall. I pulled in between a large BMW and a new Lexus. Mia jumped out of the Jag and headed for the spa. Seconds later, she emerged from Crescendo and headed off to the liquor store.

A few minutes later she was back at the passenger door.

“Lend me some money Joe – please.”

“Sure, how much do you need? And why do you need it?”

“Mom told me Ted is working at home. I should get him something.”

I reached into my pocket and gave her twenty dollars.

“I’ll need more than that. I’ll pay you back.”

I gave her all I had left – two more twenties. “Thanks Joe.” And she ran back to the booze shop.

A few minutes later, she placed a bagged bottle of expensive single malt scotch upright on the floor in front of the passenger’s seat.

“Why the booze?” I asked.

“For Ted.”

“I know, but why? You’re a waitress, and it sounds as if he has more money than a third nation country. Why are you buying him scotch?”

“Er, what do you mean?” Mia said before she turned to head back off to escort her mom from The Crescendo.

“You know what I mean - why a peace offering for your step dad?” May as well prod the abuse angle when the opportunity presents itself I thought.

Mia stopped and caught her lower lip between her teeth. The tension was palpable. “He sees me and gets angry – go figure. Sometimes, if I bring him a bottle of good liquor, he’s easier to take.”

“Was he always like that?” I asked.

Mia shot me a hard eyed glare. "I don't remember - okay? Leave it alone." And she ran off to fetch her Mom.

I remembered what Mia had told me about her mother "letting herself go" after Vickie's murder. The woman coming out of the spa with Mia was very much past that stage of grieving. Jacqueline Bissett in the movie Jaws. An erect five six, perfectly coiffed dyed brunette with a brushed even tan and Mia's blue eyes. There were expensive diamond rings on three of her lean fingers and a diamond tennis bracelet on her left wrist. Her outfit for her day at the spa had been designer white Terry top and bottom and soft strap beige sandals. "Grieving mother? Hard to imagine, but maybe a trophy wife," I thought. We were about to find out.

Eliza Bullock slid breezily onto the front passenger seat knocking over the bagged bottle of scotch. She cursed, picked up the bottle and dropped it onto the back seat. Then she turned to me and with disdain said, "So you're a scotch drinker Joe? Call me Eliza." Her voice was a purr and her perfume was subtle and probably cost more than I made in a week. I didn't like her.

"Actually no - that's Mia's gift for Ted. And your daughter can't get into the car because you are in the way."

"What did you say?"

"Your daughter - she can't get into the car while you are sitting there."

"What's wrong with her?"

"It's a coupe. There are only two front doors - no back ones."

Once mother and daughter had sorted out the seating arrangement, I pulled out of the parking lot and headed north back towards Belleaire Beach. Eliza Bullock nervously reached into her multi-colored leather beach bag and pulled out a slim gold cigarette case. With a delicate gold lighter, she lit her cigarette and turned towards me. She exhaled into my face dramatically. I liked her even less.

"Mia tells me that you're helping her try to get that old cop, Langdon, go back to work on finding out who killed my baby. Is that so?"

I mentally rolled my eyes. Damn, I thought we were going to be discreet. If this was Mia's idea of not saying anything about what we were doing, I might just as well jump in front of a speeding bullet right now. I remembered yesterday's note – The bitch will get you killed. Disappear. By the second, I was regretting this whole adventure more and more.

“Not really Mrs. Bullock. We're just trying to find out if anything more can be done. I think Mia needs closure on this.”

“Can it? And call me Eliza; I don't like Mrs. Bullock.”

“Can it what?” I said. I didn't like Mrs. Bullock much either.

“Can anything more be done to find my baby's killer?” asked with a barely suppressed touch of annoyance.

“To tell you the honest truth Mrs. Bullock, I don't really think so.”

I caught Mia's eye in the rear-view mirror and gave a quick headshake. I knew that she was about to object when I cut her off with what I hoped was a clear enough hint - shut the fuck up.

“Must be a terrible thing to learn that your child has been murdered,” I said more loudly than I needed to. My eyes were starting to water from the second hand smoke Mom continued to blow in my face.

Eliza nodded her head in agreement. “You have no idea.”

“Do you have any idea who might have wanted to harm Vickie?” I asked.

“It's hard to raise kids in a rich place like where we lived in Tampa. There was a lot of peer pressure, and a lot of spoiled brats with too much money. Vic wasn't too smart. She sometimes didn't make good decisions if you know what I mean. She probably just said the wrong thing to some guy trying to get into her pants. Who knows? There's too much sex and violence in films and video games these days. You know what I mean?”

On Mia's direction, I pulled into a triple wide patterned pink paving stone circular driveway that led a hundred feet to a three story slate gray mansion. Twenty-five feet into the driveway, an ornate heavy metal gate blocked my advance. There was a security stand with a

modern keypad mounted at window level beside me. I lowered my window and waited to see if Eliza was going to give me the code or get out and walk around to enter it personally. I did a quick scan of the property with its gulf view. I'm no expert, but I'd guess three and a half million. Lucy, I'm home.

“Well?” Eliza said.

“I need the code to open the gates Mrs. Bullock.”

“Oh, yes. 91605. And it's Eliza.”

I punched in the code. Easy to recall if I needed it again – if they don't change it the minute I'm out of here. The huge gate slowly rolled back on a hard black rubber wheel attached to the corner base of the monster. I drove the rest of the way to park in front of a solid four bay two-story garage with all its cream yellow doors closed. In the middle of the circular section of the drive was a small courtyard garden. The focal point of the professionally landscaped garden oasis was a huge working water fountain.

I got out of the car and walked around the front to open the door for her mom and Mia. As I did, a silver haired man wearing Gucci driver moccasins, a large gold Rolex, no socks, pleated tan chinos and a designer shirt in vertical white and blue stripes appeared. This had to be Ted Bullock. He looked to be about fifty-five, and he oozed arrogance. He was tanned and fit which can take years off appearances. So, in fact, he might have been older. He twirled a pair of dark aviator sunglasses as he stood there on the flag stone patio watching us. He stared at us without any visible display of interest or warmth - a rattlesnake eyeing a mouse. Eliza was definitely a trophy wife. She waved to him as she emerged from my car. No response. Unfortunately for her, I had a feeling that the finish on the trophy was tarnishing. After a few seconds, a supercilious frown crossed his tanned, smooth face. Mia had quite a family. Notwithstanding that she may have been abused by this guy, it was no wonder she chose not to live with these people.

The three of us moved toward Ted. Mia had the bottle of scotch extended towards him. The handsome man stood there frowning silently like a lean petty dictator unhappily surveying

his troops. His eyes were the small hard black marbles of a pig. They focused on me briefly and darted suspiciously to Mia and the booze she held and then back to me again. The supercilious sneer never left his face. He stood there not saying or doing anything. In fact, he seemed to have lost interest in us. His attention had switched to my Jaguar. Seconds passed. No one moved. I felt like I'd fallen into the Twilight Zone where people become Egyptian friezes.

"Maybe he's trying to get his brain and mouth in synch," I thought charitably.

Mia nervously looked over at me. She then looked back to where her stepfather stood immobile. Finally, Ted Bullock took a few small testing steps toward us. He moved to the front edge of the elevated patio.

Eliza said with evident trepidation, "Ted, this is Mia's new friend, Joe. She's brought you some wonderful scotch."

"Where the fuck did you get that car?" Ted Bullock said in a deep bass voice.

The three of us looked at each other uncertainly. Which of us he was talking to?

"It's mine," I replied simply.

"And who the fuck are you?"

"Ted is either deaf or has a short term memory problem," I thought. Keep it simple.

"Mia's friend."

"She looks like a tramp. Ya fucked her yet?"

Mia visibly flinched and almost dropped the scotch. Eliza's mouth dropped open. She gulped air like a sea bass out of water and slammed it shut again.

"Ted!" Mrs. Bullock gasped. "That's not very kind. Mia's our daughter, and Joe is our guest."

This guy was a real piece of work. It was as if he had taken the art of being a total asshole to the level of a pure science. I'd met guys like him before - thankfully not too often and never for too long. It didn't matter that he was rich and successful. As a human being, he was a waste of skin. The beat cops back home used to like to hose down these guys extra hard and cold when completing the standard arrest process. Mia and her Mom stood perfectly still - waiting. They

wanted nothing to do with Ted Bullock in his current foul mood, and they were afraid of what he might do or say next.

There were a few ways I could play this kind of dickhead. None of them worked very well.

“You must be the incredibly stupid prick I’ve heard so much about from Mia. It’s a real pleasure to meet you Sir,” I said with a wide insolent grin not meant to please. The change up sometimes worked best of all for me.

He stood there giving me this really hard glare with his mouth partially open. I think I was supposed to be quaking in my thong sandals. I guess he was trying to figure out if he should beat the crap out of me right then or wait until he had help. Perhaps he was wondering if, alone, he could beat the crap out of me at all - ever.

“Fuck you!” Ted Bullock said succinctly and then turned and walked slowly back into his mansion.

“Smartest move of your pathetic life Ted,” I said quietly.

Mia nervously handed the bottle of scotch to her mother before she got back into the Jag. She left her door open. I turned to Mrs. Bullock.

“Sorry,” I said. “Is he always like that?” knowing the answer even before I asked.

“We’ve had a bad few years,” Eliza replied distractedly. “Some days are worse than others. Ted’s never been an easy man to live with.”

A change-up - “Did Vickie seem excited about going to meet with Mia in Orlando?”

“I guess so.”

“Would she have told many people about her planned visit with her sister up there?” I asked following up quickly. I did not want to give the shaken woman a chance to get her brain into gear – old cop trick.

“Maybe that little weasel Eddy Ralston. He was hanging around her like a bitch in heat for a few weeks before she got killed - and that friend of Terry’s, Sammy something. She used to

talk with him sometimes I think,” she said back distractedly. It was as if she was pondering some insignificant event of the distant past.

“Eddy Ralston is still in the Tampa area - yeah?” I asked. I was on a bit of a roll. How many guys named Sammy would this family know? I’d already met a Sammy when I had my dance with Billy Ray and again at Walgreen’s last night. It had to be the same dickhead.

“I guess. I don’t mix with that crowd much anymore. I haven’t seen him in months.”

“Thanks Mrs. Bullock. Probably best if I get Mia away from here. I’d like to talk with you again sometime if that’s okay with you. Will you be alright going in there with Ted?”

“I guess. He doesn’t bother with me too much. Call me any time you want Joe.”

I went around and got into the driver’s seat while Mia closed her door. “Bye Mom,” was all that she said before stonily fixing her gaze through the front windshield on some distant non-existent object. “Sorry,” she said without looking over as I started the car.

“You don’t have to apologize. You didn’t do anything wrong. We don’t get to choose our parents – or step-parents,” I said quickly looking over at her as I waited for the gate to roll out of the way. “Call it a kind of learning experience. Has your step dad always been such a prick?”

“He’s always been a miserable son of a bitch if that’s what you mean. Didn’t matter what I did; you could never please that bastard. He always wanted more. No wonder fucking Vickie wanted to get away from that asshole.”

Mia’s spontaneous anger melted down. She sat and sobbed. Her crying was the wracking gasping variety as if life was sliding away from having any meaning. I didn’t know how to comfort her. I put my hand on her leg and squeezed gently. She didn’t object. She buried her face in her hands and cried louder. Mrs. Reilly had been right. The bad things had started early in Mia’s life. I looked forward to my next meeting with Ted.

We were back in Clearwater Beach before Mia was able to fully regain her composure. I decided to drive around for a little while. Strangely enough, she didn’t want to talk about what had happened to her. “Maybe sometime, but not now.” We drove in silence for a while longer. There was nothing that I could do.

New Rules Of Engagement

“What do you think we should do now?” Mia asked as she swiped at her eyes.

“Are you sure you want to go on with this? You’re okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I can’t stand Ted? He’s a fuckin pig.”

“They are quite an interesting couple. How long have they lived there?”

“A couple of years - they moved sometime after Vickie was killed. They used to live in a gated estate in Tampa. But my mom actually grew up near where I live now. She wasn’t always rich.”

“What about Ted?”

“No, he wasn’t rich. He grew up somewhere up north, made some money and then moved down here and made a lot more. He regularly brags about being a self-made man. More like self-made asshole...”

“Well, we need to find this guy, Eddie Ralston – the guy who was hanging around Vickie before she was killed. I should also try to meet your brother, Terry, and a few of Vickie’s school friends. Maybe I could put together a short list of people I should talk to and you could try to get me their phone numbers and addresses. I think it might be best if I talked with most of them alone. And let’s not tell any more people about what we’re up to. Okay?”

“I thought it would be alright to tell my Mom,” Mia said defensively.

“You’re probably right,” I said, “but it’s who your Mom tells that might be the problem – like your step dad or a neighbour with something to hide.”

“I should have thought of that. I just believed that she would like to know that I haven’t given up.”

“It’s okay,” I said trying to reassure her without raining on her parade too hard. “It will get around a bit when we talk to these people we need to see, but maybe we can play down to true purpose of our interest. So, for the time being, let’s not say anything to anyone else. Oh yeah, I thought you told me at the outset that your Mom didn’t know that Vickie was going to visit you.”

“That’s what she said to me when I phoned to find out why Vic hadn’t arrived. But it didn’t sound that way when you asked her. Maybe, at the time, I just misunderstood.”

I didn’t think so. I was going to have to find some way to find a few minutes to talk with Langdon alone. I thought I had just found another reason for the cop to get onboard. Discrepancy is always an interesting key to opening the doors of an investigation. Something didn’t gel. Cops love when stuff doesn’t gel.

“Let’s go back to the beach,” I said wanting to get away from thinking about Langdon and the topic of Mia’s dysfunctional family. “You can unpack the rest of those two bags containing all your worldly possessions. Then, if you want, we can go over to Island Estates and do some shopping, and I can get some more money. After that, we can tidy up my room, and maybe do a quick check of the rest of Mrs. Reilly’s house to make sure everything is okay. And then, after we walk the beach, and maybe have swim, I’ll take you to Cooter’s for one of the best steaks of your life. When we come back, maybe we could check to see if that little red bikini still fits you?”

I looked over to where Mia was rolling her eyes

“I get it Joe - yadda yadda yadda,” she said with her “your oars are out of the water” look. “Did Annie ever tell you you’re a bit compulsive, Joe? I mean fuck – you almost told me when I had to go pee.”

“Well, I like to be organized and have a plan,” I replied.

“When this is over, maybe we should get your head examined.”

“Now who is making plans?”

“You are a nut Joe – but you are my nut.”

I just smiled and drove.

After a few moments and maybe to cover the “my nut” comment, Mia asked, “What about Langdon. Do you think we have enough to get him to help?”

“I’ll take care of him. What time do you go to work tomorrow?”

“One to ten.”

“Okay, so we’ll have lunch with him. After lunch, you take your car on to work, and I’ll talk to him for a while. I’ll meet you at IHOP tonight at ten and tell you what I found out. Do you want to hear my new blonde joke? I’ve been saving this one for a special occasion.”

“If it will make you happy,” Mia sighed quietly rolling her eyes again.

“You’re the one with the happy problem right now Sweet Cakes. And I’m just the guy to cheer you up. Anyway, so here’s the joke: A Blonde comes home from shopping all day and discovers that her house is on fire. She calls the local fire department on her cell phone.

“Please state the nature of your emergency,” the operator says.

“My house is on fire!” the blonde replies.

“Okay, where do you live?”

“In a house - silly,” the blonde replies.

“No, I mean how do we get there?” asks the operator in frustration.

“Well, duh! In your big red truck!”

Mia broke up. Another day and night in paradise!

We Put On Our Game Faces

The next morning I slept in until 8:30. I would have slept later but for a sweaty compact female body named Mia jumping on me in bed after her five mile run. It was 9:45 before we were dressed and ready for breakfast that consisted of a piece of stale bread toasted and a chilled glass of fresh orange juice. Mia gathered her IHOP outfit and stuffed it with her purse into her beach bag. The day was incredible - sunny, warm and clear with almost no humidity – heaven. We had only a few hours before we were supposed to meet Langdon for lunch. We found a quiet sunny spot in Mrs. Reilly's small partially fenced yard, and sat down on the two blue and white, canvas lounges.

We slowly pieced together our list of names to check. With phone numbers and addresses found in the telephone listings, we could reasonably expect to find at least some of them. That list was prominently headed by Eddie Ralston, but also included other friends and schoolmates of Vickie's as well as her doctor and minister if we found out that she had been attending church. I asked Mia to find out the name of Vickie's Special Education teacher. Some of the teachers that I'd met during my stint as a detective in Toronto had been very perceptive people. Maybe I would get lucky in Tampa. I had met Ted Bullock, her step-dad, and wanted to meet him again – on my terms. I had yet to meet Terry Bullock. I wasn't ready to deal with him yet. When I did get around to him, I suspected it would be a case of like father like son. I figured that if we got Langdon on board, I could get much of this information from him.

We practiced the approach we would use on Langdon in the hour before Mia had to go to work. We both agreed that he was more likely to comply if Mia did the initial pitch – female wiles and all. I did all I could think of to boost her self-confidence. If he ever saw her in her red bikini, he'd be putty in her hands – that kind of thinking. Besides, I had already a fair notion about the approach and information that I would use after Mia left us to go to work.

Mia's off to work outfit was a pair of cut off faded blue jeans, a black sleeveless T-shirt with half inch white lettering imprinted in the shape of a necklace across the top of it and her pale blue thong flip flops. She tried to appear relaxed. Her hair was loose and her smile was

bright as we sat quietly talking. We sipped our iced orange juice and held hands in the sun – idyllic. Then, her left leg started pumping - nerves.

Suddenly, I opened the fly of my faded jeans and peeked beneath the elastic waistband of my plaid boxers. Mia's leg stopped pumping. She looked shocked. Had I suddenly turned into some kind of maniac flasher?

“What the hell are you doing Joe?” she whispered loudly checking to see that none of Mrs. Reilly's neighbours were watching.

“I just read the message on your T-shirt.”

“So?”

“So, it says that you leave bite marks. I was just checking - false advertisement. There are no bite marks.”

“Joe, honest to God you had me worried. Does it really say that? I never noticed what the words were. I mean you have me worried. Should I change it?”

“Don't worry about it – the message is well blended with the italic letters – it will be fine.”

“Come on then; let's go for a walk on the beach. We can come back for my car later.”

“Doc – did you forget something?”

“Jesus Max – someday you're going to give me a heart attack.” How he can just appear like that is uncanny – and un-nerving.

“Frank is available now. Perhaps I can fill in for your walk with Mia on the beach?”

My stomach lurched. “No I'll call now,” I said. “Mia can...”

“Mia can decide for herself,” Mia declared as she stood up. “You'll look like a dork in those clothes on the beach, but I don't mind if you don't. Let's go Max.”

I believe Max may have actually smiled. I would never have the guts to call Max a dork anywhere anytime.

I took out the little cell phone and called using the preloaded index of numbers.

“Frank... how they hanging?”

We talked for around twenty minutes. For me it was torture. For Frank, time is money. He probably blew off forty or fifty thousand dollars during our call. As I suspected, the house that Annie and I had lived in in the north end of Toronto had been sold. After real-estate and legal fees and different transfer costs, I would get around seven hundred thousand dollars. Max would bring me the papers to sign in a day or so. The insurance people were winding down and the television company Annie worked for were offering a nice compensation package. Financially, I was looking good. And then we got personal.

“Who is this girl you are with these days Doc? What do you know about her?”

“Frank – she’s a waitress whose younger sister was killed. She found out I used to be a cop and she’s asked me to help get closure - that sort of thing.”

“Doc – you’re not a cop. Remember that. And Florida doesn’t like schmucks – even if they are cops. I don’t have much juice in the sunshine state if you get my drift.”

“I got it Frank.”

“Do you have a gun yet Doc?”

“No – I don’t need one,” I replied feeling myself losing it.

Frank’s no dummy – he must have felt my anger building. “Everybody needs a fuckin gun in Florida. Remember that.”

“Was there anything else Frank?”

“No, keep the phone – it’s still good. Tell Max if there is anything you need. Take care Doc. Don’t let the little girl get to you before I’ve done some more checking.”

“Might be too late for that, but thanks for all you have done Frank. I really appreciate. Don’t worry about finding out more about Mia. Hold it – see what you get on her step father, Ted – Ted Bullock - but we’re good here. Take care.”

The phone was dead. He was back to making his multi-millions.

Just at that moment, I heard the distinctive ring of the telephone on the tiny night table beside my bed. It was the head of security at the Sand Key condominium complex where I do part time work. Obviously, Max had re-connected the line during his visit. The condo security

company needed me to cover for a guy who was going to off sick for the next two days. A hundred bucks a day was the carrot – no future employment on Sand Key was the stick. I said I'd report at seven a.m. the next morning. I hung up the phone.

When I went back outside, Max and Mia had returned. Max nodded and told me he would see me in the next day or so. He left as quietly as he had arrived, but not before turning towards Mia and telling her he enjoyed their walk and their talk. He also mentioned that if the opportunity should arise again, he would try not to look like such a dork. Mia just smiled and waved as Frank's main man left. As I mentioned earlier, Max can be quite charming when he sets his mind to it.

I told Mia of my impending wealth – the condo job – not the house sale and insurance settlements. She stifled a laugh and told me that she could make a hundred bucks on a good day in tips alone – particularly if this one sad soul named Doc – some jerkwater groupie from Canada came in to eat. So rain on my parade – “Then it's your treat at Crabby Bill's today,” I said trying unsuccessfully to capture the deep sonorous rumble of Langdon's voice. After she agreed to pay for lunch, we went for our beach walk laughing and interdigitating the whole way. She was very curious about Frank's phone call with me but seemed satisfied with the generalities I fed her. I skipped my flat stones six more skips than Mia's best effort. “That's cause you throw like a girl,” I said as I skipped away from the punch I knew was coming. I was feeling pumped. If Langdon listened to reason, it was going to be a really good day.

We Meet With Langdon Again

We parked Mia's crappy Honda as close to Crabby Bill's as she could get and went looking for the old cop. We found him at the same back table with two beers parked in front of him. He didn't stand to greet us.

"So you decided to show up after all," he rumbled as he picked up the beer he had been working on and took a big pull. "You think you have something to make me get involved in this little mystery game you want to play?"

I thought Langdon was doing a little bit of acting as I sat down. Good cops often have that skill. From what I could see of Langdon's outfit on this day, he would still be made as a cop in a flash. The suit was shabby silver gray over the same button down white shirt or its brother. I wondered briefly what Langdon had thought of the garb worn by the two guys who were supposed to be cops on the old television show – and the newer movie - Miami Vice. He had probably laughed himself silly. Mia smiled warmly at him. She pulled out the chair across the table from where he was just starting on his second beer and sat down. I didn't bother with the smile; I just sat. I was curious about how he was going to choreograph this meeting.

The very efficient waitress, who had served us last time, hurried over and took our orders. Each of us had the same meal as last time. I wondered if the waitress was being so attentive because of the tip that I left two days earlier. She might be surprised today. Mia was paying. I could not help wondering if we would get the same service next time.

"So what have you got?" Langdon asked getting right into it.

As we had agreed earlier, I let Mia take him through our theory about Vickie's body being dropped off by someone coming into the field rather than leaving the field. She explained the significance of that fact perfectly. As she carefully presented our supposition, her leg was shaking crazily under the table. I knew that she was incredibly nervous. A lot was riding on how well she did. Within a few seconds, I could tell that she had Langdon's complete attention. We were correct in guessing that the cops, for whatever reason, had quickly dismissed the notion that the body was dropped on the way in. They had conducted their investigation almost entirely on

the premise that Vickie had been killed in the field and dropped by the killer on the way out. When Mia told Langdon about our visit to her mom and mentioned Sammy, she barely drew any reaction. But when she dropped Eddie Ralston's name, Langdon, who must have been assessing the plausibility of what was being said, suddenly lurched forward and drilled Mia with a force ten glare. The poker game was over. There was enough energy in his face to force her to pause. I knew that she had pushed the old man's magic button.

"What do you two know about Eddie Ralston?" Langdon demanded gruffly.

"Well," Mia said before I cut her off.

"We know a fair bit. Most of it we got from Eliza Bullock. Why?" I asked.

Langdon ignored my question. In fact, for the present, he seemed intent on ignoring me completely. He wasn't going to give up anything on Ralston, but the name had very clearly piqued his interest. I wasn't going to give him anymore until he loosened up.

"Okay," he said reluctantly. "It sounds as if you two have been pretty busy. But you do know that even if your ideas are exactly dead on here, it's still just guess work - and make no mistake, that's all this is, guess work. There is an even greater chance that this whole deal was simply a thrill grab of some dumb little girl by a total fuckin whacked out psycho looking to getting his perverted rocks off." Langdon was about as sensitive as a public toilet seat.

"It opens some other possibilities too, yeah?" I said to give Mia time to re-group. Her leg was pumping again.

"I wondered if you were going to say anything more today," he said switching his attention to me. "I did a bit of checking up on you during the past day or so, Mr. Joseph Holiday aka Doc. The name, Hank Nolan, ring any bells with you Sunshine?"

In fact the name, Hank Nolan, rang quite a few bells – only a few of them were pleasant. He had been an early partner of mine at Metro when I'd started on the force. We had both been young uniformed cops working the tough working class district near Toronto's Don Jail. The area took in the Broadview, Queen and Dundas Streets of east downtown Toronto. I hadn't seen or heard from him since the day I was retired. I gave the standard close-lipped response I always

gave about any cop that I knew on the job - even if it wasn't true. "Yeah, he's a good cop. I partnered with him years ago for a little while."

"Did you know that he's now an inspector with the Metropolitan Toronto Police Services?" He said the name of the force slowly, pronouncing every word carefully as if it had taken him some time to memorize it.

"Nope - I haven't seen the guy in years." I guess Hank realized that he was better suited to administration. "Good for him though, he earned it."

"He tells me that you and him were something close to being local heroes early in his career."

"Yeah - well, hyperbole was always Hank's strong suit. That's probably why he's in admin now." Local heroes - more like outright falsehood than hyperbole.

Mia looked over me. She had regained her composure. Her leg had momentarily stopped beating. "You were a hero Joey?"

"Nah, all the heroes I know about are either dead or in the movies," I said. "So, Langdon are you going to give us the help we need or not?" I wanted to change the topic. "Mia has to get to work soon. I can talk with you about my good old days, but can you give us a clue about where you stand in this thing?"

"Yeah, I'll do what I can. What time do you got to be at work there Missy?"

She had left her little gold-banded watch in the bag with her IHOP outfit. I held my wristwatch out for her to see the time. "Right now," she said as she hurriedly pushed back from her chair and leaned over to give the old cop a kiss on the forehead.

Langdon hadn't expected her move and recoiled away from her. I smiled as he realized what she had been trying to do. He seemed embarrassed.

"Too late - your loss partner," I said with a smile.

"Not if it's true what her T-shirt says," Langdon actually smiled at his own quip. "I can't imagine how I'd explain bite marks to Babe. She's my old lady." Then he broke out into an incredibly goofy laugh which even surprised him. I wondered when he had last laughed like that.

“I’m never wearing this damn shirt again,” Mia muttered. “Men - short for mentally challenged.” She quickly took off in a very cute huff.

We both watched Mia as she made her hasty escape.

“That’s quite an attractive little fireball you got there mister – but damaged goods. You want to take care of her,” Langdon mused.

I thought back to the almost identical description my landlady, Phyllis Reilly, had used to describe Mia.

“Yeah, she is a bit of a wildcat; isn’t she?”

Langdon – My New Best Friend

There was a pause before Langdon switched his attention back to me. “You have anything else you might like to share with me Holiday?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” I replied. “First off though, I’m kind of curious about how you made contact with Nolan. You just picked up the phone, dialed Metro Police Services, and they gave you my life story? I don’t think so. Not in this or any other lifetime.”

“You’re right,” he said with a sly smile. “I phone Toronto given my present non status and Bob’s your uncle – dead air – fer fuckin sure. My ex-partner, Cooper, who is still on the job, phones with all the weight of the Tampa Police Department inter department special query protocol and this guy Hank Nolan phones back within six hours tripping all over himself to be of help.”

“Well, I guess that clears that up. What did your ex-partner say that I was being investigated for when he made his call up north?”

“Don’t know. I didn’t ask him – something pretty good though I’d guess. You can ask him yourself. I’d like to introduce you to him in the next day or so.”

I wasn’t happy – that phone call may have been what set Frank off - but there was nothing I could do about it. I wasn’t going to give Langdon the satisfaction of knowing that he had ticked me off. I still needed his information. I told him about my weird visit with the Doulton/Bullock clan at their Belleaire mansion. He commented that he hadn’t known about their move from Tampa. Then I dropped Eliza Bullock’s story to Mia three years ago about not knowing her daughters were intending to meet, and then how I had snagged her into saying Vickie was excited about going to Orlando to meet Mia. That bit of information piqued the old guy’s interest. He knew the significance of discrepancy. He said he would check his notes again to find out what her Mom had said exactly during the early stage of the investigation. I told him about Eddie Ralston’s connection to Vickie, and how we wanted to get Mia in to talk with him. That request turned his crank again. I thought it might.

“Well, Ralston is in the can for aggravated assault, B & E, as well as a few other drug related charges and will probably be away for another three to four years, unless someone sticks him before that. He used to snitch for me from time to time. Now, he wouldn't give me the time of day – hates my guts. Says I'm the reason he's taking a county vacation. But I guess there's always a chance he might talk to someone like Missy there. You wouldn't stand a chance - but maybe your girlfriend. He might just talk with her,” Langdon said as if he was giving the idea serious consideration. Then, with a slight shrug, he turned his attention back to finishing his meal. “Any ideas about how you want to do this?”

By this, I guessed that he meant how Mia and I were going to move forward from this point with or without his help. I told him quickly about our list that we were going to use to do a follow up. I not so subtly suggested that we would do a much better and quicker job with the help of his investigation notes. I told him that I had yet to meet the stepbrother, Terry, but doing so was slowly creeping up on my list of things to do. I believed that there was definitely something hinky about the entire Doulton - Bullock family dynamic.

Langdon was listening to me talk with a stony indifferent thousand-yard stare that old cops and good poker players develop. McGregor had been the master of it. Finally, as I finished expressing my suspicions about the Bullock pair and why I wanted to look at them closer, he broke into a grin.

“Well, there you go Sunshine. For a few hours, we also had them tagged as prime suspects. We had no idea why they might want to kill the kid except, take it from me, both father and son are total whackos. We were looking for a quick solve. We thought maybe Terry had taken sis for a drive into the park. He wanted to play some kind of kinky hanky panky with the kid, and she resisted. He fucked her anyway and then realized that he was in deep shit. So he took the handiest thing to him, her pantyhose, and Bob's your uncle – she's fuckin dead. Now he needs to get rid of the body.”

“Did you get anything from the mother?”

We tried to check out the sexual abuse angle with Mom. She gave us bupkiss, nada, zero – like we were fuckin out of our minds. And she got real indignant about it too. But that makes sense too. The Tampa place they were living in was big time rich. She’s not going to want to shake that tree. And I don’t want to piss in your cornflakes too bad Bub, but unfortunately, both of those fuckin pricks have ironclad alibis. They were both at the stag given for a neighbour’s kid that night. We verified it talking with about fifteen guys who have nothing to gain by lying for them. They were probably totally in the bag before ten o’clock on the night Vickie disappeared. And here’s something you didn’t get from me. According to the coroner’s report, the kid was killed at about the same time those two guys were about to pass out at that party.”

I had Terry and Ted as possible suspects. Regardless of their supposed airtight alibis Langdon had given me, Ted was still connected. Would he hire out the murder of his own stepdaughter? - pretty damn cold even for that fish.

“You listening to me Sunshine?”

I nodded.

“The second bit of disappointment is this: you want my notes, you take me with them.”

“What the hell does that mean Langdon – you take me? You want me to arm wrestle you for them or something?”

“They must have loved you back home Bubba. No,” he said gruffly like he was talking to an idiot, “it means that I work with you to see that you don’t get in no trouble.”

Now, I was forced to mentally weigh my options. I didn’t have any. The old cop had me in an impossible corner. Background stuff if I worked with him – nothing if I didn’t. There wasn’t much to like about Langdon, although he was starting to grow on me, but maybe he could serve a couple of useful purposes. He had done the first investigation. He knew the city and the people. He could serve as a buffer with the local cops. Obviously, he still had some clout there if he had been able to find out about my past with Metro.

“And if I don’t agree?” I asked hanging the illusion out there that I had a choice.

“I walk, and little Miss I Leave Bite Marks will think you are a total jerk-off for not taking me up on my offer. I bet Missy has quite a little temper when she’s wound up. You know it, and I know it.”

“Okay,” I said still playing coy. I extended my hand across the table to him. We shook once and sat still for a second. “So what’s next?”

“I’m going to pick up a P.I. ticket in the next day or so with the help of a few friends I still have at the department. We’ll say that we have been retained by a family member to review the case.” Langdon said as he reached down to the vacant chair beside him. He picked up a bulky tan coloured envelope. Like Houdini finishing some grand illusion, Langdon withdrew a sheaf of printed-paper. “You go over these. They are the abbreviated typed notes from my notebook that I managed to put together during the last two days. Felt good to be working at something again. I did it on a computer because you would never be able to read the hen scratch in my notebook.”

I picked up the forty to fifty single spaced computer-generated pages and did a fast scan of the first few pages. I didn’t need to read any more than that to know Langdon had been a thorough cop - and maybe a damned good one too. “This is really great Langdon. They’ll be an incredible assistance.”

“Yeah, well there you go.” He tried for modesty, but he knew the notes were good. “And do you think that you might start calling me Stuart or Stu? And as I said, sometime soon, I want to introduce you to my ex-partner, Cooper, who is still on the force. He can probably help us out a little. Unofficially, that is. This is still an open case, you know? Even though no one has done sweet Fanny Adams on it since I retired.”

“Yeah, I’ll call you Stu, and I’d like to meet your partner whenever you can set it up. Maybe you could get around to calling me Joe or Doc. The Sunshine, Bub and Bubba thing is okay, but it’s starting to wear a little thin.”

“Doc – like the dentist gunfighter buddy of Wyatt Earp - I get it – neat.” Langdon chuckled before he continued, “Good, we got a deal Joe. Give me your phone number; it’s not in the book yet – you have mine – and I’ll be in touch when I have something. Go through the notes

and write down your questions and observations. I'll meet you in another two days for lunch, and I'll have my partner, Cooper, with me. His first name is Fred. He's as close as this with Chance Kemp," Langdon said holding up his middle and index finger as if they were joined. "I think you'll get along fine with him. Lunch will be your treat right?"

And with that parting reminder, Langdon was up and out of Crabby Bill's. I picked up the check once again. Mia was pretty good at not being there when bills were presented. My treat - who was she kidding? And who was Chance Kemp and why was the fact that this guy, Fred Cooper, and he were so close such a big deal? And the name Chance itself? Not a very common name and I'd heard it twice in two days. What's that about?

One Step Forward – Two Steps Back

I spent the rest of that afternoon carefully reading through Langdon's notes. There was no doubt left in my mind about his ability as an investigator. He had been absolutely thorough – good instincts and a totally professional job. Included were summaries of all the standard police procedural steps he had followed. He had highlighted the questions that he believed needed to be more completely answered. He had talked to all the people that I had wanted to meet. Somehow, he had wangled from her doctor the exact date Vickie had been given a prescription for birth control pills - that, in and of itself was impressive. Doctors are generally pretty by the book. All of his interviews were concisely abbreviated to highlight anything he believed might be cogent. He had asterisked the things about the case that still bothered him. If he thought something was particularly important or needed additional attention, he had used bold type. As I finished going through his transcribed notes for a third time, I realized that I had made my own three pages of notations around the time line and the connections. All of my questions were underlined in red ink.

I knew that, somehow, we needed to talk with Eddie Ralston. The only interview that Stuart Langdon had done with Ralston had been close to hostile. He had learned nothing from the guy. Maybe that partly explained the angry reaction from the cop when we mentioned Ralston's name at lunch. That was the weakness in his investigation, and he knew it. I agreed with his own assessment that perhaps Mia stood the best chance of getting Eddie to open up honestly. She would have to arrange to visit him in jail.

I wanted to meet the stepbrother, Terry. Stuart Langdon had called the guy a walking hard on with an attitude – sounded just like his dad. I wanted to satisfy myself that there could not be another member of the Bullock family who was as big a prick as Ted.

Aside from the determination as to the exact time and cause of death, some of Langdon's conclusions and those of the forensic people had to be just good guesses because the body had not been found right away and there had been some physical deterioration of the corpse and the scene. The forensic piece regarding evidence of sexual activity sometime in the five to eight

hours before her demise was interesting. Langdon had been correct. No one, in any report that he had been given, had used the word rape. If the sex had been consensual, what did that tell us? I would follow up on that information if I could. There was never any suggestion that Vickie had been killed where she had been found. All parties agreed that she was dead for a short time before she had been dumped there. I needed a clearer definition of "short time". Langdon had said that this was not a fresh puppy, and he'd been right about that too. I didn't want to see the crime scene photos. I'd seen enough of those things to last me a lifetime.

Joe Holiday - Boy Hero

Just after eight that evening, I walked up the beach and ate at IHOP. Mia had to be careful not to spend too much time with me because her boss was “in a mood” and the restaurant was busy for that time of day. She surreptitiously asked about Langdon as she handed me a menu the second I sat down. I quietly assured her that she had been great. She had got him to work with us. I told her that I had spent the afternoon going over his notes.

“When you get off work, we can talk about some of the things we need to do next. I’ve got a quick blonde joke for you,” I said before I ordered. “Do you know how to get a blonde to laugh at a joke on Saturday?”

“You and the blonde jokes,” Mia groaned. “Okay I’ll bite – no I won’t bite. But I am curious. How do you get a blonde to laugh at a joke on Saturday?”

“Tell it to her on Wednesday,” I replied as I noticed the fat manageress giving me the evil eye again. “I’ll meet you out at your car after you get off. Your boss is shooting daggers at me again. I guess we better cool it when you whistle while you work.”

Later that night, after we had had a bite to eat, then showered and cleaned up we crawled into bed. Mia was nude under the cool sheet. She was lying on her stomach and propped up in the crook of my right armpit. As I gently stroked her butt, I told her the short form version of what I had learned from Langdon’s notes. I told her about the agreement Langdon had forced me to make before he gave me his computer pages. I was very careful to avoid any negative references to her family and my stubborn suspicions about their possible involvement. Iron clad alibi aside – I still wasn’t convinced. I told her that our chances of success were greater than before and asked her if she was prepared to visit Eddie Ralston in jail. I told her the logical steps we had to follow from here. She was happy. She kissed my chest and nibbled.

“What was the hero story about you and your partner that Langdon mentioned at lunch?”

“Hardly a hero story,” I replied quietly talking to the top of her head. She kissed me again.

“Come on. Don’t be shy. Tell me Joey.” Her fingers danced lightly down my chest and across my stomach.

“It’s not anything really, but if you’re going to punch me or pinch me, I’ll talk.”

“I may do worse than that Honey boy if you try to hold out on me.”

“Okay,” I sighed resigned to telling the story I’d all but forgotten. “Here goes. Hank Nolan and I were partners in the Don River section of Toronto where the river dumps into Lake Ontario. The Don River kind of snakes its way through Toronto from north to south and by the time it gets close to dumping into Lake Ontario, it has all the charm and attraction of a major league cesspool. That’s all for the geography lesson. Anyway, we spotted this kid who we had been looking for. We knew him well. He had done a number of B & Es in the area, stole money from little old ladies and little kids – not a very nice person really. The dummy was trying get away from us by crossing the river sort of tight rope walking on the lower span of a rusting railway trestle. I pulled the cruiser over, and Hank got out and yelled at the kid. Long story short, the dumb kid gets distracted, loses his balance and falls into this smelly, polluted, brown sludge – the Don River. He can’t swim worth a damn. Hank watches the kid tumble into the river and just freezes. He didn’t or couldn’t figure out what to do. Using no judgment at all – I mean I could have plunged right into the submerged fin of an old Cadillac or impaled myself on a rusted tie rod - I go in after the kid and save his mean narrow ass.

Protocol calls for the use of a reaching assist as the first response. There wasn’t time, and the kid was in big trouble. I mean I could have caught diphtheria or typhoid or honkus of the ponkus swimming in that gunk filled river, but in I go. I’m an idiot. Instead of giving me total crap for risking my life – and saving the Toronto tax payers the cost of supporting this little criminal in prison the rest of his life - like they should have and would have if the media hadn’t got hold of the story - the powers that were at the time gave Hank and me a bravery citation. Some heroes eh?

And the kicker to the story – the kid wanted to sue us for endangering his pathetic life. He then grows up to be a major pain in the ass to the police and the city for years – and get this - a repeat offender pedophile. Go figure eh?”

“You’re still my hero Joe Holiday. I’ll miss spending time with you tomorrow when you’re working,” she murmured softly. “You’ll probably be off to Sand Key by the time I get back from my run.” Mia gently licked and kissed my right nipple. Then, she softly nibbled it. Her body was warm against mine. “I’ll leave you the phone number for my apartment. I have to go back there to get some stuff. And I’ll buy some time for my cell. Call me sometime in the morning okay?” Kiss. Lick. Nibble. “I work two to ten again.” Kiss. Nibble. Light lick. Moving lower. “Come and get me when I get off at ten okay?” Lower and another kiss. Another soft nibble and gentle lick! “And, for my last trick – something very special,” she murmured again – smiling - as she looked up the length of my torso, “and with no bite marks either!”

Hi Ho Hi Ho – It's off to Work I Go

The next morning came way too early for me. I woke up just after six. Mia was not there beside me on the double bed. I wasn't worried. She would be out for her run. I put on my official security guard uniform - the light blue short sleeve shirt with the Gulf Coast Security crests on both shoulders and navy lightweight slacks. To finish the image - New Balance black walking shoes and a crested navy ball cap. I packed my light lunch into a small blue and white Thermos cooler chest. I would pick up my official clipboard and pen from the guy I was supposed to relieve at 7 o'clock. I was ready for another workday on Sand Key, but with Mia in my life now, it felt different, more meaningful. Joe Holiday, breadwinner again – it had a nice feel to it.

Just as I was leave, I spotted a small scrap of paper on the floor. I picked it up. Mia had scribbled the phone number for her apartment in Tampa on it. She must have left it on my small bookcase, and it fell off when she swung the door closed. I folded the note and put it in my pocket. The Jaguar started on the first try, and I was off.

During my mid-morning break, as I sat in the roadside guard shelter watching the twelve monitors and eating a carrot, I tried to phone Mia at her apartment. The line was busy. I tried again about a half an hour later, but no one picked up. I figured that she must have done all of the fridge cleaning and mail sorting that she needed to do, and that she was on her way back to the beach. From there, she would go on to IHOP to do her shift from two to ten. The rest of my day was as boring as it usually is doing that job. The occasional quick walk around the entire property – twenty-five minutes if I'm not distracted - is the only thing that keeps me sane. I never could figure out what I was supposed to be looking for on those patrols - anything suspicious I guess. The only thing I regularly found suspicious was how some of the residents had earned the millions that allowed them to live there. A few of them looked like they wouldn't be able to tie up their shoes. I guess looks can be deceiving.

At the end of my shift, I collected my hundred in cash in a small white envelope - which is to say under the table – from the area security supervisor. I have to be paid this way because I'm a Canadian citizen without a green card. I'm not supposed to be able to work in the U.S. of

A. as I might deprive an American citizen of a job. I guess that says something about my security guard position – no American citizen wanted it. I sat in the Jaguar with the windows down until the air conditioner got up to speed and then started my drive off Sand Key and on home. I realized that my light lunch had been too light. I was hungry. And I wanted to see Mia. Two birds with one stone, I decided to risk the dagger looks of the manager, so I stopped off at IHOP for a bite to eat.

“Nice outfit Tex! - how many?” It was the short chubby waitress named Janille trying to play with my head again.

“Forty two,” I said without batting an eyelid. “The bus is just parking around the back.”

Janille’s eyes shot wide open. She tried to peer around me to spot the bus with its forty-two passengers. “Gotcha,” I said. White humour! “Just get me a place in Mia’s section okay.”

“Mia ain’t here.”

“Yes she is,” I said. I wasn’t going for Janille’s payback. “She’s working until ten I think.”

“She’s a no show, and the boss is raggin on everyone since two this afternoon like somehow it’s our fault.”

I didn’t know what to do. I wondered if Janille was still trying to get even with me for the bus gotcha, but I couldn’t spot Mia. I thanked the chubby little black waitress and went to the parking lot. Mia’s car wasn’t there. I ran back to the Jag and drove home. Neither Mia nor her car was there. I wasn’t panicked, but I was starting to worry. I went inside and tried to phone her Tampa apartment – nothing. No one answered. There were probably plenty of possible explanations for why she had missed work, but the only thing I could think of was that she had fallen and hurt herself at the apartment. I had to get there.

Then I realized that I had set my GPS for that apartment when I had been there with her nights before. I ran back outside and fired up the Jag. After a few more seconds the GPS loaded. I punched in “Recently Found” on the touch screen and hit it. I drove as quickly as possible to her apartment praying the entire time that she was okay – but that warning note left for me on

Mia's car and the encounter with Sammy in the CVS kept playing through my head. Twenty minutes later I pulled over in front of her home. As I was getting out of the jag, I glanced over towards the apartment's grim parking lot. Mia's battered Honda was there. Please God no. I ran to the door of her apartment. It was closed but not locked. This was not good. I knocked loudly. Nothing - but the door swung slowly open.

Crime Scene

My heart was thumping loudly as I gently grabbed the receding doorknob and followed it inward. In my cop days, I would have had my gun drawn. Then, as my eyes adjusted to the dim light of the apartment, my heart almost stopped. Mia was lying motionless on the pale linoleum. Her naked petite body was covered in blood. I scrambled to her, dropped to my knees and checked for life signs. There was an irregular and feathery heartbeat. Her face was battered; her eyes swollen shut. But she was breathing - barely. I checked for any severe bleeding. Any lacerations had coagulated. No arteries severed. You didn't need to be Sherlock Holmes to figure out that some very sick prick had methodically raped and beaten her. A long stemmed broken green wine bottle covered in blood was lying nearby. I had seen a few rape and assault victims like this a number of years ago, but none of them had been this bad. I looked for her phone. Someone had torn it and its jack from the wall. There was dried blood on the handset. There was the sound of a shower running from the bathroom.

For a second, I thought the guy might still be here. I slipped into the kitchen and picked up a sharp carving knife from an empty tomato juice can that held Mia's few kitchen utensils. I listened for another second. I wanted the guy to be there. I wanted him to pay big time for what he had done. The shower was still running. I couldn't hear any movement. I was also acutely aware that Mia was dying right there on the floor. I moved carefully down the short hall, paused at the closed door. No steam was seeping beneath it. There were no sounds other than the water running. I threw open the door. Nothing!

I pulled out the cell phone Max had given me and dialled 911 - "Ambulance and police to - fuck - what's the address? I rushed to the front and read off the apartment number. The woman is in a bad way. She might die. Hurry - and I was back at Mia's side.

It was probably only four or five minutes before I heard sirens approaching. It had seemed like a lifetime. While I waited, I had covered Mia with an almost clean throw rug that I found on her couch. I tried to comfort her. I talked to her. She didn't hear me. She was deeply unconscious. Her swollen face looked oddly collapsed. I knew that at some level she was

fighting for her life. I knelt beside her and called on any god handy to do something – anything. At one level, as I knelt beside her, I was trying to comfort her, but at the old cop level, I was trying to make sense of this crime scene. There was the broken long stemmed wine bottle covered in blood. That spoke for itself. There was a blood soaked kitchen chair set in the middle of the room with adhesive and duct tape balled up off to the sides of it. There was a bloodied strip of a torn bed sheet that may have been used as a blindfold – or a gag. And the shower water was still running. The cops would piece it together. With the exceptions of the front door handle, the bathroom door handle and the kitchen knife, I had not touched anything else. I'd even left the damp red blindfold in place beside Mia's head.

As I saw it, at some time after she had decided to come to the apartment, she phoned someone – a friend and told that person she was going to be there in the morning. The person she had talked with or someone else that person had told, had got to the apartment and waited for Mia to show up. That someone – and I would find out who - had known from the outset what he was going to do. He had probably stripped down to his shorts in the bedroom to keep his clothing clear of his working space. He had ripped a sheet or pillowcase to create a blindfold. When he was finished with her, he showered and got back into his clothing and left. Pretty methodical, pretty cold blooded. When he had taken off, he had left behind my beautiful Mia. He had tortured and raped her. He had left her to die. I think I was still crying when the first uniformed cop came through the door.

The rest of the night was an absolute blur. I was escorted politely, but with no option, to the locked back seat of a police cruiser. The crime scene was secured. People emerged from their homes or stopped their cars to see if they could hone in on someone else's misery. Detectives arrived in their unmarked but easily recognizable cars. I sat there and watched as other emergency response vehicles arrived and then left. I sat in the back of the cruiser and watched helplessly as Mia's battered and covered body was rushed from her apartment to a waiting ambulance. The evident concern on the faces of the medics and the speed of their departure

reinforced my fear. I sat helplessly and tried to figure out why this had happened. Who would want to inflict this amount of pain on anyone?

I remembered the three kids and the drunk on the night Mia and I had stopped here. Maybe, my read of the crime scene had been totally wrong. Maybe, in her rush to get into her apartment, Mia had not closed the front door securely and one or more of those kids, or ones just like them, had followed her into her apartment. But why inflict that amount of torture? I had seen and felt the rage that must have been present.

I wondered if Billy Ray or Sammy had done this. Not likely. Then I remembered what I had read about the murder of Mia's sister. Vickie had been strangled; Mia had been beaten. Still, there had to be a connection. Nothing was making sense to me.

Finally, a young uniformed officer arrived with an older detective. The younger cop opened the back door of the cruiser and asked me to step outside. The detective was an older guy. He looked as if he'd been around since just after the crucifixion of Christ and had slept only four hours during that time. He introduced himself to me as Sergeant Fred Cooper. He thanked me for calling 911. His name rang a bell, but for the life of me at that moment I couldn't immediately place it. He was polite, and he seemed sincere. He asked me how I came to find Mia. I gave him the fast version of why I had come to the apartment. The young uniformed cop nodded and left just after I mentioned working at the condo and my visit to the Clearwater Beach IHOP. Sergeant Cooper listened patiently. He asked for my driver's license as part of an identity check. After commenting that I was a Canadian and making some innocuous comment about how cold the winters were in Canada, Cooper wrote my name, current address and phone number in a little black spiral wire hinged notebook. The uniformed cop returned and gave a quick head nod to Cooper. I guessed that he had confirmed my story and that had taken me off the hook as a suspect. Cops are fanatics for detail. From personal experience, I already knew that.

Cooper had recognized my name when I was released from the back seat of the cruiser, but he had remained silent until the young cop had indicated that I was in the clear. "You're the

ex-cop from Toronto who old Stu Langdon asked me to run a check on with your Metro boys, right?"

I nodded and the penny dropped. Langdon had told me that Cooper was his pal on the force who was as close as this to Chance Kemp – a fact that still didn't mean anything to me. "Yeah."

The guy was a good cop, and I already found myself liking and respecting him.

"You have any idea why anyone would want to do this to your lady friend?" Sergeant Fred Cooper asked already knowing I wouldn't.

"Not really," I replied, "unless it's tied up in some way to the death of her sister, Vickie Doulton. If it is, you will want to talk with your pal, Langdon."

"Stu?" the rumped old detective asked unable to hide the surprise in his voice. "Why would that old fart be involved in this?"

"Langdon knows Mia. He was investigating the murder of her sister, Vickie, in the time before he retired. We – meaning Mia and I - contacted him a few days ago trying to see if he would help us with a few details around Vickie's death. It was after we first talked with him that he contacted you to find out about me." I went a bit vague there because I didn't want to put Langdon in harm's way with his past employer. To divert Cooper's attention, I asked, "What did Langdon tell you he needed the information on me for?"

"He gave me some bullshit story about you dating the daughter of a friend of his. He wanted to know if his friend and the guy's daughter could trust you. He said that he thought you might be a cheap Canadian scam artist down here on a vacation."

I smiled. "Langdon's a piece of work eh?"

Cooper smiled too. "It's true. You Canadians say "eh" a lot. Stu was a hell of a cop in his day. I'll tell you that much."

A few of the uniformed police were leaving in their cruisers - back to handing out traffic tickets and pulling over drunks. The excitement was over. The curious sightseers that always arrive when there are cops or firemen involved were returning to their apartments or cars. The

crime scene in and around Mia's apartment building would be preserved until the investigators had scoured for all possible traces of physical evidence and photographed everything from as many angles as possible. The search for fingerprints had probably already started.

“Would you mind coming back to the station with me, Joe?” Fred Cooper asked courteously as he returned his spiral-writing pad to his inside jacket pocket. “You are not under arrest, and to be honest, you don't even have to talk with me. But maybe you can shed some more light on this. Maybe help us find out who did all he did to the little lady?”

We Visit Mia in the Hospital

“Yeah, I’ll go with you, but I’d feel better not leaving my car in this neighbourhood.”

“Really?” said Cooper in mock surprise. “I can’t understand that – a nice almost new Jag in this place – what are the odds?” I found another cop with a sense of humour – what are those odds?

“Slim and nil - there would be nothing left if this trip takes longer than five minutes.”

“Give me your keys. I’ll get one of our uniform guys to take it into the station parking compound. It will be safe there until you need it.”

Cooper called over one of the remaining uniforms and told him what he wanted. The young guy’s eyes lit up as he took my keys and he turned to look at the Jag. Cooper called him back to say something else like - take care of it

“Instead of going to the station, let’s go directly to the hospital,” said Cooper. He started to direct me back towards the front of the apartment where he had left his car. “We can talk there for a bit, and I can get an update on Miss Doulton’s medical condition. I’ll need pictures of her injuries as well.”

I agreed to Cooper’s proposal by nodding and walking along beside him. His unmarked cop car was a two-year old gray Chevy Impala. It had a whip antenna and a flashing red light that he’d stuck on the front top left hand corner of his roof sometime before he had left the vehicle when he arrived at the crime scene. The irony was not lost on old Fred.

“Neat disguise eh?” he said with a self-mocking chuckle as he pulled the red light in through the driver’s window and started the car. I looked out the side window in time to see Max’s white Escalade crawl by.

The drive to the hospital was fairly quiet. I was still puzzling through the reason anyone would want to hurt Mia so badly. It might have been random, or it might have been the result of stirring up the investigation into Vickie’s death. Or for a long shot – maybe Frank had given Max some direction. I didn’t like that idea. For his part, Cooper wanted to keep the conversation innocuous until he had more information and could make notes at the hospital. He radioed in his

destination and asked for a patch to Chance Kemp. When the desk person finally made the connection – apparently Kemp was at home preparing to go to bed early - he simply asked Kemp to meet him in the emergency ward of the Tampa General Hospital as soon as he could get there.

When we reached the hospital, Cooper pulled around behind the emergency area to a relatively small but quite crowded parking lot. The area was reserved entirely for cop cars and ambulances.

When we entered the emergency area, Cooper directed me past the throng of sick and injured multi coloured and varied ethnic humanity waiting, not so patiently in a few cases, for medical attention. He led me to a small, sparsely furnished, room. A moustachioed young muscular black officer in a sheriff's department uniform was writing slowly on an official form. He looked up, nodded to Fred Cooper, who returned the gesture, ignored me and went back to his meticulous writing.

“Wait here Joe, okay? I'll be back in a few minutes. My age I gotta take a whiz about every hour,” Cooper confided by way of explanation. He turned quickly and left the small room.

“These old guys,” the black cop said with a chuckle as he took a quick look at me, “they drink coffee and eat donuts all day, and then they complain when they always got to find a can. They're detectives. You would think they might figure that mystery out.”

I just smiled weakly. He had a point. But I was worried about Mia. He nodded again and went back to writing his report.

A few minutes later, Cooper came back into the room with another man. This guy was the antithesis of Cooper. He was a sharp dresser and even though his suit clothes had been tailored to minimize the effects, it was readily obvious that he was a body builder. He was quite tanned and looked to be in his early forties, but being extremely fit, seemed much younger. The black cop who had been busy writing his report quickly stood up. The new guy waved him back to his seat and then turned his attention to me. If the reaction of the uniformed sheriff's guy was any indication, this new cop with Cooper was a heavy weight in the chain of command. Cooper and his friend moved over to where I had stood and waited. Cooper's pal extended his hand. We

shook. His grip was firm but not overpowering. His eyes were a gray blue and reflected a strong intellect. This guy was no lightweight in the brains department.

“So you’re the Canadian cop that Stu told Fred about. By the way, I’m Chance – Chance Kemp. It’s good to meet you Joe. I would have preferred the meeting to take place in better circumstances. I am truly sorry.”

“Ex-cop,” I corrected Kemp. “Any word about how she’s doing?” I asked.

“Nothing yet,” Cooper answered. “She’s still unconscious and is likely to be that way for a while according to the ward nurse. The doctors are still working to stabilize her. Her head injuries are pretty serious. According to the emergency nurse I talked to, there was significant damage done to her right frontal and occipital bones. I guess that she’s been hurt real bad other places as well.”

“What’s your take on this?” Kemp asked. “I’ve talked quickly with Fred here, but I just started to get involved. You’ve been a part of it. You used to be a cop. Are we looking at random opportunity or pre-medicated savagery? Someone she knew or a total stranger?”

“I’ve been trying to figure that one out since just after I found her like that,” I confessed.

“And?”

“And that’s the same question we – Mia and I – have been asking about Vickie’s murder - random or premeditated? It’s just too co-incidental not to believe the attack on her was planned.”

“And the problem with that supposition is?” Kemp asked as if I was a rookie detective reviewing an old file.

“The difficulty with that premise is – how did whoever it was who did this know that she was going to be at her apartment this morning? I mean she’s been with me on the beach for the last two nights.”

I paused to look at Kemp and then Cooper before I continued, “The only way I can answer that one is that, at some time, she told someone – besides me - that she would be there during that time. If she did phone or tell someone, I would sure like to know who the hell that

person was. I'd have a few hard questions that they would have to answer for me. Beyond that, there's the extent and the nature of the assault. On a guess, I'd say someone – perhaps even two guys - tortured her through a fairly extended period of time – a couple of hours - maybe. Usually, this kind of torture is used as a tool to get something – information. That again strongly points to it being done by someone who knew her. Then there's the bloody blindfold. Maybe she knew the guy, and he really didn't want to kill her – at least not at first. There also seemed to be overkill there – a lot of emotional rage – also indicating that the person who did this to her, knew her. In my limited experience, a pro or a psycho gets what he wants and moves on.”

Even as I continued talking to Cooper and Kemp, I realized that I had slipped into the detached mode of thinking and talking that I had always used when I had been with McGregor on the Metro force. I wasn't certain that I liked the feeling very much.

“Your scenarios are along the lines of what we were thinking,” Kemp said when I finished with a shrug. “By the way, I've decided that I'll be working with Fred on this one.”

The sheriff's deputy who had just been getting ready to leave the small room did a double take when Chance Kemp said he would be working with the old detective, Cooper. In fact, so did Fred. There was definitely something about Kemp that I needed to find out. Who the hell was he to generate the type of response he did? And how could he decide that he would be working with Cooper? With the Metro force, the brass always decided what criminal investigations a detective is assigned to work. Kemp must have some heavy clout.

“Good,” I said. “If you go on the premise that Mia was not a random attack, what will you do now?”

“Two things,” Kemp replied quickly, “We'll follow regular police procedure making no assumptions whatsoever. That would include checking her phone records for yesterday and today. The area will be canvassed to see if anyone saw or heard anything. How did this guy get to her apartment? If he drove in, did anyone see any strange cars? Young guys are good on that one. Forensics will do its thing. We'll hit our snitches real hard to see if they have heard

anything. I believe that we'll go back and take a closer look at the murder of Vickie Doulton. How far had you and Stu Langdon got into reviewing that case?"

"We really just started. I have a short list of the names of people I want to talk with. Right now, the name Eddie Ralston is big on that list, but apparently, he's in jail. We wanted Mia to talk with him because we thought that she would stand a better chance of getting him to open up than Langdon. I guess it is common knowledge that there is some bad blood in the history between Ralston and Langdon. But I don't guess that will happen now."

"Why is Ralston on your list?" Kemp asked almost surprised. For the petty crook Ralston was represented as, he seemed to be quite a well-known character.

"According to Mrs. Bullock – Mia's mom – Eddie Ralston was hanging around Vickie in the weeks before she was killed. We thought that maybe Vickie had told him about something in her life that led to her being killed. Maybe, she told him something that he doesn't even recognize the significance of. Maybe, we just get a better feel for the girl's state of mind during that time. Talking to mom or step-dad is like talking to blocks of stone. Again though, the random element is still a real possibility."

At that moment, a middle aged nurse who looked like she could be anybody's favourite grandmother put her head in the door, nodded at the phone on the wall and told Kemp that he had a call.

"I'll wait outside- give you some privacy," I said happy to be out of the small room. I wanted to be able to go and check on Mia for myself.

Hospitals have never been a favourite hang-out for me. After I was shot years ago in my gunfight at the mom and pop's convenience store in Toronto, I spent more time in a hospital than anyone should have to in a lifetime. I found the nurse who had just told Kemp about his phone call and asked her about Mia.

"No change, Sir, sorry," she said as she turned away to deal with her next medical emergency.

“Any chance I can stay with her – or at least sit with her?” I asked as I hurried along beside her.

“None,” she replied curtly.

“Excuse me a second longer,” I said to her as I stopped walking beside her which in turn stopped her in her tracks. “Could I ask you one more question?”

She hesitated and glanced at me standing beside her then turned slowly to face me – probably counting to ten and muttering “God give me patience” – and said, “Yes, Sir. What is your third question?”

“Fourth actually,” I said, “if you count the Mia one. Who is this guy Kemp?”

The nurse sighed. Her impatience was evident. An exasperated frown crossed her face. “You are kidding me – right?”

“No,” I replied innocently.

The ward nurse looked at me as if I had just arrived from a different planet. “He is top cop in the entire area. I believe that his actual title is Chief of Detectives. His name and picture are in the papers all the time. When he says jump, his men, and there are a lot of them, ask how high. So if you don’t know him, and you’re walking free in the hall here, why is he talking with you?”

“Good question.”

The woman just waved her hand uncertainly and shook her head as if the world had suddenly become too much for her. She turned away from me abruptly and walked off towards the emergency reception area.

As I stood there momentarily watching her move away from me, I was wondering what I should do next. I took a quick look at my wristwatch. It was approaching two in the morning. I was supposed to be at work on Sand Key in less than five hours. Not that that really mattered now. I turned back towards the small room where I’d left Cooper and Kemp. They were just leaving. They saw me and moved towards me.

“Any more news on your lady friend?” Cooper asked.

“Nothing.” I liked Cooper. He was experience and probably a really good cop, but he hadn’t lost the ability to care about people and their feelings. Most cops his age, like Langdon, have become more callous and cynical.

“So what do you want to do now?” Kemp asked.

“The nurse won’t let me see Mia, and there’s nothing more I can do here. I’ve got to be at work in about five hours,” I replied pragmatically, “so I guess I’d better get back over to the beach and get my stuff together. There is one thing that occurred to me. Mia said she was going to buy some minutes for her cell. I didn’t see the cell when I was there – but then I wasn’t really looking for it. Did your guys come across it because if she used the cell instead of the apartment phone the records for that number aren’t going to help?”

“We’ll check into that. You have a job?” Kemp asked with a wry smile.

“The guy is going to report me to immigration?” I thought angrily - better do a quick tap dance on this one. “Not really – just helping out a friend.”

“Just toying with you,” Kemp said with another weak mocking smile. The guy was authority. “How about I arrange a ride for you back to the station? You can get your car and head back to the beach.”

Sometimes I don’t relate too well to authority. I didn’t know whether I liked this guy or not. Probably not!

“That would be great. Thanks.”

“No problem. I guess Fred and I will meet with you and Stu tomorrow for lunch. If you need anything or you think of anything that might help the investigation, let me know. We should have something on her phone number records tomorrow.” As he said this, he held out his business card that he had slipped from a thin black leather cardholder he kept in his jacket pocket.

“As a matter of fact ...” - and I told him about my run in with Billy Ray and his pal, Sammy, a few evenings earlier at the beach bar. “I think that this guy Sammy is probably the one

Mrs. Bullock was talking about, so I guess someone should have a chat with him sometime soon.”

When I had finished speaking, Kemp nodded to Fred Cooper who had taken his spiral notebook and pencil from his jacket pocket. “I’ll check it out,” the detective said.

Five minutes later, a young uniformed officer, who didn’t say a word to me for the entire drive, drove me back to the Tampa City Police Station impound yard. I thanked the kid cop when we arrived. He nodded once and drove away. I was alone – again.

Inside my room, I noticed the little flashing red light on my often forgotten answering machine. I was wiped out, but maybe the call was from the hospital. I pushed the play button and held my breath. It wasn’t the hospital; it was Stuart Langdon.

“I heard about what happened to your friend Mia. I’ve got a few ideas I want to follow up on. If anything turns up, I’ll call you in the morning. Listen kid, you be careful. If the guy did this to Mia because of the stuff you’ve been kicking up around her sister’s murder, you could be next. Watch out for yourself. Oh yeah, I talked to my wife about picking up my private cop license. She was okay with it when I told her why. You and Missy gave me a fuckin reason to get up in the morning. You know – you remind me of someone I once knew a long time ago – me – when I still gave a flying fuck. I think I told you that before. I’ll talk to you soon Joe.”

I thought about what Langdon had said. He’d want to be careful too. I hope he knew that.

Life Takes a Definite Turn - For the Worse

The next morning I showed up for work at the Sand Key condos just before seven. For some reason, the regional supervisor, a big bald guy, and tough as nails Viet Nam vet, now in his late sixties, was there. Among the security guards, he was most commonly referred to as the Executioner. He was the guy who did all the firing for the company with the service contract for most of the Sand Key condo complexes. I'd only seen him twice since I started working there. On both of those occasions, some guy got fired. I wondered if my time was up. He was talking with the same guard that I had relieved the day before. I walked over towards the two men who saw me coming and turned to greet me.

The supervisor said, "You look like you've been ridden hard and locked out of the barn. What happened to you?"

Could you get fired for looking like a chronic case of fatigue? I hoped not. I gave him the short form answer. "My girlfriend got mugged, and I was at the hospital until two in the morning."

"I didn't even know you had a girl-friend Joe. Is she going to be okay?"

"The docs tell me that it's too early to say. She was still unconscious when I phoned the hospital this morning, but she's in really rough shape."

"I'll try to get someone here to relieve you as early in the afternoon as I can."

"Thanks." The Executioner had a heart after all.

"Meanwhile, we got a report from one of the older residents, Mrs. Pitney on the third floor, that she saw two young guys who didn't belong here checking out the cars in the parking lot real late last night. She said they were young white trash and wanted to know how they had got onto her property. Like she owns the whole fuckin complex, and we're put here by God to look after her special needs. She's made a few unproven reports before, so she has a zero reliability coefficient with me. But I still got to fill out another fucking report anyway. Keep your eyes open okay."

"Sure."

The supervisor and the other guard left together – one to go home to bed – one to go and write out another fucking report. I decided to start with a quick walk around the property. It was too early for most of the occupants to be mobile. And I wouldn't have to worry too much about signing in any of the resident's guests just yet.

I've been told that at one time, because of its size and the number of its occupants, this condo complex always had two security people on duty. One guy controlled the gates and recorded all comings and goings. The other guy walked the property. They switched responsibilities every other hour. Then, someone on the condo board decided that an electronic entry gate with a regularly changing entry code supplied only to the residents, would mean that only one guard would be needed to patrol the property and to respond to the needs of the owners. The resident's guests and any delivery drivers were expected to ring the buzzer at the gate to notify the guard on duty that he was needed at the front gate. And abbra cadabra, only one guard is needed to do the work of two. I guess even multi-millionaires are looking for ways to save a buck these days. Maybe that's how they got to be millionaires. Of course, the problem was that some of the permanent residents gave the secret code to their guests so that they wouldn't have to wait at the gate for a guard to show up if he was on patrol. Nothing is perfect.

Two "white trash" young guys looking for cars, he had said. I wondered if Billy and Sammy were out looking for me last night. Maybe they found out from Mia where I might be. I took out the Blackberry Max had given and called Frank. It was a short phone call.

Sometime after one thirty, and just as my forehead had banged off the top of the small desk in the guard's shack for about the ninety-fourth time, my promised relief showed up. He was a new hire – a nineteen-year old kid named Ralph. He had buckteeth, slicked back blonde hair and a tattoo of a red double heart with twin piercing daggers on his right bicep. He seemed like a nice kid even though he wasn't too bright. I had to take him through the basic procedures three times. When he assured me confidently that he had the protocols down and that he would be okay to get on with the job, I walked tiredly to my Jag and drove home.

On my drive back to Mrs. Reilly's little bungalow, I had planned the rest of my day. I would sleep for a few hours and then go back to the hospital just to be near Mia. I would get some flowers to take to her. But I needed to sleep first. I parked my car in front of the garage, closed the door and locked it. As I entered my small room, I noticed that the light on the answering machine was flashing red. I assumed it was the hospital, so I had called the emergency department at Tampa Bay General. During the morning, I had phoned nine times claiming to be a different relative each time. The nurses were getting used to me. I admired their patience. I had to know that Mia's was still a part of my world. There were no updates - she had been stabilized but remained unconscious and in critical condition. A plastic surgeon had looked at her x-rays and stated that additional surgery was absolutely certain if she survived. There was nothing that I could do.

After I finished with the hospital, I phoned the numbers that Langdon had given me. I wanted to find out if he had had any luck with the leads he was following. I didn't get a pick up on any of his numbers. I left a brief message on his answering machine.

Another Surprise

I looked at the flashing red button again. Probably Frankie Donner, wanting me to chaperone a bunch of Ohio tourist fishermen who thought fishing in a northern lake was like fishing the gulf. But Frankie seldom called before seven or after nine at night. Maybe it was the dumb kid I'd left on condo duty phoning to ask me how to close the gate. But when I pushed the button, it wasn't Frankie or the kid.

"If this is the residence of a Mr. Joe Holiday, please call me. This is Mrs. Ida May Thornberry. I have a very urgent and important message for you."

The voice was somewhat familiar, but for a few seconds I could not recall who Ida May Thornberry was. Then it hit me. She was the pleasant old librarian who had been such a big help piecing together the newspaper reports about the death of Victoria Doulton. I was dead tired. I wanted to go to bed. No, I needed to go to bed. For some reason, even though Ida May had asked me to call, she had not left her phone number. On her message, she had sounded pretty upset. I'm not certain that I ever was given a phone book, and I couldn't find Mrs. Reilly's anywhere. I decided to run around to the library before it closed. "I can grab a bite to eat at Subway on my way back home," I muttered to myself. "Two birds – one stone - then I can sleep."

It took me no more than five minutes to hike it around to the small library. The place was almost empty. The sandalwood aroma had faded. Ida May was the only one there. She was busy returning books to their proper places on the shelves. I walked over and said hi. She very nearly fell off the short stepladder that she was using to reach the top shelves. She looked down at me with a flash of recognition and descended the ladder as quickly as she could. She took a fast glance around the library. There was still no one else there.

"Two rather husky young men with very crude manners and exceptionally bad attitudes were in here looking for you earlier this morning Joe," she whispered to me conspiratorially. The experience had left her quite upset.

My heart did a short flip-flop. The oddball woman resident at the condos, Mrs. Pitney, on Sand Key, had said two young guys were looking at the cars in the parking lot late last night or very early this morning.

“I remembered what you told me before you left the library the last time you were here. I didn’t tell them that you had been here. In fact, I pretended that I had never heard your name. But, I don’t know if they believed me,” Ida May went on. “They were not at all nice. To tell you the truth, Joe, they really frightened me. I felt as if I should call the police, and I almost did.”

“Would you recognize these two guys if I showed you a picture of each of them?” I asked. Billy Ray and his buddy, Sammy probably both had their pictures on file at police headquarters – maybe even at the post office. “I might be able to get photographs of them from a friend of mine who works on the police force.”

“Yes, I believe that I would. In fact, I know that I would. Do you have any idea why they might have been looking for you?”

This was serious, but I couldn’t worry the old woman any more than she was. “I’ve probably won the Publisher’s Clearing House million dollar prize. And they want to make sure I get the money,” I quipped.

Apparently, Mrs. Thornberry didn’t share my sarcastic sense of humour. She looked confused. “They really didn’t look like the kind of men who were going to give you a million dollars.” Then, a sly smile of recognition crossed her wrinkled face. “Oh. Mr. Holiday, you’re pulling my leg.”

“I guess I am,” I said with a little laugh. “In fact, Mrs. Thornberry, I don’t have a clue why men like you describe would be looking for me,” I lied. “It’s probably a big mistake that I’ll get sorted out in the morning.”

“If they come in again, is mum still the word?”

“Mum is definitely still the word, and thank you again Mrs. Thornberry. I really don’t think they will be back to bother you, but if they do drop by, I believe that it would be prudent to consider them to be very dangerous men. Please phone the police immediately.”

I had lost my appetite. I forgot about stopping at Subway. I forgot two birds - one stone. I walked back to my room thinking about how Mia's attack and these two guys looking for me might be connected. Langdon's warning on my answering machine that I might be next took on a whole new meaning. I even re-considered if Mia had been tortured to find out where I lived. Something about it sounded right. Maybe they had been searching for a Jaguar with Ontario license plates. What I did know was that I didn't want to stay at Mrs. Reilly's or put my Jaguar back on the road while it still had the home plates on it - better to error on the side of prudence. My mind was turning to mush. I honestly could not recall a time in the last few years when I had felt so tired.

I went into the Hilton and looked for their ATM machine. I found it just off the main lobby in the hallway leading to the elevators. I took two hundred dollars out of my dwindling checking account and took another two hundred from my VISA credit card. I put that with the forty and change I had left after from the day before. I was building a plan to get whoever had attacked Mia. It seemed that I was already the bait. Why not use that?

I left the Hilton and walked up Mandalay until I found a bad imitation of a Radio Shack called The Electronics Hut. As I was looking at a brand new Nokia pre-pay cellular phone with 165 minutes for \$69.99, a young guy in droopy red shorts and a Shaq basketball shirt over a white T-shirt drifted slowly towards me. He looked a bit like a twelve-year old glue-sniffing kid that I had pulled out of the bag when I was a cop back home.

"You looking for a cheap cell?" this kid hissed quietly out of the side of his mouth. He took a quick glance around the store to see if anyone was watching us. I felt ridiculous, but I took a quick peek around the store as well. He was contagious. We were the only two in the place. That seemed a bit odd. If the guy had been trying any harder to sound like one of those cheap hustlers wearing a stained tan trench coat selling Rolex watches for twenty dollars, I don't know how he would have managed it.

"Yeah, something like that," I replied. I was too tired to fire back - Not really, but I would love a really big fucking elephant gun. "You work here?"

“I own here,” he replied with a silly gapped-toothed grin. “I got a slightly used cell I can let you have for \$29.50 - taxes in.”

“How many minutes?”

“How many you need?”

“Two phones and a couple of hours on both of them,” I replied.

“No sweat. Let me get them for you. And I’ll throw in a free lesson.”

“How hard can it be to use a phone?” I asked.

The kid smiled and disappeared behind the counter.

“Oh yeah, I’ll need one of those small voice activated tape recorders.”

No problem. I got a little Sony that works like a charm. It’s a bit more expensive, but worth every cent. You should hear the clarity and volume on it.”

“How much?”

“We’ll work it out. Don’t worry.”

“Move over Donald Trump.”

I Go Into Hiding

Ten minutes later, when I had figured out how to work my almost new, probably hot, Motorola cell-phone and its twin, my first call was to Langdon. Neither he nor his wife was picking up, so I left another brief message including my new cell number. There was no way that I was going to use the Blackberry for anything other than extreme emergencies requiring Max I needed to do this myself. I then tried to reach Fred Cooper, the detective I'd talked with the night before. I figured that I would be leaving a message on his voice mail. He was still on the job when I left the hospital at two in the morning. The way I figured it, he would probably still be in bed for another few hours before reporting back for duty – or taking a day off. He'd earned it. I was wrong. The old cop answered within seconds of the desk person asking me to hold for a minute. That minute ended up being more like an anxious five.

“Cooper here,” was the brusque reply.

“Joe Holiday, Fred,” I said. There was a long pause as if Alzheimer's had set in. Maybe he had really forgotten who I was. “We met last night,” I prompted.

“Oh yeah, sorry - I'm a bit distracted today and damn tired to boot. What can I do for you?”

I took him through the Ida May Thornberry information and the fact that two guys had been scouting cars where I work at the Sand Key condo complex. I also told him that I hadn't been able to get in touch with Langdon on the phone for the past day. I admitted that I was feeling a little spooked. I told him I was concerned about returning to Mrs. Reilly's house. I was thinking it might be a good idea to go to ground in a cheap motel somewhere because these two clowns might still be somewhere on the beach looking for me.

Dead air - I wasn't certain that he was even listening. Maybe the shifty kid in The Electronic Hut had ripped me off and was laughing his ass off at how stupid I was. Or maybe old Fred had fallen asleep and his head was resting uncomfortably on his desktop. Finally, I gave up waiting for some sign of life.

“Fred, are you still there?” I asked loudly.

“Yeah, sorry again – so aside from the two guys in the bar and the two guys looking for you at the library and the two guys looking at cars on Sand Key, are there any other two guys you might have pissed off?”

“No.”

“Give me your cell number. Do what you said. Find a cheap motel; pay cash. I’ll get back to you as soon as I’ve had a chance to run this by Kemp. I’m supposed to be meeting him in a few minutes. You gotta a gun?”

“No.”

“Okay, so just lay low for a while. Oh yeah, you know those two morons that you ran into at the beach bar - the ones that you described to Kemp and me last night?”

“Yeah - I think that they’re the same guys I’ve just been telling you about.” I resisted the urge to add “Duh”. Being so tired had made me cranky.

“Right, sorry. Well, Kemp put a priority on them. We think that we have the two of them identified. Your Billy Ray’s last name is Boyle. He’s been in and out of trouble from the time he was ten years old. Nothing too big though cause he doesn’t seem to have any ambition. At the present time, he is an enforcer for a local loan sharking group. No heavy violence – guns and such. Right now, he’s on probation. He also used to have a sideline in drug selling – mainly steroids and weed. And once, a few years ago, he got picked up for flashing his weenie at a little girl. He is probably back at selling steroids and weed again, but we haven’t caught him at it yet. He hangs out at an old dump of a Tampa gym called Toby’s. No one has seen in there for a couple of days now. His buddy is a sorry sack of skin named Sammy Tolla. He’s just a local moron who kind of hangs around Billy Ray telling him how great he is. He’s one of Boyle’s training partners at the gym. As far as we know, he is strictly a minor league player with a few B&Es thrown in. Wants to do more, but just can’t cut it. Both of these guys pal around with Terry Bullock, Mia’s stepbrother, so you’ll want to be careful.”

“I’ll take that under advisement Fred.” Goddamn.

“Actually, if they are the guys looking around the beach for you, we will find them sooner cause now we know where to look. We’ve run out of all their regular hangouts with no luck. I should get back to you in about two hours.”

I shut off the cell phone to conserve its battery and went looking for a cheap motel. I was starting to get incredibly light headed from lack of food and sleep – the stress of the last days had done nothing to help. That combination often is a sign of an imminent migraine headache for me. I picked up some junk food on the fly at CVS and moved further north and back from the beach looking for a quiet cheap motel. I had just cut through a small parking lot on Papaya heading to Poinsettia, when a black Dodge Ram truck slid to a stop beside me. Two guys spilled out quickly and ran towards me. Sammy Tolla was one of them. The other guy was impressively large. I didn’t recognize him. I turned to meet their attack.

Sammy took a full running round house swing at my head. I ducked back and kicked him hard in the guts. The other guy had been more cautious. He watched me kick Sammy, then stepped in and delivered a crushing shot to my ribs. I felt my wind gush out. I backed away from him acting more hurt than I was. Sammy was picking himself ready to try again. I knew I was in deep trouble.

As the two guys moved apart, the big No Name smiled and said, “You’re history Mac.”

My ribs hurt too much for me to run. I couldn’t hide. The best I could expect was to take one of these clowns out with me. I made a quick move on Sammy. No Name bit and made his move. I knew he would. I wheeled on him and felt my fist smash into his nose. He cried out and fell back. Then, Sammy was on my back, his thick forearm trying to choke me off. As I tried futilely to fire my elbow into his solar plexus, the last thing I saw were little silver stars flashing before my eyes.

What Happens Now?

“Foodguy, Foodguy, are you okay man?”

“I don’t think so.” I felt as if I was in a tunnel with a train bearing down on me.

“Just lie still. I’ll get some help.”

“No, it’s okay. Just give me a few seconds.”

My eyes slowly opened. Papa Smurf and Larry were kneeling beside me.

“Don’t move too quick Foodguy. Just take your time.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“The guy with the busted nose was goin to the truck and the other guy was choking you. I fuckin whacked him on the head – sure did. Papa started blowin his whistle. They ran for the truck and peeled outta here fast man – sure did. I think some people over there called the cops,” Larry said.

“Thanks guys,” I said as I started to struggle to my feet. I could hear the wail of sirens closing in. “Where did you get the bat?”

“Ling-Ling. She keeps it near the cash register. We was eatin a bowl of rice when we seen those guys jump you.

I looked over to Tan’s Chinese Take Out and waved to the woman Larry had called Ling Ling. “I think we better get that bat back to Ling Ling. You guys don’t need to get roused by the cops, and I know that I don’t need to spend another night talking with them. Take a hike guys. After the cops leave, go back to Ling Ling and finish your meal.”

Papa and Larry helped me start to navigate towards Tans. I gave Ling Ling her bat and thirty bucks and asked her to give the guys a good meal. She told me that I should go to the hospital. The sirens were almost on us. I figured when the cops didn’t find anyone lying in the street, they’d write it off as a false alarm. I thanked her again and took off moving as fast and as normally as I could.

A few minutes later, I found a neat little place called the Maple Leaf Motel and checked in as Fred Flintstone – no baggage, no car - paying cash – no questions asked - no explanations

given. The room was actually clean and tidy with a flat screen thirty two inch RCA colour television and remote in working order, an apartment sized Danby beer fridge, a comfortable double bed, a working phone and dinky three-piece washroom. What more could I ask for? I locked my door, ate some of the junk food and then sprawled out on the bed. Before trying to sleep, I turned on the cell for Cooper's return call. My ribs where No Name had nailed me hurt like hell – but I was alive.

Just before I dropped off the Blackberry vibrated in my pocket.

“Doc – are you okay?” Max asked.

“Bit roughed up,” I replied. “Sorry you couldn't be there - maybe next time.”

“Where are you?”

I told him, but asked him to stay away. Bait doesn't work well when it is obviously armed and dangerous.

Another New Twist

I was swimming laps effortlessly. My flip turns were perfect. There was only one small problem - Jaws, the killer shark of movie fame, was chasing me, and with almost no effort at all he was closing the gap between us. There was an annoying bell ringing loudly somewhere. I woke suddenly and grabbed the phone on the small night table beside the bed – nothing - wrong phone. I found my tiny new cell phone and then the tinier green send button and pushed. It made a connection. It was Cooper. I glanced at my wristwatch. I'd slept for a grand total of four hours. I still felt woozy.

“You okay?” Cooper asked after he had identified himself.

“Yeah, I guess so. I had a run in with Sammy and another guy I'd never seen before, but I'm okay. I was asleep right after I got here. Have you found Billy Ray and his buddies, yet?”

“Yeah, well one of them anyway. We picked Billy Ray up outside the Tampa General Hospital. We think he was waiting for you to visit your friend, Mia. He was probably going call in Sammy and other reinforcements to hit you coming out, but right now he's saying nada. We really don't have a thing to hold him on other than he had a bit of weed on him. Boyle is on probation, so that will keep him on ice for a while. The fact that Billy was hanging around the hospital tells us that he and, whoever is in this with him, knew your lady friend was hurt and had been taken to the General. But that's pretty flimsy for a case of guilty knowledge. Any self-respecting defence lawyer would chew that lame ass argument up in about ten seconds.”

That bit of information confirmed that they were after me, because of what Mia and I had set in motion. They would be after Langdon too. I told Cooper what I was thinking. I also asked him for pictures of Sammy Tolla and Billy Ray Boyle. He agreed to bring whatever he could dig up to lunch the next day. I wanted to run those photos by Ida May Thornberry to get a positive identification. There was no sense assuming that the two guys who took a run at me earlier were the only two players in this game. I recalled training officer McGregor's advice – cross your “t”s and dot your “i”s lad – always verify the details.”

Fred Cooper went on, “Kemp is ahead of you in the worry department for Stu’s safety. Langdon’s wife, Babe, and his daughter, Paula, have been driving all over town looking for the crazy old fool since yesterday. Finally, they contacted Chance and told him that they were worried. They had not been able to find him anywhere. I think that at first they believed that he might have had another heart attack. But if that had happened, he should have shown up at admissions in one of the hospitals in town. There’s no trace of him. Babe told Kemp that he was working on something with you guys. Now with what’s happened to Mia, we’re thinking he could be in real danger. For the time being, we’re not telling his wife that. And in case you’re wondering, the reason they phoned Chance is that he broke in to the detective squad with Langdon as his training officer. He’s been a friend of the family ever since. That’s why he took an interest in your friend’s case. If those guys try anything with Stu, they’ll have to deal with Kemp soon enough.”

My estimation of Cooper as a police detective, which was already in the excellent range, had just gone up another notch. Anticipation and intuition are important parts of the job, and Cooper was proving to have more than his share of those qualities.

“So what do you think I ought to do now?” I asked. I knew what I was going to do, but I wasn’t ready to tell old Fred Cooper about my plans just yet.

“Well, if Billy Ray Boyle and Sammy Tolla were the guys looking for you, you should still be careful. We’re going to hold Boyle for a little while longer, and he may not be as keen to go looking for you after Kemp puts the fear of God into him. But he and Tolla are just muscle and there’s a lot of that to be picked up on the cheap in Tampa – even more since this recession got going. Whoever is running this thing can probably pull another stiff or two out of his hat. At some point, you might want to check on your lady friend. I know that’s what I’d be doing.”

“Thanks Fred,” I lied respectfully. “I think that’s just what I’ll do.”

Fred Cooper actually chuckled. “You shining me on boy? Got to go - don’t get yourself killed. Keep in touch eh?” Dead line.

I had my room at the Maple Leaf Motel for the rest of the night. My ribs were throbbing and my temple was scuffed from Sammy riding me to the road, but I had to act right away. I'd be back as soon as I could get some stuff that I needed out of my space at Mrs. Reilly's. On my way back to the rooming house, I detoured into the parking area at the Hilton Hotel to find a car with out of state license plates. I spotted a parked navy blue Ford Explorer with red, white and blue Ohio plates. The front of the Explorer was pushing in close to the perimeter hedge of the lot. I bent over as if to tie up my shoes and, using the edge of a dime for ten seconds, relieved the vehicle of its front plate. I quickly tucked the stolen license plate into the back of my pants and pulled my shirt down over it.

Before going into my room, I did as thorough a visual check of the area as I could. I spotted a white Escalade parked across and down the street although it seemed empty. Max was out there somewhere watching my back. Good to know. No one else appeared to be taking any special interest in the little house. I slipped into the garage and removed both the Ontario plates from the Jag and threw them into the trunk. I put the fresh Ohio plate on the back of my car - instant disguise. If my two pals decided to try to find me again, at least my car wouldn't give me away.

As I came out of the garage, my heart leapt into my throat.

"Foodguy - is that you?"

"Yeah Papa, you scared the crap out of me. What the hell are you doing here?"

"I was sleepin'."

"Oh, well I wouldn't be calling out my name. These guys might come back looking for me. So if you want to sleep there, I'm fine with it. But you be careful. I just have to get some stuff, and I'm outta here."

"Okay Foodguy - you be careful too."

"I will Papa, I will."

I watched as Papa headed back to the canvas lounge chair, and then went into my room and gathered a change of clothes, some Extra Strength Tylenol, a tensor bandage and the other

stuff that I needed. When I had all the junk lying on my bed, I threw it into my backpack with my cell phones, and digital recorder. I drove the car back to the Maple Leaf Motel and parked. Its new Ohio license was facing the door of my room.

When I settled back on the bed, I phoned the intensive care unit of the hospital to check on Mia. The nurse I talked with reported that there was no change. Mia was still unconscious, still in critical condition and still fighting for her life. I made an attempt to reach Cooper without success. It was getting very late, and there was little else I could do that night, so I drafted my last will and testament on a lined piece of yellow paper that I had ripped off my legal pad. When I was completely satisfied that I had disposed of all my worldly possessions, I went to work with the same legal pad making my plan for finding and destroying the person or persons who had ruined Mia's life and my happiness.

Finally, I fell asleep.

It Just Doesn't Stop

The next morning I was up and ready to go just before sunrise. My ribs still hurt, but I felt rested and ready. I phoned the hospital and waited five minutes before someone would pass along any information about Mia. No change. I was really starting to believe that Mia might not make a recovery. I packed all my stuff in the trunk of the powerful Jaguar and then slowly drove away from the Maple Leaf Hotel. Seven minutes later, I parked outside the IHOP and went inside. The late night shift was just ending. I didn't recognize any of the staff. The hostess was a six foot four black kid who looked more like a NFL middle linebacker than most of them do. I ordered the short stack of Nut and Grain pancakes and a large glass of milk and sat quietly looking around at where I'd first met Mia. As I sat there, pushing pieces of pancake into the syrup, I remembered the way we had started so far apart and how we had moved into an incredibly happy relationship. That relationship was now wrecked. I knew that Mia, even if she managed to recover physically, would never be the same. I knew that because I had been there, done that when those two peckerwoods in the convenience store parking lot years ago had shot me. I finished my pancakes, dropped a tip, paid the bill and left.

The sun was rising behind me as I sat in the public parking lot with the Jag facing the Gulf. I knew what I was going to do. I just wasn't certain how I was going to do it. I phoned Detective Cooper at the number he'd given me the last time that we had talked. There was a pause on the line. The dispatcher asked me to identify myself. I told her my name and waited. I thought that somehow I'd been disconnected, but just as I was about to push the tiny red end button on the cell, I heard a harried voice. It wasn't Cooper; it was Chance Kemp.

"Fred's unavailable right now. I asked that calls from you be directed to me. Where are you? What do you want?"

"I was wondering what had happened with Billy Ray?"

"He's still in custody. We're probably going to have to kick him loose sometime later today - anything else?" His tone, more than anything, told me that he had more important fish to fry. He wanted to get on with his busy day as top cop.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Have you been able to locate Langdon? I was supposed to meet him with you and Cooper today at lunch – remember?”

“Well, Stuart Langdon won’t be able to make that date Joe,” Kemp said quietly. “He was found dead in a Tampa alley late last night – multiple stab wounds.”

I didn’t know what to say. My mind was racing. Cops make enemies as certain as the sun rises every day. But Langdon getting killed had to be related to everything else that was going on around me.

“I’m sorry,” I finally managed to get out. “Do you know who did it or why?”

“We have no one, but we strongly believe that his death is somehow tied in with this Vickie Doulton case your friend stirred up. His wife, Babe, claims that you and Miss Doulton gave him a fresh outlook on his life. I doubt that, but I know for a fact that after his heart attack and mandatory retirement from the force, he went into a deep depression. That’s when he started drinking more heavily. I haven’t been as close with his family as I once was. Babe said he told her you were just like him when he was a young guy. That’s why he threw himself into this. It got him killed.”

Load on the guilt why don’t you Kemp? What a prick, I thought as I listened to the growing silence.

“I don’t know what to say,” I confessed. I felt rotten, but I didn’t know what Kemp thought I could do about it. “If there was any way I could turn this all back to before two days ago, I would. I didn’t want any of this - for Langdon or for Mia.”

“I think you should come here to my office. There are things that you and I need to talk about,” Kemp said.

“Why your office and what would we talk about?”

“There are a number of questions that have to be answered,” he replied adamantly.

And guilt to be added, I thought. This guy is an administration jerk with his own personal agenda. I’m not going to go anywhere near the cop shop. I should just get on with it.

“What time does Billy Ray walk?” I asked wanting to get what I needed before I hung up on the guy.

“I can hold him until sometime after we’ve met. I can even tell you where he’ll be released.”

Tit for tat - no meeting equaled withholding the information about the time and release location of Billy Ray. Billy was the key to what I did next. Kemp was definitely onto me. No surprise there, you don’t get to be top cop by being stupid. But worse than that, I was getting the distinct feeling that he was trying to use me. Well, two can play at that game.

“There’s no way I’m coming into your office, so if you want to meet me, I’ll be a Crabby Bill’s at noon,” I said and hung up. Fuck him.

I spent the rest of the early morning going through my plans again and then again. I tried to anticipate the problems that might develop. About half of those problems ended up with me being dead. I worked hard to devise good working solutions for each of those glitches. I then imagined the problems that those solutions might create. I still ended up dead in a few of the variations. But the planning had improved my odds. I then wondered if the worm on the hook is calculating the angles the same way when it is dropped in the water. I dismissed that whole line of thought as a bad analogy.

By ten o’clock, my brain was numb. The local shops were all open, and the tourists were heading to the beach. I drove away from the parking area to withdraw more money from my bank account and find a good map of the entire area with all the streets identified by name. I then stocked up on water, Diet Pepsi and a variety of food, mainly bread products and chocolate bars, at the local Walgreen’s before walking up to a Surf and Sand shop.

At the large souvenir emporium, I picked up some hats, sunglasses and the type of T-shirts that the tourists love. Almost as an afterthought, I added a navy, red with white numbered New England replica football jersey – another Tom Brady. I could use that stuff in different combinations to alter my appearance if and when I needed to. I knew where I was going to get a

weapon, but that was best left until after meeting with Kemp if the guy even bothered to show up. I didn't really believe that he would. But I had to give him the benefit of the doubt.

By eleven thirty, I had parked the Jag well away from Crabby Bill's restaurant. I found a spot to sit at the marina fishing docks. A lot of regulars, as well as tourists were strolling around watching the early morning charters return with their catch. The hard wooden bench I sat on allowed me a good sight line to the entry of Crabby Bill's. It also provided enough cover that I wouldn't stick out like a matador in a maternity ward. I had to know with absolute certainty that I wasn't walking into some kind of a Kemp engineered set-up. This meeting with the top cop was supposed to be a kind of off the record event. I didn't want any surveillance thrown around me while I sat there eating my fish and chips. Although I needed the Billy Ray information, I was prepared to take a quick hike if I suspected that this was a trap. I was also watching for any sign of Billy Ray, Sammy or No Name because I knew they were out there somewhere looking for me.

At eleven fifty, a new black Lincoln Navigator pulled into a vacant parking space a hundred or so feet away from the side of the restaurant. Chance Kemp climbed out, did a quick two arm above the head stretch and a sneaky visual scan of the area before he slowly walked around to open the front passenger door. I didn't like it already. Top cop was wearing shinning black loafers, tan pressed chinos and a check blue Madras shirt under a lightweight navy blazer – the better to hide his gun. He took another quick look around before opening the big Lincoln's door. When it was open, a slim woman, who looked as if she might be in her early to mid-thirties climbed out. She walked shakily beside Kemp into Crabby Bill's. The woman was dressed in a simple yellow dress and beige sandals. She was holding a gray plastic Wal-Mart bag loosely at her side. I checked around the entire area. There did not appear to be any other new arrivals. No undercover cops. So far, I felt fairly safe, but I sat and waited for a few more minutes anyway.

Just as I was about to head for the restaurant, I spotted Sammy Tolla idling along the dock checking faces. He appeared to be alone. I didn't want to waste any time with Sammy. I stood up slowly and, keeping my face towards the signs and notices along the back edge of the

pier, I shuffled along towards him. I slipped five quarters into a big coke machine and waited for the can to drop. While shaking the icy can in my hand, I slid around the side of the dispenser away from him. I waited for Sammy to reach the right spot. I could see him as he kept coming. When he was almost even with me, I lobbed the pop can into the air. It hit the deck two feet in front of him and exploded in carbonated spray. Sammy saw the can hit. He danced back and away just as I made my run at him. He went cart wheeling over the side of the dock. With a resounding smack he slammed into the backside of a moored fishing boat called Gotcha Two, and slid silently beneath the surface of the dirty water. He didn't even know what had hit him.

"Help," I yelled jogging quickly up the dock. "My buddy just fell into the water." Nobody had been watching closely enough to know I had put him there. I hoped he could swim, but I really didn't care.

The Blackberry chirped and vibrated. "Nice going Doc. Enjoy your lunch. Check under the Jag's driver seat later," Max said still laughing.

Five minutes later, I walked across the restaurant floor to where Kemp sat. His back was against the far corner outside wall gunfighter style. He had an unobstructed view of the entire dining area. He and his companion were studying their small lunch menus. I was only a few feet into the room when the muscular cop stood to greet me with a false, chilly smile – old pals united. We quickly shook hands and then he introduced me to his companion. The young woman had shifted in her chair so that she could look up at me.

"Paula, this is the gentleman your father told you and your mother about, Joe Holiday," stated Chance Kemp in a soft solemn voice. He then looked at me. "Joe, this is Stuart Langdon's only daughter, Paula."

"I'm pleased to meet you," she said softly extending her slim manicured hand for me to take. "My father told Mom a little bit about you." It was quite evident that Paula Langdon was slipping in and out of the shock that accompanies grief. She must have been crying steadily since she had learned of her father's death. Her face was pale and her glassy blue eyes were red rimmed. She held a wad of damp tissue in her left hand.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I replied as gently as I could. This wasn’t quite what I’d expected. I didn’t know where Kemp was going with this or why Paula Langdon was with him. To add to my guilt I guessed.

Kemp directed me with a short head nod to the seat beside Stuart Langdon’s daughter. The top cop then withdrew two four by six photos from his inside jacket pocket.

“You hurt your head Joe?” Kemp said as he nodded to scrapes on my temple. Fred Cooper told me that you needed these.” They were pictures of Billy Ray Boyle and Sammy Tolla.

“I stumbled into a door when I woke up this morning. Thanks for the pictures.” I’d show them to Ida May later. I could hear the sound of an approaching siren.

Chance Kemp went on to explain to me that, in spite of recent sad events, Paula’s grieving mother had asked him to allow her daughter to join us at our lunch today. Mrs. Langdon wanted to be sure that I received something that she was positive her husband would want me to have. Kemp went on to tell me that he had assured Mrs. Langdon that he would have been pleased to pass along anything that she wished to give me. Despite his assurances, the widow Langdon had insisted that her daughter accompany him. Whatever the reason, it must have been very important to the lady. Her daughter was still visibly distraught as she had every right to be. Her father had just been found murdered, and her mother expected her to sit down to lunch with Kemp and the person who might bear some responsibility for her dad’s death. Who wouldn’t be upset?

Someone else who didn’t trust Kemp? I wondered. That’s interesting and possibly instructive. At that moment, a waitress appeared to take our lunch orders. I stuck with fish and chips. Kemp ordered a shrimp salad, and Paula Langdon asked only for Perrier water. There was a prolonged lull after the waitress left. I watched as an ambulance turned off the loop into the marina parking lot.

Finally, Paula spoke as she handed me the Wal-Mart bag beneath the level of the tabletop. "This is from my mother and me. There is a note inside the box." She glanced quickly at Kemp. "Please don't open it until you are alone. We will both pray for your safety."

"Thank you," I said as I accepted the package from her and left it sitting on my lap. It weighed a couple of pounds. I wondered again what could be so important about this package that a grieving widow would send her only daughter to give it to me.

"I'd like to return to my mother now Uncle Chance," Paula said gently as she started to quietly cry once more.

"Of course," Chance Kemp replied as he hastily pushed back from the table and came around it to assist Paula.

I stood up as well to offer assistance. None was needed. Paula Langdon and I briefly shook hands again and went through the nice to meet you routine before Chance Kemp led her away from the table. People in the dining room sensed that there was a problem and paused to stare as the two of them left together. Paula was holding the already soggy tissue to her eyes.

I'd forgotten to get the information on Billy Ray's release. "What about Boyle?" I called out to Kemp.

He quickly turned back towards me, held his open hand to his ear and mouthed the words – Call Me!

I nodded once. I'd think about it. I moved around the table to sit in the space Kemp had just vacated. I set the Wal-Mart bag on the chair beside me praying that it wasn't a bomb. What the hell was that all about? Life sure is a funny thing at times.

The waitress arrived with our orders.

"Someone get sick outside?" I said. "I just saw an ambulance pull in."

"No," she replied with a quick laugh. "Some guy fell off the dock and hit his head on one of the boats. I guess the poor guy almost drowned."

After I finished and paid for the two and a half lunches, I took a leisurely stroll along the docks and back toward the Hilton Hotel. The ambulance had long since left with the unfortunate

Sammy, but now I'd have to look out for his pals as well as the cops. I needed time to find out if I had picked up any additional attention. I tried a number of evasion techniques including two double backs and an in the front and out the back of a souvenir shop. When I was reasonably certain that I was not being followed, I headed for the parking area. Again, following the old dictate that you can never be too careful, I checked to see if it was being watched. And again, I saw nothing suspicious. The Blackberry chirped again.

"You're clear," Max said, "and I'm impressed. Do you need anything?"

"No, I'm good Max. Thanks."

"No problem," he replied. "I've got some stuff to do for Frank. I'll be gone for a while. Stay safe Doc."

I briefly dropped by the Clearwater Beach library and found Ida May cataloguing some new books. I showed her the two four by six photos that Kemp had passed along to me. Ida May looked at the pictures of Billy Ray Boyle and Sammy Tolla carefully. After a moment, she nodded her head and said that, yes, these two jokers who had been looking for me the morning before. I guessed that at some time in the afternoon, Billy Ray had been dispatched to watch the hospital. No Name had replaced him as Sammy's babysitter.

Ida May looked up at me and told me to be very careful if I ever met them because she was now certain that the two of them meant to seriously harm me. I thanked her for all her help and confidently told her again that they would not be bothering her in the future.

"But mums still the word," I said.

Ida May nodded her old head slowly. There was no doubt in my mind that she must have been wondering what I had done to get these two birds so badly pissed off at me. I was wondering that myself.

I returned to my car and then drove slowly over to the Sand Key condo complex. I was starting to put my own plan into operation. The first item on my list was to get a weapon.

Luckily, the guard on duty, a middle aged guy named Henry Crank, was on duty. He was working on a crossword in the security shack at the entrance when I arrived. He opened the gate

for me. We had met a few times before. I told him that I was just there to go for a quick swim in the pool. We're not really allowed to use the pool or tennis courts if it's really busy, and we don't. Generally, we considered it a job perk not to be abused. One of the guards, a month or so ago, had brought in all twenty-two of his relatives for a birthday party on a hot Sunday afternoon. He doesn't work with us anymore. Henry told me that it had been a slow day so far and waved me into the parking lot with a wide smile.

Crank didn't know that I intended to swipe the short barrel Winchester 94 carbine rifle, that is kept locked up in a cupboard right behind where he was standing. I knew it was there; all the guards did. None of us really knew why it was there. For psychological support or to blast a beached shark, I guess. I doubted that the thing had ever been fired. I wasn't even certain that it was loaded. Since I didn't want to have to explain why I was carrying a rifle across an open parking lot, I had parked the car as close to the security shed as I could. I only had to figure out how to get Crank to go on patrol around the property while I was here, and then the carbine was mine.

Just before I got out of the Jag, I decided that it was safe enough to open the wrapped box in the Wal-Mart bag that Paula Langdon had given me. I thought again about checking to see if the damn thing was ticking. Inside the bag, I found a heavily taped, brown paper wrapped parcel the size and shape of a shoebox. In fact, when I peeled away the tape and brown paper, that's exactly what it was – a shoebox that, at one time, had contained a pair of size eleven double E New Balance black walking shoes. Now it contained a computer generated note, a loaded Sig Saur P230 automatic pistol with its safety on, an extra loaded clip and an unopened box of Federal 9 mm bullets. As well, either Babe or Paula had carefully wrapped something else in a soft baby blue hand towel. As I gently unravelled the towel, a MX12 Reflex Suppressor – the Cadillac of silencers - fell into my hand. Impressive, I thought as I started to read the note:

Dear Joe Holiday:

Please accept the contents of this box as a gift from my husband, Stuart and me. I know that he would want you to have them. I know that I want you to have them and to use them wisely.

In his day, my man was quite a marksman and also a knowledgeable gun collector. This one was a favourite. For some reason, Stuart never registered this weapon, so I guess it is virtually untraceable. The silencer simply screws onto the barrel that was threaded to accept it. The bullets were loaded properly into the clips while I was wearing rubber gloves. I hope this information is useful for you.

You probably do not know this about Stuart, but the last three or four days have been the happiest and soberest days he's enjoyed since he had his first heart attack. When he suffered that attack, he was forced to retire from the police force. He owed his newly found happiness to his meeting with you and Mia Doulton. I've been told that the young woman is listed in critical condition. I will pray that she recovers fully.

If you need to contact me for any reason at all, please call the number on the back of this note. Please destroy the letter after you have read it and memorized the phone number. My daughter and I will pray for you and your success.

Babe Langdon

I wasn't fooled for a minute. Babe Langdon wanted retribution. I didn't blame her. Her note and the contents of the package were her invitation for me to wage war against whoever had killed her man. I could do that. I put the note and the rest of the contents back inside the box and then the box back into the bag. I had a weapon. I could decide later if I needed the carbine. The plan was coming together.

Just as I was about to leave the condo parking lot, I remembered Max's invitation to check under my seat. I reached under and pulled out a Glock 27 – just like the old days. It also

was neatly rolled up in a white towel. I checked. It was loaded and good to go. I didn't expect or get a note from Max.

Kemp Blows a Fuse

As I drove out of the condo parking lot, I explained to the Henry that I had forgotten my swimsuit. I told him that I'd probably be back in a little while. He just laughed at my apparent stupidity and waved to me as I pulled out into traffic.

I dialled the number Cooper had given me – the same number that had patched me through to Kemp earlier in the day. Same process, same result. Kemp came on the line.

“So - what was in the bag Paula gave you?” he said right from the get go.

“A gift wrapped box,” I replied. I may as well be almost honest for as long as I could be.

“Yeah,” he said, “and in the box?”

“Don't know yet. I haven't opened it,” I lied. “So where do I find the Billy Ray?”

“Who?”

“Cute, Kemp,” I said. “When and where is he being released?”

“First, tell me what was in the box,” he demanded. His voice was rising in anger and firming in self-assured conviction – top cop bossing an underling.

“I told you; I haven't opened it.” I wasn't his underling. What was he going to do?
Suspend me.

“Bullshit - open it then.”

“Can't - I'm in traffic, and the box is securely taped and wrapped. Why is it important? If Langdon's wife wanted you to know what it was, she'd have told you. I'm betting on a favourite family Bible – or a bomb.”

“Not funny – and not a Bible either.”

“This is getting boring Chance. Are you a man of honor or not? You said that you would tell me when and where Boyle was going to be released if I met with you. We met. By the way, your shrimp salad was delicious. Now, are you going to tell me where and when Billy Ray walks or not?”

“Not until you tell me what was in the box?”

“Chocolates - bye,” I pushed the little red end button smiling and hoping Kemp had a problem with high blood pressure. If he did, I’d probably just blown one of his head gaskets.

Five minutes later my little cell phone rang. I had guessed that it might, so I hadn’t turned the thing off. How did we survive before these tiny buggers came along? I had left the number with Cooper. How hard had it been for Kemp to get it? Only it wasn’t Kemp. It was Fred Cooper. He was succinct. “The guy you’re looking for has been released and is, as we speak, heading for Toby’s Gym.”

Just before he rang off, he gave me the gym’s address and told me that it was in one of the worst run down parts of downtown Tampa.

I pulled over and plugged the address into my GPS. Once it had located the destination and charted the course it displayed the drive time as about thirty minutes. I turned off the cell phone to conserve its battery life. I also did a careful inspection of the Sig. When I had checked its safety and felt its heft, I screwed on the suppressor - very neat – definitely a piece of craftsmanship. I unscrewed the silencer, and stashed the weapon under my seat. I stuffed the suppressor back into its wrapping and put it in the glove compartment. I didn’t need to play with the Glock. It was like an old friend.

Two days ago, I was having a hard time trying to figure out how to get a gun. Today, people are throwing them at me.

As I drove towards Tampa and Toby’s gym, I kept my eye open for a busy strip mall. When I finally spotted one with a large wastebasket in front of a convenience store, I pulled in and threw out the shoe box and bag that the Sig had come in. I tested my memory one more time on the seven digit phone number on the back of Mrs. Langdon’s letter, got it right and tore the letter up and put it into the trash container as well. Before I left the mall, I dashed into the convenience store and bought a package of medium sized zip lock plastic bags. When I was back outside, I took out four of the bags and threw the remaining ones into the garbage bin. As I started up the Jaguar again, I wondered if Cooper’s phone call had been an independent action or was Kemp pulling Cooper’s strings? Probably best to assume the later.

Toby's Gym and More

The GPS found the address Cooper had given me – Toby's Gym. The place was beat up and run down and definitely not somewhere to go with the family. It was pretty obvious that, unless I had a death wish - which I didn't - I couldn't just waltz in there and ask for Billy Ray. I'd have to practice two skills that were not strong on my list of personal attributes - patience and stealth. I found a small metered public parking lot just across the street and down from the dirty front entrance of the gym. I parked there and realized that if there was another entrance to the place, and Billy Ray used it, I was basically screwed. I sat in the Jaguar sipping Diet Pepsi and chewing on a Snicker's bar while quietly watching the front entrance to the decaying building.

Mostly adult men, usually alone but occasionally in pairs, went in and others came out. Most athletes on any kind of training schedule usually like to stick to the same workout times if they can. I watched and waited, but I didn't see either Billy Ray going in or coming out. I wondered about the extent of damage I had inflicted on Sammy. I hoped it was significant. I sat there for forty-five minutes and another chocolate bar. I started to believe that Cooper and or Kemp had used false information to set me up. If either of them had manipulated me like that, I was probably already under some kind of limited discrete surveillance.

Finally, I ran out of patience. I thought about leaving the car and walking by the entrance. Maybe catch a glimpse of them doing bench reps of three hundred and fifty pounds or smoking dope. Just as I was about to follow up on that thought, I spotted an unhappy No Name walking out of the front door.

No Name had a crude bandage on his nose. I guess I tagged him even better than I thought. He was with an angry looking muscle bound guy in his late twenties or early thirties wearing cut-off black sweat pants, a white and blue logo muscle shirt, a white headband and black rubber sandals. The guy was tanned to the shade of a rotten banana and just under six feet tall. He had to weigh at least two hundred and forty pounds, and could probably legitimately brag that he carried less than five percent body fat. In spite of the large diamond stud he wore in his right ear lobe, he was never going to win a beauty contest or an athletic event. I don't think they

have a Mr. Ugly contest. As I was trying to remember if there was a symbolic meaning to which ear a guy used for the earring – bed wetter, left – gay, right – I couldn't recall, the guy rounded menacingly on Busted Nose and started to scream loudly at him. I guessed that I was witnessing a true clear-cut example of “roid rage” – just one of the adverse effects of steroid use. No doubt about it, steroids can produce big muscles with the right workout and diet routine. They can also generate many ugly results – roid rage, like what I was witnessing, acne, extreme thickening of the jaw line, prostate cancer, unwanted hair. I've even heard that your balls can drop off. I don't know whether I believe the last one.

One thing was certain though, this steroid user yelling at No Name had the kind of scrunched up face even his mother would have had trouble loving. He was huge and bald as an egg. His walk was a short pigeon toed jerky affair that made him look even more awkward than he probably really was.

The guy was definitely not a happy camper. He was oblivious to everything other than angrily yipping at the poor dumb Busted Nose who for his part, looked like he was making a half-hearted attempt to placate. In fact, he just looked like I remembered him – stupid. Maybe he was missing the whole point of everything. “Oops” might have been No Name's middle name. The two of them continued on for a hundred yards before turning into a dingy mom and pop restaurant.

I was just starting my car and checking the gym entrance for a final time when Billy Ray emerged. He pivoted quickly and walked away from the gym. He was heading in the opposite direction No Name and his bald, ugly friend had taken. Sometimes I believe there may be a God, and He'd like to help me out from time to time. I carefully slid the Glock out from under the front seat and slipped it into the back waistband of my jeans. I waited until I was fairly certain that Billy wasn't going to turn back and then got out of the Jag and started to follow him. My plan was back on track.

The late afternoon traffic was picking up as I trailed along behind Billy at a safe distance. He seemed pre-occupied. He didn't check once to see if he was being tailed. It was as if he was

on his own turf and no one, other than cops, would dare take him on there. And if it was the cops, he knew his rights. They could just take a hike. Billy Ray was wrong in his assumption. He had been wrong about a number of things he had done in the last few days. And he was going to pay for it. I followed him for about ten minutes before he turned into a side street and walked to the door of an ancient shabby low-rise apartment building. The joint he entered would make Mia's place look almost modern by comparison.

I waited a few minutes for him to get comfortable. I crossed the street and entered the tiny foyer. The interior of the building was painted bilious green and wafted the odour of ammonia disinfectant, boiled cabbage and urine. I did a quick scan of the mail boxes built into the hall's sidewall. I had to make certain this was Billy Ray's place and that he wasn't just visiting a girl friend or buddy. I found the name Boyle written in black magic marker taped above the mail slot for 1C. I moved back outside.

For the next ten or fifteen minutes, I walked around the building mentally noting any escape routes and all means of access. This was not a high tech security layout, but there were too many people in too small a space to do what I needed to do - particularly, if Billy Ray decided to get argumentative. I decided to return to my car. I'd hit Billy later tonight if he left his rat's nest.

After I had retrieved the Jag, I slowly cruised the neighbourhood around Billy Ray's apartment building wondering just how I was going to get to the guy. He was the key to my plan. I needed a quiet location with no witnesses. I definitely didn't want anybody to call the cops. It was getting close to seven in the evening, and I had made a significant dent in my food supply when God pitched in and helped me out again. I was parked up the street when I spotted Billy Ray come out of the front entrance. He looked as if he was about to go out for a jog.

Billy was dressed in navy shorts, baggy white T-shirt bearing some kind of navy blue fitness logo and a pair of expensive Nike running shoes. He looked pretty fit and very big. All that gym time and all those steroids had paid off. He did a few quick stretching actions while looking up and down the street as if he was trying to decide which of many routes he would

follow. Or maybe he was just being careful. His decision made, he set off running at an easy pace. To me, Billy Ray looked like a man with not a care in the world enjoying his leisure time in a healthy productive manner. If I could, I was about to change all of that for him.

I knew with my sore ribs that I wasn't about to go jogging after him. I started the car and prepared to follow along behind him by couple of hundred yards or until he passed out of sight. The decision to stay with my car was a fortunate one. Two and a half blocks down from his apartment, he ducked into what appeared to be a dead end alley. I drove slowly past the narrow opening into which he had disappeared and watched as he bent forward to open a locked garage door. I pulled the Jag into the first available parking space.

I didn't have long to wait. Billy Ray emerged from the laneway driving an early 2000's black Corvette. Who says crime doesn't pay? Apparently Billy Ray was more ambitious than Fred Cooper had reported to me. Billy Ray Boyle was doing not too badly for himself – at least in the wheels and jogging attire departments.

I pulled out at a distance behind him and followed the Corvette as it moved along with the traffic. I had been certain that the guy was going for a jog. Now, I wasn't so sure. What the hell was he up to? After almost twenty-five minutes of tracking the black Corvette, I watched as he signalled to turn off Polk Street onto Ashley. From there he turned into a public parking lot behind the Tampa Museum of Art. The parking lot faces onto the Hillsborough River and is across the street from the Curtis Hixon Park. He parked his Corvette as close to the park entrance as he could. It looked to me as if Billy Ray wanted to commune with nature as he did his run. Or maybe he was about to make a withdrawal from his "weed" stash.

I pulled the Jag over and watched him cross the road and take off into the park. When he was out of sight, I pulled into the same lot and found a parking space that was closer to the museum. It was time to use my new city map. The Curtis Hixon Park appeared to be around eight or ten city blocks large with a number of walking paths cutting through it. There was no point searching the park aimlessly looking for Billy. He had to return to his Corvette at some point in time - the later the better as far as I was concerned. It would be that much darker. Now I

needed to find a good place to ambush him - a location well beyond shouting distance and that meant well inside the boundary of the park itself. With about an hour of twilight remaining, I expected that Billy Ray and I would be having a heart to heart chat very soon. I walked into the park further than I needed to. I wanted to find a safe spot to set up my ambush. After re-checking my map and its various paths and trails I found what I was looking for.

Two of the paths – one coming in from the river side and one from the city side - blended into the main one that led back to Zack Street just about two hundred and fifty yards in. It was the perfect location what I had in mind. About ten feet off the main trail under a tall pine tree, I found enough secondary foliage to obstruct the clear view of anyone casually passing by. As I waited quietly under the big tree, I wondered if the Curtis Hixon Park might also be a sanctuary for snakes and poison spiders.

There were still a few other people in the park. The ones who did notice me said nothing but sped up a bit as they headed away. One attractive sweaty young woman wearing only cheap runners, short shorts and a gray athletic bra looked at me as if I was some dedicated pervert waiting to jump her little Red Riding Hood bones. I smiled at her innocently before I bent over and pretended to be looking for a lost golf ball among the weeds – a hard sell when I didn't have a golf club.

No one passed in the five minutes before I finally spotted Billy Ray's white jogging T-shirt. He was breathing hard and running towards me at a slowing pace. I moved in close to my tree and held the Glock behind the back of my right leg. When he came nearer, I said his name loudly enough for him to hear. "Billy Ray!" He stopped suddenly and looked over at me leaning innocently against the tree. I guess I had startled the poor guy speechless.

"I hear that you've been looking for me," I said in a quieter voice. I already had his undivided attention; I didn't need to advertise my presence.

"How did you find me here?"

"I've actually learned quite a bit about you in the last day or so Billy," I said. "I repeat – why were you looking for me?"

He glanced around to see if there was anyone nearby, anyone watching. The initial surprise was eroding quickly. His confidence was building. He started to move slowly towards me. I straightened up and moved slightly away from the rough surface of the tree. I shook my head slowly.

“I don’t think you want to get any closer,” I said and made another small shaking movement with my head and gun arm. “You might get hurt - by accident.”

“You gotta a gun? Right?” he said focusing on the shoulder of my right arm. “Cause if you don’t, I’m gonna rip your fuckin head off.”

“Let’s not worry about that for the moment Billy. I’m curious about why you and Sammy spent a good part of the past days and nights looking all over Clearwater Beach for me. By the way, how is Sammy?”

The fact that I seemed to have no fear was beginning to play on him. Perhaps he started to wonder if he was about to get whacked. Billy Ray wasn’t stupid, but he was starting to become afraid – maybe for the first time since he was a very little kid.

“Listen, I got nothing against you,” he said stopping in his tracks just a few feet off the path. “That thing in the bar - we was just funning with you and Mia. Mia’s an old pal of mine. Me and Sammy, we don’t got no hard feelins – no hard feelins at all.”

“I am very happy about that Billy. But you see - unfortunately for you and the person who was involved in hurting Mia – I do have hard feelings – real hard. And I’m here to tell you that whoever hurt her – well – he’s soon going to wish that he had never even seen her. Now, again, and for the last time, why were you looking for me?” There was no sweetness left in my voice. The big guy knew I was really pissed.

Billy Ray Boyle had started to back away. I could see the fear growing in his eyes. This wasn’t supposed to happen to him. He was the one who put the fear of God into others. He was certain now that he was about to be messed up. I had taken a step or two towards him.

“I didn’t touch Mia. I promise. We was doin a favour man, that’s all. A guy we know said he’d give us two hundred each if we could find out where you lived. We had told him about what

happened with Mia at the bar on the beach. He knew that we knew what you looked like – that’s why he offered us the job.”

“Stand still Billy - one more move back or forward, and I’ll hurt you real bad.”

“Okay man – don’t shoot me. Please don’t shoot me.”

I ignored him. It was now completely dark – kinda spooky. That is unless you’re holding a Glock 27 and just dying to use it. “What’s the name of this guy who hired you? What does this prince of humanity look like?”

“Terry – Terry Bullock. He’s Mia’s half-brother or brother. I always get it mixed up. They don’t get along too good.”

“That’s okay Billy. You’re doing well; keep it up,” I said trying to ease the fear level a bit. I didn’t want to shoot the guy if I didn’t have too, but I was worried that at any second he would figure he had nothing to lose and make a run at me. “Now, what’s this guy, Terry Bullock look like?”

“Big guy – bald head – he hangs out at the same gym me and Sammy go to.”

“Walks kind of goofy like his balls are all caught up in his under shorts and has a big diamond in one of his ears?” I asked.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s the guy. Balls in his under shorts – I like that.”

“You did great Billy Ray. Thank you. You may go now.”

The big guy looked at me like maybe he hadn’t heard correctly. Then I guess he thought that I meant to shoot him in the back. He started to back slowly away from me his hands held up in a karate defensive position – like maybe he could catch a speeding bullet. Don’t think so. When he thought he was far enough away that I could only miss or he could outrun the speeding slug, he turned and beat it out of there as fast as if the hounds of hell were on his heels. I probably should have put a round into him. I knew he would have put one in me. But there was no way he could have hurt Mia. He had been in Clearwater Beach looking for me during the time that Mia was attacked. No, I had my guy. Mia’s stepbrother, Terry, had moved to the top of my list of things to do. He was next.

I stayed off the pathway into the shelter of the trees as I made my way back to the edge of the park. I watched as Billy Ray ran across the street, got into his Corvette, and roared away. I'd been a little worried that he might think he'd been bluffed out and want to take me on just to find out for certain if I was armed. In that case, I guess I would have had to shoot him, and then things would have got even messier. I seriously doubted that he would tear off and brag about the fact that I had ambushed him. Nonetheless, I knew that it would be prudent to add him to my list of people with a grudge.

I Don't Get Killed

As I pulled away from the parking lot, I seriously considered going over to Tampa General. I really wanted to visit Mia even if she was still unconscious. When I looked at my watch, I realized that visiting hours would be over. They would never let me in. I phoned the floor nurse. She was the same nurse I had talked with a few times before. I affected my best upper crust British accent and pretended to be Mia's cousin, Reginald, visiting from England. I asked for an update on her condition.

The nurse, who during one of my earlier phone calls, had made it quite clear that she had already heard from me more often than she might have wished, barely suppressed a laugh when she reported, "Miss Doulton's condition remains unchanged Sir Reginald, or is this Joe Holiday, yet again? She's the same as when we last talked. You were her German cousin, Fritz, on that occasion. Do you recall? I'll talk with you again later Joe. Of that, I'm almost positive." She was laughing at me as she hung up the phone.

Note to me - my British and German accents need some work.

I wasn't certain about returning to Mrs. Reilly's for the night, but bait doesn't take time to sack out in a nice hotel. I started to head back to Clearwater Beach. I tried to contact Cooper again – or Kemp, but neither was in to take my call. There was nothing more I could do that night.

Before I entered the house, I locked the Jaguar in the garage and checked the entire area to make certain that no one was there to give me a nasty surprise. Papa was sleeping somewhere else I guess. I then placed the wiped down Sig and silencer inside a zip lock bag and then, that zip lock bag reversed inside another. I guessed that four plies of sealed plastic would protect the weapon for as long as I intended to leave it hidden in the water tank of my toilet. I left my Glock in the locked glove box of the Jag.

When I finally settled in my room at the back of the house, I checked the answering machine for messages. There were two. The first message was from Mrs. Reilly. She was checking on me and on her house. She left a number where I could reach her during the day. The

second call was a little bit more official. It was from Kemp telling me he wanted to see me – no he demanded to see me in his office first thing in the morning. The guy was dedicated and stubborn. The visit might be interesting if I bothered to do it. I guess he still had his shirt in a knot over what was in the parcel Paula Langdon had given me at the restaurant? I went to bed.

Another Day – Another Problem

Once more, I was swimming laps alone in a beautiful Olympic size pool. This time, not only was Jaws closing in on me, he had brought some of his more hungry relatives. There were some sharp loud shots. The big hungry shark is armed with a 30/30 Winchester? Can't be!

I sat up in bed and tried to remember where I was. I was helped in that endeavour by an impatient voice just outside my barred exterior door.

“Holiday – Joe Holiday – I know you're in there. Open up! Now – I mean it. I'll break this door down if I have to.”

I checked my watch – seven thirty. “Who are you and what do you want?” I replied as I slid over the edge of my bed looking for any kind of weapon. Smart, I thought to myself. I have a Sig Saur automatic handgun in perfectly good working order hidden in my toilet and my Glock locked in my glove compartment. What was I thinking! And now, some guy is yelling at me to open my door immediately. I quickly slid into the bathroom – then stopped.

“My name is Jansen. I'm a police officer. Deputy Chief Kemp told me to come and pick you up. You are supposed to be meeting him in twenty minutes in his office down town.”

“Oh yeah,” I said as I peeked through the gap in the heavy navy coloured curtains covering the one small window in my room. “I guess I forgot. I'll just pull on some clothes and be right with you.”

“Well Sir, you better get a move on. We're gonna be late as it is,” Officer Jansen said impatiently as he turned and walked back towards his cruiser. I could just see the nose of a police car parked back from the garage.

I pulled on a pair of clean, but badly faded, blue jeans and a fresh navy blue “I Love Clearwater Beach” T-shirt - another of the shirts from the clearance bin at the souvenir shop's “going out of business” sale. I thought about putting on the New Balance trainers I'd worn the night before. “Screw him,” I thought, “maybe I can piss Kemp off a bit wearing my flip-flops to his meeting.”

I went out to join the waiting police officer. Maybe top cop Kemp will have a buffet breakfast waiting for me when I get there. It doesn't hurt to dream. I started to pull open the front passenger door, but Officer Jansen shook his head adamantly and pointed at the back door of his cruiser.

"I won't try to play with the siren if you let me ride in the front," I said like a spoiled five year old.

"Policy - and do up your seat belt. Nice outfit." Jansen, the cop fashion critic, had just defined our relationship. We didn't have one. He was a cop doing what he was told to do to make a living. I was cargo.

Twenty-five minutes later, Jansen led me, with my official "Visitor" tag stuck to my T-shirt, to a closed door on the fourth floor of the police building on Madison. The cop shop was only a very long throw from the park where I'd had my chat with Billy Ray the night before. I guess Fred Cooper must have had some pull in the police department because his name was on the door of this cubbyhole. Jansen knocked on the door and opened it when he heard a reply.

"Joe Holiday Sir," the young officer said.

"Thank you Jansen," Kemp muttered with a quick nod of dismissal before he did a slow head to toe scan on me. "That will be all."

The room was Spartan. There was no window to jump from - just peeling green paint, dark green filing cabinets, a cheap metal-legged desk and three hardwood chairs. It was pretty depressing. Maybe Cooper didn't have as much juice as I thought.

"Thank you for coming in Joe," Kemp said trying to keep it polite. "Detective Sergeant Cooper and I thought we should have a little discussion with you this morning given the events of the last few days. It's a little more formal setting than a Clearwater restaurant."

Kemp looked bright and alert and as dapper as when I had seen him last. There was a light sheen of sweat on his tanned face. He must have recently completed his morning exercise program. Or, maybe that was the effect I had on him. He smiled as though he had just told a very funny joke. I smiled back. We were being friendly. Cooper just looked older and more tired than

when I had seen him only a couple of nights earlier. He was wearing the same pale blue and white striped seersucker wash and wear suit that had been so popular in the eighties. His tie was decorated in recent soup stain and his shirt seemed to be two sizes too large for him. He didn't smile.

"I had a choice about coming in here?" I asked. "I thought this was sort of like one of those royal command performance jobs."

Both of them ignored my remark. Cooper started. "We thought you might like to know that Billy Ray won't be bothering you or anyone else for a little while. He was released because of a clerical mistake. He had violated his probation order when he was picked up carrying dope and hanging around with another criminal. That would be Sammy Tolla. There is also an additional charge pending against Mr. Boyle. Maybe you can help us out here?"

"I'd really like too," I said growing more than a little suspicious about where this conversation was heading. "Go for it. How can I be of assistance?"

"It seems that something or someone frightened or pissed Billy off badly enough that late last night, he went into a bar and tried to buy a handgun. As I said, he's already on probation; he can't have one. Unfortunately for him, the guy he tried to buy the weapon from was a Tampa undercover cop. Our guy sold him the gun and then had him picked up with it in his possession no more than ten minutes later. You wouldn't happen to know anything about the frightening or pissing off part would you?"

"Not a thing," I said with a weak smile. "But it sounds like maybe Billy Ray has had a really bum time lately. I feel for the guy."

There had been no clerical error. Kemp was responsible for putting Billy Ray on the street and in my sights. It would definitely be his style.

"We'll let that pass for the time being," Kemp said in a business like tone. This was top cop swinging into administrative action. "We've arranged for Eddie Ralston to be here this morning. He has to be in court later on to testify in another drug related matter, so we brought him here first. We explained what had happened to Mia Doulton and explained to him how he

might be of assistance – and then, how that assistance might help him. He talked with his lawyer first, and then he agreed to talk to Fred here. Depending on the deal we offer, he has the right to have this session strictly off the record. Fred and Eddie have an old cop and snitch relationship. We thought you might like to sit in.”

With cops, hardly anything is really off the record, and I had never heard of any police department extending to any civilian the kind of invitation I had just received. Our original intent had been for Mia to visit Eddie Ralston in jail as a visitor and appeal to him for help in understanding what Vickie had been like in the weeks before she was murdered. Ralston didn't have to worry about being charged with her murder. I had read in Langdon's notes that Eddie Ralston had already started to serve time for a drug dealing offence the week before Vickie disappeared.

“That would be nice,” I said. I was still suspicious and getting hungrier by the moment.

“Just before we go to the interrogation area,” Kemp said, “are you ready to tell me what was in the package Paula Langdon gave you yesterday?” The guy was truly obsessive.

I understood the deal that he had just put on the table - another tit for tat. If I told him, what was in the package, I got to watch Coop talk with Ralston. If I didn't tell him, he probably would have me shot. Or at least, I certainly wouldn't be talking with Ralston now or any time in the immediate future. Of course, he was ignoring the other option – my favourite. I could lie to him.

I chuckled as if it was inconsequential. “Not much actually. There was a very touching note from Mrs. Langdon about how much her husband had enjoyed his brief time with us – how he'd been sober and directed from the very first meeting he had with us – felt his life had ...”

“I get the idea,” Kemp said cutting me off, once again revealing his short tolerance level. “What was in the package?”

“Just some notes that he'd made about the Vickie Doulton case. He was going to give them to me when we met anyway. There were about fifty pages of single spaced computer

generated notes," I lied. These were the same notes Langdon had given me at our last meeting. I was betting no one had told Kemp about them.

"And you have them still?"

"Oh yeah, not here right now, but in my backpack at home," I said truthfully.

"And there was nothing else?"

"Don't think so," I said. Kemp fumed. Cooper smiled. He knew I was being a jerk to piss Kemp off.

"Let's go," Cooper said. "We'll get back to you Chance after we've met with this moron." The "you" I knew was Kemp: the "moron" was Ralston. I think.

I Meet Eddie

As I followed Cooper down the hall to where we were going to be talking “off the record” with Eddie Ralston, I pulled the sticky “Visitor” tag off my shirt and crumpled it into a tight ball. I had just stuffed it into my pocket when Cooper turned to me and said, “Not many guys would risk irritating Chance like you do. You really have a problem with authority or what is it?”

“I guess I just don’t trust the guy,” I replied simply. “I think he has his own agenda, and he uses people in any way he can to get what he wants.”

“Uh,” acknowledged Cooper - neither agreeing nor disagreeing with my assessment of his superior officer. “Rules of engagement here – I conduct the interview. You don’t say or ask anything unless I say so. Agreed?”

“Uh,” I replied as we entered into a long narrow room that was barely furnished at all. It was painted the pale green color favoured by hospitals and police stations. There was a heavy scarred oak table bolted to the floor and two flimsy chairs on both sides of the table. Comfort had not been a priority in the room’s design. There was a lingering scent of Pine Sol deodorant like maybe someone had tried to create the impression of fresh air or a forest.

Eddie Ralston was sitting in handcuffs and leg irons waiting for our arrival. An escort guard stood at ease behind him. I had expected that Eddie’s lawyer would be present. He wasn’t, and I didn’t ask. As we moved to take our seats across from Ralston, Cooper quickly head bobbed the guard who nodded in response and quietly left the room.

“So Eddie, how are you doing? Is life in a small cell agreeing with you?” Cooper asked. I wondered why Cooper wanted to antagonize the guy right off the bat.

Ralston was a ratty little guy with a surly look on his narrow face. His features seemed to be squashed into a limited space. He was the “extremely anorexic before” to almost any advertisement offering improved strength and health.

“I get by,” Eddie replied squirming a little on the hard chair. “What do you want anyway? Like they told me this was tied to Vic’s death – I get it - but what do you want from me?”

“According to Vickie’s Mom, you were hanging with her for a while before she got killed and you got sent away? Is that true?”

“Close Cooper,” Ralston said with a little sly grin as if he had just side stepped a land mine or some big intellectual semantic trap. “I got sent away, before she got killed. There’s no way I’d hurt Vic anyway. Anyone from then will tell you that – we were buds.”

“Did your bud ever tell you about her older half-sister, Mia?” Cooper was throwing curves trying to get Ralston off balance.

“Yeah, she said that her older sister ran away from home when she was younger. Said she hated her stepfather, Ted. I can’t blame her there. The guy’s rich sure, but he’s a total asshole. Have you met him? Vic hated him too. In the last few months or so before I got sent up, they were talking about getting together. Why do you care about this shit for?”

“How about if I ask the questions Eddie - and you answer them. It works better that way,” Cooper shot back still keeping Ralston guessing.

“No it don’t, cause I’ll just shut the fuck up like my lawyer always tells me to do and you get jack, Jack.” Ralston actually grinned. He was a pretty funny guy. I smiled too.

Cooper pushed back in his chair like maybe he was going to get up and swat the little dork. Instead, he realized that he was in an untenable position. If he was going to get anything from Eddie Ralston today, he was going to have to give something. “Okay Eddie – how about I ask a question and as long as you don’t lie, you get to ask a question back?”

I had seen this tried before in soft interrogations. Sometimes it works.

“Okay,” Ralston said, “I get the first question cause I’ve already answered a couple of yours.”

Cooper just nodded.

“Who’s this guy with you?”

I jumped in before Cooper could answer. “A friend of Mia’s,” I replied. Cooper frowned. This wasn’t playing the game the way he’d laid it out.

The old cop let it slide and came back with another of his questions. “Did Vickie ever tell you why her sister hated her step-father?”

Ralston seemed distracted by me. He answered Cooper, but he was studying me. “Er, yeah, something about not being able to do anything right – and he was always raggin on her. I think he used to smack her around sometimes too. One time when we were doin some weed, she told me once that Ted said he’d kill her if she ever spoke about some things. Why is this guy here?”

I let Cooper decide how he wanted to reply. “Mia Doulton, that’s Vickie’s sister, was badly beaten up a few days ago. She had started looking into Vickie’s murder. We think that may have led to her being almost killed. She was supposed to be here to talk with you, but she’s in a coma in the hospital.” Cooper looked at me. “He’s here acting on her behalf.”

“You a lawyer? You sure don’t look like any fuckin lawyer I ever saw,” Ralston was talking directly to me now. “Love your fuckin T-shirt man.”

“I’m not a lawyer Eddie,” I stated. “What things could Vickie talk about that would make Ted say he’d kill her?” Cooper frowned again before he picked up his line of questioning. He wasn’t happy, but there was a developing rhythm to this Q & A. And it was also being productive.

“Ted’s a fuckin crook. He’s into all kinds of shit – big time. He don’t do nothin that won’t put cash in his pockets. Vic knew about some of that stuff I guess.”

“How did Vickie get along with her step brother?” Cooper asked.

“Hated the prick. Who wouldn’t? I think she was more afraid of him than her old man. The big asshole used to pick on her bad - my turn.”

And so it went for the next forty minutes. Cooper tried to get Eddie to give him more about Ted and Terry. Ralston didn’t want to go there. Fred went over the events of the weeks before Vickie was killed. Finally, he nodded to me to see if there was anything I wanted.

“I’d like to thank you on behalf of Mia and Vickie for talking with us this morning Eddie. You didn’t have to say a word.”

“No problem man. Fuck, I gotta get me a shirt like that.”

“Oh yeah, one last thing – do you think Vickie would have told her mom about going to Orlando to meet Mia?”

Eddie paused on this one. Finally he spoke, “You know what? I think she might - just before she left though so that her old lady wouldn’t have time to try to stop her. But she wouldn’t want her mom to worry about her. Vickie might not have been too bright you know, but she wasn’t real stupid either. She wouldn’t have said anything like, too soon cause she’d be afraid that her dad or brother would stop her from going.”

“Thanks,” I said. “That’s just what someone did.”

Ralston just nodded his head like he had just mentally reviewed his answer and believed that he had been right in his estimation of what Vickie might have done.

Cooper told Eddie that he had been helpful. He and Eddie’s lawyer would talk soon.

Cooper and I pushed back from our chairs and stood up. We were free to go. Eddie Ralston had lost that privilege. He also knew the drill. He sat in his chair and waited. You don’t do much until you are told to when you are doing time. Independent action can be misconstrued and have dire consequences. Cooper nodded to Ralston before he went to the door to get the escort guard.

Cooper and I Have a Heart To Heart

When Eddie Ralston had been led away to catch his ride for his appearance in the Federal Courthouse some blocks away, Cooper turned to me. “You must have been quite a cop when you were a kid in Toronto,” he said and nodded towards a chair. “Sit down for a second?”

I thought he was going to have a shot at me for not following his “marching orders”, but I sat down in the small room again. I could care less. I had learned what I needed to know whether Cooper or Kemp knew the significance of the information or not. “Yeah – what makes you say that?”

“Yeah, you have good instincts,” Cooper said with a faint smile. He surprised me. I didn’t know whether he was being facetious or sincere. The guy was a pretty good cop himself. “You knew just when to ally yourself with Eddie. He opened up more because of that. I thought that went pretty good for this early in the morning.”

“Well, since I seem to have made your day,” I said riding on the back of his good feelings, “what can you tell me about Mia’s step brother?”

“Aside from the fact that he’s a total waste of time and skin, what do you want to know?”

“Whatever you can tell me,” I replied. “I haven’t met the guy yet, but that’s top on my list of things to do.”

“He hangs out with that crew at Toby’s Gym. We’ve busted him a few times – mainly strong-arm and assault stuff in different bars – roid rage I guess. We don’t know where he gets his money. Probably from his old man cause he always seems to have lots. I can pull his sheet if you want. He’s only been put away - maybe twice for any real time. Most often any of the witnesses to his games develop amnesia between their early statements and the trial. It’s a fact of life – we can’t protect everyone. If I were you, I’d be looking to get a gun before I put him at the head of your list of things to do. The guy is dangerous and probably totally fucked in the head too. If you know what I mean?”

“Thanks, and I do know what you mean.” I said as Cooper stood up – our interview was over – like his boss, Chance Kemp, he had bigger fish to fry.

As Cooper started for the door, he turned look at me. He asked me, almost as if it was an afterthought, “Do you have a gun?”

It was the second time he’d asked me that question. The first time – I didn’t. Now, I did, but I wasn’t going to tell him that.

Cooper was a pretty clever cop. It was an old good cop ploy - Lull em into a sense of something like friendship and pop em with the trick question. Mental note to me - be on the lookout around old Fred Cooper. Obviously, Cooper was guessing what Paula Langdon had given to me the day before.

“I’ve been thinking of trying to get one,” I replied getting as much innocence into my voice as I could.

“There’s a good gun shop out on highway nineteen just south of Umberton. Langdon used to shoot there. If you want, I could give the manager a call and get you set up with some range time.”

“Yeah, that would be great. Thanks Coop.”

“No problem. Let’s check in with Chance before you hit the road.”

We did just that. We met Kemp in the large foyer of the police building. Cooper gave a quick rundown on everything Eddie Ralston had told us. I don’t think Kemp was all that impressed or interested. He told Coop that he was on his way to a department head’s meeting with the mayor but keep him in the loop. The crime statistics for the past quarter were going to the media later that day. The mayor didn’t like surprises.

A Change in Mia's Condition

Cooper told me that he would run me back over to the beach, but he had a few things to attend to first. I told him that I was about starved. He gave me succinct directions to a decent and reasonably priced restaurant located close to the cop shop. He told me that he would pick me up there in about twenty minutes to a half an hour. I had just started out the door of the cop shop when Coop called me back.

“I’ve just heard from the hospital. Mia Douulton has regained consciousness.

“Thank you Jesus! Can you get me there instead of to the beach – and sooner rather than later?” I was starting to sound like Max.

“Yeah, I think I can do that. I need to talk with her anyway,” Fred said as he left me briefly to tell the confused duty officer to get in touch with Kemp as soon as possible and tell the top cop where he was and who he was with.

The officer made a quick note and assured Fred that she would get on it. Was it Kemp’s name or Cooper’s request that generated instant response?

Unlike many cops, Cooper was an extremely careful driver. He apparently didn’t know or care about the “all civilians must ride in the rear of the cruiser” policy. He just casually glanced over to the passenger seat and told me to put on my seat belt. No matter how much I urged him, the guy drove at five miles an hour under the speed limit. He started to give me the detailed narrated guided tour of downtown Tampa as we went. I cheerfully could have swatted him. I wanted to be with Mia faster than Superman’s speeding bullet. Instead, I get Driving Miss Daisy.

Cooper parked the aging Crown Vic in the same small lot behind the emergency wing. It was the one that he had parked in when he first brought me to see Mia. We presented ourselves to the head nurse, Victoria Johnson, on the intensive care unit. Mia had been moved to the I.C.U. immediately after her condition had stabilized. She was still considered to be in guarded critical condition, but no one takes up space for too long in an emergency wing at most modern hospitals. Beds are too scarce.

Mia was sleeping the unmoving quiet rest of drug-induced unconsciousness. She looked terrible. The wounds that had been fresh, red and ugly when we had come here the first time had aged yellow and bruised blue, black and purple. Her beautiful blue eyes were hidden beneath the fresh white padded bandages that covered much of her head. I felt my own eyes start to well up. Cooper must have sensed how this was affecting me. He bought me time to regroup by asking the nurse the natural questions about what Mia had said during that short period of time when she had been conscious and why she had been sedated. He gently led Nurse Johnson away from the bedside to give me a moment.

How could anyone do this to another person? I grabbed a Kleenex tissue from an open box on the night table and blew my nose. It really didn't help that much. Fred came back to my side and stood there quietly.

"The doctor wanted her sedated as within minutes of waking she became extremely agitated. He feared that she would do more damage to herself. According to the attending nurse, most of what she said when she was conscious was unintelligible."

I just nodded.

Victoria Johnson arrived back beside us. "Detective Cooper – you have a phone call. You can take it at the nurse's station if you wish."

"Thank you," Cooper said as he turned to follow the nurse.

I walked over and drew a seat up close beside Mia. I gently laid my hand on her arm. I sat there quietly remembering better times. After a few moments, I silently vowed to Mia that I would have revenge for what had happened – no matter what the cost.

Fred Cooper returned to the room a few minutes later. He asked me if I was going to be okay. I just nodded that I would be fine. Okay for me - maybe; for Cooper, almost certainly; for the guy who did this - definitely not - if I had anything to do with it.

"It's really too bad we can't talk with her now. Hopefully, when she's conscious, she will be able to give us the identity of the guy who did this," Fred said to fill the void.

We both stood respectfully at the end of her hospital bed and waited. But nothing happened.

Finally, Cooper spoke again. "That was Chance's assistant on the phone. When we tried to bring in Sammy Tolla and Terry Bullock for a little chat, we couldn't find them. Chance figures they've gone to ground. They may still be out there looking for you."

"That's a happy thought," I mumbled. "You might want to check the area hospitals for Sammy. Rumour on the beach was that he had had a pretty serious accident. Maybe he had a relapse." Max may have chipped in.

"I'll do that," Cooper said as he pulled out his own cell.

Back In the Saddle - Again

“So what do you want to do now?” Cooper asked after he ended his call and another minute or so had passed. “The nurse says that Mia is on heavy duty pain killers and with the sedation, it may be hours before we can talk with her. How about I take you back to your place or that motel you stayed in at the beach? Or, if you want, I could take you to the gun range I told you about. It’s not too far from here.”

“The gun range,” I said.

“The gun range it is then,” Cooper said with an almost palpable sense of relief. I don’t think Fred Cooper liked hospitals all that much more than I did.

The drive out to the gun range was done at the same five miles per hour below the speed limit. I distracted myself by asking Fred about his work through the years on the police force - and his relationship with Chance Kemp. Some cops don’t like to talk about the job and others enjoy telling their old war stories. Fortunately, Fred Cooper was a good talker, and the time driving to the gun range passed quickly.

The shooting range that we went to was actually a huge gun shop at the front with a very large target shooting area hidden in behind it. The operating theory was that a perspective gun purchaser could try a weapon out before actually buying it. Good business. Fred told me that the owner of the shop was a former cop named Dave Kidd who had run into a few personal and professional problems and had taken early retirement from the police force. From what Cooper intimated, I would have guessed that Kidd’s leaving the Tampa Police Department for early retirement had not been entirely his own idea.

In any case, Kidd had bought out this business from the company managing its sale. The company was disposing of it after the original owner- a landed Cuban immigrant named Jesus D’Angelo – the Angel of Death in some circles - had been convicted of selling stolen, as well as permitted arms, illegally. The Feds had closed D’Angelo down three years earlier.

Dave Kidd built the business back up and now extended occasional shooting privileges to his good customers. I was about to join that number. Fred also told me that a couple of small

shooting clubs rented the facility from the shop on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. If I joined one of those clubs, I could shoot here regularly. Of course, Fred was forgetting one thing. I didn't yet legally own a gun. And he didn't know about the two I had illegally.

As we entered the massive gun emporium, various volumes of different calibre popping noises could be heard at irregular intervals from behind the sound proofed rear wall of the sales area. When there was no popping, there was classic rock and roll to keep things moving along. A tall guy in his late thirties sporting a goatee, a ponytail and gold stud earring came over to offer us any assistance he might provide in preparing for the next world war. Fred asked him if the owner, Dave Kidd, was around.

"Mr. Kidd isn't available to the public today Sir. He is working in his office," the tall guy said.

Fred flashed his badge and said, "Who does he think he is – the artist formerly known as Prince? Tell the fat peckerwood that Fred Cooper is here to see him."

The sales guy wasn't happy, but what was he going to do? "No problem," was his answer as he shuffled off in the direction of a small windowless office tucked away in the front corner of the building.

A minute or so later, a middle aged man the shape of a bowling ball and almost as bald emerged from his office and waddled at speed towards us. His thick right hand was extended out ahead of him. Fred responded in kind, and I watched as the Dave Kidd pulled Fred Cooper to him and gave him a crushing bear hug. For his part, Cooper looked embarrassed by the overt display of affection but kept up a good front. When the two men separated, Fred introduced me. Kidd extended his calloused right hand towards mine and pumped it heartily. I felt as if I was holding on to a small ham. I then wondered how anyone with hands so thick could be the best gunsmith in all of Florida, which was how Cooper had described Dave Kidd.

"So you old fart, Kemp's personal assistant, that shit for brains, Barlow, said you might be by," Kidd said with a chuckle and a feinted punch towards Cooper's right shoulder. Fred flinched at the expected impact that never happened, "what can I do for you today – slumming or

real honest to God police business?” He stretched out police to sound like - polleeese – some kind of inside joke!

Fred Cooper laughed trying to cover the reference to Kemp and the implication that he was using this shopping trip to set me up. He then became serious. I believe that he probably wanted to pull out his service weapon and put two bullets in Kidd’s big round smiling face.

“My young friend here may be in need of some protection,” Fred said without elaboration.

“Well, you came to the right place,” stated Dave Kidd as if he was about to sell me the greatest used car ever. I knew that he realized that he had made a gaff in mentioning Kemp’s name. He turned and waddled towards the incredibly long series of illuminated showcases in which his varied assortment of handguns was displayed. “I presume it is a pistol of some sort you’d be looking for - any preferences? What have you shot before?”

I wanted to say - What did Kemp suggest? - But sometimes, you can learn more by playing along.

“The last gun I held was my service weapon – a Glock 27,” I stated.

“Well. That’s a good weapon, but there are better,” Kidd said letting a slight southern drawl invade his tone before he barked out a raucous laugh. I had never found the Glock or any other gun to be that funny. The salesman in Kidd was rising to the surface.

“He’s a Canuck,” Fred said trying to move things along. “He used to be on the job a few years ago in Toronto, Canada.”

“I know where Toronto is Fred,” Kidd rounded on Cooper as if he was deeply wounded that Cooper could think he didn’t know where Toronto was, “I shot a big old moose up there a year or so back.”

He must have meant Canada. I doubted that any self-respecting moose would have been caught dead anywhere within the boundaries of Toronto in the past three or four decades – unless Kidd had potted one at the Metro Zoo. Always that possibility!

Cooper just laughed at his old friend and asked, “How about an older used automatic in good shape?” Perhaps, Cooper had detected my mouth going slack as I bent forward to study the prices displayed on some of the new weapons. I had not bought a gun since I was a kid. I had no idea how much they could cost.

“Yep, I got no problem with that, but I do got a few new wheel guns on sale this month - cheaper than most of the semi-automatics. But all my guns are in good shape, or they don’t get on the shelves,” Kidd said as he turned and waddled further down the display cases. These ones weren’t illuminated. “I got some really good used Beretta’s on sale this month. I want to clear out a couple of models I’ve had in the inventory for a while. I can give you a good deal on one of them if you like em. Beretta had trouble with the slides bustin on some of these models. They got em made in Brazil. That was contrary to the government specs. They got a bad rep, and I got stuck with too many of them. But these slides are the newer ones – and safe. I replaced them myself.”

Kidd scooted around the back of the display case and pulled out three Berettas – all variations on the basic 92 model. He placed them on the heavy glass top of the display case. He then shuffled to another case while Fred and I handled the Berettas. He was back in seconds with two other automatics. One of them, almost predictably, was a Colt Mk IV forty-five calibre handgun. The other was a Sig Saur P 230. I was a little surprised that he didn’t bring along a Glock. Then, I started to wonder if the Sig was the product of the talk Kidd had had earlier with Kemp’s “shit for brains” assistant. Was this a co-incidence or a set-up, or was I just getting paranoid? I’ve never been a huge fan of coincidence.

“Let’s go out back and see how these fit,” Kidd said as he handed me the Colt and Sig. He picked up two of the Berettas, and Cooper grabbed up the last one.

“What about ammo?” I asked.

“Lots out back – both 9 mm and 45 cal - and anything else anyone fires here,” Kidd replied.

The range behind the main shop was actually a mid-size lobby with a few tables and chairs. A Pepsi dispenser and a confection machine – a variety of chips and chocolate bars available at inflated prices - were side by side along the back wall for the thirsty or hungry. There were twenty shooting stations separated by heavy painted plywood partitions. Each station was equipped with a motorized pulley and target mounts that allowed for practice at distances of from five to fifty yards. The pungent odour of cordite was evident despite the large vent fan working in the ceiling. A layer of translucent smoke floated slowly near the heavy suspended ceiling tiles. Two large fan blades moved lazily making only the smallest impact on the quality the breathable air. At the south side of the lobby, there was a heavy painted metal door with crash bar that led to the adjacent outdoor range. Six guys and two women all wearing heavy headphone style protectors were popping away at varying regularity. All of them were also wearing protective tinted shooting goggles.

Kidd stopped at the vacant station farthest away from his paying customers and pulled over a shooter's stand. He placed the guns he was carrying on it. The shooting stand was just a wooden elevated workbench on wheels. As he turned away from us, he told us that he would be right back. He waddled away at speed to get targets and bullets from the "range master" – a goofy looking older guy wearing a black Grateful Dead concert T-shirt and tight faded blue jeans. He was available to help novice shooters and offer advice to those who asked. He would respond to any breach of shooting etiquette. He could also sell boxes of ammunition at a premium price to those who were dry. There was no doubt in my mind that he was also there to push the stock Dave Kidd wanted cleared. Seconds later, the chubby gun shop owner returned to our shooting stand. He was a little out of breath.

For the next half an hour - time that seemed to go by in a flash - the chubby gunsmith offered the pros and cons of each of the weapons we were trying. He then showed me all the firing characteristics of each weapon. Targets were sent up the alley and pulled back periodically. Kidd knew his guns, and he was an excellent marksman. There was a great deal of pulling headphones on and off as instruction followed by demonstration was done by the short

fat guy. It was quickly obvious that Dave Kidd favoured the Colt. It also happened to be the most expensive of the guns on display. For his part, Fred Cooper seemed to be content to just stand and observe as a knowledgeable and excited Kidd got deeper into his subject. At one point he drifted away and returned with a can of Diet Pepsi and a pack of M&Ms.

While all of the semi-automatics – both 9 mm and 45 cal – were slightly different from my old Glock – shooting is shooting. You can do it and get better and then quite good - or you can struggle with it all the time and improve only marginally. Finally, I was permitted to fire up range. I tried each of the five weapons and happily realized that I was still a pretty fair shot. There comes a certain personal satisfaction and exhilaration in doing something, anything, really well. I enjoyed a mild adrenaline rush when Kidd pulled back my first target and complimented me on my center grouping. Praise from the master.

I found that I liked the heft and action of one of the Berettas more than any of the others. There was something about the feel of it, and my accuracy with it, that made this particular weapon feel like a natural extension to my hand. Kidd was still pushing the Colt, and I believe that Cooper was waiting to see if I gravitated toward the Sig.

“So what will it be?” Kidd asked as we gathered up the used casings and targets.

“I really like this Beretta,” I replied holding the weapon that I preferred. “But isn’t there some kind of restriction about ownership. Don’t I have to write a test or go through a police check?”

“Yeah, but we can start that here right now, and if Fred vouches for you, we can waive the waiting period before you return to pick up your Beretta,” Kidd said looking over to Fred who gave a quick head bob. “So how do you want to pay?”

“VISA, I guess,” I said cheerfully knowing that Frank always kept my balance owing at zero. The Berettas were all on sale, but they probably still would have been the cheapest of the guns I’d handled during the last hour or so. The Beretta I liked was the most expensive of the Italian guns - \$675.00. The Sig Saur was available for \$785.00 and the Colt was listed at \$885.00. All of these guns were re-conditioned used weapons. I briefly wondered what Langdon

must have paid new for the upper end Sig that I had stashed in Mrs. Reilly's toilet. I would never afford the price a new gun unless I got really serious about shooting again.

I signed the VISA chit and thanked the gunsmith for his time and instruction. Coop nodded in agreement when Kidd threw in a box of 9 mm ammunition after he placed the gun in a narrow cardboard box and wrapped it in brown paper and then thoroughly sealed that box with heavy-duty plastic tape. It reminded me of the way the Sig had been wrapped by Babe Langdon. Maybe there was a law. Wrapped box and ammo went into a bright yellow plastic bag before we shook hands. Parcel in hand, Fred and I headed back to the not so unmarked police car.

"Nice guy," I commented as I waited for Fred to go around to the driver's side and open up.

"Yeah," Coop nodded as he started the car. "He's had a bit of a train wreck in his life though. His wife is in a nursing home."

"Why's that? He doesn't seem that old."

"He's not, and she's not either. A few years ago, his wife started doin' dippy things – not just on a single occasion but steady. Like, one day she went to make a cup of tea. Filled the electric kettle and walked away - burned the house to the ground. The insurance guys say that it's not their problem. They won't pay up."

"I thought electric kettles were supposed to go off after they come to a boil," I said not certain my information was accurate. I was starting to bristle at the insurance company's callous treatment of a nice guy.

"Not if you turn the stove on under them," Cooper said with a wry smile. He glanced quickly in my direction. "Alzheimer's - she's only forty-eight years old too. Sometimes, life's a bitch eh?"

"Let's get something to eat," Cooper said as he pulled off the road into a strip mall. "Leave the gun under your seat. No one will bother with this car anyway."

We spent the next forty- five minutes in Smokey Bones - a favourite of Fred's. It was an airy restaurant with a friendly ambience that was suited to business people at lunch or families

out for dinner. At Fred's request, we were given a booth by a window where we could look out at the parking lot – and the car with my Beretta. Fred was being prudent. The ribs were great and the time passed quickly. I got a better sense of Fred and my respect for the guy grew. Not only was he a very good cop, he was one of the good guys. He was telling me about his two kids that were still in university when the Blackberry vibrated in my pocket. I had turned the ring feature off before getting in the cruiser first thing in the morning. I excused myself and went into the washroom.

“Doc. ...?”

“Yeah Max,” I said quietly. It wasn't Max; it was Frank.

“We've got a problem – you've got a problem. Max just got creamed on the I-75. No details yet – I'll call.” And he hung up.

I returned to the table and offered to pay for lunch. Fred declined my offer and told me I had been the guest of the Tampa Bay Police Department.

“Are you okay? You look a bit off,” Coop asked.

“No, I probably ate too quickly. Spare ribs for the first meal of my day, even though we're into mid-afternoon, may not have been a good choice.” (And my safety net just got wiped out on the interstate.)

We drove in complete silence for the next few minutes. I was pre-occupied with Frank's news. I looked around and realized that Fred was taking me back to the beach. It had been quite a day – and it wasn't over yet.

An hour and thirty minutes after leaving Dave Kidd's gun store, Cooper dropped me off at Mrs. Reilly's empty house. Maybe it had been a long few days for him, or maybe it was the way Fred Cooper always looked. But he truly appeared to be totally exhausted. Just before he pulled the unmarked cop car away from the curb, he dropped his car window.

“You be real careful if you came across Mia's step- brother, Terry,” he said, “That guy is very definitely a dangerously retarded asshole.”

Point taken - I thanked him and stood watching as he slowly drove away. I did a quick sweep of the entire house. Everything appeared to be in order. In the shadow of the old garage, I un-wrapped the Beretta and loaded the clip. Nothing adds to my personal safety like a loaded handgun nearby was my new motto. I don't recall what the old one was. I put the Beretta under a T-shirt at the top of my backpack. I could grab it quickly if I needed it.

After finishing my quick visual check of the area surrounding the house, I unlocked the garage door and backed out the Jaguar. I left it idling while I retrieved Langdon's Sig Saur from the toilet tank and checked to see that seals of its protective series of zip-lock plastic bags were intact. The gun had not been touched. I hid it again. Only this time I put it amongst some old flowerpots Mrs. Reilly had stored on a primitive work shelf at the front of the garage. When I was satisfied that it would not be found in a superficial search, I closed and locked the folding garage door. I was doing a mental inventory of my growing arsenal. I had a legal Beretta close at hand in my backpack – Glock in my trunk – Sig and silencer in the garden pots inside the garage. And then he did it again.

“Foodguy.”

“Jesus Papa. You almost gave me a goddamn heart attack.

“Sorry Foodguy - but I gotta tell you something.”

“What?”

“Some guy has been cruising round the area looking for you. He's driving a big black Mercedes. A while ago, he parked back in front of Tan's and asked Ling Ling if she knew the guy that got beat up there yesterday.”

“Was he young or old Papa?”

“You got beat up yesterday.”

“Not me – the guy looking for me.”

“Not too old – not really young. I guess he was sort of in the middle like thirty or something - but big – not fat – big – like that Arnold guy. What are you gonna do Foodguy?”

“Two things Papa - one is - I’m going to take you around to Tan’s, and we’re going get you something to eat. Two - my name is Joe or Doc – not Foodguy – okay?”

It was getting late in the afternoon. I wanted to find out what Ling Ling could tell me about the guy who drove a Mercedes. I imagine, with my old backpack in hand, and Papa at my side, I looked just like any another homeless guy. Ling Ling must have seen us coming as she appeared in the door of the small restaurant before we arrived and said, “No serve. No money, no food. Not today.”

I took out two twenties and handed them to the tiny Chinese woman. “Dinner for Papa; he’ll eat out here. And a quick bit of information when you have a moment.”

“You sit there,” Ling Ling said pointing to the painted yellow picnic bench furthest from the entrance. “I be back.”

I was just as happy to be sitting outside. Papa was in bad need of a shower. Ling Ling was back in a few moments.

“What you want to drink?”

“Diet cola on ice with lime for me,” I said. “Papa?”

“Beer – any kind - don’t matter.”

Ling Ling looked as worried as I felt. “Okay Papa, but just one. I think I may need your help some more.”

“You got it Foodguy – er uh Joe.”

During the next twenty minutes, we sat in the late afternoon sun and Papa enjoyed his meal. While he ate, he told me another version of his life story and switched to water after only one beer. Ling Ling appeared beside our picnic table twice to hurry us along. I guess we were bad for business. On one of her stops, I asked her about the guy in the Mercedes.

“He think you get beat up bad. Ask where you live. I tell him I don’t know you.”

“Thanks Ling Ling. One more thing – did this guy walk funny?” I stood up and did a rough imitation of Terry Bullock’s walk. Ling Ling laughed.

“Yeah, he walk that way.”

“Thanks again Ling Ling.”

Name is not Ling Ling. Name is Jane.” And the tiny woman disappeared back into the restaurant.

I looked at Papa. He just shrugged his shoulders.

A niggling thought followed by a loud bell went off somewhere deep in my brainpan. I wondered how many times Mia’s family had inquired about her recovery. For members of a family, concern would seem to be a natural response. Questions would be asked. Answers would be demanded. And how many times had any of them visited her at the hospital? And right now, was it was a really bad idea to give them access to her at all.

I told Papa I’d see him later. I had something to do.

Back to the Hospital

Back in the Jaguar, I used the Blackberry to call the hospital. I needed to check on Mia. There was a new nurse on duty – one I had not bothered before. She informed me that Mia was awake again and asking for me. I asked the nurse if any of her family members were with her or had tried to contact her. After a lengthy pause, during which time I suspected that she did a check of her charts, the nurse told me that there had been no visitors and the only callers had been cousins from various European locations as well as a Joe Holiday and a Detective Sergeant Fred Cooper. There was one other call taken earlier that morning. Her brother, Terry, had called to see if he could visit. Damn, that wasn't good.

“Has he come in?” I asked anxiously.

“Um, no, I don't think so. Ms Doulton was not conscious when he called.”

I thanked the nurse and asked her to tell Mia that I would be there faster than Clark Kent on speed.

The drive to Tampa General was done in record time. It took almost as long to find a parking space. After hastily spending an exorbitant amount of money for a stuffed Teddy Bear in the hospital gift shop, I returned to the room where Mia had been when I had visited there earlier with Fred Cooper. I tried to ignore the hospital smells as I hurried along the brightly lit hallway. I was delighted to see a uniformed cop parked in a stuffed armchair reading a magazine outside her room. Cooper at work again. The cop guarding the room must have been Coop's idea after he was told that they hadn't been able to bring Sammy or Terry in for questioning. The uniform rose slowly as I approached.

“Whoa there partner?” he said as his right hand landed on the butt of his weapon. “Where do you think you're going?”

It took me a few seconds to convince him that I was okay. Even then, he looked in at Mia and talked with her briefly. I guess he got her approval. I love a cop who is thorough.

When I was beside her, I said, “Heard any good blonde jokes lately?” I am an idiot.

Mia had been resting fitfully before the cop roused her. She was still pretty vague. Her quiet voice was one that I had never heard before, “Joe – you’re here.”

“Bingo! First try. How are you doing beautiful?” God, I really am an idiot! She’s wrapped up like something from an Egyptian mummy’s tomb, and I’m asking her how she’s doing. I’m the blonde joke.

“I don’t feel very beautiful right now,” Mia replied softly. “Wanna digitate?”

“I’d love to,” I said as I moved around her bed and gently picked up her left hand. Her right hand was taped to a flat plastic splint and had an intravenous drip going under a tape into a vein. There was a button to call the nurse for help fixed in place close to her right index finger. She gave my hand a weak squeeze. I thought maybe I was going to cry.

We sat there quietly. I didn’t know if I could get it together enough to say anything. After a few moments, Mia spoke. She told me in that low, drugged soaked voice that I had to quit our investigation into Vickie’s death. There was nothing more that we could do. If we tried to continue, more innocent people would get hurt. It was too dangerous.

I could see absolutely no point in arguing with her given the state she was in. What would an argument accomplish? I mumbled my agreement that she was right – it was too dangerous. We would turn it all over to the police. Had she been more lucid, I might have told her that it was much too late for us to stop. This thing had taken on a life of its own, and it had cost both Langdon and her dearly.

I don’t remember very much from the many university courses I have taken, but for some reason, I do remember an old professor named Baxter. I always remember him because the guy was Ichabod Crane tall and thin. The weird guy wore the exact same outfit every day – black suit, white shirt, black tie, black socks and black shoes. I guessed he liked black. He had a sonorous voice that he used like a stage actor. I believe that he had been teaching the undergraduate Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Age course from about the day after the bard of Avon shuffled. He could recite the entire works of Shakespeare – even all of the sonnets. But that wasn’t why I thought about him at that very moment.

I think that Professor Baxter was trying to teach us something in *King Lear* when he made an off-hand reference to the image of starting a large boulder pitching down a steep hill. Old Baxter and Shakespeare believed that if you started that big sucker rolling, it would soon be impossible to control. If you tried to stop it, that fuckin boulder would crush you faster than you could say, "Oops!"

We were not going into the boulder stopping business. So instead of arguing with Mia, I asked her how the ambush had happened, and more importantly, for my purposes, who had done it to her?

Her voice was weak and strained. "I called my mom. I asked her if she wanted to meet me at my apartment cause I had to clean out my refrigerator and water my plant. I was going to tell her about us moving in together."

"Did you talk to your mother directly?" I asked.

"No, I don't think so. I can't remember exactly. I think maybe I left a message on their answering machine - but maybe not. It's kind of foggy now."

"Mia, do you know who attacked you?"

"I don't think so," she replied tiredly. "I was blindfolded from the time I woke up. Whoever he was wore some kind of strong coconut aftershave and changed his voice a number of times. It was spooky. I was fuckin terrified Joe. I thought I was gonna die."

"How did it happen?"

"I had to go to the bathroom when I got to the apartment. When I came out, someone must have bashed me on the head. I passed out. When I woke up, all my clothes had been stripped off. I was taped to a kitchen chair. My legs had been pulled apart and back and then taped to the outside of the chair legs. It was like sitting up spread-eagled. I was terrified. It was impossible for me to move. I was blindfolded too." Mia started to cry. "When I first woke up, and realized what was happening I threw up. The guy gave me hard smack across my face. I think something must have broke in my cheek. I think he was wearing rubber gloves."

Mia's voice faded to be almost inaudible. I had to move my head close to her lips just to make out what she was saying.

"It seemed like forever. He asked me questions about you – where you lived and if you were an undercover cop. He asked about Stu Langdon - what information you had on Vickie's murder. If I didn't answer fast enough, he did things to me. I lied to him. He hurt me real bad. I think I passed out a couple of times. I tried to fake being out, but that only made him more angry. I remember that the television was on real loud. I knew he was going to hurt me again when he put tape on my mouth."

Mia seemed to pass out. I sat there and cried. She came around. I told her she didn't need to tell me anything else right now.

"Rest baby" I said. "Get better and then tell it when you can."

"No," Mia mumbled "now – I need to tell it to you now Joe."

"Okay, Mia, I'm here. Just take your time."

Mia continued in a voice that had all but disappeared. "The last time that I woke up, I wasn't taped to the kitchen chair any more. I was lying on the floor blindfolded and naked, but I thought I was free. Joe, I thought it was over. I really thought he had left. But he hadn't. He sat there watching and waiting for me. When I was feeling a bit better, I tried to undo the blindfold. Then he laughed at me and started doing really ugly stuff to me. The bastard raped me Joe, and he stuck things in me. He hurt me even worse. Then he beat on me some more."

She told me that she remembered passing out that final time and then drifting in and out of awareness and hearing different voices until she woke up in the hospital.

I knew that I had a number of questions that I wanted to ask, but when the nurse came into the room, she rushed over and told me to get out.

"Visiting hours are over. Ms Doulton needs her rest."

Before I left the room, I told the nurse that Mia had asked me to pick up some PJs and stuff for her at her apartment – and feed her cat – I threw that in for good measure – but I didn't

have the key to the apartment. And almost as an afterthought, I better get her car keys or her car would be towed. God must have laughed at me and then taken pity.

The nurse, possibly sensing that she had been too abrupt with me, softened and told me to come with her to the nursing station. While I stood in front of the oversized desk covered in clipboards and paper, trying to look as innocent as I possibly could, she went to get Mia's keys from her personal effects bag that had been stored in a locker.

"Thanks" was all I had to say when she handed me the keys.

I knew that both Chance Kemp and Fred Cooper were not going to be pleased that I had managed to talk with Mia before them – unless this also was part of Kemp's grand scheme. It didn't matter. I needed to tell them what I had just been told. I phoned the number Cooper had given me. He had said that he could be reached at this number anytime night or day. After a long series of holds, I was connected to Kemp at his home. Funny how that works – ask for Cooper – get Kemp - must be some kind of new police methodology. Kemp was pretty abrupt at first – why are you calling me at this hour. It was only just after nine o'clock.

When I told him that I had talked with Mia, he didn't waste time getting pissed off at me or at the hospital; he wanted to know what she had said. I gave him the short form version – enough to whet his interest. After I finished, he told me that he and Cooper would pick me up at my place on the beach first thing in the morning. Then, we would go back and talk with Mia again. Before hanging up the phone, he told me to get a good night's rest and to be careful. His advice sounded pretty good but really, who was he kidding.

On the drive back to Clearwater, I didn't bother turning on the GPS. The result: I got lost only once. I made a right turn instead of left. If I hadn't spotted an overhead sign on the highway indicating the direction to Clearwater Beach, I would have been half way to Miami thinking it would only be a few minutes more before I reached the Memorial Causeway.

I Have an Unexpected Visitor

As I pulled into the short lane leading to the garage, I cut the lights so as not to disturb the neighbours. Possibly, God had decided to pitch in again, or maybe I just got lucky. Turning off those lights saved me. As I got out of the car, I heard a low whisper and felt a hand on my forearm pulling me down.

“Foodguy.” And then the hand pulled me towards the back of the Jag. It was Papa Smurf.

“Papa, what the hell are you doing here this time?”

“Shush. That big guy is in your house.”

“The big guy who walks funny - how do you know that?”

“I was sleepin in your yard man when he snuck around from the front and let himself in. At first, I thought it was you, but this guy is a fuckin monster. I mean really huge.”

This was not good – not good at all. I pushed Papa around to the passenger side of the Jag. I wanted to put the car between the house and me. I shot a quick look back out towards the road. There were two cars parked on the street about twenty-five yards apart. I couldn't recognize the make of either vehicle. I thought about grabbing the cell phone from the car and dialling 911. That would be the smart thing to do, but that would only postpone the inevitable. And at that moment, I had the advantage.

I had the Sig hidden in the garage and the Beretta in my backpack. The Sig made more sense with its suppressor. I'd been lucky so far. My backpack was still on the passenger's seat of the Jag. I didn't want to open the car door and have the courtesy lights go on.

“Stay here Papa.”

I crept forward and unlocked the garage door, lifted it enough for me to slide under. There was enough ambient light for me to see the front of the garage's interior and the flowerpots where I had hidden Langdon's favourite weapon.

I had the Sig. I checked the clip and safety. I screwed on the silencer as I crept quietly back to where Papa was waiting.

“Holy shit,” he said when he saw the elongated Sig. His eyes were like saucers in the darkness. “Are you some kind of fuckin hit man Foodguy?”

“No Papa. Why didn’t you just take off earlier?”

“I was afraid to, man – so I just hunkered down back here – blended in.”

“Did the guy have a gun, a knife and canon – did you see anything?”

“A little gun I think, but I’m not fer sur. What-ever it was, he held it pointing up.”

“Okay. Wait until you hear from me, or if fifteen minutes goes by, call 911. Tell them what’s happening.”

“I don’t got no watch.”

I slipped my watch off and gave it to him. “Good luck Foodguy,” he said before he crabbed back around the edge of the garage.

When Papa was safe and quiet, I crept to the door of my room. The guy was moving quietly through the dark rooms. The door had been expertly jimmed. I wouldn’t have spotted a thing.

I waited and listened for more than one person. Terry was trying to be careful about keeping quiet, but I guess he was in the wrong line of work. I could tell his location. But maybe there was another guy Papa had missed waiting just inside the door to do an instant lights out and game over on anyone returning home. That would be me.

I hit the door hard and rolled low into the bedroom. When I stopped, I was lying on my back on the floor with the Sig pointed back and up at Mr. Ambush. There was no Mr. Ambush. The room was empty. Terry must have heard me. He went real quiet.

I inched forward and slipped my suitcase out from under the foot of my bed. The only advantage I had now was that this was my turf.

“If this guy is half smart,” I thought, “he’ll quietly slip out the front door and try again another time. But maybe he wants this over.”

I waited. I was in no hurry. Whatever else Terry was, he wasn’t smart. I could hear him as he started to work his way back to my room. Fearlessly dedicated, really stupid or heavily

armed – take your pick. Still lying on the floor, I inched back towards the bathroom. I sat on the floor in the recess of the bathroom door with my unmade double bed between the passage into the hallway and myself.

Terry was still moving slowly down the narrow hallway towards the open entrance. In another few seconds, he would have to make a move to attack me or get smart, change direction, and head for the front door.

A narrow bright stab of light pierced the bedroom's darkness and quickly scanned the interior. I had already hunkered down as low as I could get. The bed was a shield. The exterior door to the garage was still slightly ajar.

The guy had semi committed to attack. Now, he had a real dilemma. Was I still in this room hiding or had I moved out into the hall and somehow got in behind him? Or had I changed my mind and taken off to get help? The flashlight went out. No noise. Seconds passed like hours. Time was running out for him. He had to make a choice - twelve feet to a slightly open doorway, or move back through the entire unfamiliar darkened house to get out the front door.

I held my breath and waited to see if the guy was a bright or not. He wasn't. His nerve gave out on him. He dashed for the partially open door – and outside.

I could have shot him right there. In Florida, I might have landed into a bit of legal trouble in that I hadn't warned him and then followed the next two steps of their inane three-step policy. But then, he wouldn't have been around to make a sequence of events statement. My word against a dead guy! No contest.

“Stop - or you're dead,” I said loudly. It was enough.

Terry glanced quickly in my direction and managed to get off one wild shot as he stumbled on my suitcase. He went down heavily and landed about a foot and a half away from the exterior door - and freedom. The shot he managed to get off might have been fatal to me if I had been standing. I hadn't been. He grunted and made a desperate effort to get up. Another mistake!

I fired the Sig aiming for the wall in front of him. The suppressor did its stuff. There was a phut sound and a neat hole appeared in the wall six inches in front of his head. He must have sensed the round passing by.

“Don’t shoot! I give up. I don’t got my gun no more,” he squealed as he stopped moving and assumed the arrest position - one he knew well. He must have dropped his weapon when he fell. No doubt about it, the guy may not have been shot at before, but he had definitely been arrested a couple of times. His face was pressed to the floor facing away from me, and his legs were spread wide. He was already moving his hands to lock his fingers behind his head.

Maybe he was waiting for me to move forward and cuff him as any cop would have. I stayed put, seated uncomfortably on the wooden floor in the doorway of my small bathroom.

“Push the flashlight this way,” I said. He was still tightly gripping a thin black high intensity metal flashlight in his left hand – the one closest to me. He paused for a moment and then slowly pivoted his face to look over at me. “Now,” I barked. For emphasis I drilled another round just over his back. My police training on the topic of discharging a firearm had kicked in. I was already concerned about where my first round might have ended its potentially lethal flight? There had already been too many innocent victims. This slug I knew would stop somewhere deep inside one of the many paperbacks crammed tightly in my small bookcase.

I think that it must have occurred to him at some point that he was at risk of being dead more than he had ever been before. He was probably praying that some cop hearing the racket would show up and arrest him. His options were definitely limited. And his time was running out.

“I said push the flashlight over to me and live a little bit longer - now.”

He shoved the flashlight towards me. I edged forward to retrieve it while keeping my eyes and the Sig pointed calmly at his head.

The full adrenaline rush I knew would hit me in any second was still building. When I had retrieved the small light with my left hand, I directed the high intensity beam at his face. He squinted before quickly ducking his face back towards the bedroom wall away from the bright

light and me. That quick second confirmed what I already knew. The guy lying on the floor of my room was Mia's stepbrother, Terry Bullock. As I continued to play the light over the room, I saw, just beyond his reach, the small revolver he had fired at me. It had landed there when he tripped on my suitcase.

I again swung the bright flashlight beam over his massive prone body. An expensive looking hunting knife with a sheathed seven-inch blade was hooked onto his waistband in the small of his back. Langdon had been slashed and stabbed to death. Interesting! Although it seemed much longer, only a very few seconds had passed.

"Well now, isn't this nice," I said with as much control as I could muster. In actual fact, my heart had started pounding wildly and my adrenaline was rushing hard. My voice was louder than I wanted. "You've been looking for me, and I had you at the top of my list of fuck-ups to meet. How fortunate! And even better, you had a gun, and I have a gun. And my gun is bigger than your gun. And my gun is pointed right at your melon. Let's see what you've got and how clever you really are. Are you listening?"

The big guy nodded his head.

"Okay, very slowly reach out with your right hand and push the revolver over here and then gently, and I do mean very gently - shove that door closed."

"I don't got to put up with your ... " he said. He made a sudden grab for the revolver and started to pivot on his right shoulder in my direction. He had already rolled enough to start his gun in my direction. He was too slow.

I shot him. He dropped his gun, cried out and collapsed back on the floor.

"You shot me," he said in utter disbelief. He was grinding his teeth.

"You're pretty good at this game Terry. Now let's try it again. Very gently push the gun, butt first - towards me and then shove the door closed. If you don't, I'll shoot you again. And this time, I won't miss."

He worked himself into a sitting position with his back against my bookcase. He was trying - without much success - to stop the flow of blood seeping from the hole in his chest near

his shoulder. He looked at me angrily, but the fight was gone. This time he complied. Not happily perhaps, but the door was closed and the small revolver was on the floor in front of me. Keeping the Sig aimed squarely at his chest, I bummed my way forward and picked up the weapon. It was an older .22 calibre Smith and Wesson Model 60 skinny handle revolver in pretty good shape. That particular .22 handgun, with its hammerless brother, the Model 650, was a favourite of older detectives wearing ankle holsters for a backup – or a “throw down”. I recalled that hit men like it too – using the double tap technique. I wondered if he had collected it from Langdon after he killed him.

“Now, before we go any further, take that blade and sheath out of your pants and slide it this way.” Again, he awkwardly complied. I slid the knife under the side of my bed using the Sig’s silencer as a prod. No sense adding my fingerprints to what I suspected was the murder weapon that had killed Langdon. There were tears in his eyes and blood all over his hands. I guess I must have hit a major nerve and blood vessel – maybe shattered his shoulder. He started begging me to call for an ambulance. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead.

I reached over and turned on my little reading lamp. Then I slid the phone from the top of the small night table that stood between my bed and the bathroom door. The message light was flashing. Without taking my eyes off Bullock, or really thinking, I pushed the play button. The first call was from Ida May Thornberry warning me that another bald, burly young man had been in the library earlier, and he was looking for me. I had that one covered. The second and last message was from Kemp. His call had been made before I had ended up talking with him earlier. The message was that he needed to see me as soon as possible, and I should think about getting a lawyer. I thought of my encounter with Billy Ray at the park. Threatening? – I guessed that could be it. I had more important things to do just then.

“Before I dial 911 for your ambulance Bub, you and I are going to play twenty questions. If I like your answers, and I believe them, you will be in an ambulance with a police escort in a half hour or so,” I said waving his small gun at him like some old time gunfighter. A twenty-two

round was less likely to go through walls and do damage elsewhere. If I had to shoot him again, it would be with his own gun. Somehow, that seemed fair.

“Fuck you ...”

So I shot him again. This time I was pretty certain that I hit the outside of his left shoulder because a small jagged chunk of meat jumped clear off. His dinky twenty-two was actually louder than the Sig Saur wearing its silencer. That was something to think about.

I remembered Papa waiting outside with my watch and quarters to call 911. I slid over to me bedroom window, pushed it open, and called out to him that everything was okay. “Don’t call 911 Papa. I got it covered.”

There was no response from him. Maybe he’d taken off - or passed out. There was nothing I could do about him right now. I turned my attention back to Terry Bullock.

“In for a penny, in for a pound Terry. I think you’ve figured out that I’m not fucking around here. You now have matching bullet holes in your shoulders, although the first one probably hurts a whole lot more - right?” I said.

Terry just nodded his bald head and if looks could kill.

“Do you want to try for more or will you answer the questions I have? And before you say anything, I can assure you that you will tell me what I want to know or there won’t be enough of you left to pack in a freezer bag.”

From that point on, Terry Bullock and I had a very productive dialogue. I pulled out the Blackberry and went to the record option. I asked the questions: he answered the questions. It was obvious that the guy was a pathological liar. He wouldn’t know the truth if it came up to him and whacked him on the nose. He was a lot like his father – a real prick. If I had followed through on my threat to shoot him every time he lied to me, he would have ended up looking like a block of Swiss cheese. But that didn’t stop me. I had him figured for the Langdon murder, and I was pretty certain that taking his knife to any forensic lab would confirm that. I wanted to play with his head for a while just to see what might fall out. Sometimes our pattern of question and answer would be interrupted when he pleaded with me to be taken to a hospital or a doctor, but

generally speaking, taking careful aim at his head with the little revolver was enough to put him back on track.

“So why did you hire Billy Ray, Sammy Tolla and the guy with the broken nose to come looking for me Terry?”

“Billy and Sam knew what you looked like. I wanted to meet you.”

“Oh yeah, and why did you want to meet me?”

“I wanted to talk to you about Vickie’s murder. I wanted to back you off it.”

“So when the moron twins couldn’t find me, you went and talked with Langdon. And then you killed him.”

“No.”

“Terry, it’s a sin to lie – yeah?”

“Fuck you, you ...

”Ah, ah Terry ...” - a small waggle with the twenty-two shut him up.

“So again, tell me why you were here with your little gun?”

“You beat up Mia. My dad told me what you did to her.”

“Your dad lied to you. I actually thought that you did that.”

“No fuckin way man. I like Mia. She don’t like me though. I was playin pool, and I got witnesses.”

“Who would the witnesses be? No Terry, let me guess. I’ll bet you were playing pool with the boys at Toby’s Gym. Now who do you think will believe them you big dummy?”

“I didn’t touch Mia. I swear it. Man phone 911 please. I’m dyin here. I can’t feel my arms. Look at all the fuckin blood.”

“In a little while, if you keep answering my questions.”

“You fucker, my Pa will mess you up bad – you fuckin bastard - you’ll be sorry you was ever born.”

I had believed up to that point that Ted had been a stepfather to Terry as well as Mia and Vickie. Not so – I could use that – Ted was Terry’s dad. And Terry believed that his father could inflict more misery on me than he could. Ted must be a pretty violent guy.

“So you want me to believe you’re here to shoot me because I beat up your half sister – is that about it?”

He was trembling and had started to sweat profusely. His dark tan had slowly turned to a weird shade of gray. I thought that he might be going into deep shock. I needed to work fast.

“You did beat her up you fuckin liar. Don’t say you didn’t.” He was crying again. And I didn’t think it was just from the gunshots. Maybe he hadn’t talked with Billy Ray before he was pulled in on the parole breach. Maybe he really did care about Mia. “My dad told me you fucked her and then beat the crap out of her. He said you did things to her with a wine bottle - you dirty fucker. You’re the son of a bitch that put her in that fuckin hospital. He’ll get your skinny ass for it too,” he muttered. “You’ll be sorry you was ever born before he kills ya.”

“Sticks and stones and idle threats Terry.”

At least the guy was consistent. My adrenaline rush was over. My pulse was back to normal. I had totally regained my composure.

“You fuckin retard - did you ever think about maybe trying to ask Mia who beat up on her? She’s been conscious since around noon today. And for whatever it’s worth I would never hurt Mia. As far as the wine bottle goes Terry, that wasn’t even in the papers. Your dad knew about it cause either your dad was there or he paid the guy who was. And that guy reported the details to Ted. He did Mia. But I don’t give a flying fuck if you believe me or not you, you shit for brains. So, why did you kill Langdon with your knife?”

Terry Bullock may have thought that he was about to be doing a tap dance to gain admission to the pearly gates. His teary eyes half closed like he was trying to remember something important. Blood now only just trickled sporadically from both of his shoulder wounds. His massive arms hung uselessly at his sides. Sweat and tears poured down his gray

face. Maybe, he really was going to have to do that tap dance. This was certainly not the way he had pictured his evening evolving.

“Terry,” I said loudly. He shook his head and his eyes popped open momentarily. He was still conscious – barely. “I’m going to put one in your head if you don’t tell me why you capped the cop. If you tell me, I phone 911 and you get your ambulance.”

His voice was fading, and he was going even deeper into shock. It took around forty seconds for him to get out his final words to me - “That old fucker told my pa that he was going to get him for killing Vickie. He said that he knew all about pa screwin her for all those years.”

“When did Langdon tell your old man this?”

But Terry Bullock was out for the count. I dialled 911. I would deal with the significance of Terry Bullock’s last words later.

I debated for about three seconds the merits of staying and waiting for the cops and the ambulance or just getting the hell out of there. Getting out of there won by a landslide. I knew that I had to speak with either Cooper or Kemp, but I thought phoning them when I was out of harm’s way was the better way to go. I believed that if they got forensics to check out Bullock’s knife, they’d have Langdon’s killer. Maybe I’d get another medal - maybe not.

I shook my pillow out of its pillowcase and stuffed the Sig and its silencer into it with a change of clothes. With some difficulty, I pulled out Terry’s wallet. I could use the money he had, and I didn’t want the cops to identify him too quickly. Let Ted worry for a while. I could see no sense in letting Terry’s old man know that his dickhead son had failed to nail me. And there was no advantage in tipping Ted off that I would be coming for him. Using my T-shirt – I was trying to be careful about fingerprints - I very carefully picked up Terry Bullock’s hunting knife and added it to my pillowcase stash.

Just as I was going out the door, my brain kicked in, and I realized what I was about to do. I knew that it would be essential for the cops to find the hunting knife with Terry and maybe even his little 22. I dumped the knife onto the floor beside the unconscious killer. I then wiped my prints off his revolver and left it on the double bed. Perhaps, when the cops arrived, they

would think that Terry had become overwhelmed with an extreme guilt for breaking into my room and shot himself – twice - once in each shoulder - as a penance.

It doesn't hurt to dream.

Fate Pitches In

I took a quick look around for Papa when I got outside. There was no sign of him. I could hear the sirens approaching as I turned the Jag south on Gulfview Boulevard. Three minutes later, I pulled my car to a stop behind the office of a way back from the beach motel. After I had paid fifty bucks cash for my room, I went back out to the Jaguar and parked it in dark back corner of the parking lot. Carrying only my loaded pillowcase and my backpack, I entered my room off the lot.

The room had a double bed and twenty-inch television. The washroom smelled of a strong pine disinfectant which trumped whatever it was disinfecting. I would be here for only a few hours, so it didn't affect me that much. Before I had a shower and flopped onto bed, I took time to make a phone call and leave a message on Cooper's voice mail. I had learned a fair bit from Terry that he needed to know. I backed the call up by dictating a quick synopsis of what I had learned onto my tape recorder. I included a statement of my intentions. No matter what happened to me the next day, I needed to be certain that the cops learned what I had found out.

The wake-up call came at three thirty. It was still dark as I showered and dressed in my jeans and navy blue T-shirt. The night air was cool so I pulled on a sweatshirt as well. I transferred the Sig and its suppressor from my pillowcase to join the Beretta in my back-pack and drove away ten minutes later. I grabbed a jelly donut and small chocolate milk at the all night Waffle House. I made a quick call to Tampa General to check on Mia. She was enjoying a good night's sleep and her condition was now listed as fair. I asked the nurse to tell Mia that I would be by to visit her later that day. As I hung up the receiver, I paused to wonder if I had just told a big fat lie.

I took my milk and jelly donut outside to the darkness of the parking lot. I could hear the channel waves washing up against the break-wall. As I crossed the black tarmac to the Jag, I started thinking about the futility of Langdon's death – and my role in it. At some time in the hours before he was killed, he had met Ted Bullock and accused him of sexually abusing Vickie. Ted had sent Terry to kill Langdon. And Ted had killed Vickie because he was worried that his

not too bright stepdaughter would tell Mia that her old step-dad was screwing her and had been for a long time. I'm not a psychologist or a social worker, but I'd bet ten to one that Ted had done the same stuff with Mia when she had lived at home. If that was so, and Mia found out that Ted was diddling Vickie, he had to fear that Mia's old memories would be stirred up and the two sisters would finally do something about it. An allegation of sexual abuse reported to the police would change his life and business forever. Mia's personal disclosure alone would land him in some steep legal trouble. He had to act. It seemed the logical explanation for the events of the last few days.

But when I had raised the probability of either Ted and or son being the killer, Langdon had told me that both of them had a really incredible airtight alibi. A number of objective witnesses had seen them at a "stag" for some neighbour's kid. Had Langdon somehow broken down that alibi? Or was he maybe blowing smoke to see what Ted did? That action would not be typical cop behaviour. They have to play by the rules. But then again, Langdon wasn't a cop anymore. There were no rules. I remembered why I had my own red flags about both men and their possible involvement in Vickie's murder. And that was even before I had met either one of them. Both of those sick assholes would be quite capable of killing the kid.

What else came out of my chat with Terry? I found out that the senior Bullock could easily manipulate his son, just as he had done when he sent junior out looking for me. I found myself believing what Terry had told me just before he blanked out. He had mumbled his explanation for taking out Langdon. Is that a confession or what? That left Ted Bullock as the one who had beaten and raped Mia – or someone he hired. But cut it anyway you wanted, he was responsible for what had happened to both of his step-daughters.

And that kind of fit too. He could have taken Mia's message off his home answering machine. Mia had left a message telling her mother to meet her at the apartment. Mia said that her attacker had knocked her out before she had managed to recognize him. She had been blindfolded during her entire ordeal. The blindfolding could mean that, initially, the guy had not meant to kill her. Rage had taken over at some point, and he had hurt her more than he had

intended. If he wanted to kill her from the start, why blindfold her and miss seeing the terror in her eyes? That was the thrill for any psychopath. No, this guy knew that she would recognize him. But then why not just kill her? He had killed Vickie. Unless Florida has come up with some way of executing someone more than once, the guy had nothing to lose. But again, maybe his objective had been to terrify her into calling off the investigation into Vickie's death. Simply back off; leave it alone. At the hospital, Mia had begged me to stop the investigation. It was too dangerous. Other people would get hurt. Killing Mia would only intensify that investigation. Ted had obviously missed the class about big boulders rolling down steep hills.

I started to wonder if Kemp or Cooper would arrive to arrest me before I finished what I had started. If Kemp had wanted me to come in with legal representation when all I had done was shake up Billy Ray, he'd now be looking for my head after what I had done the night before to Terry Bullock.

Fortunately, my meditations were interrupted before I hurt my brain too badly. Trying to tie up all the loose ends like the Bullocks, Kemp and Cooper and my future lawyers was starting to give me a headache. It didn't matter right then though, because I knew exactly what I was going to do during the next hours. Ted Bullock was an evil person. I was going to send him to hell.

I had originally only intended to use Mia's keys to use her car if I needed it, but now I had another use for them. I drove by the Bullock's Belleaire residence. The huge water fountain in the middle of the driveway turn-around was floodlit and spewing water. Other than that, there were no lights on. That would change shortly. I set the GPS and drove through almost empty streets to Mia's apartment.

I used Mia's keys to enter her apartment, and I flicked on the light only after I had partially opened the windows and then covered them. The air was hot, stale, and musty. I set to work setting up my trap. I was sweating by the time I finished. I drank a bottle of water, and then checked again to see that everything was in place. A mistake now could be fatal. Satisfied, I

dialled the Bullock's home number, and waited. On the seventh ring, the sleepy voice of Ted Bullock answered.

"Yeah?"

In my most professional cop's voice I said, "This is Officer Davis of the Tampa Police Department. I am sorry to disturb you this early in the morning sir. I have an urgent message for Mrs. Eliza Bullock, formerly Doulton? Would she be there?"

"What the fuck is this about? I'm her husband. Tell me."

"Sorry sir; the message is confidential sir."

I waited half expecting Ted to simply hang up. If he was as sharp as Terry had him, he would figure that Officer Davis would keep calling – or even send a cruiser out. Just get it over with.

"Yes," said Mrs. Bullock.

"Eliza," I said. "Sorry about the early morning call and the little deception. It's Joe. Just listen okay. I stayed at Mia's apartment last night, and I found a little diary in some of her stuff. I'm going to take it to the police in a while because it outlines a whole history of the sexual abuse Ted did to her before she left your home. It also says that the reason she has never told anyone about the abuse was because Ted said that he would kill her and you if she did. Kill you Eliza is what it says. Are you there?"

"Yes." Her voice was faint.

"I'm not going to the police with this for another hour or so, but when I do, Ted is going to be pretty upset. The cops will probably arrive at your home later this morning. I don't want you to be taken hostage. Maybe you should make an excuse to go to church or something like that. Anyway, I'm still hoping that I'll find some more stuff in the apartment. You need to get away from him because this is all going to hit the fan. Be careful."

I figured that if Eliza was in any way involved, Ted was getting my total lie little diary message as soon as she hung up. If Mia had asked her mother directly to join her at the apartment, Eliza had to be involved. Ted would have to react. But if Mia left a message on their

answering machine and Ted intercepted it, perhaps Eliza wasn't a part of this deal. If that was the case, she could just get away from the house before I had to go to Plan B. I would know soon enough.

Ted might have been able to find somebody to come for me if he had enough time. He didn't. I had put the pressure on. I had said a couple of hours. With or without Eliza, he had to come. I was ready.

Shootout in Little Beirut

I knew I had a little time. My digital tape recorder was in place. My cell phone was turned on and clipped to my shirt. My weapons were loaded. My backpack was in the bedroom. I didn't need any additional motivation, but I had a few minutes to kill. I walked through the attack as Mia had described it. Maybe I thought I could learn something more. I knew Ted was behind the assault on Mia. I wondered briefly if he had done the dirty work himself or farmed it out to one of his hired goons. But the degree of rage suggested something very personal – and that meant Ted. She had said that her attacker had been waiting for her. He had hidden behind the door to her bedroom that was immediately adjacent to the small washroom. As she came out of the bathroom, he needed only to step around that corner and bash her with – with what? I looked around for his weapon. What was wrong with me? What was I thinking? The weapon, whatever it was, would have to be in a forensic lab for tests. It would be used as evidence if the attacker were ever apprehended. I wondered if the lab guys had collected any useful fingerprints. I thought not. The assault had been too premeditated. Any little kid knows all about fingerprints by just watching television. Ted Bullock was a guy used to covering his ass. He wouldn't leave prints for the cops to find.

Although I was certain that samples had been taken and removed from each new site, no one had cleaned up all of the blood. There was a kitchen chair was still sitting alone in the middle of the floor. That surprised me. I tore strips of duct tape off the roll as I moved it out of the way. That it would not have been the chair Mia had been taped to. The detectives must have found another one for their walk through of the sequence of events. The tape pieces used to restrain Mia had all been collected and taken to the lab. I thought about Mia taped and blindfolded in that chair. I had no trouble at all imagining the attack. If I needed any more motivation, I had it in those images of Mia's suffering.

The Blackberry vibrated.

“Not now Frank.” I turned it off and went to the dirty window looking out on the street.

There was no movement and only a purr of light traffic from the main road three hundred yards away. I waited and watched. At four fifty two, a dark SUV pulled onto the street and moved slowly towards the apartment. The side windows of the vehicle were darkly tinted. I could not make out how many people were coming for me, but I could see that Eliza was driving. Plan A it was. My guess was that Ted was armed and hiding in the back seat. At least I hoped he was. Mrs. Bullock pulled to a stop and parked. She sat still looking at the door to the apartment. She appeared to be talking to herself. That would be Ted. I slipped the safety off on the Sig. Then Eliza was moving cautiously up the broken sidewalk. I opened the front door a crack and quickly retreated down the short hallway to the small washroom. I flushed the toilet and turned on a tap, and then quickly stepped around the doorway into the adjoining bedroom. There was a faint knock on the outside door.

“Come in Eliza. I’ll be right with you. I’m in the washroom.”

I hit the record button on the tape recorder.

The opening door knocked over the drinking glasses that I’d left in its path.

Three silenced shots ripped through the bathroom door to the right of me.

“Let’s go Ted,” Eliza hissed.

“I gotta get that fuckin diary. And I want to make sure that smartassed fucker is dead. Just wait h ...”

I hit the play button on the remote. Loud rap music blasted from just inside the front door. The distraction was enough.

“What the hell...” Eliza yipped.

“Hi guys,” I said loudly. I extended the Sig with its silencer through the bedroom’s doorway. “Drop the gun Ted,” I said - hoping that he wouldn’t

Ted stopped looking for the rap noise source, but he didn’t drop his gun. Eliza moved slowly away from her husband. “Joe. What are you doing?”

“Staying alive, Eliza,” I replied as I killed the rap, “or were those three shots through the bathroom door just your way of saying hello?”

Ted made his move. He didn't know exactly where I was. His shot was wild low and outside. Mine didn't miss. I hit him high in the leg. He spun away. I didn't want him dead - not yet. Eliza gasped and hit the floor. Ted snapped off another shot but he was off balance. I fired back and hit his chest. His gun dropped. He fell beside his wife. Eliza moved to pick up the gun.

"Don't touch it. Swear to God - I'll shoot you too."

Eliza pulled her hand back. She glanced back at the door. She was about to bolt.

"Sit still. Don't move! I mean it - I will shoot you too."

I watched as the frightened woman edged away from the blood Ted was leaking.

"Okay Ted, Eliza. We're gonna have to make this quick."

"How are you feeling Ted? You okay? Because, you and me, we need to talk."

I moved out of the bedroom and scooped Ted's fallen S&W 357 with a bulbous home-made silencer.

"Okay Ted, we're going to do this now, or you are truly fucking dead."

"I've got nothing to say to you, so you can just go fuck yourself," he muttered trying hard to stare me down. "Call the cops and get me an ambulance." The hit to his leg was seeping blood but the chest shot was putting him away - a man used to being in charge. Who did he think he was fooling?

"I think you've got a wrong read on the situation here Ted. I believe I'm about to send you to hell. You won't need an ambulance. Have you heard from Terry since you sent him to stop my clock? Eh? When I last saw Terry, he wasn't looking too good. And you know what Ted? It's almost funny, but he told me he wasn't going to say anything either. And I believe that he wanted medical attention too. But you know what? By the time I was finished with him, he had told me quite a bit."

As I taunted him in my quiet menacing voice, another voice - maybe Mr. Ted's Brainpan - was telling Ted what must have happened to his boy, Terry. His look of disgust and loathing evaporated. It was replaced with anger and fear. I could read it in his face. Eliza just trembled as she realized what was happening. She shifted further away from Ted. Momentarily, I felt a self-

loathing. This was not happening the way I had imagined it. I was supposed to feel good about this – pay-back for all the shit this guy had done. I shook the feeling off remembering how he treated Vickie and Mia. There were tears in Ted’s eyes now. His pain was real. Good.

“Ted, I’m going to kill you very slowly – unless I get answers – honest answers to the questions I ask. Do you understand me Ted? Nod your head if you understand.” I still intended to kill him, but he didn’t know that – not for certain.

Mia’s mom started to cry like I was supposed to take pity – be merciful – I don’t think so. These people were evil. They deserved what they were going to get.

“Do you understand what I just said Ted? Honest answers to the questions I ask.”

He nodded – and the fighting spirit seemed to ebb away from him.

“Why did you hurt Mia?”

He shook his head defiantly. Maybe there was some battle in him still. I slowly cocked the Sig and pointed it at his face. I smiled. He capitulated. “She wouldn’t leave it alone.”

Eliza Bullock turned her head to look at her husband. “You did that to Mia?” She didn’t know.

“Leave what alone?” I demanded loudly. I needed him to focus on me. I needed to hear it from him.

“What happened to Vickie – she kept trying to get that old fuck, Langdon, and then you, to keep picking at it. I wanted her to call you off. I wanted her to stop. It was an accident. There was nothing going to bring Vickie back.”

“How was anything an accident Ted? Think about it. Vickie was strangled with her own panty hose and Mia was beaten and raped right here. How is that a fucking accident?”

“Vick told Eliza that she was going to see that bitch Mia up north just before she left to get on the bus.”

Any color that was left suddenly drained from Eliza’s face.

“You can put all this shit on Mia and her meddling,” Ted continued. “If she had just stayed away, none of this would have happened.”

“Yeah, and you were afraid that Vickie would tell Mia that you had been nailing her since she was a little kid? You knew that Mia would put an end to it, right? Phone the cops. You screwed Mia when she was a kid too Ted – didn’t you? Is that why she went away?”

He looked down at the floor like an answer might be written for him in his blood. It wasn’t remorse – a little guilt maybe – but not remorse.

“You were screwing her - right Ted? That’s what Terry told me.”

“Yeah, and he was too.” He said it like the fact that he wasn’t the only one made it all okay.

“How did you feel about that Eliza- Ted here and his dipshit son diddling your daughters?”

Mrs. Bullock said nothing. She was crying. Ted raised his head and stared hard at me. Maybe he was trying for a last ditch act of defiance- or maybe it had never occurred to him that his wife would have to know about it. Or was there something else?

“Ted, you sick fuck, my next shot is going to smack into your balls like a fuckin rocket ship,” I snarled. “If you’ve got something else to say, get it out now.”

And maybe I would have been able to shoot him if his wife hadn’t been sitting beside him. It didn’t matter. Ted figured I was seriously going to finish him right then and there.

“She didn’t know anything,” he whimpered while trying to cover his crotch with his hand.

“Bullshit, Ted. She knew; she had to know. Didn’t you Eliza? You knew what the fuck was going on. So what did you do when Vickie told you that she was off to Orlando to meet Mia? Did you find Ted here and tell him all about it?”

And then, it dawned on me. Vickie had felt safe enough to tell good old mom about going to Orlando because the two vicious pricks that had made her life miserable were away getting loaded at a stag.

“You killed her,” I said in disbelief as I looked down at the pathetic woman. Tears were still streaming down her tanned face. “Maybe it was an accident. Maybe you fought with her.

But you knew that if Vickie talked with Mia, your life – your family was over. All the money and spas would disappear. That was worth more to you than the safety of your own kids. Things could never be the same.”

I was piecing it all together. It made sense. Ted had manipulated, Terry, into taking out Langdon because he was worried that Langdon would find out that his wife had murdered Vickie. He had told Terry that I had raped Mia. He was trying to protect himself and his wife. And he'd sent Terry to try and punch my ticket. Ted Bullock was just protecting his wife - just as she had protected him when she had murdered her own youngest daughter. What a fucking mess.

Ted was crying. It had little to do with the two gunshots.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” I was still trying to sort through the new images in my mental looking glass. “So when Mia started to stir things up again, and then Langdon came around and told you that he had you cold for sexually abusing Vickie, you had to act to protect yourself and your wife, right?”

The pieces fit. I felt like shooting the both of them right where they sat.

Without taking my eyes off either one of them, I speed dialled Cooper’s number. I didn’t know how long I had before cops would be banging on the apartment door. Fred picked up on the third ring.

“Fred Cooper here,” his voice was tired.

“Coop? It’s Joe Holiday,” I said. “Are you at home?” I could almost feel Cooper’s urgency as he went red alert.

“No, Chance and I have been doing an “all-nighter” trying to clean up your mess,” Coop replied trying unsuccessfully for total indifference. “You’ve been a busy lad haven’t you Joe? We found Terry Bullock in your room at the beach. Well, we didn’t, but you know what I mean. It took a few hours to identify him. He wasn’t looking too great when we tried to talk with him. Somehow he seemed to have lost his wallet and a fair bit of blood. Where are you Joe?”

“At Mia’s apartment - I had some stuff to clean up myself.”

“Yeah, well if you thought Chance wanted to see you before, he would really like to see you now. And for what it’s worth, I’d advise you to hire the best criminal lawyer you can afford.”

“And I’d really like to see Kemp too, but for the moment, I’m kind of involved in a family therapy discussion with the Bullocks, Eliza and Ted...”

“When you say involved,” Cooper interrupted me sharply, “would it be fair to ask how they are?”

“He’s probably looked better,” I replied. “She’s not looking too great either.”

“I see. Do you have something you want to tell me Joe?”

I realized that Fred’s verbal volley was to generate enough time for my call to be traced. I thought that it might be prudent to speed things up a bit. But what’s to trace? I just told him that I was at Mia’s apartment.

“Yeah Coop – I do. I’m recording this as I give it to you. Vickie Doulton was killed by her mother after she told her that she was going to meet Mia. Mom and kid may have fought – I’ll leave that for the lawyers and the courts to figure out – but Eliza hit her daughter on the head and then strangled her to protect her lifestyle as well as her husband and stepson, Terry. Both of those guys had been sexually abusing the kid for years. And Eliza knew it. That would explain the forensic conclusion that the kid had had intercourse at some time during the few hours before she was killed – probably Terry. That’s just my guess.”

I thought I could hear movement out on the street. I wondered if the cops had arrived - pretty quick if they had.

“Sorry Coop. I got distracted there for a moment. Eliza was afraid Vickie would tell Mia about the abuse and all hell would break out. And knowing Mia, I believe that fear would have been pretty well justified.”

“I see,” said Cooper simply. He sounded a little inattentive himself. Either he was giving orders to the troops, or maybe he was writing all this down. “Is there more?”

“Yup – there is. Did you happen to find a hunting knife near Terry?”

“Yeah, it’s in the lab for tests.”

“Dollars to donuts, it’s the blade that did Langdon.”

“No bet.”

“The job on Mia was done by Ted Bullock. He thought he could convince her to call off the investigation and maybe stop the big old boulder from coming down on his happy little world. I’m about to finish that sick prick in about a minute.”

Bullock’s head suddenly snapped up. He knew what I meant. I smiled at him and pointed the Sig at his face. Just then, simultaneously, his bladder and his bowels let go. I saw the terror in his eyes. Good. I had achieved the goal of every practicing psychopath.

“Boulder Joe – what the fuck is that about?”

“Shakespeare - I’ll tell you when I have more time.”

“Don’t do anything stupid Joe. Joe, are you listening to me? You may get a fuckin medal for what you’ve done so far, but if you kill the Bullocks in cold blood, you’ll get the big State of Florida needle.”

“Bye Coop!” The pushed the little red button to end the call.

“Eliza – are you listening to me?”

She sniffled and nodded. She raised her red-rimmed eyes and tried to focus on me. I pulled the kitchen chair to the middle of the room. Ted eyes widened. He struggled to move, and passed out. Eliza may have thought he’d died. And maybe he had. A short cry escaped her.

“Sit down here Eliza,” I said pointing to the chair with the silencer. I took the pre-cut tape from the chair. “You’ve got to tell the cops everything when they get here. It’s the only way you’ll stay alive. Do you understand me?”

She nodded.

Ted used a chair like this to work on Mia. Eliza tried to escape. I pushed her back onto the hard seat and went to work with the gray duct tape. My last piece went across her mouth.

“If you don’t tell the cops the truth Eliza, I’ll come back some time when you least expect it, and punch your ticket.

What's going on?

Before I drove away from Mia's apartment in the Jag, I checked Bullock's Navigator parked in front of the apartment. The keys were hanging in the ignition. I wondered if the cops or the bangers would get to it first. Then I felt a heavy weariness settle upon me. Cooper had done his job. I could hear the distant wail of the cruiser sirens heading my way. Just to make certain, I phoned Cooper again. I told him where I'd left Ted and Eliza. The only thing I wanted now was to get to Tampa General and see Mia one more time.

I didn't know how long I had before they would come for me, but I knew it would happen. I moved a visitor's chair over beside Mia and took her left hand gently. I left my backpack on the floor beside me. She was resting uneasily. I didn't want to wake her. I sat there quietly watching her. She had survived the attack, but would she ever be able to enjoy a real life again? Her doctors weren't making any rosy promises. I guessed that, as my grandmother had said often enough, "time will tell". "Will" implied the future. I wondered if I would be around to find out.

I had turned on the Blackberry when I finished at Mia's place. It rang quietly and vibrated in my pocket. I fished it out.

"Hi Frank – how they hangin?"

Through the next ten minutes I gave him a fast update. He told me he would get a top lawyer to me as fast as he could.

"Doc – listen to me. Do not – I repeat – do not say anything – a single word - to the cops until you have the lawyer I get you. Understand Doc?"

"Yeah – Frank – Thanks ..."

The day drifted by slowly. I faded in and out of sleep with the arrival and departure of the different nurses and Mia's short periods of awareness. During the early afternoon, I got another call on the Blackberry. It was the lawyer Frank found for me. His name was Bob Morse. I brought him up to date on what had happened and the fact that I was still free. He wanted to meet

with me so that we could go to Kemp together. “It will work out better if you turn yourself in, but let me get hold of them. I’ll get back to you.”

As I ate dinner beside Mia’s bed, there was still no sign of Kemp or Cooper – or S.W.A.T. and Bob Morse had not got back to me. Frank had called again to tell me that early yesterday, he had sent legal papers I needed to sign and return to him. He then told me to hang in there – Frank’s idea of a pep talk – and then to inform me that Max was alright – a broken collarbone.”

Just after eight o’clock, a candy striper gently shook my shoulder and told me that the visiting hours were over. I reluctantly said goodbye to Mia, but she didn’t hear me. I left Tampa General Hospital wondering if the cops were waiting for me at my room on the beach. I drove to Mrs. Reilly’s home and surveyed the damage Terry Bullock, the police and I had done to it. I didn’t know if I’d have to explain the bullet holes to my absent landlord. I made a note to contact the guy who did the minor repairs for the condo residents. As well as I could, I cleaned up the blood Terry had leaked onto my floor. The slugs had already been dug out of the walls and my bookcase. I knew I couldn’t sleep there – not without Mia.

I drove over to the Holiday Inn. I registered using my own name and rode the elevator to a street side room. I briefly thought about calling Frank. I decided not and turned the Blackberry off. I then wondered how Max was doing, but I wasn’t going to worry about that now. I slept fitfully.

The Gold Medal or the Big Needle

The next day started quietly enough. The first thing in the morning I made my call to the handyman who did the work for the Sand Key condos. I arranged for the repairs to be done at Mrs. Reilly's home and told him that I would be paying with VISA. He assured me, with a scout's honour even, that he could get to the job sometime during the next week. I ate a light breakfast at the IHOP. The manager and Janille asked after Mia. I told them that she was making a slow but sure recovery. I walked back to the Holiday Inn to pick up the Jaguar from the back corner of their parking lot.

“Foodguy?”

“Hi Papa - how are you doing? How long have you been here?” Here was sitting on the trunk of the Jaguar.

“A little while I guess - I got a secret nest under the bridge and saw your car when I woke up. I got your watch for you.”

“That's okay. You keep it. I'm glad you're safe anyway. I have to go to the hospital now. I'll find you when I come back. If you want to sleep in the yard, you can. There will be someone there to do some patching up in the next day or so.”

Are you going to be okay Foodguy?”

“Time will tell Papa. You take care of yourself man. And no open containers eh?”

The old guy just laughed. Open containers were what he lived for.

I left Clearwater Beach, drove across the Memorial Causeway, and on to Tampa Bay General Hospital. The head nurse today was a plump woman who looked as if she would be nice to have as your mom. She had always been friendly with me. She looked up from her work at the nursing station as I got off the elevator. She forced a smile, and then looked around anxiously. She said nothing. There wasn't a cop assigned to Mia's room any longer. That should have tipped me off. I walked into the hospital room just as Mia was waking up. A very young student nurse was giving Mia her medication. The young woman looked startled when I arrived and

then, officiously insisted that I wait outside while Mia took her meds. Changing her clothes yeah - taking her meds – I didn't think so. Something was going down.

“Joe, is that you?” Mia asked extending her unfettered left hand towards me as I moved back into her room and then to her bedside. This was the day the doctors were supposed to remove the bandages from her eyes - maybe for good. I took her frail hand, placed my backpack beside the visitor's chair and sat down beside her. The student nurse did an act that would make Houdini proud. She disappeared.

“How are you this morning my beautiful little Sweet Cakes?”

“I don't feel very beautiful with all these bandages on me Joe. Even with all the painkillers, I still hurt in a lot of places. The nurses have been really kind to me. They say that I'm improving every day.”

“That's great,” I said with as much enthusiasm as I could fake. “Maybe next week sometime we can go to the dog races together. I'll tell you about my exciting career as a jockey.”

“That might be fun to hear about,” she laughed lightly. “Joe, you do know that your oars aren't touching the water at all anymore?”

“Yeah, I know that Mia. I've been a little stressed lately.”

An officious looking nurse, one I didn't recognize, looked in through the open doorway and smiled at us. She said nothing. As she left, she nudged up into place the gray tipped rubber doorstopper with the toe of her white shoe. The wide wooden door to Mia's room swung slowly and silently closed. I turned my attention back to Mia.

“You know Mia,” I said, “oars in the water is a highly over-rated attribute, just ask any mountain climber,” I said trying to maintain my focus on her. “Would you like me to tell you a story about a princess, or maybe I could give you the blonde joke for the day?”

There was a sudden noisy disturbance in the hall. I thought at first there had been a medical emergency in one of the other intensive care rooms. That was wishful thinking. Those kinds of emergencies don't usually sound like leather and metal moving under duress – the sound of armed men moving into position often does. I moved my backpack closer.

“Both – the blonde joke first, the princess story second,” Mia replied happily. She seemed unaware of the drama that was about to be played out. The big rolling boulder was about to come to a stop.

“Okay, the blonde joke first – I shifted in my chair slightly so that I could keep my eyes on the closed door of the room. Now, there was heated whispering. Then, there was complete silence beyond the door. The joke would have to be a short one. Question: What do you do if a blonde throws a pin at you?”

Mia smiled. Maybe she had already heard this one before. She said, “I don’t know. What do you do if a blonde throws a pin at you?”

“Run like hell – she’s got a grenade in her mouth!” I said followed quickly with my own short laugh.

Mia giggled.

The door to the room suddenly swung open. I tensed. I don’t know why, but I put my hand down to the top of my backpack. Maybe, so that I could pull out the telephone number of the lawyer I had already contacted. I knew that I wasn’t going to shoot it out or resist. There had already been too many innocent victims.

Fred Cooper walked slowly and silently through the door. His almost empty hands were away from his sides. In one beefy hand, he had a small bouquet of pink and white flowers – carnations I think. He looked as tired as he always looked. He stopped a few feet inside the room and then looked at my hand poised above the backpack.

“Morning Joe,” he said and then moved deeper into the room. I pulled my hand away from the bag. “I thought Miss Doulton might like these. She seems to be looking quite a bit better. I understand the bandages are coming off her eyes today. That will be nice.”

“What are they Joe?” Mia asked tugging at my hand gently.

“They are a beautiful bouquet of flowers Mia. Pink and white mini carnations I think. Fred Cooper brought them for you.” As I said Cooper’s name, Mia’s hand grasped mine more firmly.

“Thank you Mr. Cooper,” Mia said softly. “I’ll ask one of the nurses to put them in a vase.” Cooper’s dark brown eyes had not left mine for a second. He was trying for nonchalant, but I could tell that he was barely aware of Mia or anything else in the quiet room.

“Do you think I could borrow Joe for a little while Miss Doulton?” Fred had directed his question towards Mia, but it really wasn’t a question. And it really wasn’t directed at Mia.

“I can do that,” I replied. “Mia, you be good and do exactly what the nurses and doctors tell you. I’ll get back to just as soon as I can – with a whole new batch of blonde jokes. And that’s a promise.” Mia still held my hand tightly. I bent over and whispered, “I’ll be fine. You just get better.” I kissed the back of her hand and slipped out of its grasp.

I walked over to Coop. He nodded towards the door that had closed behind him. No handcuffs yet. “Thanks Fred,” I said handing him my backpack. “The flowers were a nice touch by the way.”

As I opened the door, I could hardly miss the fact that there was considerable congestion in the hall. Four bulky guys in full S.W.A.T. gear were pointing Heckler & Koch MP 7 submachine guns at my chest.

My mind flashed to a television news image of a tall, emaciated, black, rebel soldier in some small emerging African nation strapped to a tree looking over towards the news cameraman just before his firing squad blasted him into his version of Valhalla.

Fred stepped into the hall behind me. “Put those damn things away for Christ sakes,” he said angrily. “We’re in a fuckin hospital for crying out loud. What’s wrong with you guys? He’s not resisting, and I’m driving him in. Go back to your station. And tell your captain that Kemp won’t forget this bullshit move.”

The young cops waited for their senior man to process Cooper’s words. Finally, a guy who had levelled a Colt 45 at me gave a quick nod of his head and snarled at Cooper, “It’s on your head if this asshole escapes.”

“I can live with that – go away before you shoot someone by accident.” Cooper said dismissively. He turned his attention to me, “Joe, sorry about that. The chief insisted over my

objection. I'm parked out back. Kemp and I would like to talk with you for a little while off the record. I know you have a lawyer. We have talked to Morse. You must have some deep pockets Joe, but as I say – off the record. I you want Morse – no problem – we get all formal. But I think this might work for you.”

“You say that often Coop?” I asked sincerely.

“Nah,” he replied. “That’s the first fuckin time,” and he laughed out loud. He was relieved that he’d pulled off my arrest so smoothly.

I thought about Frank’s advice. “Okay – off the record.”

The Aftermath

“How is Kemp, Fred?” I asked as I settled into the passenger seat beside Cooper. “Did I jump through all the hoops that he laid out for me?”

“Kemp is Kemp. What can I tell you? But let me say this. The fact that you got Stu Langdon’s killer is a huge plus on your side. That hunting knife we found on Terry Bullock is going to pose one fuck of a hurdle for his defence counsel. And we’ve tied that little 22 peashooter of his to about three other local murders. Seems Terry has been fairly busy dishing out death. He better hire Morse for his lawyer. He needs him more than you do. The forensic boys found enough on that blade and gun to fry that big boy’s bacon four or five times over.”

“Thanks Coop. Langdon was a good guy.”

“He was that,” was all Fred Cooper could say.

“What about the rest of it Fred - how’s Kemp handling that?”

“I’ll let him tell you all about it. You’ve been a busy guy though Joe Holiday. No one would ever question that.”

The ride to the cop station and Chance Kemp was done at Coop’s standard slow speed. I didn’t object at all today. He offered tidbits of information about the different buildings and streets. This is where the dumpster was when they found that dead three hundred pound professional wrestler wearing a black evening dress and high heels - that sort of thing.

We silently rode to Kemp’s office in an elevator designed for VIPs, the very wealthy and the mayor. How much had that particular perk cost the municipal taxpayers? I was certain that no real prisoner had ever ridden in it. We stepped off the elevator into a brightly illuminated, twelve by twenty foot, thickly carpeted foyer with oak doors leading off in different directions. This had to be the cop shop’s executive administrative suite. A tall distinguished man holding an expensive brief case stood and approached me.

“Bob Morse,” he said. “It’s good to meet you Doc. Your brother, Frank, sends his regards. I have had a chance to talk with Chance and Coop, so I am aware of their position. If you want meet with them informally, that is your decision – one I generally would advise against

– but yours is a very unusual circumstance. However, if you feel threatened or are uncertain about anything I am right here.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Coop directed me towards the room closest on the left. If I had been going to meet the CEO of any major corporation, I would not have expected a more luxurious setting.

“Kemp knows how to work,” I said to Coop making a general sweep of the large foyer with my right arm.

Fred Cooper just smiled and muttered, “He’s paid a price for it though.”

Just inside the door that Fred had directed me through, was an attractively dressed middle-aged secretary keyboarding report notes into an imposing modern computer. Fred just placed his hand into the small of my back and gently guided me through the interior door saying, “Hi Doreen, the boss is expecting us.”

Chance Kemp’s narrow muscular butt was leaning against the rounded front edge of a mahogany desk big enough to anchor an aircraft carrier. He was in the process of hanging up his land phone. There was an inquisitive look on his face as he looked up to greet us. He did not offer to shake my hand. I guess, at that moment, I knew that I wasn’t here to get another medal. He was dressed in a crisp cotton white button down collar shirt with a regimental tie, tailored navy blue slacks with a crease you could use to cut cheese, and highly polished black loafers. Very sartorial for a cop! Without his suit jacket on, it was even more evident that the guy pumped iron. By comparison, Cooper and I were dressed like third world peons.

The huge window behind the top cop looked out over the city and then, in the distance, the bay. Initially, Kemp said nothing. He simply gestured sharply with his right hand for me to sit on one of the two straight back wooden chairs he used for company. The chairs were neatly spaced on each side and two feet back of where Kemp had been leaning. After indicating in which chair I was to sit, Kemp wheeled quickly around his desk and plopped himself down into his black leather ergonomic executive armchair. I guess he was a guy who expected instant

obedience. I remained standing. He looked blankly at the two vacant chairs and then shifted his hard eyes up to meet mine.

“I said sit,” he said fighting the impatience. He started to rise threateningly from his chair. Kemp was physically powerful man with a short fuse – a bully.

“Actually, you didn’t say a thing. I’d prefer to stand.”

I thought that Kemp was about to have an apoplectic meltdown. I noticed a little vein suddenly begin to throb at his temple. I smiled sweetly at him. As well as being a bully, the guy was a pretentious and arrogant prick. Then I felt Cooper at my side. “Co-operate – you may be surprised.”

“Sorry,” I said as I sat in my choice of the hard chairs.

Kemp eased himself back into his own luxurious chair as if he was suffering from haemorrhoids. Maybe that was one of the prices he had paid that Coop had mentioned.

Once I was sitting, Kemp gave me this piercing stare and pectoral flex that was supposed to intimidate me. “You’ve been busy Holiday. Let me ask you something? Do they often let you question suspects in Canada with a loaded gun pointed at their heads?”

“Is this a trick question Kemp?”

I heard Cooper try to stifle a short laugh.

“Very cute, Holiday. Well, do they?”

I tried to get more serious. Hell, I had to get more serious. My future with Mia was at stake. “Only if there are no witnesses – come on Kemp, you know they don’t – but guess what? I’m not a cop anymore. And I’m not in Canada.”

“Canada doesn’t have the death penalty: Florida does. Let’s just take a moment to reflect on the last few days in the life of Mr. Joseph Holiday. Shall we?”

“Whatever floats your boat Kemp,” I said trying to stay calm. Why was he talking about the death penalty with me for?

“You threaten Billy Ray Boyle in a public park. It has been reported to me that you had assaulted the same man a number of days ago in a Clearwater Beach bar. What do you have to say to that?”

“Not guilty. Self defense. And I was the one who told you about that altercation in the bar.”

Kemp ignored my response and pressed on.

“You then hold Terry Bullock captive at gunpoint, after you had already shot him twice. You tell him you won’t call 911 until he agrees to answer a series of questions - most of which will incriminate him. You shoot Ted Bullock and terrify his wife in your girlfriend’s apartment. You frighten Ted badly enough that the man thoroughly soils himself, and you then tell his wife that if she doesn’t tell us the truth about what happened to her daughters, you’ll come back and put her out of her misery. Is that about right?”

“Give or take on the wording, I think I said – punch your ticket - but Terry Bullock did break into my room with the intention of topping me. He also shot at me first. You’ve already checked the bullet holes in my room. And I think that maybe I was temporarily insane when I returned Ted’s three shots at me, but I think that’s still probably self-defence. And Eliza Bullock should have been terrified and worse years ago for what she let that bastard and his son do to her kids. So maybe it was a crime of passion. I’ll have to ask my lawyer,” I replied. “He’s waiting outside.”

Kemp had used his fingers for emphasis as he listed the number of sins that I had committed. I thought I’d answered the first two points effectively. I continued to speak. “But then I guess you could also say that I found out who killed a retired Tampa Bay detective, Stuart Langdon, and left you the evidence to prove it. I also figured out who tortured and raped Mia Doulton. I will admit that I got in a little personal payback before I let you have him. And I have explained to you who it was that killed Vickie Doulton three years ago and why. As far as Eliza Bullock goes, well, I was just messin with her head when I told her I’d punch her ticket to hell. Fuck her if she can’t take a joke. Remember, she killed Vicki.”

“You’re a regular little clean up squad,” Kemp started.

“I haven’t finished. If you can get the Bullock family talking against each other, you should be able to lay different charges against each of them. Your own D.A. will almost certainly want to plea bargain rather than have me testify at any of those trials. As far as the media is concerned, each case was solved as a result of hard slogging police work. It’ll look good on you Kemp. It’s another victory for law, order and the American way. You’ll be a hero. And once all the stuff is in on Terry Bullock and his 22, and Ted Bullock and some of his businesses, you should be in a position to wipe a number of old and recent crimes off the slate. That should look very impressive on the quarterly reports. The mayor will be thrilled. Maybe you should think about giving me a medal.”

Kemp had been shaking his head in disbelief for the last piece of my dissertation. I was thinking it might be a good time to ask for my lawyer when Cooper surprised me. He stepped forward to stand beside my chair.

“Chance,” he said quietly, “you will be able to tell Babe and Paula that you brought the man who killed Stu to justice. That’s got to be worth something.”

Kemp shifted his hard stare onto Coop. Cooper just shrugged – like what are you going to do? Chance Kemp seemed to be thinking about what we had said. Fred Cooper and I were both quiet. Let the top cop work it out.

Finally, after almost a minute of total silence, Kemp made his decision, “Get him out of here Coop - now!”

“Let’s go,” Cooper said to me as he hooked my elbow with his meaty hand.

I rose to go with him.

Seconds later – and after I thanked Bob Morse for being there for me - we were descending on the silent elevator. Cooper turned to me and handed me my backpack. “I think we’re done here Joe. Kemp doesn’t want to bring you into the light of day. The media might love you more than him. Try to stay out of trouble, but give me a call sometime. I’m retiring in five months. Maybe, we can get together and talk about going into business together.”

I was dumbfounded. I thought I was going to jail for a long time, and the guy is asking me to go into some kind of business deal with him. "Can't do it Coop," was all I could say. "I don't have a green card. It wouldn't be legal."

"Marry Mia – and you're good to go - something to think about eh?"

When the elevator stopped, we stepped out into the underground parking area beneath the police building. There was a cruiser waiting.

"Thanks Coop. And what was Kemp's little shot about Canada having no death penalty while Florida does. I mean I didn't kill anyone. Did I?"

"Pretty touch and go with Ted Bullock, but it was just Kemp fuckin with your head. Call it a sphincter test."

Cooper extended his hand that I shook gratefully. "It's been a pleasure getting to know a little about you Fred. Enjoy your retirement."

"Take Mr. Holiday wherever he'd like to go – within the counties," Cooper said to the young uniformed officer who held the rear door of his cruiser open for me.

"Tampa General," I said wondering if this was a joke and someone was going to shoot me and dump me in the everglades. But Cooper had given me back my backpack. I took a quick glance inside. The Beretta and Sig smiled back at me.

An hour or two after I had settled in my chair beside Mia's bed to tell her princess stories, a skinny guy wearing blue pants and jacket and a red and white striped shirt, stepped into the room.

"Excuse me. Are you Joe Holiday? You are one tough guy to find."

"I guess so," I replied hesitantly. What would a Purolator guy want with me?

"Sign here please," he said as he handed me a white eleven by fourteen-inch air bubble package.

I scratched my signature.

"Have a nice day sir," he said with a nod of his head. "I hope your friend is feeling better soon."

I tore open the large envelope. A multi-page sheaf of legal papers slipped out with another white business sized envelope tightly paper clipped to the front of them. I carefully separated the envelope from the bundle. I opened it. Inside was a single unlined sheet of paper with a printed message and a smaller envelope that fell and landed face on the floor. I read the note:

HI Doc:

Go through the papers and sign wherever the lawyers have put and x, and return them to me as soon as you can. The sale of the house went through. I used the Power of Attorney you left with me to finish things up. The insurance claim was paid. It is included in the cheque for the attached. Give my regards to Max. Stay well.

F

Now there's a statement of brotherly love I thought as I reached down to retrieve the smaller envelope that had fallen from the note. I ripped it open. Inside, was a cashier's check made out to me for one million eight hundred and sixty four thousand two hundred and ninety seven dollars and fifteen cents.

"Mia - wake up. I've got something to tell you."