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Broken jackal

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Broken Jackal

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of
English And Comparative Literature
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements For The Degree
Master of Arts

by

John Anthony Mimosa Swanson

December 2003

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ABSTRACT

BROKEN JACKAL

by John Anthony Mimosa Swanson

This creative thesis portrays the California private detective in the twenty-first century. It depicts social conflict between man and nature and delineates the conflicts within personal and professional relationships.

The purpose of this work is to entertain. The reader views this world through the eyes of the detective. The audience is challenged to solve the crimes before the protagonist, while facing a number of twists and turns within this suspenseful thriller. Besides a fast-paced plot, this novel conveys a number of historical, racial, and political themes appearing in contemporary society.

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Critical preface

The Private Detective Novel

The private detective novel inspired me to become a writer. The combination of inductive and deductive reasoning created a passion, to craft a book that imitates existing elements in the genre while introducing some original ones.

Besides the aesthetics of the genre, the different ideologies the detective represents influenced my desire to write this novel. Baker E. Nietzel claims that "The tough detective school of contemporary mystery fiction is a mixture of cynicism, violence, native American pragmatism and social psychology" (1). It is through these elements that the detective, as a character, brings a rationale to a world that is un-rational, while he/she represents justice in a world that is unjust. The novel itself, created from picaresque, gothic, and domestic fiction, depicts historical, social, and psychological themes while the

detective gathers facts to restore harmony to the universe. The themes vary, however, from different time periods, geographical regions, and personal ideology the writer chooses to depict.

Edgar Allan Poe, for example, "provided stories which oriented readers to a particular form of tension between the ordinary and the bizarre, between sentiment and reason, and between appearance and reality" (Landrum, Browne, and Browne 1). Although many look at Poe's work as a paradigm of what later became the detective novel, elements of his aesthetics made their way into other detective writers' works of fiction. Arthur Conan Doyle, with the deductive logic of Sherlock Holmes, examines many of the same social tensions as Poe.

Doyle did little to modify the evolved style of popular fiction in England, but like Poe he synthesized a form from a variety of sources, adding his own genius to a multitude of available conventions. Dozens of imitations and further variations followed. By the turn of the century classical detective fiction was firmly established in England and was becoming an integral part of the fiction popular with Americans. (Landrum, Browne,

and Browne 2)

In America, however, the popularity of the genre began in *Black Mask* magazine. Known as pulp writers, authors like Carrol John Daly, Dashiell Hammett, Frederick Nebel, Frank Grubar, Raoul Whitfield, George Harmon Coxe, and Earl Stanly Gardner established the hard-boiled detective.

According to David Geherin, the popularity of the hard-boiled detective was a result of the drastic changes that occurred in society shortly after the turn of the century:

The outbreak of World War I in 1914, for example, seriously challenged a number of comforting assumptions about man's ability to shape, by reason, his own destiny, about the inevitable progress of the human race, and about the inviolability of civilization itself. (4)

Besides World War I influencing America, Prohibition created organized crime and turned millions of law-abiding citizens into criminals each time they took a sip of alcohol. The world became too complex and chaotic for logic alone to solve crimes. Geherin argues that this is what changed the classical "whodunit" in America:

But if crime and disorder are the rule rather than the exception, as they seemed to be in America in the

1920's, then no individual, no matter how brilliant, could be expected to restore order merely by discovering the identity of the criminal. (5)

The hard-boiled detective accepted the corrupt environment of crime, where he often got deceived, kidnapped, lied to, and beaten-- not in order to rid the world of evil or make it a better place in which to live, but to slow down the evolution of corruption.

Carroll John Daly and Dashiel Hammet, the most popular detective writers of that time, created heroes that were strong enough to survive in the actual world that surrounded them:

Like many other writers at that time, they were merely responding to the changes in values, or perhaps more accurately to the loss of previously held values, and were thus drawn to a kind of writing that would allow them to reflect as realistically as possible a world which seemed to them marked by disorder, uncertainty, and violence. (Geherin 7)

Writers like Daly and Hammet created in their stories a corrupt world that represented the actual world around them. It was not the realism, however, that sparked the success of these novels; it was the private detective, who dealt with

this corrupt environment, who popularized this genre.

Ironically, his character did not evolve from the realism found in the early twentieth century. In fact, this new hero's characterization stemmed from the earliest American novels. According to Geherin,

his [the private detective's] ancestry can be traced back . . . to such legendary heroes as Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett and to the frontier hero of James Fenimore Cooper's *Leather Stocking Tales*, Natty Bumppo. (8)

This juxtaposition of an old hero in a new environment created a genre that satisfied its readers.

In the nineteen thirties, however, the genre began once again to lose its popularity. The major criticism against it claimed that although the dramatic situations were real, the private detective was not. America, no longer satisfied with an invisible hero, usually predictable, desired a main character as real as his environment.

Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, subsequently, met their criteria.

Chandler strove to create a complex hero with as much credibility as he could manage. Initially his intention was simply to see how far he could extend

beyond the limits of the pulp formulas he inherited.

[He states] "I thought I could perhaps go a bit further, be a bit more humane, get a bit more interested in people than in violent death."

(Geherin 73)

Chandler's characters possessed greater depth and complexity than his contemporaries' characters. "The difference between him and his colleagues is his willingness to suffer on behalf of others, including some who aren't even his client" (Geherin 75). Besides his sensitivity, Philip Marlowe's popularity came from his literacy. His use of simile and metaphor expanded his audience; readers who lacked prior interest in the classic "whodunit" became fans of Chandler's Marlowe because of the descriptions, metaphors, and images.

Robert B. Parker's Spenser, similarly, possesses many of the same characteristics as Marlowe. Spenser's sensitivity, although present, is more subtle than Marlowe's. The writing styles, although possess many of the same characteristics, are completely different. Where Chandler projects images to his reader, like a movie camera, Parker paints them for his reader and walks them through the scene, like a tour guide. Where Chandler's strength is

found in simile and metaphor, Parker's syntax, through parallelism and alliteration, often contains the characteristics of metered poetry.

Both Chandler and Parker influenced me. The more I study the genre, the more interesting it becomes. The genre changes through time and depicts historical, psychological, and social qualities found in different time periods. Different regions depict ideologies found in their societies.

My story depicts the ideologies found in America as society makes its way into the new millennium. Science versus nature, man versus science, and man versus nature are themes that run through this genre. The conflict between what is right and what is practical also weaves in and out of the story. The spiritual versus the real is a conflict my detective battles with throughout the novel.

Cole Gregory, the private detective in this story, *Broken Jackal*, in many ways is a combination of Spenser and Marlowe. Like Marlowe, he reveals aspects of sensitivity and uses simile and metaphor in his diction. Like Parker, he often alludes to classic literature, and possesses poetic qualities in his dialogue. Gregory, who eventually graduated from the University of Santa Cruz with a degree in

Liberal Arts, once desired to become a police officer; once pursued a degree in law enforcement from Humbolt State; once attended the police academy; once completed the FBI's program; and for a couple years served as one of the FBI's top profilers. It is revealed through the detective's dialogue, and believed by the other characters that Gregory's failure in these institutions stems from his lack of ability to respect authority and obey rules and follow procedure. A closer look at the detective, however, portrays that it is the kinds of rules, the types of authority, and the styles of procedure that Gregory dislikes.

Cole Gregory agrees to investigate the case of a maintenance technician, Harold Blands. Blands was suspended from his job for harassing an administrator by the name of Sharon Pane. Pane had been receiving threatening letters from another employee and pointed the finger at Blands. While engaged in this case, he also takes on a missing person's case for another client by the name of Arthur Harrington. Eventually, Gregory finds himself overwhelmed with the two cases, as he slowly gets stripped of all his assets and the forces against him grow stronger.

A sub-plot that runs through the story is Gregory's

relationship with his fiancée'. Maggie Colfacts, a woman he has known for years, and plans to marry, is growing distant and begins to act peculiar. Colfacts becomes paranoid, a paranoia that expands throughout the novel. Gregory finds himself torn between helping the woman he loves and cares about, and closing these cases which expand, rather than contract, the more they unfold.

The discourse of the subplot creates another theme in the novel, as well as another aspect of the detective's identity. It appears that Gregory believes he can restore order to the universe, but he has no clue how to solve his own personal problems. Facade is another theme that emerges from the novel and weaves in and out of the characters and plot.

Broken Jackal is a fast read and a page turner, after the introduction of the main characters and the plot gets rolling. It is intended to be the first of a large series. Glory to God for the ability to write and the opportunity to live in a country where I can freely express all feelings, all passions, and all discourses. Special thanks to my parents for believing in me and my family for supporting me. Thanks to Samuel Maio, Donald Keeseey, and Chris Fink for their time and feedback.

Annotated Bibliography:

Alderson, Martha, and Neysa Clouteau. "Anne Morice."

And Then There Were Nine . . . More Women Of Mystery.

Ed. James S. Bakerman. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1985. 58-79.

Anne Morice writes entertaining detective novels that have wit, charm, careful structure and delightful series character. The stories are quite traditional and quite British. Because they are so traditional and British, one is tempted to liken Morice to Agatha Christie. Because the stories are so funny, one is tempted to liken Morice to Emma Lathen. (60)

The text also mentions that Morice's novels contain small casts of characters, take place in a short period of time, and geographically confined to an area of a few miles.

Baker, Robert A., and Michael T. Nietzel. Private Eyes:

One Hundred And One Knights: A survey of American

Detective Fiction 1922-1984. Bowling Green: UP, 1985.

Examines the hard boiled detective, beginning with the *Black Mask* magazine, where the text discusses Dashiell Hammet. The text moves from *Black Mask* and examines the different styles found in William Campbell Gault, John D. Macdonald, Joseph Shaw, and Robert B. Parker. The text argues that the tough detective school is a combination of cynicism, violence, Native American pragmatism, and social psychology.

Bakerman, Jane S. "Daphne du Maurier." And Then There Were Nine . . . More Women of Mystery. Ed. Jane S. Bateman. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1985. 10-29.

Examines Maurier's formulas, which date back to folk literature.

Black, Joel. The Aesthetics Of Murder: A Study In Romantic Literature And Contemporary Culture. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP, 1991.

Argues that murder can be critiqued as an art form. Talks about murder as fine art. Black claims that crime evokes feelings of sublimity if it is acted out properly.

Cleveland Carol. "Shirley Jackson." And Then There Were

Nine . . . More Women Of Mystery. Ed. Jane S.

Bakerman. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1985. 198-219.

Carol compares Jackson's world to the world of the hard boiled school.

Gaskill, Rex W. "Margery Allingham." And Then There Were

Nine . . . More Women Of Mystery. Ed. Jane S.

Bakerman. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1985. 30-57.

Examines Allingham's detective fiction. Gaskill claims that Allingham's attention to the descriptions of settings, which take place between London and East Coast England, and attention to character development are some of the reasons her detective fiction is so popular.

Geterin, David. The American Private Eye: The Image In Fiction. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1985.

Investigates detective fiction from Edgar Allen Poe to Robert B. Parker. Claims that the detective was questioned after WWI because man's ability to shape his own reason came into question. Geherin believes that this influenced one of the most significant changes in the genre.

Klein, Kathleen Gregory. "Patricia Highsmith." And Then There Were Nine . . . More Women Of Mystery. Ed.

Jane S. Bakerman. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1985. 168-97.

The text examines the different ways that Highsmith's fiction takes a grim look at human nature.

Landrum, Larry N., Pat Browne, and Ray B. Browne.

Dimensions Of Detective Fiction. N.P. : Popular 1976.

Claims that three forms lead to detective fiction: picaresque, gothic, and domestic fiction.

Soitos, Stephen F. The Blues Detective: A Study Of African American Detective Fiction. Amherst: U Of Massachusetts P, 1996.

Argue that the Black detective is unique due to his persona, double-conscious detection, vernacular, and use of hoodoo. His persona is his blackness, which is an ingredient for the success of the investigation.

The blues detectives identity is closely related to his community. Soitos claims that the blues detective is the most complex investigator due to his cultural heritage. The blues detective's double-consciousness detection associates the trickster figure with

detection and writing itself; Black themes usually dominate the plot. The vernacular is another important ingredient. Specific expressive arts formed part of their culture and derived from folk tradition-- music and dance, and Black language for example. The use of hoodoo/voodoo represents indigenous, syncretic religions of African Americans in the New World, as well as represents an alternative world view.

Tani Stefano. The doomed Detective: The Contribution Of The Detective Novel To Post Modern American And Italian Fiction. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1984.

Investigates the difference between the detective and anti-detective novel. According to Stefano, the detective novel provides a solution, where as the anti-detective novel creates a suspension of the situation.

Chapter 1

The first step when preparing for combat requires the thorough knowledge and recognition of your allies. Joe Karuthers in 11-A could qualify as one. I lit his pilot light once. And there's Nick Boulder. I always bring beer to his Super Bowl parties. Then there's the Baxters, from Canada, pretty much keep to themselves. They could go either way. And of course, Francine Bennet from 37-D. I made it a point to make her feel welcome whenever she asked to borrow gourmet spices, like parsley, sage, or rosemary, or sometimes even garlic. Especially during those frantic mornings, when she wore nothing but a loosely-tied robe.

I figured things looked pretty good, as I sat there in the orange springy seat in courtroom D of the Los Gatos court house. Martin was all smiles, speaking to the

assistant DA, several rows in front of me. Yet again, Martin smiles at anything; it's just something he does. His eyes broke from his negotiation and flashed on me, followed by a quick nod. We left our seats and met in the hall.

"So what's the count?" I said.

"You're out of there," Martin returned, as his smile widened.

"Just like that?"

"Yup."

"Then why did I need you?"

"I kept you out of jail."

"And for that, I thank you. "But when we arrived this morning, you told me we were going to kick ass."

"We did. Tyler Bains' anyway."

"But I already did that."

"I know, you threw him through the patio window."

"He didn't go all the way through."

"He shattered the glass."

"It was safety glass," I said. "It's supposed to shatter." We left the building.

Outside, the sky was covered with black clouds, but the streets were dry, and a bright radiant glare persisted where the sun tried breaking through the clouds.

"You know he left me no choice," I said, leaning

against my truck.

"They never do." Martin set his briefcase on the pavement and searched for his car keys in the large pocket of his black overcoat. "I got the battery charges dropped."

"What about the civil suit?"

"I took care of that, too. But, Tom Olsen, the property owner wants you gone; there's nothing I can do about that."

"What about my friendly neighbors?"

"What about them?"

"Didn't you have them sign something to help swing the court's decision?"

"They want you gone, too."

"I thought they all liked me; I'm such a fun guy."

"You make them all apprehensive."

"So what are you saying, I've got till the end of the month?"

Martin stopped smiling. He looked at the ground when he spoke. "He managed to get a restraining order against you. You're not allowed within a hundred feet of the premises."

"So how am I supposed to get my stuff?"

"I'll call Peninsula Moving. Within a couple of hours,

they'll have your personal belongings in storage. You can pick them up once you find a place."

"How am I supposed to get my mail?"

"I don't know. I will see what I can work out with the apartment manager."

"Where am I supposed to go? I haven't collected from Mrs. Bains yet."

"Move in with Maggie."

"Yeah, right."

"In six month you'll be married to her. Think of it as a preliminary hearing before the trial."

"As appealing as you make it sound, Martin, she'll never go for it. It's a religious thing."

"Well, I'm sure you'll work something out."

Martin opened the back door of his BMW and pulled out a 9 by 12 envelope.

"I've got a job for you," he said as he handed me the file. "The guy's name is Blands, Harold Blands."

"And what did Blands, Harold Blands do?"

"He was recently fired from his job for sexually harassing the operations manager. I believe her name is Sharon Pane. It's all in the file."

"What did he tell her, she was passionately dressed, or he wanted to undress her passionately?"

"I had a brief encounter with her and noticed there wasn't much to undress," Martin said. "She claims he's been stalking her and sending her love notes."

"Well, it's Valentine's Day," I said. "I thought that's what people did."

"You'll see for yourself that the content in these letters adds a new twist to Valentine's day. Blands, on the other hand, wants to sue his employer for denying him his constitutional rights when they abruptly fired him."

"Where do I fit into all of this? If the company failed to follow the proper procedures, it's between you guys to battle it out in court."

"Procedures were followed, but my client claims he was set up. It's all in there."

"What do you think?"

"I believe him. But more importantly I need an investigator, and you need a job."

"Then it's settled."

"We'll make the same financial arrangements as we have in the past. Is that all right?"

"That's fine," I said.

As I drove out of the parking lot, tiny slivers of precipitation quickly dotted my windshield. I had forgotten my cell-phone that morning, so it was about as useful as my

computer, as well as my fire-arms, and other weapons, which all safely shared the same small space inside the walls of my apartment. That is until a bunch of heavy-drinking moving men attempt to transport them to purgatory. No phone; no computer; no weapons; and I no longer had mail access, or a roof over my head. Who's to say Y2K was a hoax.

Chapter 2

I arrived at Maggie's about seven o'clock that evening, accompanied by Chinese takeout and a bottle of Corbel. Another important step when planning a combat strategy is gathering the appropriate weapons for that particular battle. Maggie was always a push-over for kungpao, especially when it was seasoned with a pungent touch of charm. I spent that afternoon, unproductively, trying to repossess my stuff from my apartment. Although I broke down and purchased some clothes, I was still wearing the black monkey suit I wore in court.

Maggie lived in a quiet neighborhood in Sunnyvale. Sunnyvale is unique, for it's a city where in some areas different social classes share the same city block. Maggie's block was no exception. Both sides of the street were lined with large Ecler style homes with oversized

windows. The sidewalk separated a small strip of lawn that contained a couple sycamore trees, from a small block of lawn, giving home to a few small trees, usually maples. In the eighties many of the four bedroom homes were converted into duplexes. The only way to tell the difference between the buyers and the renters is by the cars they drive. Maggie drove a ninety-two, red, Toyota Tercel.

She opened the door before I had a chance to knock; she didn't seem surprised to see me or dinner. She wore a pair of beige slacks with a matching low cut sweater. A gold chain laced gently around her neck complimented her fair skin, while it dangled a gold heart that fell a couple inches above her cleavage.

"Happy Valentine's Day," she said before wrapping her arms around me.

It was a little awkward kissing her while carrying bags of warm food, but I made do.

"I see you brought my favorite." Her strawberry-blonde hair seemed to bounce off her shoulders when she spoke. "I guess that means we're not going out."

"Anything you want," I said as I placed the bags on the coffee table and sat on the couch.

"I'll get some plates."

"I figured I'd let you choose your own Valentine's

gift," I cleverly retorted as I took the containers out of the bags.

Maggie returned with a couple plates, a couple wine glasses, some serving spoons, and chopsticks. "That sounds really sweet. But-- I would prefer to stay in tonight." She began dishing up our plates. "You read my mind with the take-out."

I opened the Champagne and poured us each a glass. "I aims to please, Ma'am."

Maggie's living-room was petite, yet her careful placement of objects provided the room with an echoing aesthetics. The hard-wood floors, covered with a glossy layer of varnish, sparkled in areas that were brightly lit, and melted into the off-white walls. Along the southern wall was a fireplace, free of ash. A few feet above the fireplace was a solid oak shelf that ran the entire length of the wall, providing shelter to artists like Shakespeare, Dickens, Poe, and Frost. Opposite that wall, a large shelving unit contained a picture of us, surrounded by a small clock in the shape of Big Ben, some oriental vases, and several antique looking trinkets. In the center of the western wall, a large imitation of Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin on the Rocks* loomed towards the cream colored couch. Below the painting, a Sony VCR, television, and stereo

system rested neatly inside a narrow, vertical, oak case with Plexiglas doors. On the coffee table, next to dinner was a remote that tempted me to flick through the channels. I wisely chose not to.

"The students really drained me today," Maggie said before she gracefully scooped some kungpao into her mouth.

"They're a bunch of eighteen-year-olds."

"No, there's something else." She twirled some chow mien around her chop sticks. "There's something strange going on in the classroom."

"Don't tell me they're not doing their homework," I said in a deep, formal voice.

"I only wish their lack of interest towards Melville was my only problem. I'm having problems controlling my two-thirty class."

"Mutiny!" I shouted, filling up her glass.

"I wish it were that simple. There's something weird going on."

"Like what?" I heaped a large spoonful of fried rice onto my plate.

"Like there's some sort of a joke they're keeping from me."

"Maybe they're cheating. I remember taking a psychology class at Humbolt State, where someone got a hold

of a final exam and sold copies of the test for twenty bucks a pop."

"Maybe-- but the quality of their writing doesn't reveal that."

"You mean their papers aren't good enough to imply cheating."

"Right."

I dumped the remainder of the chow mien onto Maggie's plate and the remainder of the fried rice onto mine. I made a gesture towards her with the kungpao and she shook her head. I emptied the contents of the kungpao onto my plate and crammed the emptied containers into one of the large bags they came in. Maggie took the bag into the kitchen to throw it away. While she was gone, I drained the bottle of champagne into her glass. When she returned, she picked up her glass and sat close to me. I put my arm around her.

"Cole, is it possible that the Literature department enrolled someone into my classroom for the sole purpose of evaluating me?"

"Anything's possible," I said.

"So it's possible there could be a spy in my classroom."

"If there is you have nothing to worry about. If anything, you'll come out smelling sweeter than the finest

French perfume."

"Yeah, extracted from the *finest* semen-- from the *finest* dead sperm whale."

"That depends upon where and when, and most importantly who is smelling you," I said placing my empty glass on the coffee table. "But from where I'm sitting, you smell pretty damn good."

Maggie turned her head and gently kissed me on the cheek. She placed her glass next to mine on the coffee table and rested her head on my shoulder. Strands of her soft hair tickled my ear. She really did smell nice. No, that's an understatement. She was the combination of pine needles, and blossoming roses moist with dew. "Thank you for listening. But from where my students sit, I stink."

"You can't please everybody," I said, caressing her shoulder, preparing my next move. "I guess we all have problems with our clients at one time or another. That last one I had sure turned out to be a wash."

"Debbie will pay you; I mean, you did what she asked."

"Yeah. I know. I followed her husband everywhere, and watched him do everything. I practically lived in my truck, while he ate in cheap coffee shops, and cheated at racquetball. A part of the job I hate."

"I know. I hardly saw you." She began slowly brushing

her hand across my leg.

"And I didn't find one blemished grain of dirt on him."

"Not in public, anyway." Her brush strokes were becoming slower and softer.

"How was I to know that every night, while I slept, he was banging my next-door neighbor."

"How ironic. At least you figured it out, and gathered enough proof to show Debbie."

"Only to have her husband come over to slice me up." I moved my hand from her shoulder and began messaging her neck.

"That was certainly an extravagant mistake on his part." Her skin was soft but her neck was tight. It was like feeling the sharp metal of a rim through a flat tire.

"Mine too."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it looks like I'm in trouble again."

"What kind of trouble?" Maggie broke away enough to face me. "You're not going to jail again, are you?"

"No. I've been evicted."

Maggie grabbed her glass from the coffee table. "When do you have to leave?"

"I'm gone."

"Where do you plan to go?" She swallowed the last of

her champagne.

"I figured I'd stay here for a while."

"You can't do that. Not that I wouldn't love having you around-- but it wouldn't be right."

"Come on Maggie, we're going to be married soon anyway."

"You just can't. You know how my mom already feels about you. What will I tell her if she precipitously arrives-- the way she often does-- and finds you lounging around?"

"The truth."

"No, Cole," Maggie said as she stood up. "I'm sorry but I'm not capable of dealing with anything like this right now."

"You'll have to sooner or later."

"I realize that," she said picking up both our glasses. "But I've never taught this many classes before; I need my space."

"I thought you were concerned about what your mom thought."

"I am. That too." she walked into the kitchen.

From the couch I heard her running water into the glasses. I heard the dishwasher open, followed by a couple soft taps from the glasses being placed on the plastic

racks. Then the sharp scratchy sound of ceramic plates, followed by the thin chimey sound of shuffling silverware. I didn't get up. I had arranged my pieces perfectly. It was Maggie's move.

When she returned, her facial expression revealed that she had come to an uncomfortable decision.

"Cole-- I need to get up early tomorrow. You can have the couch tonight, but nothing long term. We'll work this out later; we always do. Right now, I want to go to bed."

"Do you want to go to bed or go to sleep?"

She gave me a slow kiss on the lips. When we broke apart she said, "I'm tired."

It appeared that the only thing I'd get that night was a place to stay. And I barely got that.

Chapter 3

I awoke to the sound of the garbage truck, banging Maggie's trash into its clangorous compacting compartment. It wasn't long ago when heavy men with large tattoos heaved metal cans over their shoulders and shook the garbage into the back of the truck; now a larger machine automatically grips a plastic container, dumps it and places it back, somewhere close to the curb. I knew the noisy compost truck that devours piles of leaves was soon to arrive, followed by the rickety recycling truck that picked up newspapers, bottles, and cans, so I figured it would be a good idea to get up and perhaps put on some coffee.

I took the opportunity to view the file on Harold Blands, finding that there wasn't much to tell. He was a maintenance technician for the San Jose Museum of Ancient Arts. He had been employed there a little more than five

years and had a near perfect attendance record. Not one of his previous employers, nor the Museum, had accused him of any harassment in the past, nor any other acts of misconduct. He was still married to the same woman after twenty-five years, and had a son attending graduate school at San Diego State. He owned his own home in Santa Clara and had never been convicted of anything as serious as jaywalking. Based on his file, Harold Blands set a good example for the American citizen. But I've learned there often exists a sea of discord between how one looks on paper, and what one does in life. Sharon Pane could have been one of those creatures who lived in that stormy sea of psychotic desire after getting tangled in Blands' disconnected net.

She had been receiving notes of passion on the windshield of her car. According to her, the first few notes were nothing more than innocent love letters. Yet the notes became more vulgar as time progressed, ultimately becoming violent. They all shared something in common: they all possessed traces of Harold Blands' finger prints. Yet again, the true correlation of facts or its antithesis would remain a mystery until I got a chance to view the letters and hear my client's side of the story.

I made arrangements to meet Harold Blands at Original

Joe's for lunch. The Italian restaurant, mostly noted for generous portions and authentic Italian meals, rested on the corner of First and San Carlos. The inside of the restaurant was spacious and dark. The main dining room consisted of roomy booths with soft maroon cushions. Along one side of the wall, large windows provided a vast view of San Carlos street. Absorbed in the back wall were gigantic golden hand basins and golden vases, imbedded inside glass cases. A lime green light fully illuminated a long planter box, containing bromeliads, palms, and ferns that rested on top of a partition separating the counter from the main dining room. At the far end of the counter, sitting in front of an untouched glass of water sat my client.

"Harold Blands," I said extending my hand. "I'm Cole Gregory."

Blands gripped my hand softly with a large clammy hand. He was a big, heavy, cumbersome looking gentleman. He wore his grayish hair slightly parted to one side, allowing it to cover the tops of his ears. The back of his hair fell slightly above his collar, exposing a dense ripple in the back of his neck, while the front flopped along the tops of his eye-brows. He wore a dark blue work-shirt with the name Harold embroidered above the left pocket. He had a round face with large blue eyes that had been reddened by either

tears or lack of sleep or both.

"I didn't do nothing," he said in a deep scratchy voice.

"That's what I'm here to prove." Our waiter approached us.

"You want your usual, Cole?" our waiter asked as he placed a loaf of bread in front of us.

"Yeah Henry, I'll have the usual."

"You want some mushrooms on your filet?"

"Loads," I said as I buttered a piece of bread.

"What can I get you?" Henry asked, looking at Harold.

"I don't want anything."

"Come on," I said. "This is on Uncle Martin."

"I'm not hungry."

"That's beside the point," I said. I pushed the bread in his direction. "When you have a meeting with me, you eat. Order something."

"I'll take a Heineken," my client responded in a musty voice.

"Henry, he'll take a Heineken and a full order of spaghetti."

"I'll be right back with your beers." Henry placed our ticket on the counter next to the grill-man and darted towards the bar.

"So tell me about yourself, Harold," I said as I buttered another piece of bread.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything. Martin briefed me on your situation, but I need to know more."

"Like what?"

"Like everything. Why you only have one kid? Why you're only a technician? Why after five years of perfect service, they fire you without question. But most importantly, why you're in this fix?"

Henry arrived with our beers. He opened the bottle of Heineken, filled a tall glass, and placed it in front of Harold. He popped the cap on my Coors Light and placed the bottle in front of me. From where we sat at the counter, we had a close view of the kitchen. I like to keep a close eye on what the cooks do with my food. In a way, it's entertainment, entertainment I take very seriously. Who knows what happens to your provisions behind closed doors.

Behind Henry, waiters and cooks avoided contact as they passed carrying hot pans and plates full of Italian cuisine. To the far end, near the front window, a pudgy chef with a toothpick turned steaks and burgers from a flaming mesquite grill. Next to him another cook kept a large grill slick with olive oil. Several salmon filets and

portions of breaded veal sizzled on top. Next to the grill, baskets of French fries danced in scalding vats of oil. To the right of the vats, another cook shook a sauté pan full of mushroom. We sat at the end of the counter, close to the bar. Across from us, a cook filled plates with different types of pastas and sauces. As I eagerly awaited my steak, Blands stared through his beer into a vast array of empty space.

"Let's start with Sharon Pane," I said. "What's her problem."

Blands kept his eyes fixed on his beer. "Sharon don't have any problem."

"Oh, I consider getting threatening letters on the windshield of her car a huge problem." I took a large swallow of beer. It felt good. There's nothing quite like the first swallow of beer.

"I didn't put them there," Harold said, still staring through his glass.

"I'm not saying you did. But based on my information, you spent a great deal of time in the parking lot around Sharon's car, and all the letters are loaded with your fingerprints."

"I'm responsible for the lights in the parking lot. I wouldn't spend so much time there if them damn kids would

stop busting them."

"What about your finger prints?"

"Like I said, I don't know anything about no letters. Someone else must have put them there." I could tell by his short answers that he had been preparing himself against accusations. Martin probably coached him a bit. At the moment my client didn't recognize his allies.

Henry arrived with our food. He placed my steak in front of me, and a plate of French fries next to it. He set a plate full of spaghetti in front of Blands, then made a gesture towards my beer. I nodded.

"What kind of rapport does Sharon Pane have with the other employees?" I cut into my steak.

Harold took his fork and began stirring it through his spaghetti. "Pretty good, I guess. Everybody respects the job she does."

"And what is that exactly?" I asked. I speared my fork through a mushroom and a piece of steak.

"At the Museum of Ancient Arts, there are about a dozen different supervisors. I have a supervisor, accounting has a supervisor, purchasing has a supervisor, MIS has a supervisor, the museum has a supervisor and so on. Sharon is their supervisor."

"So she is like a queen, and they're her privy

counsel," I said. I sliced a few more pieces of steak, causing the red juices to emerge onto my plate.

"I guess you could say that," Blands said before draining his beer. Harold wasn't much of a scholar on English government.

Henry arrived with a couple more beers. He opened Blands' and poured enough into his glass so that the foam made its way to the rim, without flowing over. He opened my beer and placed it in front of me. "Anything wrong with your spaghetti?" he asked Blands.

"No," Blands replied.

"How's your steak?"

"Primo," I said as I dumped a pile of catsup near my fries. I stopped talking for a while, and ate meat and drank beer. I hoped my silence would encourage my client to volunteer some information. It didn't. He just sat there, drinking his beer and agitating his fork through his spaghetti with his right hand-- while staring into nothingness. "Is Sharon Pane married," I asked, finally breaking the silence.

"Divorced."

"Any kids?"

"I don't think so."

"Is she close to anybody at work?" I drained my beer.

"What do you mean by that?" My client looked at me for the first time.

"Who does she mostly associate with?"

"Well, she's best friends with Peggy Mills."

"Who's Peggy Mills?"

"She's the head of the purchasing department. When Sharon started working there, a couple of years ago, then two hit it right off."

"How long has Peggy worked for the museum?"

"Peggy's been there forever. Before I started working there, anyway."

"Does Sharon Pane go out to lunch or have drinks after work with anyone?"

"Peggy."

"Besides Peggy."

Henry arrived once again with another round of beers. He removed the plate that once held the fries along with our empty bottles. He gazed for a moment at Blands' full mound of spaghetti, followed by a quick glance at my almost devoured steak. Blands wasted no time going for his beer.

"I often see her with Ronald Peters, the museum curator."

"How often?"

"Oh, it varies. They occasionally have coffee together

during breaks, and I've seen them go out to lunch a few times. Every once in a while they leave the premises together."

"Interesting," I said. "Do they leave in the same vehicle?"

"No. What I meant to say was, they walk to the parking lot together and leave at the same time."

"They could be meeting somewhere. Did you ever hear them argue about anything?"

"Never."

"Do they ever give you the impression that their relationship is anything other than platonic?"

"No."

The restaurant was filling up. There were no longer any available seats at the counter, and the overall noise level from the dining room had increased. There were fast exchanges of plates behind the counter, and everything moved at full pace. Henry took my empty plate away.

"Any desert today, Cole?"

I shook my head.

"You still working on that?" he gestured towards the spaghetti.

"No," my client returned.

Henry took the full plate of spaghetti and slid it

into a large to-go container. He tucked the food ticket underneath my bread plate. "Let me know if you guys want some more beers." Henry left.

I took another sip of beer. "Besides the curator and Peggy Mills, does Sharon Pane associate with anyone else?"

"Every Friday she goes out to lunch with the maintenance crew."

"So, in a way, you have lunch with her."

"Never."

"Why not? Do you have anything against her?"

Blands took a swallow of his beer and looked me in the eyes. "I would do anything for Sharon," he said.

"Then why don't you go to lunch with them?"

"I'm never invited."

"Why? Is there a problem between you and another maintenance worker?"

"Not really. I'm not close to any of them. But there's no serious problem. I usually bring my lunch from home. They probably realize that."

"Still, it's nice to be invited," I said. I stuffed the last piece of steak into my mouth.

"I know."

"What about your supervisor. How do you get along with him?"

"Ok, I guess."

"Do you ever feel that you should be the supervisor?"
I figured that the improper placement of power has encouraged people to do eviler acts than writing love notes.

"I've been there longer than him. I've been there longer than any of them. But I never really wanted the job; I'm happy doing what I'm doing."

"Let me get this straight," I said. "You've worked in the shop longer than anybody else, and nobody thinks twice when Sharon Pane excludes you."

I appeared to have struck a chord-- a low E-- perfect for playing the blues. Harold's eyes were glossy when he spoke. "I would give anything to go with them. If I could have lunch with her once-- just once-- it would make things all worth while. Or if she'd talked to me, the way she talks to other people . . . I guess that will never happen."

I was silent. A part of me started to sympathize with this guy. Or at least pity him. Here was a hard-working man who appeared innocuous. While he worked hard to support his family, he developed an infatuation for a female employee, who not only made him feel lower than worm food, but also jeopardized his livelihood. On the other hand, I empathized with Sharon Pane. Harold Blands was as weird as they come. Although he seemed harmless, there was something very

disturbing about his character. He was a slug. He sat there quietly, his sticky passions oozing onto the counter, while his slimy desires dripped into his bottle of Heineken.

"Can you tell me anything else that may help your case?" I asked. I looked at the bill.

"No," Harold said. His empty stare now coming back.

"Whatever you do, don't go anywhere near the museum," I said. Take a few days and relax. Spend some time with your wife. I'll clear this up as soon as I can. These things have a tendency to get worse before they get better. But I have a feeling things will work out in the end. Remember *Job*."

Harold looked at me blankly. I smiled as I left a tip.

Chapter 4

As I approached my car on First street, I noticed a brown 99 Toyota Camry parked directly behind my truck. Sitting at the steering wheel was a gray haired gentleman, who appeared to be in his early forties. Normally I wouldn't think twice about it; in fact, it's unusual not to find a vehicle parked behind you on this street during the middle of the day. But there was something about this one. Maybe it was the human figure behind the wheel. Most vehicles are vacant. I guess he could have been waiting for someone. Or maybe it bothered me because there were forty-five minutes left on the meter. If he were there to pick someone up, why feed the meter? Or maybe it was the person himself. He looked familiar. I couldn't remember where, but I knew I had seen him somewhere before. Or maybe it was the way his dark eyes glared through me as I opened the door

of my truck. Or maybe it was because he started his engine right after I started mine. Or maybe I was just paranoid. Maybe I had been spending too much time with Maggie, and maybe I was starting to believe that everyone was a spy. I was overwhelmed with maybes. Not good.

I turned left onto San Carlos, noticing that the Camry did the same. I figured it could be a coincidence, but decided to test the theory. As I approached the Orchard Supply hardware store, I signaled and merged into the left lane; the Camry did the same. I slowed into the turning lane, watching the Camry do the same, then I darted back into traffic. I noticed in the rear view mirror that the Camry was trying to get back into the center lane but had trouble due to traffic. I read the frustration on the face of the driver. I also made a mental note of the license plate number. It was obvious I was being followed. But by whom? And why?

As I waited for the light to change at the intersection of Meridian, I noticed my pursuer had caught up to me. He was a few car links behind but had me back in his sights. I didn't want him following me to my destination, nor did I want to alter my plans by physically confronting him, so I figured I should do my best to lose him.

I stayed on San Carlos for several miles until I

reached Bascom, where I made a left; he did the same. I remained on Bascom until I approached the county hospital; he did the same. I turned into the hospital parking lot; he did the same. Once inside the parking lot, he was directly behind me, and several cars were behind him. The lot was full and parking was spotty. People were scattered throughout the parking lot, walking to and from their cars. I turned down an aisle where an endless row of cars were tightly parked. The Camry followed me, accompanied by a few cars looking for parking spaces. I slowly drove down the aisle of cars, giving the appearance that I, too, was looking for a parking space. My pursuer's car could easily out maneuver my truck, so I could forget about any finesse moves. I was a whale pursued by a shark. I was forced to come to a stop when a fat dark lady in a purple jogging suit carelessly walked in front of me, and took her time in passing. None of us are ever in a hurry when we're at the hospital. I drove to the end of the aisle. I was given the option of turning either left or right, which provided me with the option to search other aisles for parking spaces, or slowly cruise through one of the aisles, in the other direction, to get back to the main entrance of the lot, where I could make my exit.

I didn't like my options, nor did I like my

predicament, nor did I like parking lots, especially hospital parking lots. At the time, I didn't like much. As I sat there at a dead stop, I was tempted to get out of my truck and beat the crap out of the creepy guy driving the Camry. At least I'd save him travel-time to the hospital. But that would only get me into more trouble. I needed to do something else. I needed to create a new attitude. I also needed to create a new set of options. In front of me was a long rectangular mound of ivy that ran the perimeter of the parking lot. This long narrow strip separated the parking lot from the side-walk. On the other side of the side-walk was a back street that fed into Bascom avenue in one direction and quickly dead-ended in the other. I checked my mirrors for cops, then drove straight into the ivy, attempting to roll over it. My four-wheel-drive-transmission easily cleared the curb, but the soil underneath the ivy was full of mounds and pot holes that sprung my truck from side to side as I made the climb. Thick vines, rocks, and broken sprinklers attacked the bottom of my truck as I revved over the mound, bouncing across the sidewalk onto a public side street. As I merged back onto Bascom avenue, I took one more look back at my pursuer, who was trapped in the parking lot at Valley Medial Center.

Chapter 5

I arrived at the San Jose museum of Ancient Arts a little after 2:30. For mid-February, the afternoon sun was unusually warm, even for California. I wandered around the grounds for a while, searching for the administration building. A carefully landscaped garden weaved between the various buildings, and unfolded into a picturesque park, with an illustrious glow and intricate details: plush Kentucky Blue-Grass accommodated rows of lofty rose bushes, partitions of manicured hedges, and quarrels of colorful flower beds. Dense redwoods, oaks, and poplars towered over striking maples and shined under lofty palms. Strategically arranged statues added to the garden's decor, while providing a flavor of authenticity.

I found myself in the middle of the grounds where two opposing staircases descended into a cement gallery that

contoured the outer structure of a tall narrow fountain. A lady in Levi shorts and a red tank-top sat on one of the benches and read a paper-back. On the other side of the fountain, a middle aged man and woman sat closely to one another and shared a bag of potato chips. Beyond them two little girls in shorts and no shoes reached into the fountain for pennies. A few feet away from the children, a skinny red-headed lady in a long, colorful summer dress and a yellow straw hat sat at the edge of the fountain and meditated. On the stairs, a short, pudgy security guard scolded a couple of teenagers in long shorts and no shirts carrying wide skateboards. The garden was in perfect harmony. Even the worthless-looking skateboarders appeared to serve a purpose in this microcosm. They left when I approached the security guard.

"My name's Cole Gregory." I showed him my P.I. License.

"My name's Bob," he said. "What can I help you with." He was a short, dark, bald man with a slight weight problem.

"What can you tell me about Harold Blands?"

"Harold Blands no longer works here."

"I know that," I said. "I'm here to learn more about him."

"Sir, there's not much to tell. He harasses someone in

upper management and that's a no no around here."

"You mean Sharon Pane," I said.

Bob nodded.

"How did he harass her?" I said.

"Sir, that's information I don't have access to." Bob was lying. I knew he wouldn't be much help.

"How can I get a hold of Sharon Pane," I said.

Bob pointed through a forest of papyrus at a sign that read Administration Building.

Inside the building, a narrow hallway ran between a few small offices, and made its way to the receptionist's window. Inside the casement, a large lady with thick black hair sat behind an immense phone, containing flashing red buttons.

"Can I help you?" she said tapping a pencil against a wide log book.

"My name is Cole Gregory," I said. "I would like to speak with Sharon Pane."

"Hold on a sec." she said as she picked up the phone and punched a number. "Sharon, there's a gentleman in a San Jose Sharks cap here to see you." She looked back at me.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No." I said. "But I have some information she may want to hear."

"Ms. Pane is a very busy person; what company do you represent?"

"Let's just say I'm in public relations."

"He's some sort of a public service guy. Should I schedule an appointment?" she looked at me and smiled. "Yeah, I'd say he is-- if you like muscles, . . . Ok. I'll send him in." She hung up the phone. "Miss Pane will see you now. Third office on the right, across from accounting."

Sharon Pane sat in an office void of windows behind a large oak desk she kept clean and organized. Neatly stacked files, a computer monitor, a phone, and a book titled *The Secret to Successful Time Management* were strategically arranged on top of her desk. On the wall directly behind her was a mural that contained a wall painting of the tomb of Ramesses VI. To her left, a number of filing cabinets rested up against a dark brown paneled wall. To her right the paneled wall was covered with paintings of Egyptian artifacts, pictures of the Nile River, and a poster of Greece. Near the door, where I stood, a large bulletin board rested on the wall, cluttered with clippings from the *Far Side*. Below it was a bottled water cooler that rested next to a table, comprised of an auto-drip coffee pot, some filters and a box full of condiments.

Sharon Pane sat comfortably behind her desk while she talked to another woman with short curly black hair, wearing blue-jean overalls. The woman made a scratchy hissing sound with her saliva after each one of her witty comments, that Sharon Pane followed with forced laughter. The woman leaned up against Sharon Pane's desk and drank coffee out of a large mug with bold letters that read "When God Created Man, **She** Was Only Kidding." To get their attention, I walked to the filing cabinets and provided a posture that I may actually open one. That works every time.

"Is there something you need?" Sharon Pane said.

The lady with the coffee mug gave me a snotty look.

"I'll see you later Sharon," she said, and left.

"Ok, Peggy, I'll see you later," Sharon Pane yelled out the door.

"Hi, I'm Cole Gregory," I said walking to the desk and extending my hand.

Sharon Pane shook it, then gestured me to sit. She had long wiry fingers with a firm grip. "I like your boots," she said with a passionate smile. "Did you purchase them in Montana?"

"Wyoming."

"I could tell by the stitching you didn't get them in California."

"No, ma'am. California caters to the Hollywood cowboy."

"And you don't like that."

"No, ma'am. If the leather's not tough enough to stop a rattlers fangs from penetrating your skin, and the toe won't kill a scorpion in a corner, then they ain't boots."

I could tell I had Sharon Pane completely amused. She sat there smiling, showing every one of her pearl white teeth. She wore a couple of gold earrings in the shape of the Ankh symbol that she let dangle an inch below her lobes. She had long frosty curly hair, dark blue eyes, and a healthy facial bone structure. She knew how to apply make up to delineate her features, without calling attention to the radiant facade of materialistic paint. I could tell her personality was quite the same.

"So, what can I do for you, Mr. Gregory."

"Cole."

"So, what can I do for you, Cole."

"I represent a gentleman by the name of Harold Blands."

"Are you another damn lawyer?" she said in an angry tone as she got up and closed the door. She wore a tight red dress that fell far above her knees. She was a tall lady, about 6'. A couple of inches taller than me, even with my boots on. But what really stood out was how thin

she was. I could practically see her ribs through her anatomy. I didn't know if she were suffering from anorexia nervosa, or if she regularly partook in the fine art of met amphetamines. One thing's for certain, she really needed a sandwich.

"No, I'm not a lawyer; I work for one. At least at the time." I pulled out my license and laid it on her desk.

"She picked it up and looked at it. "So you're a private dick," she said handing me back the license. "I thought you were into public relations."

"To me they're one in the same. Tell me about Harold Blands."

"There isn't much to tell, except he's a pervert."

"I heard he sent you a stream of love letters."

"The love letters didn't bother me."

"Did they flatter you?"

"Not really. Since the third grade, guys have developed crushes on me. So, when a lethargic middle-aged man began writing me love letters, it barely fazed me. It's when the letters became vulgar and violent. Do you know what he had the obscenity to say?"

"I've read them," I said quickly.

"Then you shouldn't blame me for firing the creep. He's lucky I didn't push to get him registered as a sex

offender."

"Are you certain he's guilty," I said. I heard a loud knock on the door behind me.

"Come in," Sharon Pane said.

A thin man with short frizzy red hair and freckles entered.

"Sharon, I need your signature once again please," he said then nervously walked to her desk. He had blue eyes that shone through a pair of wide lens glasses with a thin wire frame. His white and brown vertically striped shirt was neatly tucked into his brown slacks, and the top button was open. Besides his features, his facial expressions and body motions reminded me of Woody Allen. He had a nervous habit of slapping his right fist against his left palm, followed by the snapping of both fingers, which he repeated while he stood in front of Sharon Pane's desk.

"What are you ordering more of this time, Mark-- sphinx shirts, glass pyramids, or puzzles of the universe?"

"Actually, none of the above. We're running low on dark roast."

"Now we can't have that; have to keep bookstore concessions up," Sharon Pane said, before she skimmed the form and signed it with her left hand. She wore a gold bracelet with individual hieroglyphic symbols attached to

the band; they rattled when she signed her name. The fingers of her signing hand contained an abundance of rings, which all appeared somehow to represent Egyptian art. I noticed her other hand looked similar, but with more color. "There you go," she said handing the form back to Woody. He thanked her and left.

"You wear quite a depiction of Egypt," I said, hoping to get her pleasant tone back.

"I love Egyptian art. I've been to Egypt several times-- been on the Nile, seen all the tombs. Ever been there?"

"I'm lucky to get out of California."

"I can't imagine. In fact, the study of Egyptology is one of my hobbies."

The lady with the overalls abruptly opened the door and came in. "Sharon, I'll be ready at five today," she said impatiently.

Sharon Pane looked at the gold Rolex on her right wrist. "Oh shit-- it's getting there isn't it. I have some things to finish up, but I should be ready by five." she said. The lady in overalls left.

"Hey, if you ladies are going out for drinks after work, I know a place that has a great happy hour," I said. Always the charmer.

"Peggy doesn't drink," she said harshly. "We car-pool-it from Mountain View every day. Now if there's nothing else, I have a lot to do."

"I just have one more question," I said standing up. "Do you know of anyone besides Harold Blands who may want to threaten you."

"No."

I got directions from the receptionist to the facility maintenance shop. It was 3:30 when I arrived; the door was open. It was a large shop with a high ceiling and several exhaust fans mounted to the roof. To my right was a large double sink with heavy duty hand cleaners mounted above it on the wall. A tall, husky man with a mustache, wearing an empty blue ball cap, and a puny, gray-haired man with a pointy nose worked on a small motor that rested on a long bench, with mounted vises, that ran the length of the wall. On the wall above the bench a myriad of different types of screw drivers, wrenches, pliers, and hammers hung from a pegboard. The back wall had a larger pegboard that dangled different types of drills, saws, sanders and other power tools. A bearded man drove a forklift, carrying a pallet full of five gallon paint cans through a receiving door. The joining wall had a giant shelf containing a plethora of florescent light bulbs and a small room marked "flammable."

The floor of the shop consisted of a couple large drill-presses, a table saw, a jigsaw, a welder, a sander, and a metal grinder, which all individually rested inside a perimeter of yellow and black safety tape. To my immediate left, a short, fat man with a dark scruffy face sat behind a metal desk and did paper-work. Behind him were three large metal cabinets covered with pictures of naked women taped to the doors. I didn't know if it was the noise of the forklift, or if it was because they were engrossed in work, but none of them realized that I stood there. I decided to see how long it would take them to notice me.

A couple of minutes went by before the man with the blue hat saw me and nudged his little friend.

"Hey, this place is off limits," the little man with the pointy nose said.

I suddenly became the center of attention. It's nice to be noticed. "Who's in charge here?" I said.

"That would be me," the chubby man behind the desk said.

"My name's Cole Gregory," I said showing the chubby man my detective license. "I'm a P.I."

"I'm Ruben Sanchez, facilities supervisor," chubby said as he shook my hand. "What can I do for you?"

"I represent a former employee of yours, Harold

Blands."

The two by the bench stopped working on the motor; it was clear I had everyone's interest. The three men were dressed identically in blue work shirts-- like Harold Blands'-- and blue-jeans. They all had name tags above the left pocket. The tall man's was labeled "Ken," and his little friend's "Gary."

"So what do you want to know about old Harold?" Sanchez asked.

"What kind of an employee was he?"

"He was reliable, that's about it," he said with a slight chuckle.

"I was under the impression he was also very skilled," I said.

"He had OK job knowledge, I guess. But it took him too long to do things."

"Is that why you assigned him to changing parking lot lights instead of changing combustion chambers?"

"Yeah, before I came along he was responsible for all the air-conditioning and heating systems. But I found it was more efficient to contract that work out."

"And who hired you," I said.

Sanchez closed the thick red binder he had been writing in. The cover of it said "work orders." "Mark Morgan hired

me a few years ago. He's not here any more."

I grabbed the binder from his desk and began skimming through it, noticing that the oldest work order, marked #1 dated back to January, 1997 and the most recent one, marked #1492 took place a few minutes ago. "I'll need copies of these," I said, tossing the binder on the desk.

"I'm too busy to make copies," Sanchez said as he stood up with a red face. He was almost as wide as he was tall.

"I understand where you're coming from," I said in a pleasant tone. "Just bring the originals with you to court."

"What's this court shit?" Sanchez said nervously. "I'm not going to no damn court!"

"And you won't have to," I said. "As long as you cooperate with me."

"When will you need them?" Sanchez asked.

"Now."

The bearded man who drove forklift entered the shop. He was a tall man, about six-four and appeared to be in his early twenties. He was dressed the same as his co-workers, except he wore a black lifting belt. His name tag said "Mike." "The trucks loaded," he said to Sanchez.

"Then get your ass out-a-here," Sanchez said. "I want you back here before quittin' time."

"Well, I was wondering if I could make the return tomorrow morning."

"No." Sanchez said harshly.

"But I'll never"

"No buts," Sanchez said as he walked towards the open roll up door.

I approached Ken and Gary as Sanchez and Mike walked out the door. "I guess your boss isn't one to question," I said.

"Ruben's all right," Gary said. "As long as the job gets done, that's all he cares about."

"How did he get along with Harold Blands?" I asked.

"Blands didn't know what he was doin'" Gary said. "He should have been gone a long time ago."

"So what do you guys do around here," I said, looking at Ken, who then looked at Gary.

"A to Z," Gary said. "Little bit of everything."

"Where's your co-worker off to," I said to Ken, who looked to Gary for guidance.

"He's off to Orchard Supply," Gary said.

"Yeah, he's making a return to the hardware store," Ken finally spoke.

"Excuse my ignorance," I said. "But in an operation like this, it seems more logical that you would purchase

items from a hardware store, not supply them."

Ken looked at Gary. "Ruben runs a tight ship," Gary said. "Sharon Pane makes him. Everything we don't use gets returned."

"Yup, everything," Ken said nodding.

"How often do you guys make returns?" I said to Ken.

"Every Tuesday," Gary said.

"Who does the ordering," I said to ken.

"Ruben," Gary said.

"Yeah Ruben," Ken said nodding.

"Who does most of the returns," I said to Ken, really hoping that he could think for himself. Actually, I didn't care but it had my interest.

"Mike's in charge of all the part runs," Gary said.

"Did Harold Blands ever make any returns," I said to Ken.

"No," Gary said. "All Harold was good for was moving furniture and changing light bulbs."

"Yeah, in the museum," Ken said with a slight laugh.

"They're the only ones who could stand him," Gary said shoving Ken playfully.

The two of them made quite a pair. It was as if every thought Ken possessed was fed from Gary. It was like talking to a ventriloquist and his dummy. Sanchez came into

the doorway of the shop. "I'm not paying you bozos to stand around and shoot the shit," he said loudly. Ken and Gary went back to the motor. I walked out the roll-up door into a sordid cloud of dark, vile smoke as Mike took off in the flat bed truck, carrying a few pallets full of paint. I reminded Sanchez about the copies and went to the museum.

Glimmers of light waned through the tops of the large palms, as the afternoon sun sat low in the horizon. I felt a calm chill on my bare arms, as I approached the lofty brass doors of the museum. A school group-- looked like fourth graders-- slowly exited the open doors in a long, askew line. In front off the towering pillars, a middle aged Asian man in a black suit snapped pictures of a slender Asian lady in a black dress with ruffles. Behind me, a few young teenagers smoked cigarettes, as they sat on one of the sphinx statues. A lady with dark wrinkles and bluish hair sat behind a counter to the right of the foyer. An attractive red-head with long strait hair and thick eye lashes stood next to her and browsed through a jewelry catalog.

"Admission for one?" the older lady asked in a tired voice.

"I'm here to speak with Ronald Peters, the curator."

"Let me see if he's in his office," she said as she

picked up the phone. She wore a dark blue blazer and matching slacks. She had a name-tag pinned to the upper left pocket of the blazer that read "Museum Staff." The young red-head was dressed the same, but her tag read "volunteer."

"He's out of the office," she said looking at me as she held the phone. "What did you need to speak with him about," she asked.

"My name is Cole Gregory; I represent Harold Blands," I said before the lady repeated it into the mouth of the phone.

She hung up the phone and sadly looked into my eyes. "The poor man-- oh, the poor man," she said shaking her head.

"How well did you know him?," I asked.

"Oh for quite a while," she said. "The poor man. I hope he's all right."

A lady with long brown hair and a nice figure gracefully approached us. She was dressed like the other ladies. She wore a large diamond ring on her left hand.

"I'm Donna Grant," she said shaking my hand. "I'm, the museum's registrar."

"This is Mr. Gregory," the ticket lady said. "He's the one I told you about on the phone. He's friends with

Harold."

"How's he doing," Donna Grant said after flashing an annoyed look towards her co-worker.

"I hope he's doing ok," the ticket lady said. The young read-head let out a brief giggle.

"Can we do this walking," I asked the registrar. "I was born and raised in this area, and I've never been in here." I didn't lie; I drove by the museum many times, but never stopped. But I really wanted to step away from the ticket lady and her and her giggling friend.

"You've lived here all your life, and you've never been in the museum?" Donna Grant said with a smile. "Well let me give you a tour."

We walked down a wide staircase into a large room marked gallery D. In the corner of the western wall, a dozen patrons stood in front of a chain that barred the entrance of a cave marked "tomb" just above it. A sign dangled from the chain that said "Next Tour At 4:30." We walked passed the line to the southern wall. Mounted to the wall was a continuous stream of display cases.

"So how long have you known Harold?" Donna Grant said.

"I really don't know him, Mrs. Grant . . ."

"Donna," she interrupted.

"I'm a private investigator, Donna. Harold Blands'

lawyer hired me to dig up all the information I can find on the man. How well do you know him." I stopped in front of a case with several mummified primates.

"I've been here about five years," she said as we slowly walked to another case. This one contained different types of birds, traditionally preserved. There was a sign that claimed the process was accomplished in 1300 BC. "I liked Harold. He was the only one of the maintenance crew we could count upon."

"What kind of work did he perform," I asked. We approached another case.

"Pretty much a little bit of everything."

"His co-workers claim that changing light bulbs was the only thing he was good for," I said as I stopped in front of another case. This one contained different types of mummified rodents.

"That's not true. He fixed our air-conditioning, our plumbing, and pretty much fixed whatever broke. I must admit the work he accomplished on our lights was what made him such an asset."

"But anyone can change light bulbs."

"True, but Harold retrofitted the whole system to make it run more efficiently: he added timers and sensors and relays. . . . I really don't know much about electricity;

but I do know that once he was assigned to the museum, we had less burn-outs."

"Burnout's?" I said as I looked into a case with a sea of fossilized fish.

"A burn-out is when a case goes dark. If you haven't noticed-- some of these artifacts date back to 3500 BC.

"So they say."

"Not if a light burns out. In fact you can barely see the artifact. We get a lot of school groups, tourists, as well as anthropologists in here. Trust me-- once they pay their six bucks, they want to see it all."

A little girl in pigtails and freckles, and a small boy, void of front teeth, wearing a beanie approached Donna. "Are these real live mummies," the boy asked.

"Well first of all none of them are alive, because they're dead; And yes they're real."

"I heard that some of them come alive at night," the girl in pigtails said.

Donna took the two over to a large display case that rested in the middle of gallery D. I followed. Inside the case, a human that had been mummified in the twenty-first dynasty lie flat.

"This mummy was preserved over 3000 years ago, Donna told the kids. "And so far, he hasn't started walking

around."

I figured Donna had a job to do. While she educated the kids on the difference between preservation and myth, I continued looking at the cases along the wall. Towards the end, I noticed an empty case that was fully illuminated. There was a sign inside the case that talked of a Jackal that was preserved in the year 2500 BC.

"Sorry about that," Donna said as she caught up to me.

"Where is this mummy," I asked.

"Well this is kind of sad," she said "This was the last job Harold did for us. He was changing the ballast in the case, and by mistake, dropped it on the artifact."

"And the mummy crumbled."

"No, it developed some small blemishes in a couple places."

"But it's ruined?"

"Not at all. We have a company that assists us in maintaining and restoring the artifacts."

"How often do you call on this company?"

"It varies. Occasionally artifacts get damaged; it's rare, but it happens."

"How?"

"Sometimes they get damaged when we remove them while we clean the cases, and one time a fight broke out between a

couple patrons, and they crashed into one of the cases and shattered the glass all over an ancient battle shield, causing tiny, but noticeable blemishes. And besides that, after all, this is California. We have our share of earthquakes. Sometimes nature causes cracks in the antiquities. There's nothing we can do about that. So we call the Gladco company, and they fix them up."

"But doesn't that lower the value?" I said. "Some of these things must be priceless."

"And that is the key word, Mr. Gregory."

"Cole."

"Cole," she said with a smile. "Many of these artifacts are worth a large fortune. But we're not an antique dealer, we're a museum. We share a fascinating, ancient culture with the world. The preserved jackal may have been broken, but it's still over 3500 years old and embodies an essential aspect of Egyptian culture-- and hopefully it will be ready for the public's enjoyment soon."

"But right now it's with that company."

"No, actually, we received it this morning. We need to prep the case and dust the artifact before we can display it."

"So you have the artifact here?"

"Yes."

"May I see it?"

Donna hesitated. "I guess that would be ok. If you think that will help you."

"You never know," I said.

Donna led me across gallery D to a door that stood between a wooden sarcophagus and a statue of Anubis. She fanned through a large collection of keys and opened the door. Inside the door, a narrow staircase, dimly light by a single incandescent bulb, descended to a large room built out of chain-link fence material. We could hear the echoes of our foot-steps as we walked down the stairs. The sharp stench of lacquer became more and more pungent. A shelving unit that climbed from floor to the ceiling sketched the perimeter of the inside of the room. A wall with shelves full of different types of clays, molds, resins, paints, solvents, and adhesives joined a wall full of shelves with boxes, crates, and packing material. The wall next to it contained shelves that held a small quantity of different types of light-bulbs, a few gallons of drain opener, and some miscellaneous parts used for plumbing and electrical work. At the edge of the shelf, there were a pair of rubber boots, a couple pairs of safety glasses, and a pair of work gloves. Above them, a yellow rain jacket and a shop coat dangled from hangers. The shelves on the wall next to it

held rows of small ceramic sphinxes, oxen, and tombs: some were painted, others were a smooth and white, and others looked a little rough around the edges-- kind of like me.

The center of the room had a long work table with several light fixtures with adjustable positions clamped to the table. A thin, man in his fifties, with a pale face, leaned over the table and performed surgery on an artifact. He had dusty brownish gray hair, partially parted at the side, a neglected mustache, and completely ignored sideburns. His horn rimmed glasses had thick bottleneck frames. Loose brown slacks hung low with a matching belt that dangled the excess. He wore a white shirt with the top button opened and a solid brown tie, loosened at the neck. Next to him was a stool with a brown blazer, carelessly draped over it. He appeared not to notice us as we stood behind the table and watched him work.

"So, what are you doing? re-preserving the artifact?" Donna said with a slight laugh.

The man ignored her and continued his work. He had a small piece of fine grained sandpaper in one hand and a battery operated dremil tool in the other. He altered tools as he intricately worked on a one-half inch section.

"Well Cole, this is the famous jackal we're looking at," Donna said. "And the busy man putting the finishing

touches onto it is none other than Mr. Ronald Peters. I thought you went home for the day, Ron."

Ronald Peters carefully placed his tools down, but failed to acknowledge us. He selected a touch-up brush with a fine tiny head and dipped it in a small vial of paint. He dotted the paint onto the section he worked, followed by a few light brush strokes. He lay the brush down then grabbed a hairdryer, turned it on low speed, and blew a continuous stream of hot air onto the wet paint in a vigorous motion. I was amazed watching him work. He kind of reminded me of an embalmer I investigated a few years ago. Same type of personality. Same attention to detail. Same responding problem. Eventually, he turned the hairdryer off and looked at Donna. "So what do you think," he said.

"It looks beautiful," she said approvingly. "A little on the polished, shiny side in a few small areas. But nobody will notice. And after a little dust falls on it, I won't even be able to tell."

Ronald Peters grabbed a large thick magnifying glass and glared at the area he had been working on. "Hmm, I see what you mean. Maybe a little more rattan brown and olive gray in the mixture to combat this hideous silky orange."

"Ron, it's fine," she said. "Now it looks more like it did when it was originally preserved. But why are you doing

this? Is there something wrong?"

"They failed to pack it properly," he said. "When I opened the crate, the Jackal was damaged."

"Why don't you send it back to Gladco?" Donna said. "If the artifact got damaged during shipping because they didn't pack it right, it's their responsibility."

"There's no time," he said. "The Grand Master wants it on display before the Supreme Council arrives this evening."

"Oh that's right," Donna said, looking at her watch.

"If you normally don't restore artifacts down here, what usually takes place?" I butted in.

"Oh I'm sorry," Donna said. "Ronald Peters, this is Cole Gregory" We nodded at one another. "Mr. Gregory is a private investigator; he's seeking information on Harold Blands."

Ronald Peters looked at me tensely through his glasses. "I can't say I'm sorry he's gone. This is an example of the work he did," Ronald Peter's said, pointing to the Jackal. "It will also be nice once his maintenance supplies are out of my shop."

"You mean the light bulbs and such," I said.

"I mean everything," he returned, "Those detestable forms of attire he leaves lying around haven't been washed for months. Their fragrance alone could make a fly vomit."

"Harold liked to keep a supply of maintenance equipment down here; it saved him time," Donna said in a defensive tone. "He also kept some work clothing down here. He used to get pretty grimy when he worked on our air conditioners and performed repairs on our roofs."

"What's with all the fake statues," I said, pointing to the shelves.

"Those replicas, in which I spend numerous hours on a week, are near perfect depictions of Egyptian art," he said emphasizing the words replicas and perfect.

"We sell them in the book store and the gift shop," Donna said.

I looked at Ronald Peters. "I wouldn't think a museum curator would have the time to spend doing arts and crafts," I said.

"Those arts and crafts, as you so mildly put it, were inspired by the Grand Master herself. I also happen to have a great deal of pride in them. I make the molds, the clay and the paint myself, in a way similar to the ancient Egyptians."

"I notice that many of the paint containers say Gladco on them" I said.

"Those are just the base colors," he said. "The process of producing the exact coloring of these replicas is

highly intricate. And I hand polish them to an authentic interpretation. Few people in the world have that knowledge or skill."

"Sharon Pane tells me she's quite a buff on Egyptology," I said.

"Miss Pane knows a thing or two about the culture and their art, but her professional skills are strictly limited to delegating and budget cutting," he said. He began dusting off the jackal with a feather duster.

"I heard you guys are close," I said.

"You heard wrong. Our relationship is strictly business."

"It's like one long negotiation," Donna said.

"Sharon is good at what she does," Ronald Peters said. "But there are certain things in which you can't cut corners."

"Like broken mummies," I said.

"Which reminds me Donna, the museum will be closing soon. Would you be so kind as to prepare the display case for the artifact. I would like to put the jackal in it immediately after the museum is cleared of people."

I looked at my watch. 4:50. I walked out of the basement with Donna then quickly walked back to the facility maintenance shop. It was getting dark, and I was concerned

about getting to my truck before Sharon Pane and Peggy Mills left for the day. Both the roll-up door and the front door were closed when I got to the shop. The flatbed truck had returned. Sanchez handed me the copies I asked for but didn't open the door wide enough to allow me to see what they were doing. His breath smelled like beer.

As I approached my truck in the parking lot, I noticed the gray haired gentleman who had been following me was parked next to my truck and leaning up against the trunk of his car. He had his arms folded and stared at me as I approached. All I could think of was how familiar he looked. When I got about four feet in front of him, I took off my Shark's cap and flung it in his face. I swept his feet out from under him, lunged his face to the pavement, pulled his right arm behind him, and bent his wrist. As he squirmed on the blacktop, I imbedded my knee into his back, a basic move I learned when I took Shodakon Karate. Except for the hat flinging. That was my own spin on the maneuver.

"I've had enough of you," I said, increasing the tension on his wrist and penetrating my knee deeper into his back.

"Do you treat all your clients like this?" he said painfully.

"You're no client of mine," I said.

"Please," he said in a state of agony. "Let me up."

"Why have you been following me?"

"I want to hire you. That's all. But please, you're breaking my arm."

I looked around and noticed a few employees in the distance were making their way out of the administration building. What I was doing looked bad. I lost it for a moment. I quickly frisked him, then let him up. "If you wanted to hire me, why didn't you get a hold of my answering service?"

"I tried, but there was no answer." I didn't draw blood, but I shook him up quite a bit. I had forgotten that Peninsula Moving Co. had moved all my stuff. There really wasn't any way to get a hold of me. I started to feel bad as I watched the trepid man, shaking with fear and confusion.

"How did you find me?" I said.

"Word on the street has it that you're the best when it comes to finding people," he said brushing himself off.

"That doesn't explain how you found me."

"I also heard that you drove a white Toyota four by four, and learned the places you frequented. I figured I was lucky when I saw your truck parked on First street. Now I'm not so sure."

I had no idea I was famous. I had been in business for over ten years, but had no idea the streets knew me. I thought that only happened in loosely plotted detective yarns. "Why didn't you approach me at Original Joe's? Why follow me?"

"I tried to get your attention. But before I knew it you took off."

"How did you find me here?"

"I live close by. I was on my way home when I noticed your truck."

"Why do you need an investigator?"

The man reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He opened it up and pulled out a picture.

"This is my fiancée. She has been missing for the last couple of days." He handed me the picture.

The photo was an attractive female with straight blonde hair, who appeared to be in her early twenties, standing in front of an sycamore tree with a building in the background. Probably an office building. She wore a loose, short, low cut, baby-blue dress with lacy shoulder straps. The kind of dress that makes me appreciate the wind.

"So how long exactly has she been missing?" I asked.

"Well she never came home Friday night, so I guess it has been a few days."

"So, you live together."

The man nodded.

"Must be nice," I said. "What's her name?"

"Her name is Amanda Fisher. I wrote it on the back of the picture."

"Do you know of any relatives, close friends, anybody she may have, for whatever reason, decided to visit?"

"No. She didn't talk much about her family. I've already checked with her close friends."

"I'll need to know who they are." I said. The parking lot was filling up. I really needed to skidaddle. "You can get that information to me later. Any reason she may have wanted to leave you?"

"None that I know of. We had a loving relationship."

"Well, I'm currently working on something, but I can work you in. How can I get a hold of you?"

The man handed me a card with the name Arthur Harrington printed in bold letters. Below his name, in slightly smaller letters, was the word Realtor, and below it were both a home and office phone number.

"For missing persons, I charge three hundred a day plus expenses. Will that be a problem?"

My client shook his head.

"I'll also need to search your premises, look through

her personal belongings, things like that. Will that be a problem?"

"Right now that's not possible."

"Why?"

"I need to be there when you go through my house, and I'm going to be away on business for a few days. Perhaps when I get back."

"Suit yourself," I said. "But the more you cooperate, the better chance of finding her. Also, as soon as possible, get me the information on everyone Amanda Fisher knows, including names, addresses, phone numbers, and if possible, pictures. Oh, and what type of car does she drive?"

"She drives a 1989 Pontiac Transam."

"What color?"

"Red"

"Do you know the license plate number?"

"No."

"Ok, that will have to do for now," I said. I opened the door of my truck. "I'll be in touch. And stop following me." I got in my truck, and drove into the shopping center's parking lot across the street.

Chapter 6

I had a full view of the employee parking lot from the shopping center. I positioned my truck to easily pursue any vehicle departing from any exit in any direction. I began developing theories on which vehicle belonged to Sharon Pane. Developing theories and hypotheses on minute details, that often meant nothing was something I did whenever I was bored. It kept me focused and prevented me from worrying about problems that often meant nothing.

Honda Accords, Toyota Corollas, Ford Escorts, and Volvos seemed to be the cars of choice for these museum employees. But I wouldn't figure that Sharon Pane would own any of them. There were a couple Ford station wagons and a Dodge mini van; but driving one of those just wouldn't be her. There was also a bright yellow 67 corvette with high performance rims and gleaming chrome. I figured I could see

her in a Vet, but I wasn't so sure about the color. There was also a lavender Mercedes sports car with a sun-roof and a bright red Firebird. I knew it had to be between the Vet, Mercedes, or the Bird.

Before too long, I watched a kid with long hair, shorts and sandals, jump into the Vet, a gray haired man in a three-piece suit get into the Mercedes, and a plump middle aged lady in a short black dress tumble into the Firebird. So much for hypothesizing. There was no sign of Sharon Pane, so I took a chance and called Maggie from a pay phone in front of the convenience store. From the phone, I could still view the parking lot. Maggie picked up the phone on the third ring.

"Hello."

"Is this the future bride of the luckiest man in the world?"

"Cole! Where are you?"

"I'm in the process of following someone." I watched a few more employees enter the parking lot. Still no sign of Sharon Pane.

"I really need to talk with you."

"Why what's up?"

"Someone I never saw before entered my classroom today. He was so creepy." I could tell she was upset.

"What did he want?" I asked.

"I don't know. He was disruptive and refused to leave."

"Did you call campus security?"

"No."

"Why not?"

There were a few seconds of silence before Maggie spoke. "He really didn't do anything to authorize that."

"Wait a minute," I said. "You're in charge of your classroom. You have the right to kick anyone who's disruptive out of your class. If he refuses to leave, you call security. It's as simple as that."

"No it's not as simple as that." Her voice became thick. She was starting to cry.

"Take it easy girl. Tell me exactly what happened."

There were a few seconds of silence before she spoke. "About ten minutes into the class, while I was lecturing, this strange man walked into my classroom and sat at an empty desk."

"Are you sure he wasn't enrolled in your class?"

"I know who my students are."

"I'm not saying you don't," I said. I watched Sanchez and his maintenance crew enter the employee parking lot. They carried themselves like they spent the last few hours

in a dive-bar. They were playfully pushing and yelling loud obscenities at one another. I could hear their laughter and profanity from across the street. "How was this guy obnoxious? Was he offensive?"

"No. He just laughed at some of the things I said."

"Like what?"

"I don't remember exactly but it always had something to do with my analysis of the text."

"Did he laugh at any students?"

"No, they stopped participating once he started laughing. That's when I asked him to leave."

"And what did he do?"

"He just ignored me. Then he'd behave for a while. Then he'd write something. Then he'd start up again." There was silence for a few seconds. "It was awful."

"Did you talk to anybody in the department about this?"

"No, I wanted to get your feedback, first. I mean there was something strange about this guy. He didn't look like a student."

"What do you mean?"

"He was an older looking gentleman, in his early thirties. He was dressed nicely, in a white shirt and Khakis. He even wore a tie. He could have been from the department. He was there checking up on me."

"Maggie, that's highly un-likely. But if that's the case, all the more reason to get in touch with your department. Anyway you look at it, they should know if there's a situation in your classroom."

"I guess you're right," she said, her normal voice now coming back. "When will you be here?"

"I need to follow these people around for a few hours, see what develops."

"Do you have to? I mean we have some things to talk about. And I don't want to awaken to you jumping into my bed in the middle of the night."

"No, I figured I'd jump into your bed sooner than that." I noticed Sharon Panes and Peggy Mills walk to a blue 1998 Volkswagen Bug. Peggy Mills got behind the wheel; the skeleton lady sat in the passenger's side. "I've got to go, babe. The queen bee's leaving the hive."

"So what time should I expect you?"

"I should be there before ten. I'll call if I'm delayed."

"Love you."

"Back at you," I said. I ran to my car and prepared for the pursuit.

Chapter 7

I followed the Volkswagen on 280 north through dense commuter traffic. I stayed several car lengths behind, so I wouldn't be recognized. I also maintained my distance when the Volkswagen took the Mountain View exit off El Monte road. A few traffic lights and some side-streets later I watched the vehicle pull into the driveway of a small yellow house-- probably a two bedroom-- on Pacer drive. I was a few houses away when I pulled to the side. I wasn't entirely happy with my view of the house, but at that point I concerned myself mostly with not being seen. They both failed to notice me when they made their way to the metal door on the small concrete walk-way. Peggy Mills unlocked the door, so I assumed that we were at her place. I hoped they wouldn't be there long because I was more interested in Sharon Pane's residence. I hoped this would be a quick stop

before Peggy Mills took Sharon Pane home.

My plan was simple. Once I found Sharon Pane's residence, I'd call it a night, go to Maggie's, maybe take her out to dinner, or something; then, the following afternoon, I'd return and look for clues at the Pane's residence. Probably in her garbage. I don't know.

But as luck would have it, nobody went anywhere. About eight thirty, a van with the letters WWW.Webvan.com printed on its side parked behind the Volkswagen. A slim man with a pencil mustache, wearing a San Francisco Giants cap carried two large bags of groceries to Peggy Mills' door. Shortly after he left, a couple who appeared to be in their early sixties, stopped on the sidewalk near my truck while their small white poodle urinated on a poplar tree. They didn't appear to pay any attention to me. It was dark, and I was hunched down low in my truck, so they probably failed to notice me. But once they turned the corner, I started the engine and took off.

I figured the van brought the ladies supplies to make dinner, so it would be a while before Peggy Mills brought her friend home. If I were going to leave the scene for a while, now was the time. At least I hoped. I also figured I should relocate my position. I never like to stay in any place for too long. It had also been a while since I had

anything to eat, so I should get some food. But mostly, I needed to call Maggie. I felt bad holding her up. And I was concerned about her present state of mind. I knew she'd be upset when I told her I'd be stuck watching these people for half the night. I knew she didn't want me getting in her bed in the middle of the night. In fact, she didn't want me in her house during the middle of the night. I decided to watch the ladies all night long. Once Sharon pane was dropped off, I'd watch her for the duration. At least this way Maggie wouldn't have to worry about me spending the night. She could tell me all her problems on the phone, and I would make her feel better.

A few miles from Peggy Mills', I found a shopping center with a Safeway and some pay-phones. Surprisingly, I got Maggie's answering machine. I told her it was me, encouraged her to pick-up, and left a long message, that wasn't one of my best, but contained bits and pieces of wit and charm just the same. I also told her I'd call her again in fifteen minutes. She may have been taking a shower. I skimmed the phone book, determining if my ladies were listed. They were. And, like I thought, Sharon Pane also lived in Mountain View, on Amber.

Inside the store, I bought a box of Wheat Thins, a cheddar cheese ball, and two quarts of Coors light. The

produce section had peanuts in the bulk, so I got a pound of salted. I also purchased a half-pound of roast beef from the deli. The entire shopping spree lasted about twenty minutes. I tried Maggie's again, only to get her answering machine, again. I began to worry. Did she go somewhere? If so, where? If she were expecting me, why would she leave? Was there an emergency? Was there something wrong with her phone? Was she all right? Maybe she was just pissed-off. I figured the best thing for me to do was to go back to work.

I positioned my truck more strategically when I arrived at Peggy Mills'. I was across the street, a couple houses down. My truck rested in front of a house where the front yard was completely enclosed by a tall redwood fence; I didn't have to worry about them noticing me. I had a full view of the front of Peggy Mills' house, and I could see the ladies in the living room eating dinner and drinking wine. I decided to join them. I spread large portions of cheese on the crackers with my knife and topped each one with a thick slab of roast beef. I opened one of the quarts of beer and filled my coffee mug that hadn't been out of my truck since the summer of 99. It was one of the coldest, freshest, best beers I had ever tasted. They all are.

While I ate, I viewed the copies of the work orders I'd

obtained from Sanchez by shining a small penlight on them. They were all in numerical order and dated. The forms asked information on the location of each job, who performed it, cost of materials, vender where materials were purchased, and date completed. All work orders had to be approved by the operations manager. By eleven thirty, I had finished the roast beef, cheese ball, my first quart of beer, and half the box of Wheat Thins. I had carefully scrutinized the work orders up to May of 98. I came to the conclusion that Blands was doing his job. There were some work orders with names of former employees that I didn't recognize, and compared to what they were doing, Blands appeared to be more efficient, while possessing a broader job knowledge. Like he said, he was responsible for most of the technical work.

About one o'clock, five males with shaved heads, no older than age fourteen, proudly strutted down the middle of the street, while they shared a large bottle of something that they drank out of a bag. As they passed my truck, I noticed one of them swinging a large thick chain, occasionally striking the ground. The others just drank. One played with a butterfly knife. I had almost finished my second quart of beer and my bag of peanuts and the remaining work orders, noticing that the work orders began to look strange starting with March of 99. Sanchez's name appeared

on most of them, while Ken's and Gary's always appeared together, like they were one person. Mike's were void of detail, always marked shop, with no materials list, or vender. And poor Blands was assigned the dirtiest, lowest jobs imaginable. They had him cleaning toilets, digging ditches, and climbing underneath the buildings, setting traps for rodents. Starting November of 99 Harold was assigned back to doing technical work once again, but his work was restricted to the museum.

But at least all Harold's work orders were consistent: The materials required and the time it took him to complete the job made sense. Many of the work orders completed by Sanchez and his boys appeared flawed. Sometimes it would take Ken and Gary four hours to replace an electrical receptacle, while other times they could move an employee, and his office equipment, from one building to another, and change sixty fluorescent light bulbs in two hours. It seemed that Sanchez worked around the clock changing almost every part imaginable in their heating and air conditioning systems. Which I thought was weird because he told me they contracted all that work out.

But the kicker was the materials they purchased. They'd order twenty gallons of paint to paint the woman's bathroom in the administration building. They'd request

forty sheets of sheet rock to install a partition in the purchasing office. And they'd order boxes and boxes of sixteen penny nails whenever they'd do a construction job. And everything was approved by Sharon Pane. It's true, according to Gary, she made them take everything they didn't use back; but I was still surprised that she'd stand for such incompetence. If she ran such a tight ship, why would she stand for all those manual hours of purchases and returns. Maybe she didn't know? And then again, there was something else. Something staring me in the face. Something I was missing. It was as if the work orders spoke to me in a language I didn't understand, revealing the answer to everything I needed to know.

At two thirty, a police car slowly crept along the street. The officer was gradually maneuvering a beaming spot light in all the yards, underneath cars, in the trees, and in the bushes. I shut my light off and crouched down low. It seemed like it took for ever, but he finally turned the corner. I looked across the street at Peggy Mill's house. All the lights were off. I shoved the work orders in the glove-box, tossed the empty quart bottles in the back, and got ready for another pursuit. But amazingly, the ladies never came out of the house. It appeared that Sharon would be spending the night at Peggy's. Interesting!

Chapter 8

I awoke the next morning to the clanging collar of an Irish Setter. The dog was playfully sniffing and digging around a row of freshly planted junipers in the yard next to the one where I parked. A large bald man in a green robe and red slippers stood across the street listening to a transistor radio while he smoked a pipe. I took him for the owner. I could hear the radio, and sometimes make out words and phrases, which sounded like the voice of Paul Harvey. The man banged his pipe against the light pole a few times, scratched his butt, and whistled for the dog. The dog bounded across the street, running past the man into the neighbor's yard and began destroying a bed of chrysanthemums. The man whistled again and slowly walked up the driveway. The dog followed him, and they both disappeared into the garage.

I couldn't stop thinking about the dream I had. I was dining with Maggie at Zorbas, her favorite. I remember

asking her what she wanted, only to have her talk around the question. She'd respond with a "well this looks good," or "I haven't had this in a while," or "I wonder if this is grilled in olive oil or saturated with canola?" or "I wonder if I could get this broiled?" That was so Maggie: constantly analyzing, never reaching a decision. Each time I suggested something, big mistake, she'd analyze that. Throughout the entire dream, she never told me what she wanted; so I kept ordering her more wine. Suddenly we were no longer at the restaurant but at the Giants' game. Barry Bonds was at the plate with two outs in the bottom of the ninth with runners in scoring position. I had no clue what the score was but assumed that the Giants didn't have the lead or they wouldn't be up. As Barry fouled back every pitch, I continued to ask Maggie what she wanted. Although she still had the menu from Zorbas she no longer looked at it. She just looked at me and shook her head. She wore a Giants cap backwards. I looked back at the pitch to Barry that floated in slow motion. I heard commentators analyzing the pitch as it sluggishly floated through the air. Transistor radios continued to analyze the pitch, but the pitch was no longer to Barry-- but to me. I had the pitch in site and stepped into it, but I couldn't get the bat around. Like the ball, now the bat moved in slow motion.

Transistor radios moved from the ball, to the bat, then to me. The world froze as I made contact. I popped-up the ball a few feet sending it half way between the pitcher's mound and home plate. Maggie, Sharon Pane, and Sanches all scrambled for the ball. I heard Martin's voice through the transistor radio: "Run you idiot. I've got another job for you. Don't you know the Dow and the Nasdaq are both up, and you're about to be driven down. You need to spend less time peeping through windows and more time getting to first base." But it was no use; my legs were too thick. I stood on top of home plate, alone, with a full beer and a bag of peanuts. And I really had to piss.

The kitchen light was on at Peggy Mills', but no sign of the ladies. There were peanut shells on the floor, the dash, the seat, my jeans, and some managed their way into the glove box and my files. My mouth felt like someone had stuffed it full of wool and I really had to piss. The darkness was slowly giving way to a milky morning glow, and, at times, I heard doors closing and engines starting. It was the time between subsistence and reality where people left their desires and dreams and went to work. I was no exception.

The front door opened at the Mill residence and Peggy quickly walked to her car. She wore an off white sweater

that fell just below her large hips. Other than that it appeared that she wore the same pair of overalls. She got in the car just long enough to start the Volkswagen then began scraping the frost off the windshield. Soon Sharon Pane came out and closed and locked the front door. She was dressed differently from the last time I saw her, wearing a low-cut bronze dress with a white frill that draped over her knees. How strange. What does she do, keep another wardrobe at Peggy's?

I followed the ladies back to their jobs and watched them exit the parking lot and enter the building. Then I drove back to Mountain View. It was time I had a look at Sharon's place.

Chapter 9

Sharon Pane lived in a two bedroom house in the center of Amber. Her front yard was a small green square of grass recently mowed and edged. On the other side of the sidewalk, was a small rectangular island of bright yellow rocks surrounding a large Magnolia. In front of the house, underneath the front window was a long, narrow bed of lilies. At the end of the driveway a couple garbage cans sat up against the gate of the backyard. I put on a pair of latex gloves and looked in the cans. They were empty. So far, no nosy neighbors. A cement walkway ran from the driveway to the porch. A squarely trimmed juniper bush occupied a small section between the porch and the walkway. It took me less then ten seconds to pick the lock attached to the doorknob. The deadbolt took a little longer. They

always do.

Sharon's living room was surprisingly empty. A light brown couch rested on a white shagged carpet up against an off-white wall. A few feet from the couch was a matching reclining chair. On the other side of the room was an oak table with a large screen Sony television and a VCR. A few feet from that sat a small open cabinet housing a CD player, receiver, and speakers. A breakfast bar separated the living room from the kitchen. A sugar dispenser, salt and pepper shakers, and a napkin holder lay in the center of the breakfast bar near a telephone. A flashing red light indicated she had four messages. I played the messages. Two were from a man named Dan, another was from Ronald Peters, and another from a lady named Irene who left her number. I wrote it down. It was (604) 555-1900.

I walked into the kitchen and looked in the waste basket. It was empty. I looked in the refrigerator. In the crisper were some apples, some celery, some tomatoes, and an onion. A six pack of Corona lay next to several cans of diet Pepsi on the bottom shelf. There were a half gallon of non-fat milk, a pint of cottage cheese, and a pitcher of orange juice on the upper shelf. Low fat salad dressings, a jar of green olives, and a jar of pickles were stuck in the shelf inside the door. I opened the freezer and noticed a

couple rows of Lean Cuisine frozen dinners and a pint of Ben and Jerry's ice cream. Coffee with walnut. Lying down next to the ice cream was a three-quarter full bottle of Absolut Vodka. I closed her freezer and went into one of the bedrooms.

In the center of the room was a king-sized bed with a soft pink bed spread. Against the wall was a dark maple dresser. On top of the dresser was an open jewelry box full of rings, bracelets, and chains, most of which embodied Egypt. I opened the top drawer. On one side was a couple of neatly folded piles of sexy panties. The other side contained carefully folded bras. I carefully skimmed through the piles and noticed a cold, hard object underneath the piles. I pulled it out. It was a Browning .38 caliber revolver. I checked the chamber; it was loaded, ready to kill. A lady needs to protect herself. I put everything back and closed the drawer.

The second drawer displayed several tidily folded piles of colorful teddys and nighties. I ran my fingers through the fabrics. I didn't find any sharp objects in this one. At the bottom of the drawer, I felt a layer of paper. I carefully took the colorful piles out of the drawer. The bottom was lined with newspapers. I removed the newspapers and glanced at the titles. They all focused on the Museum

of Ancient Arts. I skimmed the articles. Some dated back to the 1920's and talked about donated artifacts. Others talked about past curators. One mentioned Ronald Peters receiving a reward for his commitment to excellence. Several of these articles described various types of artifacts displayed in the museum. I knew Sharon Pane was dedicated. And I could understand her interest in the subject matter. But why keep these articles in a drawer under lingerie? I put the papers back and carefully placed the sexy piles back on top.

The next drawer contained socks, pantyhose, and various types of women's stockings. The drawer below it contained organized piles of tiny shorts and small, narrow shirts. How old was she, four? The bottom drawer contained a couple bathing suits and a couple pairs of sandals. I looked in her closet and noticed a number of female business suits on hangers. She had a number of elegant evening dresses and several quite provocative--a whole lot shorter than the others.

I went into the other bedroom. She converted this one into an exercise room. In the corner, an aqua colored exercise ball rested near a couple of pink five pound dumbbells. A couple of one inch blue mats lay in the center of the room with a perfect two inch gap between them. Along

the wall was a shelf containing a number of exercise books and video tapes on aerobics. Never before could I imagine Jane Fonda, Martha Stuart, Chuck Norris, Susan Summers, Kristy Binkley, and Richard Simmons in the same room. Sharon Pane established a tight-knit community with them on the same shelf. Opposite the shelf was a dark empty television and a VCR. In the back of the room was a stair-climber, the resistance set at three, which is somewhat moderate. The course she selected showed a pattern of ascending rectangles, which implied that this course was like scaling skyscrapers. In front of the stair climber was a reading stand, containing the latest issue of *Feminine Health and Fitness*. The articles focused on certain foods that boosted metabolism and stimulated electrolytes, encouraging weight loss.

I went into her bathroom. Everything was pink. I looked in her pink waste container. There were a couple wadded-up tissues and an empty tube of Close-Up toothpaste. I looked in her small backyard. Two patio chairs stood on a cement slab. The entire backyard was a cement slab enclosed within an orange fence. The neighbors had a small dog that started barking. I left.

Chapter 10

I figured I could catch Maggie before she left for school. There was a gray Mercedes, an older one, probably from the seventies, with peeling paint and bald tires parked in front of her house. Maggie and a man in his early fifties with his hands in his pockets leaned up against the car. The man wore a gray suit, a white shirt, and a loud tie with bright bananas and oranges. It almost appeared edible. He had short grayish brown hair neatly parted to the side and thin sideburns. As I approached, he stood straight up, and, keeping his hands in his pockets, gave me a quick nod. He was tall with a medium build. He looked like the kind of guy who didn't work-out yet stayed in shape. Probably a stair-climber.

"I'm Dr. Doug Roberts," he said extending his hand. His hand was warm and wet, and his grip was tight. Too

tight. He was sizing me up. Big mistake.

"I'm detective Cole Gregory," I said. Like a vise I squeezed his rubber hand till I saw pain in his eyes. Surprisingly, his face didn't change color. He wore a ring from Stanford.

"Cole," Maggie said, "Doug is the director of literary studies at the University. He took time out of his eventful schedule to help me with my class." Maggie wore a tight pair of blue jeans over designer leather boots and a low-cut white blouse that fell exactly to her black belt. This wasn't the way she usually dressed for class. This wasn't the way she usually dressed for me.

"More than happy to do it," Roberts said. "It provides me with a nice vacation from Thebes."

Maggie looked at me. "Doug is an authority on classical drama; he's currently writing a book on the plays of Aeschyles, Sophocles, and Euripides."

"That's all Greek to me," I said.

Roberts laughed. "Impressive. Maggie told me about your wit. She also informed me of your degree in liberal arts. Whatever that is. But tell me, what motivated you to turn from a life of academia to the life of a sleuth?"

"Now that's an epic," I said. "Let's say I prefer facts to fiction."

Roberts looked at his watch. "I've got to run. I have an eleven o'clock meeting." He looked at Maggie. "Swing by the office later and we'll talk some more." He walked around to the driver's side and looked at me. "Nice meeting you Kyle. If you ever get tired of spying on people, stop by the office. I'm sure I can find you a job doing something." He got into his Mercedes with the bad paint and the bald tires and left. The car sounded like it had a hole in the muffler and black smoke spewed from the exhaust pipe.

I gave Maggie a long hug and a brief kiss on the cheek. "So how you doing?" I said. I was a little self conscious about my breath.

"Better," she returned.

"I was worried about you."

"You sure took your time getting here."

"I tried to call a couple of times and spoke to the answering machine. Where did you go?"

"I was with Doug," she said. Her cheeks became slightly flushed. Maggie was never good at concealing embarrassment.

"Where?"

"We met at the Bavarian coffee house near the University. He's been teaching college for more than twenty-five years. I figured if anyone could give me

advice, he could."

"Did you tell him you thought there might be spies in your classroom?"

"No, no, heavens no. I didn't want him to think I was crazy. I did, however, listen closely to his rhetoric in case he revealed something along those lines."

"Did he?"

"No. I saw a completely different side of him. I feel I can trust him."

It was good seeing Maggie in good spirits, but I like to be the one to put her there. I really didn't like what this conversation was divulging. I trusted Maggie. But there was something weird about this situation. She has never bailed on me like that. One of the strengths of our relationship was that we kept lines of communication open. They appeared to be closing. And things just didn't add up.

"I'm glad he was able to help you, and he seems like an ok guy." Now I was lying. "But if you met for coffee for a few hours, what was he doing here--now?"

"What do you mean?"

"The question was not rhetorical."

"Cole, what are you insinuating?"

I said nothing.

"If I didn't know you better, I'd think you were . . .

You are. You think there's something between me and Doug, don't you. I must admit, I'm surprised at you." Her tone was faintly harsh. The type of tone that would make one feel guilty for cheating on a homework assignment. This tone had a strange sexual stimulus attached to it. At least for me.

"I'm not insinuating anything. These things are automatic with me. I like a little harmony with my chaos. When things are out of order, I try to fix them. When things don't add up, I take a recount."

"But I thought you trusted me." She spoke now like an innocent child.

"You know I do. It's your new friend I'm concerned about."

Maggie got real close. "It sounds to me like you're jealous." She slowly draped her arm around me and gave me a quick peck on the lips. "I think that's sweet. But who loves you the most?"

"You do," I said.

Chapter 11

After Maggie left, I used my key to let myself into her house, and immediately put on a pot of coffee. I used her shower and put on a clean pair of levi's and a white t-shirt. About half way through my third cup of coffee, I began to feel better. It was time to eat.

In many ways, Maggie's kitchen is a gourmet chef's dream. Every herb, every spice is clearly marked in fancy glass bottles and lavishly arranged on elegant mahogany racks. She uses a special cupboard for oils and marinades and dedicates an entire shelf in her refrigerator to extravagant sauces. She also keeps her refrigerator stocked with a variety of exotic fruits and vegetables, many that no one can find in a supermarket, some that most can't pronounce. The time of year had no authority over Maggie's refrigerator. If strawberries or blueberries were out of

season, and Maggie wanted them, Maggie got them. Somewhere. Somehow. I could never understand that. The door of her refrigerator is tightly packed with different types of organic juices, all of which she processes herself, and the bottom shelf contains a variety of cheeses, creams, and jams, all neatly arranged and clearly marked. She keeps a lot of health food in her freezer; I never go in there.

One thing you won't find in Maggie's kitchen is any type of meat. She'll occasionally eat chicken or fish at a restaurant, if it's prepared a certain way, but these things are strictly forbidden from her kitchen. I had this giant void that needed to be filled with bacon and eggs. But I knew this wasn't going to happen. Not in Maggie's kitchen. I wound up making myself a dozen buttermilk pancakes, smothered with Missouri goat butter and topped with sliced bananas and chopped pecans. I saturated the entire mound with coconut syrup from Molokai. It wasn't what I craved, but it filled the void.

I used her phone to call Martin. His receptionist picked up on the third ring.

"Marin Swarz, attorney of law," the voice said.

"Hi Brenda, It's Cole."

"I'll put you right through."

I had the pleasure of listening to half of *Fur Elise*

before Martin picked up. I looked at the work orders and the copies of the love notes to Sharon Pane that I had scattered on Maggie's coffee table while I waited.

"Cole, how's it hangin'?" Martin said when he finally picked up.

"I'm hangin' in there. But barely." I sipped some coffee. "I need to get my stuff."

"Well, we'll talk about that. First, tell me how you're doing on the case."

I sipped some more coffee. "I think you're right. Blands was set up."

"I knew it. What proof do you have?"

"Nothing you can use, yet." I glanced over the work orders, stopping at the ones that revealed excessive buying. "There's something going on in the maintenance department that really stinks."

"Like what?" I could tell he was in a hurry. He was probably due in court.

"I think the maintenance crew has been embezzling from the San Jose Museum of Ancient Arts, and Blands is caught in the middle."

"How?"

"I've seen it before, Martin. A company trusts a department to purchase their own supplies. The department

over buys, then returns the excess materials, and pockets the refund."

"I know, I've defended people for that. And I've gotten them off. But what's that have to do with sexual harassment?" He sounded impatient.

"Well, the victim of this harassment approved all these purchases."

"You mean Sharon Pane."

"Yes."

"Are you sure she even knows about the embezzlement?"

"I'm sure Sharon Pane knows everything."

"Then she probably knows that she won't get caught. She probably has a line of flunkies that will take the fall for her. But that's besides the point. That's not what I hired you to do."

"But it's information I need to know."

"Cole, my client was fired for writing violent and vulgar letters to someone in upper management. Now I need you to find me proof that he didn't write these letters, so I can sue this company for violating his rights, or find me proof that he did write them so I can sue them for something else. But forget about this embezzling scam. It's a dead end street." Martin always spoke more boldly over the phone. Or in court.

"I think they're related," I said. "I don't know how, but I think they're related. This provides a motive for them to get rid of Blands. Maybe they didn't want to cut him in? Maybe they knew he was too honest to become part of such a conspiracy? Or maybe he's their future fall guy? You know it's always easier to accuse someone who isn't there. Especially a sexual harasser."

"And you may be right. On all counts. But even if you are, a court of law will view these crimes as mutually exclusive. I, myself, have a problem seeing the connection. I'll have a bigger problem proving it. But, unless you can find a relationship between these work orders and these love notes, I wouldn't waste my time. I think you should focus on finding the person who wrote these letters."

"I think it's someone in the maintenance department."

"Then you have it narrowed down. You'll have it narrowed down even further when you exclude the ones who never learned how to write. But get me some proof. Get me some proof today. Anyway, I have to go to court."

"Wait a minute. How can I get my stuff?"

"Well, there is a slight problem."

"What kind of problem?"

"Well, it's nothing to worry about." Martin's voice changed. He was losing his authoritative tone. "The truck

drivers for Peninsula moving company are on strike."

"What exactly does *that* mean?"

"Like I said--there's nothing to worry about." He sounded worried. "It's just that it's going to take a little longer to get your stuff out of storage."

"Why?"

"Because it hasn't arrived yet."

"Then why don't we go to my apartment and you could go in and get a few of my things, while I wait in the car. I need my weapons."

"Cole, it's not that simple."

"Why not?" Now I was getting impatient.

"Because your stuff isn't there."

"Then get an injunction to get it out of storage."

"Your stuff isn't in storage either."

"Then where the hell is it?"

Martin said nothing.

"No! You're not telling me that all my belongings are stuffed in a moving van that's parked at one of the trucking companies main outlets. Can things get worse?"

"Things are worse."

"How?"

"Your stuff is safe . . . in a moving van. But the van isn't parked. And nobody knows where it is."

"I'm not following," I said.

Martin hesitated. "Cole, some of these trucks are owned by Peninsula Moving. But many of their drivers own their own rigs. Now, the good news is that all the trucks owned by Peninsula have been accounted for and are safely parked and locked in a secured storage area."

"What about the trucks owned by independent drivers?"

"Well, I'm sure once they settle, that they will diligently unload all the items in the proper storage area."

"What about now?"

"Well right now there's not much we can do."

"So I guess the only thing I have to worry about is whether my stuff was moved by an independent driver or not." I already knew the answer to that riddle.

"That's right," Martin said.

"Do you know which?"

Martin said nothing.

"You mean everything I own is traveling around the country, in the hands of a pissed off truck driver."

"Yup. That's one of the ways they're encouraging management to settle."

"By holding the lives of their costumers for ransom."

"In a manner of speaking, yes. Well, I'm late for court. Don't worry. I'm sure this will be cleared up in a

few days. Try to find out who wrote those letters, and give my regards to Maggie." Martin hung up.

Chapter 12

I found myself walking in circles in Maggie's living room. Here I was with no place to stay, and besides a few changes of clothes, no personal belongings. The good news was that I felt I was getting closer to solving this case. Martin was right. This embezzlement scam the maintenance department was running with Sharon Pane appeared to be pretty light weight. At most they'd put an extra grand in their pocket a month. Hardly worth going to jail for. And what did that have to do with sexual harassment? Still, there was something about those work orders. I also knew that I had to start thinking about how I could track my missing person.

Since the beginning of time, detectives have received assistance from metaphysical powers. Oedipus had the gift of prophesy. Aeneas had help from Venus. Adam got answers from the Archangel Gabriel. And Eve received forbidden

knowledge from a succulent apple. Who knows who was speaking to me. But I couldn't get off these work orders. There was also something different about the living room. Something very disturbing. All the furniture was in place. But for some reason, it looked weird. I needed answers. Or maybe I needed to get my mind on something different. I needed to shift my thought process. I decided to call Billy Bass.

His wife picked up the phone on the first ring.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi Samantha, this is Cole Gregory."

"Cole, how the hell are ya?" She spoke with a course Southern accent.

"Well you know me," I said. "Is your man around?"

"Why, you interested in some of my sweetness?"

"Samantha, I'm always interested in anything you got. But I have a need right now for Billy's expertise."

"I'll see if I can wake him. He drove in from Indianapolis early this morning, and I know he's got to make another run tonight. But I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks, doll."

Billy seemed a little groggy when he answered the phone: "Cole, what kind of trouble you get yourself into now?"

"No trouble. Just called to see if you wanted to make an easy hundred bucks."

"It better be both easy and fast cause I've got a load to deliver to Spokane by the day after tomorrow."

"That's the beauty of it. You can do this job while you travel."

"So you want me to help you find somebody."

"Yup."

"Who is it this time, a convicted felon or a missing child?"

"Neither, a good looking blond in a red Transam."

"So you've narrowed it down to a few thousand. What's the license number?"

"I don't have one." The living room sure looked strange.

"Like I said, you've narrowed it to a few thousand."

"Well just do what you can. Besides me, you're the best fisherman I know. Her name's Amanda Fisher, she's in her early twenties, she's got straight blond hair, has the figure of a model and the face to go along with it."

"So now you've narrowed it down to hundreds."

"Just use your resources and check around. See if anybody has seen anyone who fits that description. I'll find the needle once you locate the haystack."

"You wouldn't happen to have a picture of her would you?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"Drop it by the house today and give it to Samantha. I've got to catch some zzs before I leave tonight."

"Then it's a done deal."

"I can't make any promises; it's a big world out there. But I'll put the word out on the CB and I'll flash her picture at the truck stops I eat at. Soon I'll have every trucker in the country looking for her. Anything else I can do for you?"

"Not really, but how much do you know about Peninsula Moving?"

"Just enough to say don't use them."

"It's a little late for that."

"Don't tell me that you hired those clowns to move your stuff. You should have went through us. Mayflower has the best reputation in the country."

"It wasn't my choice. But the sad truth is that everything I own is in the back of one of their trucks." I felt embarrassed. And what the hell was wrong with the living room? "What do you think the odds are on getting my stuff back?"

"None."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope. You know they're on strike again. And they're once again screwing people out of their belongings."

"You mean this kind of thing has happened before?"

"This kind of thing happens constantly with Peninsula. The problem is they don't take care of their people. At least that's one of the problems."

"That doesn't give the drivers the right to screw with people's personal belongings."

"I know it stinks. But since they don't take care of their people, the only drivers who will work there are ones that aren't qualified to do their job. Don't you read the business section in the paper."

"I occasionally skim it."

"Well then you'd know that Peninsula is written up by the BBB as a company you want to avoid. They're notorious for causing accidents, breaking merchandise, and not delivering-- period."

"So what can I do?"

"I don't think there's anything you can do. I'll tell you something Hoss, they probably already hawked your stuff off at a swap meet. But I'll put the word out that a friend of mine is being victimized by them. Maybe they'll turn yellow and return your stuff. Anyway, I got to go to bed."

We'll have to go fishing this spring; got a new fly rod."

"We'll have to. How do I get a hold of you about my missing person?"

"Do you still have your CB?"

"Peninsula has it."

"Then you'll have to call the B bar B truck stop in Salem sometime tomorrow between the hours of 5:00 and 7:00 PM. I plan to have a bite to eat and fuel up with coffee instead of dealing with that Portland traffic. I should have some news for you then. Or else I won't."

By the time Billy hung up, I figured out what was bothering me about the living room. How could a subtle change be so devastating. I felt my stomach tingle with confusion and anger and trepidation. All the furniture was intact. All except for a few pictures. Our pictures. My pictures. They had been removed from Maggie's living room. I had been removed from Maggie's living room. There was no longer our ski picture from Heavenly Valley. There was no longer our picture from Rambart studios. And there was no longer our picture from Hawaii. What did she do with them? Why did she remove them?

Chapter 13

I felt a little better when I noticed our pictures in her bedroom. I've always preferred her bedroom to her living room. She had neatly arranged them on her dresser, surrounding my autographed baseball, signed by the entire 1989 World Series winning Oakland A's. It was at that point, as I stared at the signatures of Ricky Henderson, Mark McGuire, and Jose Canseco that I realized what was staring me in the face. There was a direct connection between the work orders and the love letters. But while I was focusing on content, I should have been focusing on style.

I briskly went back to the living room and compared the signatures of the work orders to the writing in the love notes. Blands' signature was identical on both, but the substance of the letter was written by someone else. The

violent content of the letters was written by a left-hander. I could still see Blands playing with his food with his right hand. While I studied criminology, I learned how to easily detect left-handed writing. A southpaw's writing contains a different angle in the letters while possessing a natural curvature, similarly to a left-handed pitcher's natural curve. Although it was a little ambiguous whether a left-hander actually wrote the letters, and I wasn't positive that Blands was right-handed, I did know that the letters were not written by Harold Blands. But I alone couldn't prove this. I needed the help of Lieutenant Waters.

"Waters" the voice on the end of the wire said.

"Top of the morning to you Lieutenant," I said charmingly.

"Don't give me that shit, Gregory. I'm not real happy with you right now."

"Have you been watching me J-walking again?"

"No, just hearing about you terrorizing my town."

"So you heard about what I did to Tyler Bains."

"I always hear about you beating somebody up, somewhere. What's the deal with you bashing that guy to a pulp in the parking lot of the San Jose Museum of Ancient

Arts?"

"I never did that."

"While I have a file on my desk that claims you did. The man's name is Arthur Harrington."

"My client?" I remember shaking him up, but I never hit him. He seemed fine when he left. This didn't make any sense. "The guy was following me around. I may have scared him a little, but I never hurt him. In fact, he hired me to find somebody."

"That's not the way it's written up here."

"Then we need to talk."

"I agree," The lieutenant said. "But I'm too busy to fit you into my daily routine."

"That hurts me. We used to spend so much time together."

"I don't deal with thugs anymore. And I don't want them in my town. And that's why I need to talk to you. But we'll have to do this after hours."

"Are you still working out?"

"Enough to know I can still slap you over my knee."

"Then why don't we meet for a jog. At least I know I can still out run you."

"I wouldn't feel too confident, because I'm about to run you down. But that sounds like a plan. I'll meet you

at Vasona Park at four o'clock sharp."

"I'll be there with bells on."

"Then it's a date. But I know that's not why you called me. What do you want?"

"Does Ray Finch still work there?"

"Ray, the expert on forgery."

"Yeah."

"Nope, we canned his ass. He was lazy. Detective Armstrong takes care of that now. Why, are you mauling forgers now?"

"I've got something for him to look at."

"Drop it by the desk Sergeant with a brief explanation asap. I'll get back to you on it tonight." Lieutenant Waters hung up.

Chapter 14

After I dropped Amanda's picture with Billy, I left copies of the love-notes and work orders with the desk sergeant at the Los Gatos City Police Department. Lieutenant Waters had briefed him. Now it was just a matter of time to see if my theory were correct. I figured if the signatures on the letters didn't match Blands' signature on the work orders that that would be enough to exculpate my client. The odds of ascertaining the parties responsible were slim. But if I could, the penalty from the law suit could increase; and that meant that I could make more from this case. That was a lot of coulds. I love it when I think optimistically.

I began at Johnson Supplies. This was a typical heating and air conditioning parts house. There were a few aisles that displayed high tech equipment, like compressors

and vacuum pumps, and welders and a few aisles that stocked common supplies like tapes, sandpapers, and solders. Towards the back of the store was a long glass case about four feet high that displayed specialized meters, temperature controls and valves. This case also served as the parts counter separating the customers from the employees working retail. From my side of the counter, a dark bearded man in white overalls with black pinstripes sat on a metal stool and ravaged a glazed donut, as he thumbed through a thick catalog that rested on the parts counter. A middle aged man in blue jeans and a blue work-shirt stacked boxes of copper fittings as he collected them from a younger looking clerk with a flat-top and thin blond mustache. A skinny man in a navy blue work uniform, wearing a matching ball cap that bore the name Snap on Tools spoke loudly into his cell phone about electrical wiring. I was approached from the other side of the counter by a large, fat, bald man in a yellow shirt, who sweated and wore his pants low.

"Help ya?" he said.

"You betcha," I returned, handing him one of Sanchez's business cards. "I'd like to speak with someone from accounts payable."

"Sanchez huh. You don't look like no Mexican."

"My mother is Swedish."

The fat man took me through another door into a large room filled with gray cubicles. There was the cacophony of occasional phones ringing and file cabinets slamming, and people talking too loudly on phones. But still Barry Manilow's *I Write the Songs* could clearly be heard. Enveloped in the third cubicle on the right, a slender woman with straight blonde hair and large wire-framed glasses sat behind a Macintosh computer. She wore black slacks and an off white low-cut blouse.

"Liz," the sweaty man said. "This is the facilities supervisor from the Museum of Ancient Arts. He has some questions." After handing the lady Sanchez's card, Tubby left.

"So what can I do for you Mr. Sanchez?" she said reading his name off the card.

"A couple days ago we had a fire in the purchasing department that destroyed all our records."

"That's terrible," she said. She took off her glasses and turned to face me.

"It is terrible. Now I have to go to all the places we do business with and obtain copies of our purchase orders."

"Why doesn't your purchasing department call these places and have copies of the documents faxed over?"

"The fax machine was burned up in the fire." Always

important to think on your toes.

"Interesting," she said. "Let me see what I can do for you." She left the cubicle.

She returned a few minutes later with an older lady with short straight gray hair and wrinkles. "Mr. Sanchez," the attractive blonde said. "This is our accounting manager, Joyce Winters." We shook hands.

"Mr. Sanchez," the elderly lady spoke. "I'm not going to sell you parts anymore unless you get an account with us." Her voice was deep and scratchy. I could smell the cigarettes on her.

"We're working on that."

"There's no work involved. Have your purchasing supervisor fill out one of the forms we keep giving you and you can pay with purchase order numbers." She handed me a form. "It's a lot simpler than paying with a check each time. That's just stupid."

"I agree. But Peggy's under a lot of pressure-- with the fire. Not to mention the audit." I was getting better at lying as I went along.

"Well you tell your purchasing person, whatever her name is, that we are a wholesale dealer and we only deal with companies who have an account with us. Occasionally we make exceptions, but this has gone on far too long."

"I promise to tell her. But do you think I can bring her back some receipts that represent the business we've done with you. We need them for our records."

"Liz told me you had a fire."

"Yes."

"And all your records were incinerated?"

"Yes."

"I never heard of anything so ludicrous. It's a wonder how you stay in business. If you had an account with us we could pull your entire record by entering your name in our computer. Now we have to search each business day for your name. That could take hours."

"I only need you to go back a year. That should cover the audit."

"I sure the hell don't have the time for that."

"I wouldn't mind helping this gentleman out," the attractive blonde said.

"If you want it Liz, it's yours. But don't spend too much time on it."

It took Liz only 25 minutes to pull the records and make copies. It was a pleasure watching her work. She provided me with two different forms--and several different poses. One was a purchasing form, the other was for

returns. The purchasing form contained the customers address, the date, an itemized list, the check number, and the total cost of the purchased materials. The return form enveloped the same type of information, except it dealt exclusively with returns. It also conveyed how much money was returned and the type payment going back to the customer. All these forms claimed that the customer received cash back.

I spent the remainder of the morning and early afternoon repeating the process, going from one maintenance and building supplier to the next, collecting copies of purchase orders, impersonating Sanchez. Some were more cooperative and more efficient then others. I was in and out of Home Depot within a half an hour without a dirty look. The same thing with Southern Lumber and H&S Plumbing. Electrical Distributors asked too many questions. They didn't like their merchandise being returned, even if the boxes were never opened. And Kelly Moore Paint was so furious that they refused to divulge any information, especially to a grubby maintenance man. They said they wanted to speak with both purchasing and accounting as soon as possible. I said I'd let them know, then expeditiously left their building. I had to be careful. If any one of these places got back to any one of the departments, Sharon

Panes was sure to know. And if there was something going on, she possessed the expertise to cover it up, even if she wasn't involved.

But based on these purchasing forms, she was. So was the maintenance crew. There were places like Orchard Supply Hardware, San Jose Nursery, and North Air Welding that used the PO number system, that the gray haired hag at Johnson Supplies explained. The maintenance department never returned anything to Suppliers on this type of payment system, and made a reasonable amount of purchases. On the other hand, at small part houses and lumber yards where they paid with a check, or places like Home Depot where they paid with a credit card, there were ridiculous purchases made and an equal amount of ridiculous returns. But these absurdities cancelled each other out. And like an iceberg in the Arizona desert, the building materials seemed to liquidate right into someone's pocket; for all these returns rendered cash. They seemed to use enough suppliers so that it never became too obvious, and the returns were always made towards the end of the month. The net return was always somewhere between ten and twelve thousand dollars per month. A nice chunk of change even when divided up between a few people. What puzzled me was how come the accounting department at the museum didn't know? Were they involved in

this? Or was someone fudging the numbers?

The last place on my list was the Gladco Co. They rested in the industrial area of Santa Clara near Great America Parkway. To the west, there was a view of some of the giant roller coasters at the amusement park; to the north, a nice view of the dump. A plush green lawn bearing a couple sycamore trees surrounded a small concrete pathway that led to a square flat building with large thick glass windows, tinted to prevent viewing from the outside. Both the building and landscape looked familiar. Too familiar. It was as if I was suffering from *deja vu* all over again. The inside of the building didn't resemble a retail store. In the lobby, there were extravagant green plastic plants in the corners. Some yellow chairs with thick plastic cushions rested behind a dark coffee table with a couple magazines lying on top. *Newsweek* and *People*. Also on the table there was the Gladco Co. catalog, that is until I confiscated it. Opposite the front door was a small partition made out of dark wood. Behind it were a couple of desks. One was occupied by a middle aged heavy lady with thick short curly hair wearing a colorful large dress. A girl in her early twenties with shiny black hair and dimples sat behind the other desk.

"Can I help you?" she said with a friendly smile. Her big brown eyes revealed her thoughts as she eyed me up and down. I liked what she was thinking.

"I represent the San Jose Museum of Ancient Arts," I said as I approached her desk, handing her a card. She wore a tight short blue skirt, slit up the sides. Sometimes I love this job.

"Where's Ronald Peters, or Donna?" the fat one asked. "They usually buy supplies from us."

I went back into my fire and audit story, managing to captivate the pretty brunette. The other one looked as if she longed for a donut.

"How come they're sending a maintenance man to inquire about purchase orders?"

"Well we're the ones who usually make the part runs and"

"I've never dealt with any maintenance man before. The only people I've done business with is Ronald or Donna. Isn't that right Krystle."

"I guess," the beauty responded. "But there was that one guy a couple of weeks ago."

"What guy," the fat one asked. Her tone was loud and defensive.

"The large, sad looking man."

"Oh yeah! The man with the case of fumble mouth.
Harry something or other."

"Harold," I said intervening. "Harold Blands."

"I do believe that was his name. Kind of a strange
man. Definitely had a self image problem."

"I guess we all have our issues," I said. "Now how
about them purchase orders."

"Well I guess. Krystle give the man what he wants."

It didn't take Bright Eyes long to locate the files and
copy them--and I enjoyed watching her work. I did find it
interesting that less than a couple of weeks ago, Harold
purchased oil paints from this company. I also found it
interesting that he also made another trip 45 minutes later
to Electrical Distributors and purchased a case of warm
white fluorescent light tubes. But what was most
interesting was that his name didn't appear on any other
purchasing receipt. Things were falling together. Two
weeks before Harold got fired, and the, so-called, love
letters increased, he makes this part run. I wonder what
he uncovered? I wonder if he knew?

Chapter 15

Lieutenant Waters was stretching her right hamstring when I pulled into the Lake Vasona parking lot. Her firm black leg extended over the top bar of an old iron gate while both arms stretched around her Nikes as she slowly bent her face down to her knee. She wore purple nylon shorts and a white sweat shirt that bore the name Humboldt State. Her black curly hair was in a thick pony tail that fell to the middle of her back. I wore tan khaki shorts, a white sleeveless tee-shirt and Reebok running shoes.

"That's a mean pose you got there," I said.

"Don't feed me that bullshit. I've been waiting here for fifteen minutes."

"I got stuck in traffic."

"Traffic my ass. Next time you're locked-up, maybe I'll decide to get stuck in traffic."

"Now that wouldn't be any fun," I said. I joined her in leg extensions.

It was a crisp afternoon. The salmon colored sun still shining above the mountains sparkled onto the crystal blue lake. The alders, poplars, and maples were still bare, but pink blossoms formed on the cherry and plum trees. As we made our way through the picnic area, the smell of damp eucalyptus and barbequed hot dogs encompassed the brisk winter air. A large Mexican family occupied three tables while they ate dinner, drank beer, and watched a five year old open large gifts. Three teenaged males sat a few tables away, smoking cigarettes, and listened to Creed on a radio. A little ways down from them, a middle aged couple in blue windbreakers leaned up against a picnic table and gazed at the lake. We took the path West, into the slowly setting sun.

"Let me know if I go to fast for you," she said as we past a power walker in black spandex and a yellow walkman. "I know how soft your girl makes you."

"Linda, I'm still the same indurate rock you once loved." The path was well shared by joggers, cyclists and occasional roller-bladers.

"Yeah, until you met up with kooky-broad."

"If you're referring to Maggie, show some respect."

"I'm sorry Cole. I know how you feel. What I don't know is why."

"Nicely put, coming from a jealous woman."

"Don't flatter yourself, stud. I've been over you since the day you walked out of the program."

"I was thrown out, remember."

"You could have gotten back in."

"Not likely. The fearless Sergeant Wilcox was afraid of me."

As we made our way half-way across the lake, the sun appeared to be resting on top of the mountains. Linda pulled her sweatshirt over her head and tied it around her waist--without slowing down. Impressive. She wore a light purple tank-top that fit loosely over her hard, flat stomach, and tightly around her firm chest. The way she glided playfully, slightly pivoting her tiny waist made me question why I ever left her. Underneath a dormant willow tree, a heavy man in a straw cowboy hat smoked a cigar and watched his fishing pole. On the other side of the path, a few young kids fed a band of honking geese. Coming towards us, a bearded man in a black leather jacket walked a German shepherd. The dog tried to sniff Linda when we passed. Can't blame him.

"I'm gonna pick it up a bit," she said. "That is, if

you can hack it."

"Please do."

"So when's the wedding?" Linda asked, emphasizing the "w" in wedding.

"We haven't set a date yet."

"Don't tell me you're getting cold feet, hotshot."

"It's not me. It's Maggie."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me."

"And why do you say that?" I said. We passed a couple joggers wearing gray sweat suits. They both appeared to be in their early thirties, had long straight hair and thin wiry builds. Neither Linda nor I were breathing hard.

"You two are just wrong for each other."

"I guess now is when you fill me with your theories on heterosexual sociology."

"Cole, I have nothing personal against Maggie. And she may even make you happy, for a while. But you'll never make her happy, no matter what you do. And that will make you miserable."

"So far I seem to please her."

"Things may appear that way, on the surface. But wait till you travel to her dejected core."

"I've been there. It wasn't that despondent. And why would it be?"

"Cole, I've been in this business for a while. There are some people who are just born unhappy. They may smile, and they may laugh. They may even remind you how happy you make them. But deep inside, they're miserable. They have a constant unstated hunger for something new and different. They're never content. Occasionally they are pacified, but never filled."

"And you feel that Maggie is like this." I really didn't like what the good lieutenant was saying. It was making too much sense.

"You're one in a million Cole. You often impress even me. And I've seen a lot."

"Oh shucks."

"But Maggie will get tired of you. It's just a matter of time. Then she'll find someone new, who she'll eventually get tired of. She'll do that till the day she dies."

"I always love how you speak your mind without remorse."

"I just tell it like it is, Ace. Little white lies only cause trouble later."

"Yes, but there's always a gray area you fail to see. In fact, maybe that's why we didn't last?"

"Now that's a white lie if I ever heard one. We both know that we ended because I was Black."

"We ended because you became a cop."

"But you always wanted to become a cop."

"No, I always wanted to be Black," I said. Linda punched me in the arm, hard. I really missed her; but I loved Maggie.

As we reached the lake's inlet, we followed the path up the river. Only the tip of the sun could be seen over the mountains, radiating shades of coral into the lower sky and upper clouds. Above us a flock of Canadian Geese streamed across the sky. We were forced to run outside the pavement to pass a large group of teenagers in black cotton shorts and white tee-shirts. The front of their shirts said Los Gatos High school in large orange letters. Must have been their track team. When we finally passed the leader of the pack, Linda picked up the pace once again. She still wasn't breathing hard. Neither was I.

"Did you hear back from your handwriting specialist?" I said.

"Yes I did."

"Come up with anything?"

"Of course."

"So what do you got?"

"They are a perfect match."

"Really? But I was sure . . ."

"Same person who wrote those love notes signed all them work orders."

"Sharon Pane?"

"I don't remember her name honey. I just remember that my man said that the love notes were written by a left handed female; the same left handed female who signed off on the work orders. And He don't make no mistakes. Will that help you with whatever you're working on?"

"Yes. Thanks." I had forgotten that Miss Pane used her left hand to sign the form for Woody.

"It will cost you."

"And you know I'll pay," I said. "But could you check out a phone number for me? For some reason, my methods don't work on this one."

I was curious about the long distance number I'd pulled from Sharon Pane's answering machine. It probably meant nothing-- like the pink bathroom or the cemented back yard or the papers on the museum, or the .38. But I hate loose ends. They tie me up in knots and keep me awake.

"You know how much I hate dealing with the phone company," she said. "But as a friend, Cole, I'll do it."

We took a bridge over the river to the path that headed back to the lake. It was getting dark. The pole-lights along the path were illuminating, glowing an iridescent

beige, and a few stars could be seen high above.

"I'm gonna hit it real hard on the way back," Linda said. "Keep up if you can."

We took it pretty fast down the river and back around the lake and across the dam. Besides an occasional mountain bike rider, the path was empty. The last half mile Linda broke into a full sprint. I stayed right beside her. The last hundred feet seemed more like a race. What we raced against, I don't know. But it was something we always did, no matter where we were.

"We'll have to do this again," she said. She seemed a little out of breath. I was breathing hard myself. She opened up her car and pulled out a brush.

"Should I call you?" I said.

"I like hearing from you, Cole, more than I like hearing about you." She took her hair out of the pony tail and let it dangle close to the ground as she delicately bent forward at the waist, slowly combing her locks in front of her. Next she flung her hair straight back then swung her dark ringlets over her right shoulder and rigorously stroked her curls. It always drove me crazy when she did that, and she knew it. "I'm tired of hearing about you roughing people up."

"The last one was purely accidental."

"They always are," She said. The brush strokes getting slower.

"This one actually hired me."

"I'm lettin' that one slide. I did some checking on Mr. Harrington. It's best you leave this one alone."

"As long as he can pay my fee . . ."

"No, Cole! He's trouble!"

"His personal life is none of my concern." I said.

"It should be. This man is connected."

"To What?"

"He's done time for things like dealing, theft, and possession of stolen goods. Your typical dirt-ball."

"He sounds kind of lightweight. And he fights like a girl."

"I'm just repeating what his record states."

"What about off the record?"

"He's a well known fence. We know he deals with some heavy people. People have a tendency to get killed whenever he's around. That's all I can tell you."

"Thanks for all your help," I said.

"No sweat. You know you really were the best in the class."

"I know."

"I do hope things work out with Maggie."

"No, you don't."

"You would have made a good cop."

"I know."

"I think you still could."

"Not any more."

"I know," she said.

Chapter 16

I arrived at Maggie's about 6:30. The driver's door of her car was open. So was the front door of her house. I figured she must have just gotten home. I heard her rustling around in the bedroom and decided to surprise her. I found her applying mascara to her eye lashes while she stood in front of the bedroom mirror.

"Looking good," I said.

"Cole, you're here." She seemed startled. She wore a tight long black evening dress that emphasized her curves. She would never teach dressed like that. She also had something done with her hair. It was a little shorter, and straighter and had a lavender tint to it. It looked good; but not as good as her natural strawberry blonde hair that once bounced off her shoulders.

"You just getting home?" I asked.

"No, I'm just leaving."

"To the opera?"

"No. I'm required to attend a faculty meeting."

"Is Poveritty speaking on cutting the budget again?"

"What? Cole, we need to talk." Maggie grabbed her purse and a black shawl off the bed. "But I can't right now. I'm super late."

"When will you be home?" I asked. As she moved closer I noticed that she wore sparkles of glitter on her face.

"I don't know. Late. Why don't you call me tomorrow." Before I could respond, she flew down the stairs, out the door and into her car. It happened so fast that it seemed like it happened in a movie. But when she backed out of the driveway, it was done in slow motion. Weird.

There was also something strange about her bedroom. It looked different. No. It was different. My pictures were gone. Our pictures were gone. My baseball was gone. What did she do with them? It didn't take me long before I found them in a box in her closet. I had been relocated from the living room, to the bedroom, to the closet. This could mean that she may plan to have someone in her bedroom besides me. I didn't like this. I didn't like this at all.

But there wasn't much I could do. At least right now.

I took a shower and put on a fresh pair of levis. I

threw together a hearty white sauce containing broccoli and mushrooms and poured it over a generous portion of boiled linguini. I washed it down with a Coors Light. It hit the spot, but I still craved meat.

Chapter 17

When I awoke the next morning, Maggie wasn't home. Things were looking pretty obvious. Could it be that Linda was right in her assertion that Maggie was growing tired of me? Was Maggie sleeping with that Literature professor? Was I crowding her? Maybe she just wanted her space? Now would be a good time to give it to her.

Harold Blands lived in a one story home in south San Jose. A small white picket fence in need of paint surrounded a small yard littered with clusters of roses growing in a sea of Bermuda grass. The other homes on the block were the same style, built in the late sixties, except they were maintained better. A pudgy lady in a long loose summer dress worked in the garden.

"Is Harold around?" I asked as I approached the front entrance.

"Harold's not here. Somethin' I can help you with?"

She wore a red and white scarf over her dark short curly hair, resembling Rosie the Riveter.

"I'm Cole Gregory. Perhaps Harold mentioned me?"

"Nope. Never heard of you."

"I'm a friend of his. Do you know where he is."

"At work, where he belongs."

"At the Ancient Art's Museum?"

"Where else." The lady stood up and began pruning the dead buds off a rose bush. "You don't look like a friend of Harold's."

"What does a friend of Harold's look like?" I said.

"I don't know. I've never seen none. Not sure he's got any."

"I'm assuming you're his wife?" Their social skills and appearance made for a perfect match.

"I'm his one and only. But I won't be for much longer if he don't start Talkin'."

"He doesn't seem to me to be much of a talker," I said. I really didn't know where I was going with this line of questioning. I was getting the impression that Harold never mentioned any of this to his wife. I've always believed that lines of open dialog are the key to a successful marriage. Then again, sexual harassment never

makes for pleasant dinner conversation.

"Nope, Harold's not a talker," she said. "But nowadays he don't say nothin'. You know what I think?"

"No."

"I think something's up."

"Like what?"

"I don't know exactly," she said. "I'm in bed most nights when he comes home. And he leaves before I get up. He told me he was working a lot of overtime, but I'm not that dumb. I smell the booze on his breath."

"Times could be hard."

"You know what I think?"

"No."

"I think he's boozing it up after work. Are you here to booze it up with him?"

A scraggy gray dog with deranged fur and scrawny legs ran out of the house and profusely barked at me from the other side of the fence. I guess the Blands didn't receive many visitors. The dog had the body of a poodle the face of a schnauzer, and the fur consistency of a possum; but mostly, it resembled a giant rat.

"Stop it Gizzard, stop," the lady yelled. That encouraged the dog to stand on its hind legs and lunge its face between the openings of the fence to try to bite me.

The lady continued to yell while grabbing the spray-gun nozzle attached to the hose and shooting a hard, steady stream of water, hitting the dog in the neck, knocking it up against the fence. Once she stopped, the dog whimpered, shook itself off, and lumbered back into the house.

That was about all I could handle. "Tell Harold I stopped by."

"You better not be drinking with Harold," she said

"I'm not."

"If you're dinking with Harold I'm gonna call the cops."

Chapter 18

Sharon Pane looked tranquil sitting behind her desk signing work orders.

"Can I get you some coffee? Cole, right?"

"Yes that's correct," I said. "And I'd love some."

She meandered to the table behind me. She looked different than before. She wore a white blouse with the top two buttons open, tucked into a tight pair of Wrangler blue jeans. She looked nice strutting past me. Her jeans concealed her skeletal frame, while emphasizing her gluteus maximus. She tucked them into a low-cut pair of gray cowboy boots. Her jewelry still manifested centuries of Egyptian art without taking away from her cowgirl persona. Both Dalida and Shania would approve. I know I did.

"I like your boots," I said.

"Thank you," She poured our coffees. "Do you want

cream or sugar?"

"Black is fine," I said.

She handed me a Styrofoam cup of coffee. She drank hers out of a narrow cup covered in hieroglyphics.

"What can I do for you this time, Cole?"

"I was wondering if you've seen Harold?"

"No," she said, almost choking on her coffee.

"His wife said he's working again." I took a sip of coffee. French Roast. Good stuff.

"Well he sure the hell isn't working for the The Museum. That creep's not allowed within 200 feet of this place. I made sure of that."

A woman in her late-twenties wearing a white blouse tucked into a black pair of slacks walked into Sharon's office. She had straight brown hair that hung to her waist. She wore wide-lens glasses with a wire frame. She carried a small stack of timecards in her right hand, and wore an expensive wedding band on her left.

"Sharon," she said, "I'll need your signature on these before I disperse the checks." She seemed nervous as she approached the desk, yet maintained a nice posture, and a real nice strut. Especially in high-heeled shoes. I wondered how long she practiced that walk?

"How soon do you need them?" Sharon returned.

"As soon as possible. There's not a lot of happy campers right now."

Sharon took the cards from the attractive brunette and placed them in the top drawer of her desk. At first glance, the stack of cards looked bigger than it really was. There were less than a dozen of them.

"When they hassle you about getting paid, tell them once I evaluate their time cards, you'll mail their checks."

"Ken and Gary are the only ones demanding their checks," the Brunette said. "Terry Burns is threatening to sue the company, Bethany refuses to clear-out her desk and Ruben Sanches is threatening to . . . well, I'd rather not repeat what he wants to do. They all refuse to leave the park. The scene is both sad and scary."

"And pathetic," Sharon said. "But you'll only have to put up with this for another hour or so. The police are on their way. If they refuse to vacate the premises, they'll be removed."

"But what do I do until then? Things are ugly out there."

"I don't know what you do till then." Sharon's pleasant tone began to grow teeth. "You're now the one in charge over there. You tell me. Maybe you go back to work? Maybe you go to lunch? Maybe you fire somebody? Do

whatever it is that accounting managers do."

The attractive brunette looked hurt, confused, timid, and embarrassed, all at the same time. And like a nervous, bashful, and beautiful little deer, she walked out of the office in her high-healed shoes.

"Trouble on the Nile?" I said.

"Nothing I can't handle. "I caught some of my employees with their hands in the cookie jar; so I had to fire them." She smiled radiantly, as if she were enjoying every moment of this termination.

I took another sip of coffee. "So you caught them embezzling funds."

"That is the technical term for it."

"Are you sure you got them all?" I said.

"All I need," she said. "Why, what are you insinuating?"

"Nothin' much. I just think you missed someone. Probably the biggest fish in the river."

"Well this sounds interesting, as you are, Cole. Would you consider enlightening me on your theory?" Sharon seemed completely amused.

"I think you missed the mastermind of this scheme."

"Fascinating," she said joyfully. "Could you describe this disingenuous villain to me?"

"Well, this person must be intelligent, ambitious, well versed in the arts and trades, and she must have a great deal of power."

"You said she. Does that mean you think this hooligan is a woman?"

"I know it's a woman. One very much like yourself."

Sharon continued to look amused. Her confidence almost provided evidence for her innocence. With this line of questioning, most people reveal some sort of guilt, either in their voice, or in their face, or in their eyes. Sharon showed no signs of anything but enjoyment.

"The way I see it," I continued, "This person must possess a unique power to manipulate. She'd have some who are in love with her, some who feared her, and some willing to do her dirty work for her. Most importantly, she'd have a lot of power. How am I doing so far?"

"You just described Nefertari. But other than that, you're doing just fine. This keeps sounding better and better." She still looked joyfully intrigued.

"So if she could get a department, such as the maintenance department, to purchase more materials than they required, only to return a portion of them later for a refund--a refund that they'd all pocket, all this person needs to worry about is how to finagle the data in the

company records as well as finagle anyone from getting too close. The only person around here with that kind of talent is you."

"But there are others within the company with the freedom to fudge the numbers in the books."

"But they'd never be successful running it past you."
I finished my coffee.

"Maybe that's why I've been spending my morning terminating faithful employees. I had to let the entire maintenance department go. And Terry Burns worked as the accounting manager a full year. That is until 10:00 this morning--when I fired him. Along with Bethany Ludlow, his dreadful assistant. Dianna Chambers, the cute one who was just in here is the acting manager, bless her soul. I wonder how long she'll last?"

"Not very long based on the employee records since you've taken over," I said. "The way I see it, you manipulate the right people, push the right buttons, fudge the right numbers until too much gets revealed. Then you fire the departmental supervisors before they can expose you."

"Wow, Cole! You may just be right on the money. But don't think my power is limited to this organization."

"I don't follow," I said.

"This morning when I arrived for work, I got a call from one of our building suppliers. She told me that a very handsome, charming, and interesting man, a man that sounds an awful lot like you Cole, was hanging around asking questions. I called some other venders and learned that they too had the same pleasure of this very handsome man's company, not to mention his questions. Do you know what they said this handsome man's name was?"

"I don't know? Gumby?"

"No Cole. They said his name was Ruben Sanches. Now, I've known Ruben for years. He's neither charming nor handsome. And he's everything but interesting. I assumed it was you, Cole, impersonating my maintenance supervisor in order to retrieve whatever it was you were looking for. And I know that you feel you found it. Or else you wouldn't be here. But I'm afraid everything you've composed is nothing more than delightful conjecture. And if I were the mastermind behind such an atrocity, I'd cover my tracks the first sign of trouble." She lifted her forearms from the table and showed me the back of her hands. She wore pink nail polish. "You'll never find any dirt under these claws."

Sharon had a point. Although I had solved this unusual riddle, she had the power to twist its contents.

She knew that I knew she was guilty. And she liked that. She also knew that I couldn't do anything about it. And I knew it. And she knew that I knew it. And she loved that. But I wasn't done.

"Harold Blands must have been your first symptom of trouble."

"I don't know what you mean," she said. For the first time, she showed signs of apprehension. Not much. But some.

"You may have managed to get the entire maintenance staff to do your dirty work," I said. "Everyone, except Blands. There was something about his character that wouldn't allow you to bring him in. Maybe he was too honest, too pure . . ."

"Maybe he was too stupid, too creepy," she interrupted. "I've got letters he wrote that prove he was a sicko."

"I've got proof that you wrote those letters, Miss South Paw, and these are tracks you won't be able to cover."

"Whatever little proof you have against me, I'll beat. I'll checkmate you before you make another move."

A large red-faced woman wearing blue-jean overalls stormed into Sharon's office.

"I can't believe you, Sharon. I can't believe you did this to me." The woman in the overalls was Peggy Mills, and she was crying. "How could you treat me like this?"

"Peggy, now's not the time."

"But I've done everything for you! I've done everything you've asked!"

"I'm sorry, Peggy, but there's nothing left to say."

"But you don't understand! Please listen to me!"

A short bald security guard came in the door and grabbed Peggy Mills by the arm. "What would you like me to do, Miss Pane?" he asked.

"Escort her to her car and see that she leaves the premises. If she won't go, hold her till the police get here; then have her arrested."

"But Sharon, you don't understand," Peggy Mills continued. "You can't do this. Not to me."

"I have no other choice," Sharon Pane said.

"But Sharon, you don't understand," Peggy Mills continued. "You're not being fair."

The security guard did his best to pull the hysterical girl out of the office. But she was bigger and stronger than he and had no desire to leave. Now I was amused. It was like watching a chimpanzee dancing with a penguin. Eventually, a younger security guard with a flattop, sideburns and big arms entered and assisted the other guard. He had a thick tattoo band circulating both biceps. Peggy put up a fight, but the two of them managed to take her out

of the office.

"I'm gonna get you, you bitch," Peggy screamed as they escorted her down the hall. I'm gonna get all of you."

"Better get some protection from your friend there," I said with a smile.

"Oh, I can handle Peggy," she said. Sharon didn't seem to be enjoying our little game any more, nor did she appear to be amused. But in no way did she seem bothered. She was a cold fish, showing no emotions. But she had a twinkle in her eyes that sparkled success.

"I really think you're an astonishing man, Cole. I'm free tonight if you'd like to have a drink somewhere."

"I don't think so." I stood up.

"Come on. Don't be so sentimental. Cole, I'm very good at what I do. And I've been doing this a while. I think you did well. You were just out classed, that's all."

"I'm sure I'll see you again real soon," I said.

"Maybe through the heavy bars of a jail cell."

"That wouldn't surprise me," she said. "The question is, which one of us will be in the cell?"

I walked out the door.

Chapter 19

I arranged to meet Martin Shwartz and Linda Waters at the Coleman Still. From the parking lot one had an adjacent view of planes departing from San Jose Airport. The architecture was a mixture of Tennessee barn, Virginia mill, and Louisiana shack. Inside, the place was dark and rustic, embodying Southern farms during the early twentieth century. Displayed in the lobby were old shovels, pick axes, yokes, and wooden carts. Next to the hostess station was a rickety wooden bucket suspended by a thick shabby rope attached to an oak pulley bar with a splintering handle. Beyond the lobby was a salad bar enclosed in a lengthy wooden trough. There were several small dining rooms aligned with wooden booths and tables with red and white checkered tablecloths. Antique saws, hoes, and plowing equipment covered the darkly stained walls, accompanied by stilted plaques and signs

possessing the profound thoughts of southern farmers. In places, rusty looking chains dangled antique lanterns and wooden fans from the ceiling. As I approached our booth Martin busily studied a police file; Linda studied the menu. I studied Linda.

"So what's good here, Cole?" she said. She moved over and gestured me to sit.

"That depends upon what you're in the mood for," I said.

"I think she's in the mood for private dick," Martin said looking at her over his glasses. Linda kicked him hard.

"My services extend a long way," I said.

"I wish you guys would at least try to act like gentlemen. At least when we're in public." She went back to the menu.

"Who the hell is Officer Armstrong?" Martin asked, still looking at the file.

"We got him out of LA," Linda said. "Kind of a young hotshot. Likes to look at himself in the mirror and flex his muscles as he straightens his tie."

"He any good?" Martin asked.

"He's ok," she said.

"Is he as good as Finch?" Martin asked.

"Probably not. But at least he's no racist."

"Is he competent?" Martin pushed harder.

"He'll have to do. Nobody else in my department knows shit about analyzing hand writing."

"Good enough," he said. Martin closed the police report and picked up a menu. He looked like he just got out of court. He wore a three piece button Gucci pinstriped suit and a solid gray shirt that brandished a ribbed black silk tie with silver twill stripes.

Linda was dressed the way any respectable police lieutenant should, in a white cotton shirt with the top two buttons open that she tucked into a pair of auburn colored slacks. She concealed her gun and holster inside a blazer that matched her pants. She wore her thick hair in a bun, which exposed her shiny black neck. A gold chain held a silver cross with diamonds just below her neck. I was still in a t-shirt, blue jeans, and cowboy boots. I wore a black blazer with the buttons open.

"So can we clear our boy?" I asked Martin.

"I think so," he said. "Thanks to your assiduous attention to the written word, and the assistance of Los Gatos' finest, I will not only prove that Blands didn't write those harassment letters, but I will also prove that he was intentionally set up by someone in higher

management."

"And this person in higher management, exploited Blands to prevent him from discovering an embezzling scheme." I said.

"Like I told you before, Cole, that whole scam issue is none of my concern. Linda may be interested?"

She shook her head. "Out of my jurisdiction."

"It's quite simple." Martin went on. "My client was fired for writing deranged love letters that he never wrote."

"Sharon Pane wrote them to herself," I said.

"You previously made that clear. But I don't need to open that sack of frogs. I've got enough to launch a law suit against this company for firing a faithful employee. I don't see how they could have violated his rights any more. Do you realize that he worked there for six years and never took a sick day? I'm sure the Ancient Arts Museum will opt to quickly settle out of court. Then we can get paid."

A slim girl in her early twenties with short curly blond hair and big white teeth approached our table and took our order. She wore black boots, a tight pair of Lee jeans, and a red and white checkered blouse that stopped just below her naval. She had a red and white bandanna tied tightly around her neck. Linda ordered the Chinese Chicken Salad

and a glass of white wine; Martin ordered the seafood Louie with snow crab and a vodka sour; I ordered the all-you-can-eat catfish and a liter of Coors Light.

"So will the Museum hire Harold Blands back?" I asked.

"They may now," Martin said. "But by the time I'm done with them, they won't want anything to do with him."

"Aren't you shrewd," Linda said.

"I'm a lawyer."

"That place was his life," I said.

"And now it's not. And soon he'll be a hundred thousand dollars richer. That will make him forget about that place."

"I'm not so sure," I said.

"It won't hurt," Martin returned. "He deserves to spend some quality time away from work, with his wife."

"Have you ever met Harold's wife," I asked.

"No."

"I didn't think so." I couldn't imagine a more daunting task than spending time with Harold's wife and that dog Gizzard. "I guess he could find another job."

Our waitress arrived with our drinks. She centered a coaster in front of each one of us and set our drinks on top. She placed a basket of biscuits and a large bowl of country gravy in the middle of the table.

"I'll be right back with your fish," she said. She gleamed at me with her white teeth and left.

"I'll be back with your fish," Linda said sharply. "What about my salad? What about his crab Louie?"

"People remember me," I said. I scooped a few spoonfuls of gravy onto my plate. "I think it's my boyish charm."

"Charm nothin'" Linda said as she grabbed a biscuit. "That was just plain rude."

"I kind of liked it," I said.

"Why should you get the attention? What about us?" Linda dipped a small piece of biscuit in a tiny pool of gravy and gently placed it in her mouth.

"Linda has a point," Martin said. "If our waitress knew any better she'd focus on me."

"And why the hell you," Linda said. "It certainly couldn't be because of that suit. And you've been divorced three times." She took a sip of wine.

"I'm springing for the tip," Martin said.

"Why do you guys care?" I grabbed another biscuit and soaked up the remaining gravy on my plate. "The girl's just doing her job. No need to feel neglected."

"I'm not concerned with why I'm not getting the attention, Cole," Linda said. "And I'm not concerned with

why she paid you all the attention. I'm concerned with why she's blatantly flirting with a man who's sitting next to me. She should at least surmise that we're a couple?"

"Since we're not a couple, why does it matter?"

"I think Linda wishes you were a couple," Martin said. He finished his drink. He carefully separated a biscuit with a knife and dumped equal portions of gravy on each half.

"That's not the *issue*," Linda said. "I don't want people to assume we're not a couple because we're not the same race. It's part of my post-egalitarian philosophy."

Our waitress arrived with our food. As she approached, I put my arm around Linda. Our waitress didn't seem to notice. She put our plates in front of us. "Could I get you anything else?" she said. "Want another beer?"

I nodded.

"What about the rest of you?"

"I'll take another one of these," Martin said, swirling the ice in his glass.

Our server looked into Linda's irritable eyes. "I'm fine," Linda said. Our waitress left. Her jeans fit her nicely.

Linda took my arm off her shoulder. "Want another beer? Want another beer? I should either slap that girl

for being insensitive, or hit her for being stupid." Linda took a bite of salad.

"I think you're jealous," I said.

"I concur," Martin said. He shook his head. "Fucking catfish."

"You want a piece?" I said.

Linda took a filet off my plate. "I gave up being jealous long ago." She sliced the filet into thin strips then cut them into squares. She tossed them into her salad. "Don't you think for a second, sport, that I'm that tenacious. Besides, soon you'll be a married man."

"That's the general consensus," I said. I finished my beer and cut into another piece of fish.

The place was now in full swing. A combination of early bird's and happy hour's. The hostess showed a large party of young women in tight dresses to a center table. Across from us a man with thinning gray hair and an Asian woman in a black dress sat at one side of a booth and split a carafe of Chablis. Near the entrance of our dining room an older couple sat across from each other and ate salad. Beyond them I could see three men in suits and ties sitting at the corner of the bar rolling dice. Lone Star's "Amazed by You" delicately played in the background, muffled by laughter, chatter, and clanging plates. I heard a 727

ascend over the restaurant.

"How is Maggie?" Martin asked.

"I don't know. She's been acting strange lately."

"How so?" Martin asked.

"That girl's always been strange," Linda said.

"She's been spending time with a Literature professor."

"How much time?" Martin asked.

"Too much time," I said.

Our waitress arrived with our second round and another plate of fish. Martin speared a piece of crab with his fork and gazed at it in the light. Linda stabbed at her salad. I dumped malt vinegar on my fries. Our waitress smiled at me and left.

"Think she's cheatin' on you Ace?" Linda said.

"I trust Maggie. I've always trusted Maggie." I drank some beer. "She acts more like she doesn't trust me."

"That girl don't trust herself," Linda said.

"I know how you feel about Maggie," I said. "And I know why. I'll work it out. Right now I'm more concerned with getting paid and getting my stuff."

Martin took a sip of his drink. "You'll get paid when I get paid. I'm estimating sometime next week. As far as your stuff, I haven't heard anything."

"What happened to your stuff?" Linda asked.

"After I was evicted, Martin arranged to have my items placed in storage. The moving company went on strike while they were expediting my belongings."

"This trucking company isn't Peninsula moving, is it?"

"The one and only," I said.

Linda looked at Martin. "You cheap bastard. That company aint no damn good."

"The price was right," Martin said.

"But the company's worthless," Linda returned. "It's just like a Jew to go with the cheapest company."

Our server arrived with more fish. "Can I get you anything else?" She said.

We declined. "I'll be right back with your check."

"Where have you been staying all this time?" Linda asked.

"With Maggie."

Linda shook her head. "Well, soon you plan to make it official."

"Soon," I said.

"I think I have another job for you," Martin said. "I'm struggling with a divorce case."

"You want me to take pictures of some schmuck cheating on his wife?"

"Something like that," he said. "I want you to follow

some guy's wife."

"I'll take it."

"Pervert," Linda pierced.

"I should be in town next week," I said.

"Where are you going?" Martin asked. He finished his drink.

"I've got a missing person's job."

"For Arthur Harrington?" Linda asked.

I nodded.

"Careful, Cole," Linda said. "This man's dangerous."

"So am I."

"You're good at what you do, Cole. But you have boundaries. Harrington doesn't. I think you should walk away from this one."

"That would be unprofessional," I said. "Besides I'm not working against him. I'm trying to find his fiancée." I drank some beer.

"Just be careful," Linda said.

"I always am."

"I've never heard of the guy," Martin said.

"He's no one," I said.

"I've got a file that claims otherwise."

"Have you been watching out for me, Honey?"

"You and the entire city," Linda returned.

"I bet I'm your favorite citizen," I said.

"More like my favorite criminal."

"You like arresting me," I said.

"I like keeping you from terrorizing my town."

"I think you like handcuffing me."

Martin intervened. "You guys still tease each other like you did in college."

"No need for teasing back then," Linda said. "It was the real deal."

"Yup," Martin spoke, "It was us against the world back then."

"Sometimes I think it still is," I said.

"Sometimes it's not," Linda said. She took a French fry off my plate and ate it.

"So what do you think will happen to all those people Sharon Pane fired yesterday?" I asked Martin.

"I'm assuming they'll get lawyers."

"I don't think all of them participated in Sharon Pane's rip-off," I said. "Most of them are honest, hard-working people."

"I do love my job," Martin said.

"You love the money," Linda said.

"Well, there's that," he returned.

"But your hours suck," I said. "Your wife will testify

to that."

"Stay away from my wife, Cole."

"What do you call these large golden balls near the center of your plate?" Linda asked.

"Hush Puppies," I said.

Linda speared one with a fork and took a bite. "Tastes like soggy corn bread."

I finished my beer.

Chapter 20

When I arrived at Maggie's, it was dark. The air was full of moisture and the smell of fresh smoke from fireplaces. The absence of vehicles in her driveway was a clear indication that she wasn't home. We were overdue for a profound conversation on the ethics of interpersonal relationships. I figured I could throw together a plate of vegetables, and slice some cheese, and chill some wine to set the atmosphere with a nice tone. I didn't get it at first. My hands were cold, the porch light was off, and I had a lot on my mind. But I couldn't get my key to work. I thought for a moment that the dank air contracted the tumblers, preventing proper intercourse as I tried to thrust the key into the slot. I retrieved my flash-light from my truck. As I walked back to the house, a drop of rain splashed on my nose. I shined the light on my key-chain and

made sure I was applying the right key. I was. I studied the key-hole to make sure there wasn't something wedged inside. There wasn't. After studying the knob a little more, I realized the problem. It was a different knob.

Maggie changed locks. Why would she do that? I went to my truck and pulled out my lock-picking kit from behind the seat. The sky slowly dribbled large drops of rain. Why would she change locks without letting me know? Was I the reason she changed the locks? I have never violated Maggie's trust. And I wasn't going to start now.

I got into my truck and headed for the freeway.

Chapter 21

I called the B bar B from the payphone in Denny's. Not my favorite place in the world, but at least it's somewhat quiet. Except for the occasional pleasant sounds from the restrooms.

"Burns Brothers B bar B," a female answered on the other end of the line.

"Could you page Billy Bass, please," I said.

It took a while but Billy finally came on the line.

"This you, Hoss?" he said.

"Any luck?" I returned.

"Not on your stuff. Them boys at Peninsula got themselves acting out of control."

"You have anything for me on Amanda Fisher?"

"The blond gal?"

"Yes."

"Got more than you want. Girl gets around."

"That's great," I said.

"I don't know about that. Truckers seen her in San Antonio, New York, Saint Paul, Cedar Falls, Boulder, and San Diego all around the same time. Looks like you got a mighty big hay stack to look through, cowboy."

"I had no idea there were so many blonds driving red transams. Chances are, she hasn't made it to the East Coast, and I doubt, for some reason, that she went as far as Minnesota. I think she's somewhere on the West Coast."

"Why you say that?"

"Call it a hunch, but a girl like this will take a plane if the trip is any more than a few hundred miles."

"You gather all this from her picture?"

"They speak a thousand words."

"I guess so," he said. "That narrows it down to a few."

"Let's have them," I said.

"Well this one guy who calls himself 'Hammer Down' said she's staying at the Motel 6 in San Diego. Another trucker said he saw her driving down the strip in Vegas last week. She was also spotted at the rest area on highway 5 just South of Corning a few days ago. She's been spotted at the Blue Spurs Tavern in Grants pass, and a nice fellow I talked

to a little while ago said she served him breakfast this morning at the IHOP in Riverside. That's about it."

"That narrows it."

"When do I get my hundred bucks?"

"I'll drop it by the house as soon as I get back."

"I ain't worried."

"Give me a line on my stuff and there's another hundred in it for you."

"Like I said, Hoss, you've got as good a chance finding your stuff as a giraffe finding a gopher. But I'll see what I can do."

"Much obliged."

"Talk to ya soon." Billy hung up.

The next step to this battle was determining which blond to track. I immediately ruled out the waitress in Riverside. What did she do, leave her fiance to pursue her dream of becoming a pancake house waitress? I don't think so. Amanda also didn't look like the type to stay at a motel 6. Best Western maybe. But not Motel 6. So I ruled out San Diego. Las Vegas seemed appropriate for a young, wild blonde. Maybe she went there to marry someone else? The problem is that every other girl in Las Vegas resembles Amanda Fisher. I'd never find her. So I ruled that out.

It makes sense that she'd stop at a rest area on North

I-5. Everybody in the world is familiar with highway 5. It's everything a highway should be. It's a road that's easily mastered. It's a road built for speed. It's a road that can get someone to jump from town to town, state to state in a few short moments. I also thought about the girl seen at the Blue Spurs Tavern in Grants Pass, which is also off I-5. Together with the rest area, I could develop a scenario.

Here's a young attractive blond engaged to marry an older, kind of creepy man. Who has money. At least he looked like he had money. She experiences pre-marital jitters, begins to feel confused, possesses the sudden urge to get away and think. She snakes her way through the Bay Area, ventures into its outskirts and jumps onto north I-5. Maybe she has a sister, or an old friend that lives up that way? A couple hours later, she needs to tinkle and stops at a rest area. Several hours down the road, she needs to eat and finds herself at the Blue Spurs Tavern for a quick bite, a couple beers and some shots with the local cowboys and lumberjacks of Grants Pass. No.

But she could know somebody in Grants Pass. Before she marries this older guy, she wants to be sure. She makes arrangements to spend time with someone she trusts. She doesn't tell Harrington because he'd want to tag along or

he'd object or he'd blow it out of proportion or something. While she stays with this friend, she decides to go out and get wild one or two more times before she marries. The Blue Spurs is just the place for that. Although I've never been there, I love the name. It's a place I need to visit at least once. And fate was going to take me there.

Chapter 22

The Blue Spurs sat at the edge of Cascade Street on the west side of town. From the outside, it resembled many Oregon Taverns, some neon signs illuminating through dense clusters of evergreens. Wherever you're in Southern Oregon, walk a mile in any direction and you're in the middle of the forest. In the case of the Blue Spurs, the back of the parking lot rested up against the woods. It was a little after midnight when I arrived. Some SUVs and Chevy trucks occupied the parking lot. The inside of the place was dark and rustic and smoky. Ronnie Millsap's *Stranger in My House* blared from the jukebox. A few large men wearing plaid shirts sat on tall wooden stools at a long narrow bar. Brown stained wooden booths aligned the remainder of the walls, and the majority of the floor consisted of dark rural tables. Near the edge of the bar a young man in a Levi's

jacket played electronic darts with a long-haired girl in a black vest and tight blue jeans. Beyond them, a couple of large men in black cowboy hats shot pool. Behind the bar, a heavy man in a white apron with a scrubby beard washed glasses. I ordered a draft beer from him and took it to a booth.

It was times like these I weighed my probabilities, pondered my philosophies, and often questioned my logic. I sat there and thought. What if the girl from the Motel 6 in San Diego was Amanda Fisher? I was still just up the road-- about a thousand miles. What if she were in Vegas? I remember thinking that even if I were on the right track, she could be in Canada by now. Did I have enough to go on? I should have asked Harrington more questions. I should have insisted on searching his premises. I wondered why I took that job in the first place? How could I expect to find anyone? I couldn't even find my own stuff. I wanted to ask the bartender if he'd seen a hot looking blond around lately, but I was afraid of the answer.

At least the beer was good. Crisp, cold, and sharp. A few more of those I'd blow the case off and go fishing. This time of year, steelhead and silver salmon ran in the Rogue River. I started thinking about Harold Blands. How much would he get from his law suit? Will he get his job

back? Will he try? Will he retire? How long will Sharon Pane exploit her employer? What was going on with Maggie?

I had almost finished my beer when the door opened and seemed to mesmerize everyone in the tavern. A girl in a brown suede coat advanced to the bar. I knew it was Amanda Fisher. Was I good or what? She ordered a seven/seven from the bartender and eased into a stool. She seemed to radiate charisma into the drab atmosphere. It was interesting that people knew her, as if she were a regular. They called her Amy. The men at the bar talked loosely with her. The bartender felt at ease around her. I never met her and I already liked her. I studied the scene for a few moments and approached her from behind.

"Amanda," I said.

She turned and looked me in the eye. At first she looked pleased at what she saw. Then the look of confusion set in once she realized what I called her. "Do I know you?" she said gently.

"My name is Cole Gregory. I work for your fiancée."

"I'm sorry," she said. "you're mistaken. I've never been engaged to anyone. You have me mixed up with someone else."

"No mistake," I said "Arthur Harrington hired me to find you. He's worried about you."

Her face grew flushed. "You work for Arthur?" Her eyes looked as if they'd expand out of her face. "You, you're here to kill me?"

I shook my head.

"Help me! He wants to kill me!" she shouted.

"I think you better go, pal" the bartender said. "We don't tolerate no harassment."

"I'm not here to harass anyone. I just want to talk to the lady for a moment."

The more I spoke, the more confused I became. Did I have the right girl? Was I set up? And If the bartender didn't tolerate no harassment, does that mean the Blue Spurs requires harassment?

The bartender got into my face. "I'm not gonna tell you again." He hardened his stare; I held it.

In a few moments he broke away and motioned to the pool table. The two cowboys left their game and stood in front of me. One of them held a pool cue. The other held an almost emptied Budweiser longneck.

The one with the pool cue spoke. "Now I've never seen you in here before *Friend*, but you made a mistake threatening the lady." He was much taller than me and had a large frame. He had a brown beard and mustache and large hairy hands. He seemed like he might be a fun guy to watch

football with, but I wouldn't want to be around him after his team lost.

"I'm not threatening anybody," I said. "I'm an investigator and want to ask the lady a couple of questions."

"I don't care who the fuck you are," the one with the beer bottle said. "We'll rip you apart and dump you in the drink before you know you was bleedin'" He wasn't as big as his friend but more intimidating. His wild eyes penetrated through his bony face. He had long black hair and a vertical scar jagging down his right cheek. His right forearm was covered with a tattoo of serpents entwined around a heart.

The bartender leaned across the bar. I saw him from the corner of my eye. "What should we do with him, Amy?" The bartender now had a bat in his hand.

Amanda looked at me from the other side of Wild-Eyes. While she studied me, Scar-Face hit me on the side of the head with the beer bottle. It hurt, but I didn't go down. The larger cowboy took a step back and swung the pool stick at my face. I blocked it with my forearm and kicked him in the jewels. He hunched over but didn't go down. I helped him to the ground by shattering a wooden stool across his back. He lay flat on the floor groaning. I looked

peripherally at the bartender. He had the bat cocked back, waiting for me to move into range. Scar-face came at me with the jagged piece of the broken beer bottle. I felt my adrenaline expand and my throat tighten. The bartender chopped at my head with the bat and missed. I moved out of range. Scar-face lunged at my neck with the sharp glass. Bad move. I avoided the glass, grabbed his arm, and whacked his wrist on the edge of the bar. The glass fell to the ground. With my back to him, I threw my right elbow into his face. He fell back but held his balance. I stepped into a sharp left to his stomach, followed by a hard right to the face. He fell to the ground and stared at me through his expansive eyes. But he didn't get up. He wasn't that crazy. Blood seeped out of his nose. I looked at the bartender. He was on the phone. Probably to the police. I looked for Amanda. She was gone. I looked at everyone else, who seemed mildly entertained, like this happens all the time at the Blue Spurs. I ran out the door.

Outside, Amanda was in a struggle with another man. He had her by the upper arm, forcing her into his car.

"Don't make another move," I said.

They both froze and looked at me. I stared into the man's eyes. Although it was dark, very dark, I clearly saw the man, as if he were illuminated. It was Harrington. He

pointed a gun at me from the other side of the car, resting his trigger arm on the hood. I hit the ground before the shot went off. It whistled over my head. Sounded like a .22 revolver. I tumbled underneath a pickup truck before another shot went off. I heard the bullet clip a branch in the forest behind me. I got to the other side of the truck and peeked over the hood. Harrington was no longer shooting. While he was engaged with me, Amanda managed to struggle away and dart for the woods. I heard the high piercing sound of police sirens approaching. Harrington got into his car and fled. Amanda ran into the woods. I thought about making my way to my truck, but I'd never make it out of the parking lot before the cops arrived.

I didn't know what to do. If I kept my head, I could sort things out with the police. But they'd want to detain me at the police station, ask me questions, fingerprint me. By the time I got out, Amanda would be gone for good. By the time I got out, maybe Harrington would have killed her. I darted into the forest and hid.

Chapter 23

The longer I was in the woods, the longer I wished I weren't. It was a long, cold wait. Although it wasn't snowing, the chilly air bit ferociously. I wore my black leather jacket, levis, and cowboy boots, which were fine while I was indoors, but no match for the late winter elements of Southern Oregon. I was cold, very cold. I felt the frost hardening on my eyebrows.

Fortunately, the dismal atmosphere worked a little to my advantage. I managed to keep my eye on the cops in the lighted parking lot by staying low in the thickness of giant pine trees, a few feet from the edge of the parking lot. A couple times an officer walked to the edge of the lot and shined his flashlight aimlessly in the woods. And one time his partner shined a wide traveling beam from their vehicle.

They never spotted me, nor gave it much effort. Most of their attention was spent investigating my vehicle. They were over every inch of the outside of the truck, gathering particles and lifting prints. Who says small town crime fighting isn't sophisticated?

They took everybody's statement. The bartender kept saying he'd never seen me before, and I wrecked his bar. The large cowboy who swung at me with a pool cue didn't say much. His friend with the tattoo, scar, and broken nose did all the talking. He kept repeating that he was going to kill me. He was going to have to wait in a long line. About two in the morning, the police made the bartender close the Blue Spurs and told everyone to go home.

About two thirty, another police car arrived. Besides my truck, the TransAm, the officers and their vehicles, the parking lot was empty. The officers lifted prints from the TransAm and gathered evidence from the ground of the parking lot. I couldn't see what they were collecting but guessed they were looking for bullet-shells. They shined both lights from their cars into the forest, occasionally overlapping the beams. About three, a tow truck arrived, hooked up my truck, and towed it away. They left Amanda's TransAm alone. The bartender must have put in a good word for her. About three thirty, the cops shined their lights

in the forest one last time, got into their vehicles, and left. A red TransAm stood alone in the middle of the cold, desolate, parking lot. I froze as I watched it from the somber, gelid forest.

Chapter 24

I thought about renting a room. I knew I could walk to the main section of Grants Pass in a half-an-hour. Then what? I'd wake up several hours later and try to get my truck out of police impound? What if the two cowboys brought charges against me. No. They seemed more like the type to ambush me and dump me in the river. By running my plates, the Grants Pass Police Department would learn everything about me. It's a matter of public record that I am a private investigator, once attended the police academy, and once served with the FBI, none of which sit too well with small town cops. They'd lock me up because they could.

I went a little deeper into the forest and built a small fire. From my new location, I could still see Amanda's car. About five, a Toyota Camry slowly drove into the parking lot and stopped next to the TransAm. I

recognized the Camry; it was Harrington's. He got out and scraped some frost off the windshield of the TransAm and looked inside. He popped the hood, felt around the engine, and yanked something out, probably the coil wire. A few moments later he got back into his car and left the parking lot. I heard him kill the engine a little ways up the road. He was waiting for Amanda to come back.

What was he doing here? More importantly, why did he shoot at me? If he could find his fiance, why did he need me? What if he followed me from San Jose, the way he followed me from Original Joe's? Was he following me all the time? Why hadn't I noticed? Why did he shoot at me? Amanda looked scared when I told her I worked for him. Linda was concerned when I told her I worked for him. By now, I wished I never worked for him.

About six-thirty, a figure entered the other side of the parking lot from the forest. It was Amanda. She wore a light blue down jacket, blue jeans, and hiking boots. I made it a point to intercept her before Harrington saw her. Several feet from her car, she spotted me and ran back into the woods from where she entered. I ran after her. She knew this forest better than I did, and she initially had developed a nice lead. And Justin boots aren't the best running gear.

She was on a trail that obviously led to somewhere, and she knew exactly where. She'd probably been here a few days and managed to explore; in case a large dangerous man found her, she could make an escape, the way she did last night. In fear, Amanda followed the trail, up and down, like a wild doe, running for her life from a pack of angry blood hounds. But she didn't know that I no longer represented Harrington. Whoever he was? I was there to help her. I was her only hope at this point. Farther and farther Amanda sprinted up the trail, with me slowly, yet consistently gaining on her. Finally, I caught up to her and grabbed the back of her jacket. She kept going till she lost her balance, causing us both to fall to the ground. As I lay on top of her, she struggled, but she was too tired to be effective. We were both too winded to speak, so for a while nothing got accomplished. She struggled to get away, as I held her firmly.

Finally, I caught my breath and spoke: "I'm not going to hurt you."

She said nothing and continued to fight.

"I promise not to hurt you," I said. "I'll let you go if you stop fighting."

She continued to struggle. "If he gets a hold of me he'll kill me," she said. She continued to struggle but her

resistance declined. She was exhausted. "Please don't hand me over to him. He'll kill me."

"I no longer work for Harrington. He broke our contract when he shot at me."

"Who are you?" she said.

"Right now, I'm the only chance you've got."

I let her go and I stood up. She got up and began brushing herself off. Her wild blond hair lay partially in her face, her cheeks were flushed from running, and I could see the hint of fear in her deep blue eyes. I could tell she thought about running, but I could also tell she thought it a bad idea. I had never before seen anything more beautiful up this close. I showed her my PI license. I also told her who I was, how Harrington approached me, how he followed me to Oregon, and how I witnessed him pulling the coil wire out of her engine. By the end of my synopsis, Amanda began to relax. She told me she had never been engaged to Harrington, claiming that he fabricated the entire story. She said he was delusional.

"I think we should get the local police involved in this," I said. "You seem to have hit it off real dandy with the locals. Maybe you could put in a good word for me and I can get my truck back."

"No cops."

"Anything I need to know about that," I said.

"No Cops."

"I understand," I said. "Do you know anyone in this area?"

"There's Lisa. I've been staying with her the last few days."

"Can you trust Lisa?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Does she trust you?"

"I guess so?"

"Let's hope so. Where does this trail wind-up?"

"A city park. Lisa lives up the road from there."

"How convenient." I said. "I think it's time I met Lisa."

Amanda nodded. We briskly walked up the trail.

Chapter 25

Lisa lived in a two bedroom cabin on Fir street. It took us forty-five minutes to get there, about thirty-five to get to the park, and another ten to get to Lisa's. Not much was said during the hike. One time, Amanda used her cell-phone to warn Lisa of unanticipated company. Occasionally, we'd stop, and I'd make sure we weren't followed. When we did talk, we spoke lightly of the area, the wonders of nature, and the beauty of Oregon. I think I earned her trust. I didn't want to push too hard. I wanted to let her open the cover of the can of worms I'd fallen into.

Lisa was straightening-up the living room when we arrived. Her place wasn't messy, but one could say it was comfortably lived in. There were a knit snow-cap and a couple pairs of gloves dangling from nails in front of the

fireplace. Some landscape paintings of farms, mountains, and meadows hung from the ruddy paneled walls. A TV Guide and a worn copy of Tolkien's *Twin Towers* lay near the center of the couch. There was a *Cosmopolitan* magazine, a phone, and a half empty bottle of Merlot on the end table. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air.

"You kids want coffee?" Lisa said.

"With sugar," Amanda said.

"Black is fine with me," I said.

"So where's your car?" Lisa asked Amanda when she came out with our coffees.

"The Blue Spurs," Amanda said.

"Still?"

Amanda nodded. "Arthur's watching it."

"This guy cool?" Lisa asked, pointing to me.

"I think so," Amanda said.

"He looks cool," Lisa said. She had long brown curly hair and was dressed in a white uniform. Her nametag said dental assistant. "I thought you worked for Arthur?"

"That was before he shot at me."

"Where's your car?"

"Cops towed it." I drank some coffee.

"How long you known Arthur?"

"Not long," I said "You?"

"Not at all," she returned.

"How long you known Amanda?" I said.

"Since college," Lisa said.

Lisa took a couple of keys off her key-ring. She handed Amanda a set of car-keys. "I've got to rush to work . You're welcome to use the old Celica if you need to get around. I'll be home about six." Lisa looked at me. "Take care of her." Lisa Left.

From the large living-room window I saw thick snowflakes collecting on the giant pines. Across the street there were several other places that resembled Lisa's. White clouds of smoke slowly dispersed from their chimneys. Along the street some young kids in knit caps, bright jackets and mittens gathered at the school bus-stop. A lady in a white down jacket with matching earmuffs walked a vanilla lab. A man in a red hunting jacket and black snowcap with earflaps shoveled snow from his driveway. The scene looked like something portrayed in a *Hallmark* card.

The inside of Lisa's cabin was warm, and the coffee felt good running down my throat. Amanda sat on the other side of the couch. She smelled nice.

"Does anyone else know you're here?" I asked.

"No. I still don't know how you found me?"

"It's what I do."

"Lisa warned me not to spend much time in public places. She's been great. Cooking for me, buying me things from the store. She says I can stay here as long as I need."

"Yeah, and she introduced you to the Blue Spurs."

"No, I stumbled onto that place during one of my daily jogs along the local trails. Lisa's not much of a drinker. And she wouldn't go for a place like the Blue Spurs."

"But you do?"

"Not really," she said. "It was different. From the time I walked in there, they all treated me like a princess."

"And you liked that," I said.

"All girls like that. I also thought it was out of the way enough to be safe."

"There's no such place," I said. "How do you know Harrington?"

"I worked for Arthur."

"Doing what?"

"Bookkeeping mostly."

"You did bookkeeping for a realtor?"

"Arthur, a realtor? I don't know where you got that."

I pulled out the card he gave me when we first met.

She looked at it, and shook her head. "Arthur has his

fingers in a lot of different puddings, but that's the first I heard he was a realtor." She began to chuckle.

"What did he do when you worked for him?"

"Currently he owns a small business that restores antiques and jewelry."

"What's the name of this company?" I asked.

"Gladco."

"Gladco! You can't be serious."

"That's the name."

"Did this company do work for The Ancient Art Museum in San Jose?"

"Occasionally."

This was getting interesting.

"Do you know Sharon Pane?"

"I know her signature."

"What about Harold Blands?"

"No"

"What about Ronald Peters?"

"Museum curator?" She said.

"Yeah."

"He's the one who usually drops off the antiquities and picks them up. That is whenever our delivery driver is backed -up. I've seen him a few times, maybe. But we never spoke."

"What about Peggy Mills?"

"No."

"Ruben Sanchez?"

"No."

At first I thought it highly improbable for my two cases to be tied this closely together. What does embezzlement have to do with finding a missing person? But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Sharon was dirty, and so was Harrington. Sharon was a fraud and so was Harrington. Deceit has a way of clinging criminals together. Now they both appeared to have a common interest in museum artifacts. What was that common bond? One restored, the other paid the bill?

I still hadn't gotten over how I met Harrington. He claimed he heard I was famous and got lucky finding my truck parked in front of Original Joes. Now that's too coincidental. But what if he followed Blands? Like a shot in the arm, it suddenly hit me where I recognized Harrington. He was sitting in the seats at the Los Gatos Court house the morning I faced battery charges for roughing-up a cheating husband. There's no way all three cases could be tied together. But did they have to be?

So Blands gets fired for damaging a rare, mummified jackal. Blands sues the company and hires a lawyer.

Harrington, for some reason, feels the need to follow Blands. Harrington also feels the need to follow Blands's attorney. Harrington Follows Martin to the courthouse. Harrington follows Blands to Original Joes. Harrington's been following me ever since. He followed me right to Amanda. And he was trying to follow us both right now. How was Amanda connected to all this? One thing was certain, we had to lose Harrington.

"Why is Harrington following you?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said.

"Could it have to do with his books?"

"It could." She yawned while stretching out her arms and sticking out her chest. Nice pose.

"Do you still have access to them?"

"That's a possibility," she said.

"If I take you back to the Bay Area, can you retrieve them for me?"

"Take me back to San Jose? That won't be necessary."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"I brought the records with me."

"So that's why he's following you."

"Yes."

"I bet the records have something to do with why you're running."

Amanda's cheeks reddened. "You are good, aren't you," she said solemnly. She looked out the window.

I got up and got another cup of coffee from the kitchen. When I returned I sat closer to her. I looked her in the eye. "Amanda, there's a dangerous lunatic out there closing-in on you."

"I know," she said.

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes"

"Do you want me to help you?"

"Yes."

"Then it's vital you tell me the truth."

"I know," she said.

"What's in Harrington's files?"

"Information that will incriminate him."

"What kind of information?"

"Mostly tax evasion," she said.

"How serious?"

"Somewhere in the millions of dollars."

"And being the good citizen you are, you feel it's your civil duty to report it."

"Not exactly," she said. She sipped some coffee.

"Arthur hired me, and paid me well, to keep him out of financial troubles."

"You mean he paid you to manipulate his books."

"Yes." She said. "I fudged the numbers in his books for a couple of years. Now I want out."

"And he's not ready to let you go."

"Arthur won't let anybody go. I tried to reason with him. He threatened me."

"So you decided to run?"

"Yes."

"Why bring the files with you?"

"The files are my insurance. Without them, he'd have shot me by now."

"You're not blackmailing him?"

"Oh no! That's like signing my death warrant."

I drank some coffee. The pieces were falling together. I figured if I could get Amanda back to the Bay area, Martin and Linda could get her out of whatever legal jam she fell into. But I needed to take care of Harrington. Right now, he was too close. I needed to at least slow him down.

I told Amanda to call the Shell station I saw on my way into town. They advertised towing and full automotive repair.

"Don't I need to be there when they tow it?" she asked.

"They prefer it, but it's not necessary. Once you give them your credit card number, they'll do anything you ask."

"Won't Arthur follow the tow-truck to the gas station?"

"I'm counting on it," I said. "Before we get your car, I'll tip-off the local police about him."

"You promised no police."

"Your name will never come up. All we need to do is point them towards Harrington. I'll tell the cops I'll give them the shooter from the Blue Spurs parking lot. One look at Harrington and they won't be able to help themselves. And if they find anything on him, he could be out of our hair for a long time."

"There's got to be another way," she said.

"We could take Lisa's Celica to California, leave Harrington here surveilling your car for a couple days."

"I need my car."

"Is it that important to you?"

"Yes."

"Then there's no other way."

Amanda agreed to go along with the plan. She made arrangements with the Shell station, informing them of the keys she'd hidden underneath her vehicle, so they could begin working on it immediately. Like that was going to happen. Once she was done, I called Lieutenant Waters at home. She picked up the phone on the third ring.

"Hello."

"Linda, I need a favor."

"Now where the hell have you run off to?"

"I'm in Grants Pass."

"What the hell you doin' there? You need to be here. Martin's been looking all over for you."

"I plan to leave in a few hours. What's up?"

"You know that conniving broad from the Museum? The one who wrote all those phony notes?"

"Sharon Pane? What's she done now?"

"She's done nothing. The fact is she's dead. Some one offed her."

"You can't be serious!"

"Oh it's serious."

"Any suspects?"

"Just your client, Bings, or something like that."

"Blands?"

"That's the one."

"Any other suspects?"

"You."

"Me?"

"I told you it was serious."

"How do we know it's murder?"

"I don't. This is out of my jurisdiction. I got a phone call from Martin late last night. He was looking for

you; he was looking for Blands. He said San Jose PD was all over him. I don't have any details except you need to be here."

"There's a problem."

"What problem?"

"My truck's been impounded."

"First it's your apartment, then it's your stuff, now it's your truck. You turning vagrant on us, Ace?"

"I need you to help me with the local law around here."

"Where did you say you were, Grants Pass?"

"Yes."

"Them boys will listen to a Black, female, lieutenant from California, as closely as a shark listens to a lifeguard. But I'll see what I can do."

"They may surprise you," I said. "Especially if you fax along some information on Harrington."

"Arthur Harrington? What the hell he doing there?"

"Lately he's been shooting at me."

"Do they know that?"

"They know there's trouble in their peaceful little town. The problem is they think it's me."

"I think they're right," she said. "But I'll see what I can do. I'm on my way to the department right now. I'll have a chat with the locals in Grants Pass. But you've got

to get your wanted ass here as soon as possible."

"That's a promise," I said.

"Call me at the office in a couple of hours." Linda hung up.

I called Martin at his office. He was in court. All we could do now was wait. I called Maggie at home. I got the answering machine. I looked at Amanda and she smiled at me trustingly. She smelled extremely pleasant. Different than Maggie. Maggie smelled of damp rose pedals and sharp pines. Amanda smelled of ripe cherries and sweet candy. It was driving me crazy. I finished my coffee and began making breakfast.

Chapter 25

I made scrambled eggs, sausage, and toast. Amanda bolted the food down as fast as I did. She was surprised how good it was; my breakfasts always are. It was pleasantly unusual watching a female like breakfast the way that I did. "This is so good," she repeated. "This is so good." "How did you get that texture in the sausage?" "What spice did you use to create that delectable flavor in the eggs?" Maggie interrogated me whenever I cooked for her. She'd say things like, "How much butter did you use?" or "You didn't cook this enough" or "I hope You didn't use the same spatula on my pancake that you used on your bacon." The very smell of meat made Maggie sick, unless we were at an expensive restaurant.

During breakfast, I looked at the books from the Gladco company. Amanda was kind enough to share. Overall, the

company appeared legitimate. Too legitimate. Sometimes the books revealed an extremely low overhead, and sometimes an extremely humble profit. Not what I'd expect from the notorious Arthur Harrington. Gladco dealt with a number of different companies, mostly antique dealers. Gladco also dealt regularly with the museum. Every month, the books revealed sales of specialized rouge, glues, clays, powders, oil paints, tapes, and resins. There were several areas where "service" was marked, with a separate line for parts and materials, a separate line for labor, and a separate line for shipping.

It appeared that the museum relied mostly on Gladco for supplies, although in 97 and 98 there seemed to be a great need for service. Nevertheless, last September, they restored a plaque of hieroglyphics, a soldier's spear, an array of mourning women painted on a large block of limestone, and a wooden stela of Hesy. In October, they restored a black granite sphinx, a ram-headed vase, an archer's bow, and an alabaster statue of the Divine Consort Amenirdis. In November, they polished a ruby from Tuthmosis' crown, a copper flute, and a steatite and alabaster disc portraying hunting dogs. In December they polished a bracelet in the image of the royal protective Cobra Uraeus, and touched-up a gold necklace from a statue

of Isis. No service for the museum was recorded for January but Gladco sold them a case of clay, a box of brushes, and a jar of rattan paint. In the first week of February, the museum sold them another case of potting plaster, and restored a mummified Jackal.

"How many people work for Gladco?" I asked Amanda.

She slightly lifted her head and looked at the ceiling.

"Hmm, well there was me; Arthur; Rita, the bimbo receptionist who does nothing but answer the phone; Mary Lou, the office assistant who does everything else; a parts driver; a few shipping and receiving clerks; some sales consultants; some assembly workers; and that's about it. I guess about fifteen."

"How many restore jewelry or artifacts?"

"Oh, I almost forgot about Ahmul. Can't forget about him."

"What does Ahmul do?"

"Ahmul performs the actual restoration on the antiquities."

"He restores all the orders by himself?"

"Several assembly technicians help him with the preparations, but Ahmul is the only one who knows the actual process."

"How hard could it be?" I said.

"Hard," she said. "The art of preserving and restoring artifacts and treating precious stones and metals requires one to be an archeologist, an anthropologist, a geologist, and an artist all at the same time."

"He must work long hours to keep up with the orders," I said.

"He does work hard, but he refuses to cut corners. He believes that there's no substitute for perfection."

It stopped snowing, but the sun was still hidden. The ground, the roofs, the trees, the cars, and everything else was layered with inches of snow. The sky was gray. A persistent white radiance glimmered through the atmosphere. On the porch some finches ate seeds that fell on the railing. Underneath an alder tree a squirrel squatted and ate a nut.

I laid the stack of books on the floor near the couch. "I don't see anything unorthodox here," I said to Amanda.

"Most people wouldn't. Arthur paid me to create that facade." She was lying on the couch in the fetal position. Every now and then her foot accidentally brushed across my leg. "You'd have to compare these records with his tax records, his total deductions, his various allocations, and his gross earnings from all his *little* projects over the past five years. Believe me, his smile may be bright, but

there's plenty of decay between his teeth."

"Are you a CPA or a dentist?"

Amanda laughed. "Excuse the bad metaphor," she said.

"I've been around Lisa the last few days. She's the one who works for a dental clinic." She playfully tickled my leg with her toe. "And I'm not a licensed accountant, although I've got a degree in business."

"Does Harrington have a degree?" I said.

"No," she said. "At least I don't think so. But he's very smart. And he's very dangerous."

"So am I," I said.

I called Linda at 9:30.

"Lieutenant Waters," she said.

"Linda, it's Cole."

"Cole, this must be your lucky day."

"So far it hasn't been."

"It turns out you have a friend in the Grants Pass police department."

"Tell me about this friend."

"Remember Wyatt?"

"Wyatt Andrews?" I said.

"Yes."

"Our old third-baseman?"

"The one and only. He's been up there since he left."

"I thought he was a fireman?"

"One and the same in Grants Pass," she said. "They cross train everybody up there. He's been part of their Operations Division for the last few years."

"I hope he's a better peace officer than he was a third-baseman."

"Right now he's the only friend you got up there."

I looked at Amanda. She was still playing footsies with me. "I wouldn't say that."

"I don't follow," Linda said. "I thought you said you needed help?"

"I do."

"I told him a little about Harrington and told him why you're there."

"Will he help?"

"He said he'd look into it. He's been at work for less than an hour and he already heard from fellow officers about your incident at the local tavern."

"What exactly did they tell him?" I said.

"They think you're the shooter and they think you killed some innocent blond from the tavern. Have you been straight with me?"

"Linda, I didn't kill anyone from the Blue Spurs; the girl they assume is dead is still alive; she's lying next to

me as we speak; and I'm starting to think she's not all that innocent." Amanda smiled with her mouth opened. She gently kicked me then sat up.

"I don't know what exactly you're getting yourself into stud," Linda said. "But you need to stop playing games and get here. As soon as possible, you need to explain things to Wyatt, get him on your side."

"I'll call him right away," I said.

Linda gave me the his number and extension and hung up.

Chapter 26

We met Wyatt at Sally's Kitchen, which rested across the street, and a few doors down from the Shell station. When we entered, Wyatt was sitting at a booth near the window. He looked at Amanda, then at me, then back at Amanda as she removed her coat. She was stunning. She wore a clinging white turtleneck sweater tucked into a faded pair of levis. Her blond hair was braided back into a ponytail. She wore wire-framed sunglasses on top of her head and shimmering salmon colored lip gloss that matched her fingernails. She and I sat across from Wyatt, Amanda closest to the window.

"How you been Cole?" he said, extending his hand. He had a strong grip. His arms weren't as big as mine, but well defined.

"Well, you know me," I said. "Can't seem to stay out of trouble."

"Now ain't that the truth," he said. He had short brownish hair tucked under a blue ball cap that said Police in large white leathers. He had a thick mustache, strong bone structure, and big white teeth. He wore a blue shirt unbuttoned at the collar revealing a darker blue thermal undershirt. He wore his police badge to the right of his chest. Over his left pocket was a patch that said Operations Division: Fire/Rescue & Police. His belt possessed the standard decor of police equipment: walky-talky, mace, billy club, and a .38 caliber revolver. I introduced him to Amanda. They shook hands.

"So how do you enjoy Law enforcement?" I asked.

"Well, you know me. Fightin' fire has always been my passion, and fightin' fire always will be." He sipped something out of a tall glass. Probably ice tea. "That's mostly what I do up here. Most of the crimes I investigate are fire related. But we all have to spend our time on patrol."

"Keeping the streets safe for humanity," I said.

"Writing tickets is more like it."

"Not much crime up here?" Amanda asked.

"Naw." Wyatt said. "Some years back that spotted owl thing devastated the timber industry. Since the mills closed up, this place is more of a tourist trap than

anything else."

"What kind of tourists you get up here?" Amanda asked.

"Mostly rafters, some fishermen. And we get many people passing-through."

"Not an ideal ecosystem for hardened criminals," I said.

"With the exception of you, Cole." Wyatt gestured to the waitress. "Most of the time, we confiscate a lawbreaker's bottle or his drugs or his guns. In your case, we confiscated your entire truck." Wyatt laughed.

Amanda giggled.

"Any chance of me getting it back today?"

"No." Wyatt said. He held the vowel sound of the "o" a few seconds.

"Why not?"

"It's the weekend. First thing Monday morning you can try. Shouldn't be any problem. Pay the fee and fill out the forms."

"I've got a situation in the Bay area. I've got to get back right away."

"I know," Wyatt said. "Linda mentioned something about that. Tell you what: I'll keep an eye on your truck, make sure the department don't auction it off, while you take care of your business in San Jose. You need to get back as

soon as you can. The fine increases seventy dollars a day while your truck's impounded."

"And there's nothing you can do about that?"

"There's nothing I can do about that."

The waitress arrived with a couple of waters for Amanda and me. She asked if we wanted menus, and we shook our heads. We were still full from breakfast. she filled Wyatt's ice tea and left.

"Did you find anything out about our friend, Harrington?" I said.

"Is that him across the street by the light post?" Wyatt asked.

A little down from the gas station, Harrington sat in his Camry, parked between a Dodge Dart and a Ford Courier. From his position he could clearly see the TransAm, as well as the entire gas station. He would also be able to follow any car leaving the parking lot in any direction.

"It sure is," I said. "I noticed him when we pulled into the parking lot. How long's he been sitting there?"

"He's been there since I've been here."

"Probably been there all morning," I said.

Amanda shook her head. "You guys must possess exceptional vision or an acute perception, or something because I've been looking over my shoulder all day, and I

didn't see him parked there."

"You've got to know what to look for," I said.

Wyatt nodded. "And you always know what to look for. Don't you, Cole? Wyatt winked at Amanda. "The problem with Cole here is that he don't know what to avoid. And he can't resist a pitch inside and high." He looked at me. "This Harrington character is one vicious dog."

"Then you shouldn't have a problem detaining him for a while," I said.

"How long do you need him detained?"

"Twenty years should do it," I said

Amanda smiled.

"We have a little problem," Wyatt said. "Unless he breaks the law, there's not much I can do."

"I don't get it," Amanda said. "This guy's dangerous, extremely dangerous. I know it; you guys know it; everybody knows it. But nobody does anything about it?"

"Even dirtballs have constitutional rights," I said.

"It's been my experience," Wyatt said, "that the dirtier they are, the more protected."

"That doesn't make any sense," Amanda said. "This guy kills people."

"Can you offer any proof to support that assertion?" I said.

Amanda shook her head gently.

"Neither can anyone else," I said.

"According to his file," Wyatt said, "many have tried."

"But he's never been convicted?" I said.

"Nope. Not for murder. He has a mountain full of priors--drugs, burglary, possession of stolen property, things like that. And he's been arrested for conspiracy to commit murder, but never convicted."

"Must have a good lawyer," I said.

"I don't know," Wyatt said. "I'm just working off a condensed version of his police record that Linda sent me. According to Linda there's more. What that more is, I don't know."

Across the street, the mechanic got into Amanda's car and tried to start it. No luck. He got out and popped the hood. He was a large man with straggly shoulder length hair and a long black beard. He wore a greasy pair of navy blue coveralls and a black Raider's cap. He felt around the engine then walked into the garage.

"How long do you think the repair will take?" Wyatt said. "I'm doin' this as a special favor to you. You know, softball buddies and all. But I do have a job to do."

"If Harrington pulled the coil wire," I said, "this shouldn't take longer than a few minutes. If he has to

order the part, it could take a while."

The mechanic appeared from the garage. A thick twelve inch black wire dangled in his left hand. He held a large coffee mug in his right. His head disappeared briefly inside the hood while he installed the wire. He got into Amanda's car. The car started. He revved the engine a few times then let it idle. He shut the car off, closed the hood, took a gulp from his mug, dumped out what remained, spit, and went back into the garage.

"How much do you think this repair will run," I asked.

"Knowin' Hank," Wyatt said, "about a hundred bucks. But Hank does good work. He repairs our department's cars."

"It looks like it's Show time," I said. "But I still have a problem. I need a way back to the Bay Area." I looked at Amanda.

"Take Lisa's Celica," she said. "I'll phone her, tell her what's going on. She won't mind."

"That Celica won't make it out of Oregon with those tires," I said.

"Won't make it out of Oregon with them tags either--been expired for years," Wyatt said.

I looked at Amanda.

"Don't look at me," she said. "I'm driving north as far as I can. I need to get as far away from that maniac as

possible."

"Even if You bury yourself deep inside the Yukon," I said, "your past will catch up to you."

I was almost embarrassed for sounding so corny, but I was desperate. I needed a fast ride to San Jose, and there was a fast TransAm across the street. Just the ticket. But there was something else. I was enjoying this girl's company. Maybe a little too much. I loved Maggie. I was going to marry Maggie. There was no one else for me but Maggie.

On the other hand, I wasn't ready to say goodbye for ever to this girl sitting next to me. I also had the feeling that she really needed me. I had the feeling that she was in real trouble. I don't remember exactly what it was, but something gave me the impression that there was something Amanda wasn't telling me. And I had a cryptic feeling about her enigmatic future. The same feeling one would get after releasing a domestic kitten into a savage forest. From the time I saw Amanda's picture she's been a fascinating conundrum. I'd never be able to figure this one out. Maybe that was part of the attraction?

"You know you've got some things to sort out in the Bay area," I said. "I've got connections, as you can see. I can help you."

She sipped her water. "I'm sorry Cole," she said. "I appreciate everything. Believe me, I do. But I'm not going back there."

Wyatt got up and left two dollars on the table. "If we're going to do this thing, we've got to do it now," he said.

We followed him to the cash register where he paid his bill.

"So we're all clear on the plan," I said.

Amanda nodded.

"Seems simple enough," Wyatt said. "But like I said before, If I don't find anything on him, and he cooperates, there's not much I can do."

"Just keep him occupied. Run his plates. Run his license. Just give Amanda enough time to get away."

We left the restaurant.

Chapter 27

The plan was simple. Wyatt was to go across the street and detain Harrington while Amanda talked to the mechanic, paid the bill, and drove away. During this time, I'd watch Amanda's back. I figured at best, Wyatt would find Harrington's .22, and he wouldn't have a permit. Maybe Wyatt would find more than a gun? At worst, Wyatt could apply all his training and stall Harrington long enough to allow Amanda to get away. Once Wyatt finished, Harrington's real nightmare would begin. Once Wyatt left, it was my turn. I looked forward to spending a sentimental moment with Harrington.

Amanda opened the hatch-back of the Celica and pulled out a large black suitcase. I tried to take it from her and she tugged it away and sat it on the blacktop next to her.

She grabbed a smaller, square shaped case and placed the handle in my hand.

"You don't want me taking the big one?" I asked. "What you got in there?"

"If you want to see my vast assortment of lingerie, there are other ways," she said.

I said nothing.

Amanda gently placed the cases in the trunk of the TransAm and slammed it shut. I looked towards the street and saw Wyatt talking to Harrington through the Camry's opened driver-side window. He took Harrington's license and slowly walked to his police car. We walked inside and talked to the mechanic.

"So how much do I owe you," Amanda asked. She smiled at the mechanic radiantly. She had shiny white teeth. She must get them professionally bleached.

The mechanic stared at her, speechless for a moment. "There's no charge," he said. "You bring it back when you got a real problem." He dropped the keys in her hand. We walked to the TransAm.

Amanda looked at me. "Well, I guess this is it." I heard sincerity in her voice.

"I guess so," I said. I looked towards the street. Wyatt still sat in the police car. He must have been doing

a thorough check. I could see the back of Harrington's head. "There's no way I can change your mind?" I said.

"Cole, you're one in a million. I'd like nothing more than to get to know you more intimately. But I have to do this." She smiled sweetly. "I hope you understand."

"What makes you so sure he won't find you? There are other sleuths out there. A lot of people make a living finding people."

"They won't find me this time," she said. "I made the mistake of hanging around here too long. Where I'm going, no one will find me."

"You know you'll always be looking behind you. Sometimes the feeling will fade, but it will never vanish entirely. I can extinguish these problems in a few short days."

"Will you kill Harrington?"

"Not if I don't have to."

"Then you won't extinguish my problems. I have a better chance running. You know?"

"I know."

Amanda gave me a hug followed by a short kiss on the lips. She got into her car and drove away. As she left the parking lot I could still smell her. Sweet candy and cherries. Wyatt was back talking to Harrington through the

drivers-side window. He had him step out of the car. Wyatt looked at me. He was enjoying himself. I watched Amanda make a left from the parking lot onto the avenue. She didn't travel a country block before a metallic gray Ford F150 with monster tires peeled in behind her. The license plate of the truck said ROAD KILL in bright red letters. Harrington wasn't the only one watching Amanda. She was in immediate danger.

Chapter 28

I followed the truck that followed Amanda onto I-5 North. I was traveling about seventy miles an hour, keeping an even pace several car lengths behind. Amanda probably didn't notice the threat, or she would have floored the accelerator pedal. It didn't matter. Road Kill's Ford was supercharged like a rocket. She'd never know what hit her.

Besides a few commercial trucks, and the occasional SUV, the highway was somewhat vacant. It wasn't the best traveling day. It was snowing again. And although the roads were plowed, a fine film of snow stuck to the ground. The Celica was slipping out of its lane occasionally, and struggled as we sputtered up the grade. The Ford was far ahead but still in sight.

Several miles out of town, the incline decreased-- but

the snow didn't. There were cars on the road putting on chains. The Ford was out of sight, and I wouldn't be able to make it much further. If Harrington hired Road Kill to retrieve his files, it would only take Road Kill a few minutes to break Amanda's neck, and take what he wanted. That was his style: Seek and destroy, then move on.

About twenty miles south of Roseburg, ahead in the distance, I saw the Ford and the TransAm, stopped on the side of the road. The truck's front bumper lay flush against the trunk of the TransAm. It was clear he had forced her off the road. Next to the driver-side of the car, Road Kill gripped Amanda firmly by her shoulders and was shaking her like a rag doll. He must have been questioning her, or she'd be dead. Once he found what he was looking for, that would be the case.

As I came closer to the vehicles, I thought about how I would approach this situation. It's important to remember that when engaging with a force much larger and fiercer, the only strategy to possibly overpower such a monster is a well orchestrated plan. I didn't have one. At the moment I didn't have much. The only angel in my favor was the element of surprise.

I slowed from forty to twenty miles per hour. The back of the car fishtailed as the speed declined. I grabbed a

wool blanked from the backseat and pushed it against the inside of the front windshield. I grabbed the cushion from the passengers seat and placed it between me and the steering wheel. I guided the Celica to hit the back side of the truck at an angle. I pressed my chest firmly against the cushion right before impact and tugged on the shoulder harness, causing it to restrict.

As I crashed into the truck, I heard the thundering sound of a shattering explosion. I felt a mighty hard blow, and heard my pectorals pop as the steering wheel crashed against my chest. Sharp pellets of glass cut into the back of my neck, as the windshield shattered on impact. I smelled burning fluids and singed rubber, and a powerful whistle streamed through my ears along with a painful tone. But I was OK. I'd been hit harder. I also quickly noticed that I could move my upper body freely. I released my seatbelt and looked through the shattered windshield. The front of the car was smashed like an accordion, the windshield area was reduced to about a foot. I saw through the opening that Road Kill marched towards the crash and looked at the damage. The crash had bent the back of his rear wheel-well into his driver-side rear tire, causing it to flatten. The damage wasn't serious, but this was his baby.

I squeezed my legs out from the plastic dash that pressed against them firmly, and then lay on the seat with my legs crouched together. As my enemy approached the Celica and tried to open the driver-side door, I kicked the door open, smashing it against his chest, pushing him onto the highway. I sprang from the car and rushed to the TransAm. Amanda stood next to the open door. I shoved her in and got behind the wheel. I looked in the mirror and saw my assailant slipping on the icy highway. The motor was running. I put the car in gear and floored the accelerator. The tires spun, but we went no where. I looked in the mirror at our enemy. He had made it to his feet, but he didn't approach. He stood about 6' 6, with a large muscular frame. He had a square white face, a short flat-top, and a thin mustache. He wore a dark green flight jacket. He pulled out a large .44 Magnum automatic from the back of his camouflage pants, and pointed it through the back windshield to the back of my head. I shoved the car in reverse forcing it against his truck's front bumper. Then I jammed the automatic stick into first gear and floored the accelerator again. The tires spun, shooting shivers of ice, mud, and gravel high into the air, but we didn't move forward. We slowly slid sideways onto the highway.

Road Kill took a shot at us that knocked out both

windshields. We slid onto the highway, and managed to gain traction and burst forward, smoking the tires through the powdery road. Road Kill got off another shot. This one smashed through a taillight, cutting its way through the car and out its body. We were flying ahead on the highway, as I looked at our enemy in the mirror. He stood there, poised, ready to take another shot. He wouldn't miss a third time. Not Road Kill. At any given time, he could have taken out any of the tires, easily. He could have sliced Amanda's car to pieces with that .44 automatic. But for some reason, he was being careful. He crouched down a little and took closer aim. I was a dead man.

The sound of police sirens filled the air, as I prepared to meet my maker. I saw Road Kill slowly lower his gun and stick it in his jungle pants underneath his jacket. I faintly saw two highway patrol jeeps make their way to the crash as we disappeared into the highway. I looked at Amanda. Her hair was glittering with pebbles of glass, and her eyes were the size of grapefruits. She was so beautiful.

chapter 29

It was a cold, slow drive to Roseburg. The snow thickly fell in bulky clusters. Highway 5 was a white blanket with a faint set of tire tracks. There were no lines on the road. The headlights of the TransAm peered through ten feet of milky atmosphere. Snow freely blew in through the broken windshield. In a way, the lack of visibility worked to our advantage. Any law enforcement officer wouldn't hesitate to pull us over--for good--driving without windshields. No law enforcement officer saw us that day. We pulled into Roseburg about two. We hadn't spoken since the gas station.

Roy's Body and Paint stood at the edge of town. A thirty foot plastic statue of a man in a blue ball cap and checkered coveralls stood between the driveways near the sidewalk. The statue held a giant sledge hammer, and wore a

giant smile. Roy resembled him little.

"We's closed," he shouted. He was smoothing the bondo on the fender of a sixty-nine mustang. He slowly guided a rotary sander along a small area on the top of the fender.

"That's not what it looks like," I shouted. It was hard talking over the sander.

He shut the sander off and removed his safety goggles. His left cheek held a wad of tobacco. "I only work a half day on Saturday; this here's my own car." He was a short plumpish man with a few days growth on his face. He probably shaved once a week. He wore an orange ball cap that said Fred Meyers in white letters. He wore a brown Dickie's coat with a nametag over the right pocket that said Roy.

"Any chance of you replacing a couple windshields," I said.

"We'll make it worth your while," Amanda said. She threw him the same smile she threw at Hank, the gas station mechanic.

Roy looked at her for a moment. "I'd like to help you, ma'am. But I can't get no parts today. You can leave it, and I'll see what I can do Monday."

Amanda looked at me. "What do you think," she said.

I shook my head. "We need to get out of here."

"Not in that you ain't," Roy said.

"Know anybody else in this town who may be able to help us out," I said.

Roy spit a black stream of liquid tobacco on the ground. "Nope. There's a couple of glass places in town, but they don't work on Saturdays neither."

"If we leave it with you," I said, "will you keep it inside the shop? We want it out of the weather."

"I spose that wouldn't be much of a problem." He spit again. "Why don't you park it right there on the other side of that bug."

To the far right of the shop there was a glossy orange Volkswagen. On the other side of it was a parking space, then a long tool bench with an assortment of wrenches, hammers, drills, and cans of paint. I parked the TransAm between the Volkswagen and the bench. Amanda grabbed the large suitcase from the trunk. I grabbed the smaller one. I could tell she trusted me. But not enough to handle her large suitcase. We left Roy's shop and walked up the street.

"Now what?" she said.

"We can't stay here."

"Do you think your friend found anything on Arthur? Anything that might put him away for a while?"

"When we left, it looked like Wyatt was giving him a sobriety test, which means that Wyatt was stalling."

"Who was that monster who destroyed my car?"

"He's the one we need to worry about."

"He's the scariest thing I've ever seen." There was fear in Amanda's eyes as she spoke of him.

"His name's Road Kill," I said. "He kills things."

"Is he involved with Arthur?"

"He's involved with us."

"I don't follow."

"Road kill involves himself with no one. Arthur may have hired him to find you, but Road kill never gets involved with anything deeper than finding people. He doesn't have that kind of thought process."

"Is he a mercenary?"

"Some would think," I said. "He's an ex-commando. He led a ground crew in desert storm. I'm sure he worked a number of secret missions that required his expertise."

"Which is?"

"Killing," I said.

"How do you know him?"

"Our paths cross occasionally, me being a private investigator, and him being a bounty hunter. Did you miss a court date?"

"No."

"You need to be honest with me, Amanda. Road Kill usually works privately for the courts."

"I have been honest with you. I've never been arrested for anything."

"If you're running from the law, you don't want Road Kill to find you. He always brings his skips back. Sometimes he brings them back alive. But they're never the same after they encounter Road Kill."

"I'll never be the same," she said. "He was ripping my shoulders apart. He was smiling. He had the scariest eyes. I thank God you came around when you did." She gently placed her hand around my fingers as we walked. "Thank you."

"You know that you have to come back with me. You'll never escape Road Kill. You need to resolve this."

"Won't he go to jail?" She said. "I saw the police get him."

"They'll contain him; they'll want to contain him for ever; they'll try to contain him for a month; they'll be able to contain him for forty-eight hours; but they'll release him tomorrow morning, after he puts a few prisoners in the hospital and scares a few guards half to death."

Amanda shuttered. "How will you resolve this? Do you

plan to kill him?"

"Not if I don't have to."

"Then what's to stop him? Cole, that man's dangerous."

"He is dangerous. But you need to understand him.

He's not normal. He lacks all passion. He doesn't feel.

All he does is survive. The only thing he cares for is

fulfilling his contract. The only thing he loves is his

truck. If we can get rid of this contract, we get rid of him."

"So you're saying we take care of Arthur, we lose Road Kill."

"Yes."

"What if we just bought a used car and kept going north? He'd never find us." Her grip on my hand tightened. Her shoulder now flush against mine.

"You mean you're willing to forget all about your TransAm?"

"It's just a car."

"I can't run," I said. "I have business in the Bay area. Tomorrow morning, Road Kill will tear this town apart looking for us. If we're careful, he may continue north for a while. But soon enough he'll locate us. Right now we need to focus on getting back."

"Do you have a plan?"

"I'm working on one."

"You know," she said, "he had a tattoo of a bloody dagger on his *neck*."

"I know," I said.

"On his *neck*!" she said.

Chapter 30

We paid two-hundred dollars for a 1972, Ford Station wagon from a middle aged couple who rented a small apartment in town. The sign on the car's window asked for five-hundred, but the couple happily accepted ten twenties, knowing that it was all the money we had, and realizing the landlord was threatening to tow it. We took highway 138 through the Umpqua National forest to highway 97, then south on 97 to I-5. I called Martin from the Motel 6 in San Jose about Mid-night. He picked me up about one A.M. and took me to the crime scene, where Sharon Pane was murdered.

Her small front yard was roped off with yellow caution tape, and a uniform sat in his patrol car on the street. Besides him, the place was deserted, and dark. We lifted up the yellow tape and walked under it towards the door. The

uniform shined his flash light on us as we approached the porch.

"This is a restricted area," he shouted from his patrol car. "No one is permitted beyond the perimeter." He sounded like a rookie.

"Representatives of the court," Martin said.

The uniform cautiously approached us. He shined his light in Martin's face.

"Get that out of my face!" Martin said.

The cop looked at me. I showed him my license. He looked tired, and young. "Ok," he said. He opened the door for us. "Be careful not to touch anything."

We both looked at him. He looked embarrassed. He went back to his patrol car.

"Linda tells me you've seen Wyatt," Martin said as we approached Sharon's living room. It looked the same as it did before. TV, coffee table, couch, and stereo.

"He sends his regards," I said. I walked into the kitchen. Martin followed.

"How's he doing?"

"Same old Wyatt," I said. "He's now a cop." I opened her refrigerator. She had purchased another half-gallon of nonfat milk and eaten a few carrots; other than that, everything looked the same. I opened her freezer and looked

at the Ben & Jerry ice cream. Banana-nut with cashews. The same bottle of Absolut vodka lay next to several neatly stacked weight watchers frozen dinners. I took out the vodka and looked at it. There was about a quarter of the bottle left.

"I heard on the news you got hit with some snow in Grants Pass."

"That's an understatement," I said.

"I didn't think it snowed much in Grants Pass."

"It did last weekend," I said. I walked into Sharon's bedroom.

On the bed was an outline of Sharon Pane. Other than that, the room looked almost the same. Everything was immaculate. Everything but the small area around her dresser. All the drawers were closed but the top two. The top drawer was open almost all the way. A pink lace bra hung over the front edge, dangling one strap. A crumpled pair of white panties lay on top of the dresser. A lacey beige thong lay stretched out next to it. The remainder of the drawer was in disarray. Her gun was missing.

I closed the drawer, so I could get a look inside the second one. This one was equally muddled. Teddys and nighties were tumbled together. Nothing was folded. On the floor, more panties and nighties and stockings lay crinkled

in front of the dresser. The newspaper articles were gone. The next drawer revealed tampering, but didn't compare to first two. Most of the socks remained folded. The bottom drawers showed signs of someone going through them, but most of her narrow shirts remained folded. Her sandals and swimsuits were in the same place.

"You know they found Harold Blands all over this place."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "On the way over you told me that his wife gave him up. They pulled him out of his bed."

"I was speaking figuratively. You haven't slept much have you?"

I shook my head.

"They found fibers from his clothes, follicles from his hair, even footprints from his shoes." Martin pointed down to the floor near the head of the bed. There were some faint shoe imprints created with police powders. They looked like the bottoms of large work boots. "Police even have a scenario."

"Let me guess," I said. "Heart broken Harold comes over Sharon Pane's to ask for his job back. She invites him in. They tiptoe into the bedroom where they fool around before he kills her, and plays around with her underwear."

He decides to call it a night, and goes home and goes back to bed."

"You don't buy that either?"

I shook my head. "What happened to the gun?"

"I didn't hear anything about any gun," Martin said.

"Sharon kept a thirty-eight revolver in her top drawer, underneath her panties."

"I'll look into that," Martin said.

"What happened to the newspaper articles she lined her second drawer with?"

"I don't know anything about any newspaper articles."

"Maybe the cops took them?" I said.

"As far as I know," he said, "no one's taken anything."

We walked into Sharon's small exercise room. In the corner her pink five pound dumbbells rested neatly next to her aqua colored exercise ball. In the center of the floor, the large blue mats lay next to each other revealing a perfect two inch space between them. Mounted on the wall, a small shelf occupied the same exercise tapes. The television in the center of the back wall still looked empty and quiet.

"What was the cause of death?" I asked.

"Strangulation."

"What was the time of death?"

"Sometime Friday night."

I walked to the stair climber and noticed that she kept the same resistant setting, but had changed to a more challenging course. The screen indicated that this course would resemble a steep walk up and down a seventy degree triangle, as if this exercise mimicked a brisk walk over the pyramids--a skill, no doubt everyone should master. On the stand in front of the machine, a magazine lay open, revealing a tall blond on a dock holding a bottle of *Freixenez* sparkling wine. The page next to it featured a small article on children with ADD. I looked at the cover; it said News Week. I looked through the table of contents. Circled in red was the page number of an article that depicted the process of mummification. I turned to the page and started skimming the article.

"Was she raped?" I asked.

"I'm waiting for the complete forensic report on the body now."

"Is Blands capable of rape?"

Before Martin answered two plain clothes detectives came in the room, followed by the uniform. I knew both detectives. They didn't like me.

"Mr. Gregory," one of them said. "I knew we'd see you again." Sargent Davis was a tall Black man with receding

hair and a thick black handlebar mustache. He wore gray slacks, a yellow dress shirt, a brown tie, and a red vest.

"Cole Gregory," the other one spoke. "I'm arresting you for the murder of Sharon Pane." He read me my rights. He was of medium height with a slim muscular build. He was clean shaven and his short, layered, brown hair was parted in the middle. He wore an unbuttoned gray sports coat that allowed his gun and shoulder holster to be visible when he stood in certain positions. His name was Richards. Sergeant Richards was very proud of his gun and shoulder holster.

"You're out of your mind," Martin said.

I laughed.

"Should I cuff him?" the uniform asked. He sounded scared.

"Do we need to cuff you, Cole?" Davis asked.

"I'll go peacefully," I said.

Richardson cuffed me anyway.

Chapter 31

I sat at a metal picnic table in one of the police interrogation rooms in downtown San Jose. Sergeant Davis sat across from me reading an opened file. Martin stood behind him and peered at the file's contents over the detective's shoulder. Richards stood at the edge of the table with one foot on the bench, holding a Styrofoam cup of coffee. I could see his gun.

"What's your involvement with Sharon Pane?" Davis asked.

"None." I said

"Is that why she registered a formal complaint against you?"

"Maybe I wasn't giving her enough attention," I said.

"Let's get something straight," Richards said. "Your

wise cracking attitude won't get you out of this one."

I looked at Martin. He rolled his eyes through his thick glasses.

"Richards is right," Davis said. "We have witnesses that will testify they heard you harass her in her place of employment."

"I just asked her a few questions," I said. "It's what I do."

"And he was representing my law firm at the time," Martin said.

"We've got a witness," Davis said as he read the file, "a Miss Peggy Mills, who claims you followed Sharon and her to where Miss Mills lived, and stalked them all night. Several neighbors corroborate her story."

"Part of the job," I said. I found it strange that Davis referred to the victim by her first name.

"It gets better," Richard said.

Davis went on. "We also have reports from several commercial businesses that you unlawfully acquired personal records by a method of fraudulence." Davis seemed upset.

"Would you like me to read you the list, Mr. Gregory?"

"Sure," I said.

"Johnston supplies, Electrical Distributors." Davis stood up and became more agitated as he went on. "Home

Depot, Orchard Supply, Gladco Company, Kelly Moore Paint, Conliff Plumbing, Southern Lumber, and *fuckin'* Black and Decker." He slammed the file down on the table when he finished and walked to the large mirror at the back of the room. We all knew he had an audience looking in from the other side.

Davis came back at me again. "These charges alone can get your license revoked. And could you not dare to deny that this was not you committing this act of fraudulence? Just answer me yes or no!"

"Don't answer that," Martin said.

I started laughing.

Richards got into my face. "Do you think this is funny?" He slammed his fist on the table.

"A little," I said. "You?" I looked at Martin.

"Quite," Martin said.

Davis came back. This time he looked authentically angry. "This isn't funny. We've got your buddy Blands in a cell ready to confess, and I can't wait, I mean *I can't wait* to charge you as an accessory. Do you realize we found your fingerprints all over her place."

I said nothing. I was careful not to touch anything bare handed, but it's always hard to be sure.

"Have you ever been inside Sharon's place?" Davis said.

"Don't answer that." Martin said.

"If I was you," Richards said. "I'd cooperate." He got into my face and stared.

"I thought I was," I said smiling.

"It's obvious that you don't take us very seriously. You a part-time pig and all," Davis said. He combed his long mustache with his hand a few times. "Well, we a little different here. Down here, we take murder very seriously."

"So do I," I said.

"Obviously not seriously enough," Davis said. "You have your fancy lawyer here, protectin' your ass. And you have that smug attitude like you above the law or somethin'. You may try to convince us of your innocence, but from where I stand, you're as guilty as Cain."

"I didn't kill anyone," I said. "And you know it."

"Maybe not," Richards said. "But thanks to you, a police officer is dead!"

I looked at Martin. "What police officer?"

The door opened and a man with a thin wiry build entered. He wore gray slacks, a white shirt and a gray tie with gold stripes. He had a thin, serious face and a large forehead. He combed his thin strands of brown grayish hair straight back. His name was lieutenant Dan Lexington. He had another file in one hand, and a box of Crispy Cream

donuts in the other.

"Why don't you guys call it a night," the lieutenant said, looking through the two sergeants. Richards marched out of the room. Davis stood there, slowly combed his mustache with his hand, looked at his lieutenant, and shook his head. Davis slammed the file on the table, flashed me an angry look, and left.

Lieutenant Lexington handed the file he'd brought to Martin, and set the donuts on the table. He grabbed the other file from the table and remained standing.

"You guys want coffee?" he asked.

We shook our heads.

"At least have a donut," he said. "I pull you guys down here in the wee hours of the morning, the least I can do is feed you."

"You're the one who sicked Laurel and Hardy on us?" I said. I grabbed a chocolate glazed from the box. Martin studied the file.

Lexington laughed. "They're only doing their job."

"I think they'd rather take me out," I said. I bit into my donut. It was excellent, as far as donuts go.

"Everyone's on edge right now, since the murder of detective Randall," Lexington said.

"Detective Randall?" I asked.

"You know her as Sharon Pane."

Martin and I looked at each other.

"That explains the gun, and the empty apartment," I said. "Might even explain the newspaper articles." I took another bite of the donut.

"A few years ago," the Lieutenant said, "Some consultant representing the San Jose Museum of Ancient Arts informed us that there had been a lot of money disappearing from the organization."

"What kind of consultant?" Martin asked.

"I don't know exactly," the Lieutenant said. "He said he specialized in some sort of research and development in employee excellence."

"You mean he was a hatchet man," I said.

"Yes."

"No company should be without one," Martin said.

"So we placed Sharon," the Lieutenant thought for a second, "Detective Randall in that organization. We worked it out with this consultant to create a position, provide Sharon with a cover, and let her take it from there."

"Who knew about this charade?" I asked.

"Just the consultant, and a few members of my department."

I grabbed another donut. "So all along, this company

specialist, this expert in Egyptology, this muse of the ancient arts was a cop?"

The Lieutenant nodded.

"And you kept her there for over three years?" I said.

"Essentially you're right," the Lieutenant said. "But it's a little more complicated than that. Initially, we figured she'd crack this in a couple of weeks. Then we'd pull her out, the Ancient museum would discontinue the position, and she'd move on to the next assignment."

"But that didn't happen," I said.

"Not exactly." The lieutenant went on. "She discovered the embezzlers in a few short days. We were preparing to make some arrests. We were just dotting our Is and crossing our Ts when she stopped us. She, apparently, uncovered something much bigger."

"So you guys kept her there?" I said.

"When she told us there was something unfolding right in front of her eyes, something really big, we kept her in there. Besides, that petty embezzlement she uncovered wasn't worth pushing the paperwork through."

"So what exactly was this new and improved form of corruption?" I said.

"I don't know?" The Lieutenant said. He looked a little mortified. "Sometimes I'm not certain she knew. But

she promised us it was big, and insisted we keep her working on it."

"You kept her on this project for three years and you didn't even know what she was investigating?" Martin asked.

"I know it sounds preposterous, but the captain insisted. He was quite taken with Sharon. And if she said something big was going down at the Ancient museum, something probably was. And we couldn't take any chances. That place is the Mayor's baby." The Lieutenant grabbed a donut.

"You can ski down that slippery slope," I said, "but it doesn't explain why she was embezzling." I grabbed another donut and took a bite. This one was frosted with maple and filled with whipped cream. "And how does Blands fit into all this? Was he an unfortunate pawn?"

The Lieutenant nodded. "Sharon was an exceptional police officer, but not a poster child for ethics. Around here, they really loved her or they really hated her."

"Were there social conflicts amongst her and some of the male officers?" I said.

"Let's just say that she did whatever she needed to do to get what she wanted. That's what made her such a good cop."

"But she fired all those people," I said.

"She didn't fire anybody; she suspended them." The lieutenant continued. "She told us she finally figured out what was happening over there, and she needed to clear the area while she gathered proof. After we brought this thing to a close, the museum would discontinue her position, hire everyone back, and Sharon would move on to something else."

"But someone killed her, and now you guys are lost," I said.

The Lieutenant said nothing.

"This autopsy," Martin said, "indicates that she was strangled to death by someone with long and narrow fingers."

"That sounds about right," the Lieutenant said.

"Couldn't have been Blands then," I said.

"Blands," the lieutenant muttered as he threw his donut back into the box. "All I've heard the last year was the name Blands. He followed her around; he hung around her office; he hung around her car. He smothered her. He was going to blow her cover."

"So you were aware she was setting him up," Martin said.

"Yes, Martin, I knew what was going on," Lexington said. "She tried to get him to find another job. The man was in the way. When we closed this thing she was going to find him something else. At least that's what she said."

"That place was his life," I said.

"Cole, I'm not happy with the outcome myself. Especially now that we have your boy for murder. But we have motive, and we found fibers from his clothing, footprints from his shoes, and we even found his DNA on the bed. And as the autopsy indicates, on Sharon's body."

I looked at Martin who was still reading the report.

He nodded. "This also states that her body contained complex powders and displayed traces of foreign oils."

"I don't know what to make of that," Lexington said.

"Her fingernails also contain skin tissue with different DNA," Martin Said.

"Look," the Lieutenant said. "I've talked with Blands. And my gut tells me he didn't do it. The fact is, there's evidence that points the other way. You're good Cole, real good. Our philosophies differ, but I've always respected you."

"I'm touched," I said.

"Now most people around here detest you. But we all want Sharon's murderer found. Martin, it was a sad day when you left the DA's office. Normally you guys are a spike in my side. But you have my full cooperation on this one. I want to know what's going on at that museum, and I want

Sharon's murderer found."

"Can you furnish me with firearms?" I asked.

"No."

"Who from the department is on this?" I asked.

"Davis and Richards."

"They think Blands did it," I said.

"That's our #1 suspect."

"Will you release him to me?" Martin asked.

"Right now that's not a good idea," Lexington said.

"Who was this consultant who started this whole shebang?" I said.

"Sullivan," The lieutenant said. "George Sullivan, if I remember correctly."

"How do we get a hold of Mr. Sullivan," I asked.

"You can't," Lexington said. "He died of a heart attack a year ago."

Martin looked at me. I grabbed another donut. We left.

Chapter 32

Amanda was sound asleep on one of the queen sized bed when I got back to the Motel 6. On the dresser was an unopened bottle of Merlot next to two glasses. She probably waited up for me as long as she could. I took my shoes off and laid on top of the other bed with my back flush up against a couple of pillows and read the complete forensics report.

There was no signs of rape, although there were signs of a struggle. There were bruises on Sharon's neck, swelling on the back of her head, and a couple of broken fingernails. There were microscopic fibers from Blands contained within the fibers from a shirt, which occurs when someone who perspires a lot wears the same shirt for days at a time without washing it. They also found his DNA in his

hair follicles and particles from his scalp. There were other elements found within the victim's fingernails, as well as other parts of the body that contained a DNA code that didn't match Blands' or Sharon's, which would indicate a third party. But that could be from digging her claws into her sex partner. There were also some residues in her hands containing particles from myrrh, frankincense, and borax. Large portions of her face and body contained a residue of calcium sulfate. I really didn't know what these chemicals meant; I knew less about what they were; and I knew nothing about how they made their onto her body. Maybe she used an exotic soap? As I read the file, I found myself occasionally dozing-off.

Martin came to the door with a large pizza, and he brought Harold Blands with him. Of course Maggie was there, sitting straight-up in a chair with a large slice of pizza hanging over her hand.

"This doesn't have meat in it does it?" she said.

"This better not have meat in it."

Wyatt joined us and Arthur and Road Kill.

"Where's my truck," I said to Wyatt.

He pointed to Road Kill. "Ask Him."

Martin kept nudging me. "I know where your stuff is Cole. We'll get it as soon as we finish eating."

I looked and there were only two pieces of pizza left. I tried to grab one, but Road Kill grabbed my arm. He was sitting on the bed next to Amanda. I sank into the rug as if it were quicksand.

"Come on, Martin. Let's go get my stuff. I need my guns."

"As soon as the pizza's gone," he said. "As soon as we eat the dinner."

I looked at the pizza and there were about eight slices left. This pizza was pepperoni. There were also bread sticks, pickles, Ben and Jerry's ice cream, donuts, and a fountain of red wine.

We were no longer in the motel room but in the locker room at the gym. I could hear people showering and smell the steam from the showers. The only person I could see in this bay was Sharon Pane, although I heard others walking, and lockers closing. And I heard the showers. I heard all the showers. Sharon Pane slowly walked towards me and stood right in front. She was so skinny and wore so much jewelry. Her face was gold, like a statue.

"What do you think you're doing?" she said.

I tried to talk but couldn't. I was too disoriented.

She put her arm on my shoulder. "Don't you know the truth?" she said.

I said nothing.

"Don't you know the truth?" She put her other arm on my shoulder. "Things aren't always what they seem, my big strong private kitty."

"I know," I said. "You're dead."

"That's not the truth," she said. "I never was. Don't you know the truth?"

"I will," I said.

"I never was. I never was who you thought I was." Her face became brighter. Her head became larger. Now even her hair was gold. No. It was orange. "I can never be who you want me to be."

"I know," I said. "You're dead. And I'm sorry."

"But you're not listening to me," she said. "You never listen to me." Now she had golden freckles. Now she looked a little like Maggie. "I need to tell you something. Don't you know the truth?" Now she was Maggie. "I never was; we never were; and now, we're dead."

When I awoke, Amanda was taking a shower. She had another pair of jeans and a small pink shirt that said *bebe*, folded neatly on the bed. I looked at my watch. It was 8:00 A.M. I called Maggie. On the fourth ring some guy answered.

"Hello," he said.

"Let me talk to Maggie," I said.

"Who's this?" He asked.

"Cole! Who the hell's this?"

There was silence on the other end of the line. I could hear talking in the distance but I couldn't decipher what they were saying. I waited about twenty seconds before I heard a crackle, a click, then a dial tone. The prick hung-up on me.

Amanda walked out the door of the bathroom and started drying her hair in front of the mirror with a towel. She was in white bikini panties and a lacey white bra.

"Good morning," I said.

She acted surprised and a little embarrassed to be seen in her underwear. But she didn't rush for a robe, or ask me to turn around. She stayed in front of the mirror and started stroking her long hair with a thick brush.

"What time did you get in?" she asked.

"About four," I said.

She put down the brush and walked over to the bed and picked up her jeans. She shook them a couple of times and slowly began putting them on. She was putting on a show. I was flattered. She was obviously teasing me. It was working.

"I waited up for you as long as I could," she said. "I

bought us a bottle of wine. I hope you like Merlot."

"A coastal 97 is hard to beat," I said.

"I was afraid being here alone last night." She slowly pulled her jeans over her waist and buttoned them. "I hope you stay here tonight."

"I need to run over to a few places, but I should be back this afternoon."

"How much longer do you think we need to stay here?"

"As long as we have to," I said.

"Does Road Kill know we're here?"

"By now he knows we're not in Oregon. He probably knows we're in San Jose."

"Will he be able to find us?"

"He has his ways, so eventually he'll pinpoint us. But remember what I told you: Don't use any credit cards. Let's not leave a trail."

"But he'll find us anyway?" she said. Her frightened look had returned.

"He's good at what he does," I said.

"How will you handle him when he does find us? I mean, that man's a mutant."

"I know."

"You don't seem concerned."

"I am."

"You don't act it."

"Road Kill's a bulldozer. He plows forward, destroying anything in his pathway. Most people don't see him coming. The ones that do try to run. He runs them down. The only way to handle Road Kill is to out-think him."

"So brains triumphs over brawn?" she said.

"Something like that."

She slowly walked over to my bed and stood over me. She still wasn't wearing a shirt. She had a tiny waist, and her stomach was flat with tiny muscle cracks. "I like you Cole Gregory," she said. "I find you wonderfully refreshing."

"I bet you say that to all the hunks who drive station wagons."

"No," she said. "I don't. I don't like a lot of people. But I like you, Cole. I like you a lot."

I said nothing.

Chapter 33

I drank warm coffee as I stood in the cold office at the Motel 6. There was a heavy-set couple in front of me who didn't exactly know what they wanted. Did they want upstairs or downstairs? Did they want the room through Wednesday of Thursday? Did they want a wakeup call at nine or ten? I still felt Amanda's gaze from her blue eyes piercing through me as I lay there on the bed. That was the moment when nothing in the world existed but sweet passion. That was a moment to expand upon. I kissed her on the forehead and got ready for work. Not much of an expansion. I couldn't do that to Maggie. Maybe there would come another time? Maybe there wouldn't need to be?

"Can I help you, sir," the man behind the counter asked.

"I'd like to pay for another night," I said.

I told the man my room number and he began making the changes as he scrolled up and down the computer screen. Why does this always take forever?

"You want to remain on the ground floor, in 42?" he asked.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"No reason, sir. It's just that some of our occupants complain about the noise level there. It's right next to the pool. Right now I have some openings on the second floor."

"We'll stay where we're at."

The printer leisurely dispersed my bill and the man tore it from the printer and handed it to me.

"What's the additional \$27.83 for?"

"Those are for the long distance calls charged to your room."

"Could you provide me with a list of the numbers called?"

"I'm not sure I have access to those records, sir. Don't you remember who you called?"

"I didn't make the calls" I said. "And that's not the point. If the calls came from a phone in this motel, and you know exactly how much to charge me, then you should know

exactly where the calls went."

"That makes a lot of sense, sir. And I know it will appear on our monthly bill, but right now, I don't know how to access those records."

"Can I at least use the phone at the front desk," I said.

"Is it local?" he asked.

"Yes."

The man lifted the phone from behind the front counter. I called Linda, and asked her to check with the phone company. She retorted several reasons why she shouldn't help me, and several more reasons why she should never help me again. But by the time she hung-up, I was certain that she would help me.

I arrived at the museum about ten. The wind was picking up, bending the tops of palms, and blowing through my black leather jacket. The forecast called for rain and there were deep black clouds in the sky, but, so far not a sprinkle. Near the sphinx, a man in a white shirt and khakis took a picture of a tall lady in a red dress and a floppy hat. On the cement stairs, a tall man with long greasy hair, wearing a black shirt that said "Metallica" leaned against the golden rails and smoked a cigarette. The

security guard stood in front of the bronze doors, talking to a short man in a black overcoat carrying a black folded umbrella. The man with the umbrella left when I approached.

"Morning Bob," I said.

"Good morning," he said. He pretended not to remember me.

"Guess you know about Sharon," I said.

"Everybody knows about Sharon. It was in the paper."

"How's everybody taking it?"

"Not well," he said.

"What about her enemies," I said.

Bob became a little disturbed. "Now sir," he said, "Sharon's death is a sensitive matter around here. The employees are scared. If you're going to cause trouble, I'll have no other choice but to call San Jose PD, and have them escort you off the premises."

"Bob-- I'm not here to cause trouble. Besides, San Jose PD is already here." I pointed across the street. In a brown 1974 Mercury Monarch with a primer fender, Davis and Richards sat and watched every move I made. I'd noticed them since highway 17. With Road Kill due to show up with blazing guns, a couple over-zealous cops may come in handy.

"I see no police car across the street," Bob said.

"Sometimes it's what you don't see that's important,

Bob." I walked inside the doors of the museum.

Donna Grant sat behind the admissions counter. She recognized me right away. "Cole?" she said.

"Yes, That's correct, Donna."

"Wow, you have a good memory."

"I try," I said.

"So I assume you're here investigating Sharon's death."

"Nothing gets by you," I said.

"Do they suspect poor Harold?"

"Do you think he could have done it?" I said.

"He seemed like a nice man, a very nice man, but you never know."

"Well, that's why I'm here," I said. "I want to go down stairs and take a look at some of Harold's personal belongings. I remember he kept some work clothes down there."

"Would you like a personal escort?" she said.

"Only if you're the escort," I said.

The man with the long greasy hair and rock shirt entered the building.

"William," Donna said to the man. "I need you to watch the front desk."

The man looked at her. His eyes were small and red.

"But I am, like, supposed to work in the gift shop."

"I won't be gone long."

"What ever," the man said. He slowly walked behind the desk and put on a blue blazer that said Museum staff.

We walked through the gallery to the basement. On the way, I noticed a small crowd looking at the mummified jackal through the thick glass.

"That display draws quite a crowd," I said.

"There are only a few in existence. We're lucky to have it," Donna said.

We walked down the stairs to the basement. The room looked the same. That is, except for the rows and rows of pasty white heads of Cleopatra on a long work table.

"Looks like your boss has been making crafts again," I said.

"He's been so busy down here. Lately the gift shop's had a great demand for these. Ron's been working senseless to keep up with the orders, as well as his normal curator responsibilities."

"Where's the kiln where he fired those up?" I said.

"There's no kiln, Cole. He sets them in molds over night. Then he sands them smooth and paints them."

"Is that the ancient way?" I asked.

Donna laughed. "No, Cole, it's not. He likes to think that these replicas are authentic; and he often implies that

his process is; and he does buy high quality materials where the chemicals resemble authenticity; but, come on, we sell these in the gift shop to sixth graders."

I looked at the shelves that ran along the walls. They looked about the same as before. One shelf contained a couple of neat rows of different types of molds. There were large boxes and cans of paint and tubes of adhesives on the shelves below it. Another shelving unit contained packing material. I looked towards the far end of the shelf where Harold kept his supplies. There was a box of fluorescent light bulbs, a case of flood lights, a palm sander, and a spool of green 12 gage wire. A box of disposable particle masks sat on a package of fine grain sand paper. There were no work boots, shop coat, or safety glasses.

"Where did you guys move Blands' personal stuff?" I asked.

"I never knew it was moved," Donna said. "I don't come down here that much. I guess I never noticed. Maybe Ron knows?"

"Where is Ron?" I said.

"He was in his office a half an hour ago."

"I need to talk with him," I said.

We left the basement.

Ronald Peters sat behind a long gray metal desk in a small office with yellow wall paper, void of windows. He was leaning back in his chair, talking on the phone when we entered. He wore brown slacks, a white shirt, and a brown tie. His desk was cluttered with paper. There was a thick hard cover book on archeology near the edge of his desk. Next to it was a set of cassette tapes on Egypt. Donna sat in a chair on the other side of his desk. I remained standing.

"Can I help you, Donna?" he said, hanging up the phone.

"I was hoping you could help me," I said.

"And you are?"

"Cole Gregory. We've met before."

"Oh of course," he said. "The private detective. What can I do for you, Mr. Gregory?" He looked at his watch. He had a thin wrist and long fingers, like a pianist.

"I'm investigating the murder of Sharon Pane," I said.

"I've already told the police everything I know," he said quickly. "You can get my statement from them."

"I don't want your statement," I said. "What I want is to know what happened to Blands' belongings."

"Oh yes," he said, "Harold, Blands. I heard they arrested that Baboon for murder."

"That's what I read in the paper," I said. "That's why

I need to know what happened to the clothing he kept down stairs."

Peters shrugged. "I have no idea what happened to his filthy clothing," he said. "Maybe the janitors threw them out?"

I looked at Donna. "How can I get a hold of these janitors?"

"They come in every day about five," she said.

"I'll come back, then," I said.

Chapter 34

I met Linda and Martin in the late afternoon at the Mini-gourmet in San Jose. They occupied a booth near the window. Linda was drinking coffee, as Martin played with a saturated bag submerged in his tea. I passed Martin the forensics report and sat next to Linda.

"They have an excellent chef's salad here, Cole," Linda said. She wore a blue cotton blouse tucked into a pair of tan slacks. Her curly black hair was in a thick pony tail.

"Is that what you're having?" I asked.

"Uh huh."

"Then I'll just have some of yours." I looked at the menu. It was pretty eclectic.

"Martin tells me Dan's got you working for him," Linda said.

"Martin's wrong," I said. "I work for no one. And

that includes Lieutenant Dan Lexington."

"Still the lone wolf, aren't you Ace," Linda said.

"Today he sounds like a cranky lone wolf," Martin said. He was in his courtroom uniform, dark brown suit, coffee colored vest, tan shirt, and a copper colored silk tie.

"I'm a little tired," I said. "I've got to put this thing to bed."

"Any ideas on who killed Sharon Pane?" Linda asked.

"Take your pick," I said. "An angry ex-employee, an angry ex-lover, an angry ex-friend. Possibly, anybody who's met her."

"Martin says she was a cop."

"Yup." I said. "Could have been one of them who killed her."

"I wonder how many people know this about her?" She said.

"I know I didn't have a clue," I said.

"Nor did I," Martin said.

"Most people still don't." I said. "The folks at the museum think she was just another employee in upper management to fear and hate."

"But I don't get this," Linda said. "I thought this broad was the queen of this mendacious hornet's nest? She forges your clients signature, she embezzles from the

company, she fires hard working employees, and San Jose PD. condones this?"

"Part of her cover," Martin said.

The waitress arrived and took our order. Linda had the chef salad, and Martin requested the Hawaiian fruit cup. I ordered a cheeseburger, fries, and a chocolate milkshake.

"I hear Road Kill's back on your tail," Linda said.

I nodded.

"One of these days, stud, that boy's gonna put a bullet in you."

"Not if I see him first."

"One of these days, maybe you won't" she said. "You see those twinkies in the Mercury?"

"I see them."

"Who they supposed to be?" she said.

"They's San Jose's finest," Martin said.

"They tailing you?" Linda asked.

I nodded. "They can't wait to take me down. But if I work things right, they'll soon be my body guards."

"You mean against Road Kill?" Martin said.

"You kidding me, Ace?" Linda looked at me. "Road Kill will slice through those two like a cantaloupe."

"Weak back-up's better than no back-up."

"They're not so bad," Martin said.

The waitress arrived with my milkshake. Linda took her coffee spoon and swiped the cherry off the top of the whipped cream.

"Would you like some?" I said.

Linda finished the remaining water in her glass and set it down next to the milkshake. I filled it up and slid the glass back over to her.

Linda took a sip. "Mmm, this is good," she said.

"Glad you approve," I said.

"I checked out those long distance calls for you, Ace."

"Anything interesting?" I returned.

"I'll say," she said. "Your new girl friend . . . what's her name, Bambi?"

"Amanda." I said

"Well she talked to a Lisa Miller in Grants Pass for thirty-seven minutes."

"That's who she stayed with in Oregon," I said.

"The call she made at seven PM. was to Vancouver, British Columbia."

"Canada?" I said. "Maybe that's where she was going?"

Linda went on. "The lady she called goes by the name of Irene Mcgraff."

"What can you tell me about Irene Mcgraff?"

"Right now, not much," Linda said. "It's the same

number you pulled off the late Sharon Pane's answering machine." She drank some milkshake.

"So, Sharon Pane and Amanda are connected, somehow, through this Canadian Lady," I said. "Weird."

"They must also be connected through that Gladco company you mention from time to time," Martin said.

The waitress arrived with our food. She set the salad in front of Linda, the fruit cup in front of Martin, and the cheeseburger and fries in front of me. Outside, the pavement became dotted with drops of rain.

"Can I get you anything else?" she asked.

"No, thank you," I said.

The waitress left.

I bit into my hamburger. It was a little too well done, but still pretty good. "I bet that somehow this Irene person is connected to the Museum of Ancient Arts. I wonder who else has phoned her?" I looked at Linda.

"No," she said. She stabbed a piece of lettuce with her fork and crunched it vigorously in her mouth. "I'm tired of messin' with the phone company. Besides, I've got work of my own."

I looked at Martin. He was picking through his fruit salad with this unusually thin fork.

"Out of the question," he said. "I spent all morning

in court. I need to see our client this afternoon.

Harold's not adapting to jail well."

"Martin," I said, "I'm getting pretty close to putting this thing together. My instincts tell me that this Canadian lady holds the missing pieces to this puzzle." I took another bite of my hamburger. "Why else would two people who hardly knew of each other be contacting the same person in another country?"

"I don't know," Martin said. "You're the detective."

"I really don't know either," I said. I drank some milkshake. "This lady Irene, leaves a message on the answering machine of a cop, who's working under cover at a museum that specializes in ancient arts."

"And this cop gets my client fired for sexually harassing her, which he never did," Martin said. "She does this solely avoid him from blowing her cover."

"Don't forget the part about her having the physique of a twig," Linda said. She was eating French fries off my plate.

"So somebody murders this cop while I'm involved in a non-related missing person's job. Yet, shortly after I find this person, and less than a day ago, she calls the same lady in Canada as did the late Sharon Pane."

"Like I said before," Martin said, "they're both tied

in with Gladco."

"Both companies are related," I said. "Maybe this lady works for a distributor that furnishes supplies to both these companies." I ate the last remaining hunk of hamburger. "This could mean that this Irene person has nothing to do with this murder. Maybe their dealings with her were legitimately related to business?" I sipped some more milkshake. "But why the urgency for Amanda to call her last night?"

"Don't forget about Harrington, Ace. If that spitwad's involved, there's no legitimacy to none of this. In fact, I think he could be our boy."

"I'd concur, Linda. But when Sharon Pane was murdered, Harrington was shooting at me in Oregon."

"Based on the coroner's report" Martin said, "the estimated time of death occurred in the early evening. When did you first see him?"

"A little before two in the morning."

"That gives him time," Linda said.

"And the first time I met him, he was hanging out at the museum," I said. "The million dollar question is why did he do it?"

"A man like Harrington don't need no reason to commit murder," Linda said.

"Pick him up and do a DNA test on him," Martin said.

"This autopsy report claims that there's a code that doesn't match my client's or detective Pane's."

"Maybe it's Harrington's," I said. "I've had a good look at his hands. They're long enough to form such abrasions on Sharon's neck. But what bothers me about this report are the chemicals found on her body."

"I don't know what to make of that either," Martin said. "The coroner said many of these chemicals are found in cleaners. Maybe she cleaned the kitchen shortly before she went to bed?"

"We can only guess," I said.

"What exactly are these mysterious chemicals you're referring to," Linda said. She took the last fry from my plate and ate it.

Martin opened the report and read from it. "In the victims hair, on the victim's face, and on the victim's clothing, appeared fine particles containing myrrh, frankincense, calcium sulfate, soda ash, and borax."

"I don't know if that means anything or not," Linda said. "I use a hand soap that contains borax. I know that calcium sulfate is found in pottery plaster. Maybe she regularly plastered herself with some sort of beauty-mud?"

"But how would it get on her clothes?" I said.

"Maybe these chemicals are from her laundry detergent?" Linda said.

"How did they get in her hair?" I said. "We can easily speculate how traces of one or more of these chemicals made their way onto one particular area. But these chemicals were all over her. The only way this residue made it onto her clothing, her skin, and in her hair is from an outside source."

"The killer," Martin said.

"So these chemicals flew off the killer and attached themselves to the victim during a struggle?" Linda said.

"That makes sense. If that's the case, where did this murderer attract these chemicals? More specifically, if the murderer is Harrington, where did he attract these chemicals?"

"Gladco?" I said. "They use a number of chemicals to restore artifacts. It's probable these chemicals are constantly circulating through the building via the air ducts."

"That would be my guess," Martin said.

"OK," Linda said. "You guys win. I'll get some of my people looking for Harrington. I'll even stop by the Gladco company and look around. But you're gonna owe me big for his Hot Shot."

"I'd still like to know who this Canadian lady is," I said. "I know she's linked to this somehow."

"I'll get one of my paralegals to check with the phone company," Martin said. "By tonight we'll know everyone this lady's talked to in the last six months."

"That leaves you free to save Bambi from Road Kill," Linda said.

A grim feeling came over me.

"What's the matter Ace? you all right?"

"It just dawned on me," I said. "I hit Road Kill with Lisa's car, which means that Road Kill became aware of who Lisa is. If he checked with the phone company, like I'm sure he did, then he knows Amanda called Lisa. He'll also know from where Amanda called Lisa. By now, he knows exactly where Amanda is."

"What you gonna do?" Linda asked.

"I'm gonna face Road Kill."

"How can I help?" she said.

"Can you lend me a gun?"

"No."

I looked at Martin. "Can you loan me your twelve gage?"

"No."

"Well, it looks like I'll have to face him on wit

alone," I said.

"If that's the case, Ace, it was nice knowin' ya.

We left the restaurant.

Chapter 35

It was six o'clock when I made it back to the Motel 6. The sun had recently set, and the wind had increased, blowing wet debris and paper bags through the dank atmosphere. It rained sharp pellets steadily, and it was dark. Very dark. I slowly drove passed the motel. Road Kill's giant Ford F150 stood in the parking lot like a warship in the midst of a storm. I drove past the motel and looked in the rearview mirror. The Mercury that was tailing me drove into the parking lot. Martin was right. These cops weren't too bad. They weren't the best profilers, and they played the worst game of good cop, bad cop. And when it came to tailing someone, they were about as covert as a hippopotamus in a tribe of pygmies. But when it came to laying their lives down for the city, they were as good as they came.

I parked a couple blocks away from the parking lot on Curtner Ave, and walked to the back of the motel. From the other side of the chain link fence, I saw Road Kill's Ford. He'd positioned himself along a parking row directly in front of the rooms, but a few doors down. From where he sat, he could easily see anyone approaching Amanda's room, or easily shoot anyone entering or exiting. He also had a view of the parking lot's driveway. What was he waiting for? Richards and Davis sat in the Mercury along the back row of cars between a Saturn and a Nissan Pathfinder. They were familiar with Road Kill's vehicle, and more familiar with his reputation. I was certain that Road Kill knew nothing of these two cops, yet was fully aware of their presence. He must have expected something.

The rain continued to fall in thick blankets. I wore a dark green rain poncho over my black leather jacket, a gray sweatshirt and blue jeans. My Reebok cross trainers were saturated. I'd never managed to obtain a firearm. A Swiss army knife, a tire iron, and an old flare were the only weapons I possessed. I carefully walked a little way around the perimeter of the fence till Road Kill and the officers were out of view, then climbed over the fence and crept behind a thick row of oleanders. I crouched behind a cluster of the shrubs with my back to the fence. I had a

narrow view of the F150 through a space created by a Subaru Outback and a Volvo. The rain popped furiously on the top of my poncho and crisply dripped down my garment. I was about twenty feet from the back bumper of Road Kill's truck. My hands were cold and wet, and my mouth was dry. I sat in the blowing night, drenched, waiting for the right time.

At seven, an old Lincoln Continental pulling a U-Haul trailer entered the parking lot. The vehicle stopped in front of the office, and the driver got out and ran into the office, with the top of his jacket pulled over his head. He was in the office for about twenty minutes before he exited and darted back to the Lincoln. The Lincoln and trailer slowly drove between the rows of parked cars, coming to almost a complete stop when it approached the speed bump directly in front of me. This was my opportunity. I remained low and quickly scampered between the narrow space between the cars to the back of the Lincoln, letting the car and trailer slowly pass by, blocking me from Road Kill's view. As the wheels of the trailer bounded over the speed bump, I tumbled to the back of Road Kill's truck. For a moment, I sat with the back of my neck aligned with the truck's back bumper. The Lincoln with the trailer slowly made its way down the driveway and turned the corner. A narrow stream of murky water ran down the middle of the

parking lot. If the detectives didn't see me sitting there, they would soon. I needed to do this now.

With my back to the truck, I took out the flare and snapped it in half. It hissed as a bright pink iridescent flame emerged from its center. While the flame expanded, I threw the flare over the cab of the vehicle and watched it shoot sparks and crackle as it landed on the hood of the truck. Road kill jumped out the driver's door. He acted out of pure instinct. He hadn't acknowledged what happened. I was counting on that. I flung the tire iron, hitting him below his right knee. A perfect shot. Road Kill stumbled, but he didn't fall. I ran at him and timed my jump perfectly to nail him with a sharp sidekick in the chest. He bounced against the inside of the opened door and lunged forward. I kicked out his feet, sending him to his knees. I stood over him and began throwing hard combinations of punches on his face: A left, a left, a right, a left, a knee, a left, a right. I was ready to put him out when a piercing beam shown in my eyes. The light came from somewhere near the Mercury. The voice over the speaker came next.

"This is San Jose Police Department! Drop your weapons!"

I stepped away from the truck with my hands in the air.

Road Kill got to his feet and pulled a giant hand rifle from inside his jacket. Before they knew what hit them, Road Kill released a shower of bullets upon the two officers, blowing out their spot light, exploding the Mercury's tires, and ripping through their car's body. The gun sounded like a Steyr automatic machine-pistol. I dived and rolled to the front of the Ford as Road Kill fanned a few bullets at me. They came close, some ricocheting off the building and some dancing through the truck's metals. Road Kill began to position himself to get a better shot at me when the cops fired from the Mercury. Road Kill casually turned towards them and continued filling the Mercury with holes. It was only a matter of time before Road Kill would have fully ventilated Davis and Richards. As he worked on the officers, Road Kill spoke to me.

"Well, Cole, that's twice I let you cheap-shot me." He spoke calmly with a slight Australian accent. "There isn't going to be a third time, Partner. I think, perhaps, we'll take care of our, ever so slight differences, right hear and now." He snickered as he emptied the rest of the clip in the direction of the officers.

I heard the magazine hit the ground as he released it from the pistol. I peeked over the hood and noticed him reaching under the seat for another clip. I saw a brief

opportunity to turn the tide. While his hips were turned and his arms extended inside the truck, I pushed the door of his truck with my foot, crimping his upper legs in the door. Road kill gave out a quick yelp of pain then pushed the door open with his shoulder, shoving me back a few feet and onto the ground. Road Kill popped the clip into his gun and pointed it at me.

"Good bye, old buddy, old mate" he said. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you."

The intermittent .38 caliber shots from the Mercury returned. One blew-out the Ford's back windshield. Road Kill turned his attention towards the officers. He yelled angrily and emptied more bullets towards them. I knew he'd get them this time. While his attention was on the officers, I sprang to my feet and lunged into him, knocking him hard against the side of his truck. As we wrestled, I smashed the wrist of his shooting hand into the body of the Ford. I bashed his wrist against the hard metal a few times, till I heard the gun clang to the ground. No sooner had I kicked the pistol underneath the truck when Road Kill connected with a sharp elbow to my jaw, dropping me on the cold, wet ground. The officers continued firing. From the ground, I saw Road kill jump into his truck, start the engine and floor it in reverse, crashing into the back end

of the Volvo. I heard him slam the gear in first and squeal out of the parking lot, the officers firing at him the entire time. As I came to my feet, I heard his tires screaming up San Thomas Expressway.

I darted for the room, and opened the door with my card-key. The officers didn't shoot at me. When I entered the room, Amanda sat on the corner of her bed. Her lip was cut, her cheeks were bruised, and her entire face was red. Tears dripped from her eyes. She shook her head as I approached. I walked a couple of steps before I felt the cold steel of the butt of .22 against the back of my neck. I went down. I remained conscious, but everything was a little fuzzy. From the ground, I saw a blurred figure of a thin gray man. That man was Arthur Harrington.

"Nice of you to join us, Mr. Gregory."

I crawled to the bed and painfully sat myself down and leaned the back of my head against the wall. Harrington didn't contest, but he kept the gun on me.

"A couple quick questions for you," he said. "Then I'll put you both out of your misery." Chimes rang, stars danced, and gongs hummed in my head as he spoke.

"Just tell me where it is, and we'll get this over with." Harrington's voice became angry. "Where is it!"

"If you're referring to Road Kill," I said, "you just

missed him."

Harrington got close and stuck the gun in my face. I thought about making a move, but I was too groggy. "Where is it!" he growled. "Don't think I won't shoot you. Killing's nothing new to me."

"You said you're going to kill us anyway," I said. "So why don't you get it over with." I noticed the room was a mess. Dresser drawers were wide open, pillows were strewn on the floor, and Amanda's suitcase lay open on her bed. Her clothing was scattered.

"I can tell you're not scared," he said. "I figured you wouldn't be."

He walked over to Amanda. She was terrified. He put the barrel of the gun against her forehead. "Better tell me this time," he said. "Where is it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

Harrington cocked his pistol back completely. "Now for the last time, Where the fuck is my artifact?"

I looked at Amanda. She couldn't speak if she wanted to. She was beyond fear.

"Oh," I said. "You want the artifact. Why didn't you say so?"

"I knew you'd come round," he said. "Where is it."

I thought for a second. "Well it's not here," I said.

"But it's safe."

"Don't play games with me," he said.

"No games," I said. "I have the artifact. But it's no longer your artifact. It's mine." I took a deep breath. I was feeling a little better, but my head still hurt. "I figured we could negotiate a nice price."

"I'm not kidding! I'll kill her!" He grabbed Amanda by the hair and dug the barrel into the side of her head."

"What would Irene think if you killed this girl," I said. I still didn't know who Irene was, but I figured I'd throw it out there like bait.

"So, you know Irene," he said. "I know several Irenes."

The front door flung open and Richards stormed into the room. Davis was right behind him.

"Drop it!" Richards shouted. He pointed the gun at Harrington's chest. Davis pointed his gun at me.

Harrington, possibly out of instinct, or maybe out of stupidity, swung the gun towards Richards. Richards put a .38 caliber slug through Harrington's heart. He was dead before his back hit the floor. Richards stood over Harrington's dead body then slowly put his pistol in its holster, inside his sports coat.

"Congratulations," I said. "You finally hit

something." I stood up.

Amanda rushed over and buried her face in my shoulder. I put my arm around her. Davis finally lowered his gun.

"You have a lot of explaining to do, Gregory," he said. He began combing his mustache with his hand.

Lieutenant Lexington marched in the open door. He wore a black overcoat and a gray and black checkered hat. In his hand, he held a large zip-lock baggy containing Road Kill's machine-pistol. He looked at Harrington on the floor.

"Who got him?" Lexington said.

"I did," Richards said. His voice carried the notes of pride and regret simultaneously.

The Lieutenant looked at me. "Is he the one who killed Sharon?"

"One would think," I said.

"What did he want here?" Lexington asked.

Davis and Richards looked at each other. They looked confused.

"Why did he kill one of my officers?"

Davis and Richards looked at me. They didn't have a clue.

Lieutenant Lexington looked at me. "What aren't you telling me?" he said.

I broke away from Amanda and sat on the bed. "Amanda, why don't you tell these gentleman what they want to know?"

She looked at me as if I just dropped her into the lion's den. She looked at the ground. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"Come on Amanda," I said. "It's over."

She raised her head and peeked at me from under her chaotic blonde curls. "I'm really sorry, Cole. But I don't know what you're talking about." She walked over to her bed and began throwing her clothing into her suitcase.

I walked over to her and stood between her and the suitcase. I grabbed both her hands and held them together firmly. I looked her in the eye. "I'm sorry, girl. It's over."

She buried her head in my chest and continued crying.

"Cole!" the lieutenant shouted. "Will you please enlighten us!"

I softly moved Amanda into detective Richards. He held her by the shoulders. I walked over to the suitcase and began removing her belongings.

"Harrington was after something hidden in this case," I said. "The problem is, he didn't look closely enough." I removed every shred of clothing until we all stared at the gold fabric lining of a large empty case.

"I'm not seeing anything," Lexington said.

"I think he's stalling," said Richards. "When we were outside, I heard him say he had some sort of artifact."

"No sergeant," I said. "Then I was stalling. Then, I wasn't sure where it was."

"But you do now?" Lexington said.

I pulled my Swiss army knife from my pocket, and with it fully folded, I tapped it against the inside edges of the case. When I tapped it along the bottom, the tapping sound changed. I unfolded the standard blade from the knife. I looked at Amanda. She was shaking her head.

"No, Cole," she said. "Please, Cole, don't."

I sliced into the fabric and cut a perimeter around the bottom corners of the case. I removed the fabric from the bottom, exposing a facade of thin plywood. I removed the wood, exposing a compartment a few inches deep.

"Well I'll be damned!" Davis said.

Inside this compartment was a long package. I carefully removed the package, and set it on the bed.

"What's inside this package," I said, "will tell us this massive crime Sharon Pane uncovered. What's in this package, is why she died."

I diligently opened the package. I looked at Amanda. She held her head down and cried. I removed the last layer

of paper. On the bed lay a mummified jackal.

Richards shook his head. "So this is what Sharon died for," he said. "Some old wrapped up dog."

"There's more to it than that," I said. "I think she uncovered an illegal multi-million dollar operation."

I wrapped the packaging back over the mummy and picked it up. "The museum of ancient arts will want this back as soon as possible," I said.

"You need to explain some things as soon as possible," Lieutenant Lexington said.

I nodded. We all left for the department.

Chapter 36

I was drinking a double latte and eating a peanut butter muffin in the museum's coffee shop. Linda and Martin both drank coffee. The museum had just opened for the day. A red headed girl in a blue blazer and matching slacks cleaned the outside glass of the display cases. In the gift shop, a bald man in a white shirt and black tie punched the keys on a computer. A lady with bluish gray hair sat behind the counter near the doors and read a magazine. Besides the museum employees and us, the museum was void of people.

"So your new girl friend had stolen the artifact all along," Linda said as she tore a chunk of my muffin and popped it into her mouth.

"In the first place," I said, "she was never my girl friend. There's only one woman for me."

"And this special woman is none other than kooky

Maggie, I'm assuming," Linda said.

"And in the second place, Amanda didn't steal it," I said. "Harrington stole it. Amanda lifted it from him."

"That explains why he was chasing her," Martin said. "But how do Sharon Pane and Harold Blands and Gladco fit into all this?"

I continued. "For years the museum was taking their artifacts to Gladco to be restored. Most of the time, Gladco would do just that-- restore the artifact. But every now and then, Gladco would make a cheap replica and send that back to the museum. They'd sell the authentic piece to museums and art galleries in other parts of the world."

"So that must be why your girl friend contacted this Irene Mcgraff," Martin said. "She owns an art studio in Vancouver."

"She's not my girlfriend," I said. "And yes, Amanda probably arranged to sell the artifact to this lady in Canada. Who else called Irene Mcgraff?"

"Sharon Pane called her a couple of times," Martin said. "Amanda Fisher called her several times."

"What about Harrington?" Linda said. "He ever call her?"

"No."

"Somehow," I said. "Sharon Pane must have suspected

there was something shady about Gladco."

"Shady isn't the word for it," Linda said. "You should have seen this operation. Talk about your antiquated sweat shop."

"I'm sure they swindled dozens of museums out of their artifacts," I said.

"That's all changed now," Linda said. "Gladco no longer exists."

"I guess poor Harold was in the wrong place at the wrong time," Martin said.

I nodded. "They release him from jail yet?"

"Not yet," Martin said. "They did find his DNA all over her house. The cops don't want to let go of that."

"What about you, Ace. You got anything lined up."

"I need to sort some things out with Maggie. Then I'm gonna get my truck out of impound, and then I'm going after Peninsula moving. They've got my life in the back of one of their trucks."

Martin looked at Linda. They both shook their heads.

"What's in the bag?" Linda asked.

"Some old clothing," I said.

"Times must be tough," Martin said.

Lieutenant Lexington entered through the large bronze doors. The lady behind the admissions counter tried to

charge him for admissions. He just looked at her and marched in the direction of our table. He wore gray corduroys with a yellow and white striped polo shirt under an off-white cotton sweater with a gecko sewn on the pocket.

"Hi, Dan," Linda said.

Lexington nodded at Martin and me. He carried a long shallow box. "Hello Linda," he said. "You're looking good." He set the box on the table.

"So this is what all the fussin's about," Linda said.

"The six-million-dollar mummy," I said.

"Your girl friend didn't want to give it up," Lexington said.

"She's not my girl friend," I said. "But what's going to happen to her?"

"That's hard to say," Lexington said. "She's willing to turn over all the records to us on Gladco. And she said she can help us track some of these stolen pieces down. But she got her pretty fingernails pretty dirty."

"Does she have representation?" Martin asked.

"She has one of our new public defenders. You may want to stop by and talk with her."

"Has she mentioned me?" I asked.

"No."

"Sorry to hear about you losing one of your officers,"

Linda said.

"Thank you."

"At least you put a bullet in the creep who killed her," she said.

The lieutenant said nothing.

Linda looked at him. "Harrington did murder your detective," Linda said. "Didn't he?"

Lexington shook his head. "The coroner ran a DNA test on his corpse. Harrington didn't kill her."

"But I was sure it was Harrington," Linda said. "It must have been him."

"He fit the profile perfectly," Lexington said. "But facts are facts."

Linda looked at me. "You don't seem surprised," she said.

"Nope," I said. I ate the last of my muffin.

"You never thought it was Harrington," Linda said.

"Did you?"

"He fit the profile," I said. I drank some coffee.

"But you didn't think he did it," Linda said.

"Sharon's murder showed too many signs of premeditation," I said. "Harrington was ready to put a bullet in Amanda and me last night. He bragged about others he killed. He'd never go to great lengths to plan a murder."

He'd either shoot you, or hire someone else to do it."

"I'm afraid you're right, Cole." Lexington sighed. He looked at Martin. "We're back to convicting Blands."

Ronald Peters approached us as we sat at the table. He wore brown slacks, a white shirt and a brown tie. He carried a ring full of keys. He looked at the open box on the table.

"I can't believe it," he said. He looked embarrassed.

"I haven't got all day," the Lieutenant said. "Let's do this."

Lexington picked up the box with the jackal, Martin and Linda grabbed their coffee, and I grabbed the bag of old clothes. Ronald Peters carried the bulky key chain and lead the way through gallery D. When we arrived at the case, Ronald Peters used one of the keys and opened the lock. He slid the glass door open, grabbed the phony mummy out of the case and set it on a cushioned bench. He took the real artifact from the lieutenant and carefully set it in place, inside the display case. He spent a few moment adjusting the jackal's position before he slid the door of the case shut it, and locked it.

"Thank you," he said to lieutenant Lexington, extending his hand.

Lexington shook his hand and nodded.

"I'm surprised you couldn't tell the difference between the two," I said. "For the money they're paying you, I'd expect you could tell the difference between a real artifact, and a phony."

Peterson looked at me. He seemed annoyed by my insolence. "Mr. Gregory. I am an expert in the study of ancient arts. Often my responsibilities prevent me from scrutinizing every single artifact for authenticity."

"You got a pretty close look at this replica the day I saw you touching it up. The day it got damaged during shipping."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"Where are you going with this, Cole?" Linda asked.

"That's what I'd like to know," Lieutenant Lexington said.

I looked at Peters. "You mind accompanying us down stairs. I'd like to show these good people your laboratory."

"I fail to see the relevance," he said. "And I'm quite busy. Perhaps some other time."

"Humor us," I said.

"Cole," Lexington said. "Is this necessary?"

"Yes," I said. "Down in the basement, amongst hundreds of insipid replicas, on a table full of deceit, lies the

truth."

"Call my assistant, Donna Mills," Peters said. "And make an appointment."

"I think you better let us down there," Lexington said.

Peters lethargically walked to the basement door. He fumbled through the cumbersome key ring, found a key and unlocked the door. We followed him down the stairs. The large rectangular table was full of Cleopatra sculptures. Most of them were painted, and looked pretty nice. There were a couple of rows that were a smooth pasty white, and a couple rows that still required a thorough sanding.

"This is the table where I watched this man put the finishing touches on a phony mummified jackal," I said.

"I don't know what you're referring to," Peter's said.

"Donna Mills will testify to this."

"But with all due respect, Cole," Lexington said, "can you move this along?"

I set the bag of clothes down, and took the phony artifact from Peterson. I pushed some of the Cleopatra heads aside and lay the Jackal on the table.

"What's always bothered me about this case," I said, "Is all the loose ends. Take Gladco: they've been robbing this place blind for years. Now, a person like you, Mr. Peters, an expert in the ancient arts, a specialist with an

eye for detail, should notice someone passing off a cheap replica."

"Even experts can oversight something," he said.

"But I remember watching you, with your magnifying glass and touch-up brush, polish this piece to perfection." I picked the piece up. "It's not even the same weight. I'm no expert, but I've held both jackals. This one weighs at least two ounces more."

"I didn't notice," he said.

"Most people didn't" I said. "But Sharon Pane noticed. That's why you killed her."

"You're out of your mind," he said.

"You better back up these accusations, Ace."

"For years," I said, "you worked with Gladco. It was perfect. Nobody could touch the artifacts without the curators approval. You not only knew Gladco was replacing your artifacts with phonies; you were part of it."

"This is all quite stimulating," Peters said. "But these accusations are preposterous."

"I can prove it," I said. I looked at Martin. "What chemicals were found on Sharon's body? Some borax? Calcium sulfate? A little myrrh and frankincense?"

Martin nodded.

I grabbed a piece of sand paper from the shelf. I took

a large zip-lock baggy from the clothes bag I carried, opened it and placed it in Martin's hands. I held one of the rougher Cleopatra statues and sanded it vigorously, dropping about a tablespoon of fine white particles into the bag. I took the bag from Martin sealed it, and handed it to Lieutenant Lexington.

"I'm certain that this bag contains the identical chemicals as the outside of Sharon's body." I looked at Peters. "Your clothing is always covered with this powder, from all the sanding you do. The chemicals attached themselves to her during the struggle."

"You're mad," Peters said.

"We'll just have to wait and see" I said.

"You have my interest, Cole," Lexington said. "But even if these chemicals match, it only proves that Sharon was exposed to them."

"True," I said. "But is this evidence sufficient enough to run a DNA test on Mr. Peters? I'd bet that it's his DNA wedged deep inside Sharon's fingernails. I'm also sure his fingers will match the abrasions on Sharon's neck, perfectly."

"What do you say, Mr. Peters?" Lexington said. "If you've got nothing to hide, you shouldn't mind taking a few short tests."

"Ludicrous," he said. "This whole thing's ludicrous. I'm going to speak with my lawyer before I take any of these absurd tests. Besides, I thought you already caught the killer?"

"Blands?" I said. "I don't think so." I reached into the bag and pulled out a blue shirt. It was somewhat soiled and smelled. The shirt said Harold. I reached into the bag and pulled out a pair of boots. I ripped the bag open and shook the shirt onto the bag. Tiny flecks of white dander fell onto the bag. I picked up one of the boots and stamped the sole onto the bag.

"That's how Harold found his way into Sharon's home," I said. "Earlier I borrowed these from Harold's wife. Lately she hasn't been doing his laundry. Harold also kept a set of clothing here. You took his work clothes with you the night you killed Sharon. After you killed her, you put on Harold's dirty boots and tracked his foot print all over her white carpet. Then you shook the clothing all over her dead body. Then you destroyed his clothing. That's why Harold's finger dimensions don't match the marks on Sharon's neck. He wasn't the one who killed her. You were."

"You can't prove any of this," Peters said. "Anybody could have killed her. She was a cop for crying out loud."

"How did you know she was a cop?" I said.

"It was in the papers," Peters said.

"No it wasn't," I said.

"She told me," Peters said.

"No, she wouldn't," Lexington said.

"The only way you would know she was a cop is if you searched through her personal belongings and found her badge. And I'm sure she wouldn't let you accomplish this while she was alive," I said.

Lieutenant Lexington called his department and ordered a squad car to take Ronald Peters to the police station. I had another muffin while we watched the uniforms escort Peters off the premises. Linda and Martin had coffee.

Chapter 37

The station wagon broke down about a mile from Maggie's. The car was knocking all day. On Steven's Creek Boulevard, the knocks became louder, until finally, the pistons froze-up, one of the connecting rods snapped, and the car died--for good. It took a while, but I was able to push the oily, smoky collection of metal off the road, into the parking lot of the Seven-Eleven.

The rain came down hard and the wind blew fiercely. I walked along a dark residential road with nothing but the clothes on my back. Puddles of water formed on the muddy lawns. A small stream of oily water ran uneasily along the gutter. Underneath a porch light, a black and white cat sat on a chair and sang.

Ronald Peters did his share of singing earlier that afternoon. At least his lawyer did. Lexington and his crew

obtained a warrant and found Sharon's .38 caliber revolver in Peters' home in Redwood City. They also found a stack of newspaper and magazine articles that possessed Sharon's fingerprints. But it was his DNA the forensic specialists found inside Sharon's fingernails, that encouraged Peter's full confession. His fingers also matched the marks on Sharon's neck perfectly.

When I finally arrived at Maggie's, I was saturated. A gray Mercedes was parked in her driveway. It still had bald tires. I walked across her wet lawn to the front porch. I tried the knob; it was locked. I rang the bell.

Maggie opened the door with a huge smile. The smile faded once she saw me.

"Cole, what are you doing here?"

"Who were you expecting, pizza delivery?"

"As a matter of fact, we are," she said. She looked different. Her natural strawberry-blonde hair that once bounced off her shoulders no longer existed. She had cut-off almost all of it, and died it a dreary yellowish blonde that now appeared plastered to her head, and fell well above her ears.

"I see you've got yourself a new do."

"Cole, what do you want?" Her face looked big and bent. Her head was pointed.

"We need to talk," I said.

"About What?"

"About us," I said.

"There is no us," she said impatiently.

A man made his appearance and stood directly behind her. It was that literature professor, Roberts. He affectionately placed one arm over her shoulder. I didn't like that.

"Is there trouble, darling?" he said. He wore a red sweatshirt that said Stanford.

"I'm calling the police," she said. Maggie broke from him and vanished inside the house.

Roberts looked at me. "I've got nothing against you personally, Kyle," he said. "But Maggie thought it best to get a restraining order against you."

"Move out of the way," I said.

Roberts stood in the doorway with his arms folded. "I don't want any trouble with you, Kyle. Maggie tells me you're a tough guy. I'm far from a Pansy myself."

"Move out of the way or I'll break you."

"The simple fact is Kyle, you don't want to make me angry." Roberts embraced his fingers and cracked his knuckles. "In fact, I was captain of the wrestling team when I attended Bellarmine. I am also quite a study on the

martial arts. I know many ways to easily split you in two."

I looked him in the eye and burned right through him. Right then, I wanted to waste him. I felt myself losing it, the way I did when I first met Harrington. If I started on this one, I wouldn't stop. "If I were you," I said, "I'd stick with infinitives. As you just exemplified, they're easier to split."

Roberts face reddened. He didn't know what to do. His type of arrogance couldn't accept constructive criticism from anyone, let alone a sleuth. How could he counter my attack on his rhetoric? He went inside, slamming the door behind him. Through the living room window, I saw Maggie on the phone. I was sure she was talking to the police. I thought about smashing the door in. That would only make things worse.

I walked back across her soggy lawn and headed back to the Station Wagon. I needed to get out of the weather. I wasn't sure what would happen if Sunnyvale PD. got a hold of me for breaking through a restraining order. Over the years I've managed to develop a damaging rapport with Sunnyvale PD. Farther and farther I walked, the rain beating against my leather jacket. The puddles becoming deeper; the rain becoming sharper. A car slowly approached, coming to a complete stop when it got close. The driver got out and

shined a flashlight in my face. I stopped.

"Cole," the voice said. "Stay where you are." I recognized the voice. It was Linda.

"I want to be alone," I said.

"I'm afraid I can't allow that." She sounded serious. "I'm afraid I'm gonna have to ask you to come with me."

I walked over to the car. "Do you want to cuff me, Lieutenant?"

"That won't be necessary," she said. "Maybe later."

I opened the passenger door and sat next to Linda. We drove up the wet street. Neither of us spoke. We traveled north, deep into the wet, blustery, darkness, along a familiar path we didn't know, yet had been down so many times before.

The End