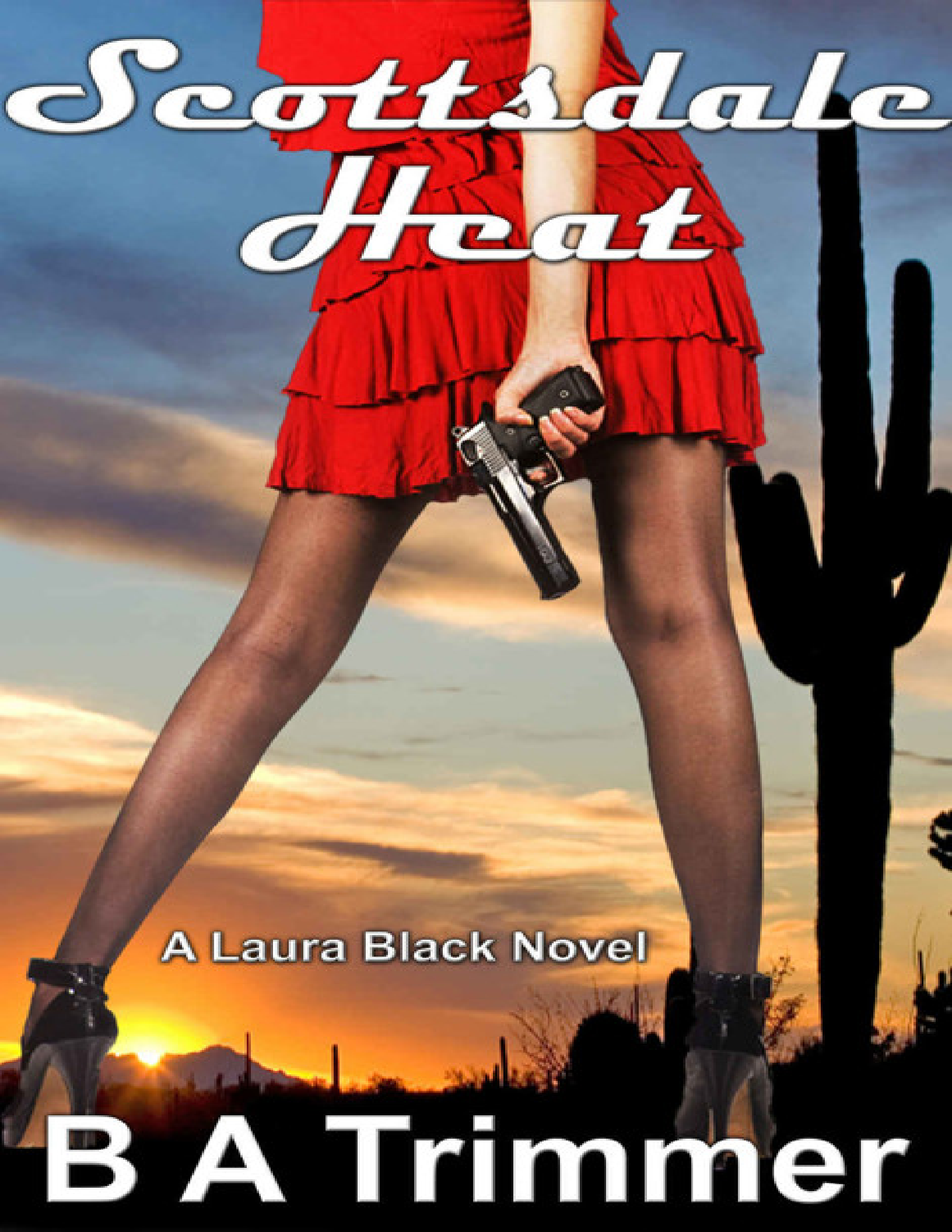




Scottsdale Heat

A Laura Black Novel

B A Trimmer

SCOTTSDALE HEAT

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## SCOTTSDALE HEAT

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Also by B A Trimmer

*Scottsdale Squeeze*  
*Scottsdale Sizzle*

*For Alison*

*Remembering the fun of audio books on our many long drives across the  
desert.*

# SCOTTSDALE HEAT

# ONE

As I've grown older, I've noticed I go through a lot of phases. I've also noticed my phases don't always match with everyone else's. Like when I was five and every other girl in the neighborhood wanted to be Barbie, sailing with Ken on the Dreamboat, I wanted to be GI Joe. It wasn't I didn't like being a girl. I just thought it wasn't fair Joe got to drive a tank and shoot a machine gun, while all Barbie got was a kitchen and a pony.

Then there was the time when I was sixteen. I caused a minor family scandal by going to a Smack-Down wrestling match with my best friend Alison, rather than to the Junior Prom with Brian King. This was even though he had been asking me for a month, once actually in front of my mother. The way I looked at it, I could go to a dance anytime, but how many times could I see the Undertaker versus the Rock in a Texas Cage match?

When I was in college, all of my sensible friends studied sensible things like business, engineering, and computers. Even though I knew those majors were the best way to get a good job, they just weren't for me. Instead, I was a philosophy major. Every night I would stay up late, reading the most depressing writing ever conceived of by man. I did it because after I finished reading, I always felt better about myself. Compared to these guys, my life was a piece of cake.

After college, I joined my friends by marrying the man of my dreams. Then, like my friends, I had a messy divorce. Most of my friends from college were now on their second marriages, complete with kids. But I decided a second marriage wasn't for me. Who needs that kind of stress?

Of course, one of the good things about being married is you can have sex whenever you want, with a man who doesn't make you feel creepy if he sees you naked. Unfortunately, I don't have a man in my life and I'm not having any sex. As a result, I think about men all the time.

Take now for instance. I was lying on a bed in a suite of the Scottsdale Princess Resort. Looking out of the balcony door, all of Arizona was spread before me. Lying next to me on the bed was my old boyfriend, Jackson Reno, wearing nothing but a pair of red silk boxers. He was staring at me, breathing deeply with anticipation. I followed his gaze and realized I was naked.

*Yes!*

A wave of lust spread down my body in a warm shiver. Having Reno back in my bed had been a fantasy of mine for months. Now I was about to have him.

Anticipation rose as I lay back on the pillows and held my arms out to him. He leaned his gorgeous face over mine. I put my arms around his neck and drew him close. I felt him press hard against me as our lips came together for a slow, deep kiss. He placed his hand on the bare flesh of my stomach and then hesitated, as if not knowing what to do next. Just to be helpful, I gave his hand a gentle nudge. My heart pounded and I stopped breathing, waiting to experience the moment.

The phone in the next room started ringing. Reno was still smiling, but his hand had stopped moving. I nudged his hand again. The phone rang again. This time it was the phone in our room.

*No, no, no, I thought, not now!*

Again, the phone rang. This time with Sophie's ringtone. The sound tore through my head like a vacuum cleaner.

*Damn!*

I opened my eyes, rolled over, and glanced at the clock: 8:23, *in the morning*.

*Damn!*

I felt around on the nightstand, picked up my phone, dropped it, and then picked it up again.

“Hello,” I mumbled into the phone, hoping it was only a salesman so I could hang up and finish my dream with Reno.

“Hey Laura, were you still asleep? Damn girlfriend, you know you really sound terrible. How late were you up last night?”

“Sophie? Why are you calling me?”

Sophie is Sophia Rodriguez. She’s not only my best friend, she’s also the paralegal and administrative assistant for Lenny, my boss.

“Lenny says for you to get your skinny butt down to the office right away. Something new just came in and he’s all hot to get on it.”

“What is it?”

“Don’t know, but it’s gotta be something pretty big. Lenny’s got a wet spot on the front of his pants. You know how he gets when he’s excited, sorta like a puppy.”

“Doesn’t he remember I have three days off? Doesn’t he remember what I’ve been through the past couple of weeks? Doesn’t he remember I have a life?”

“It must have slipped his mind.”

“OK, he’s right. I don’t have a life. But I’m still asleep. It’s going to take at least two hours before I can get in.”

“Two hours? Lenny’ll be pissed.”

“OK, just *tell* him two hours. I’ll try to be there sooner.”

“Alright, just don’t be too tardy.”

I collapsed back onto the pillow.

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When I woke up it was 9:00 AM and the alarm was chirping away. Unfortunately, Reno hadn’t come back into my dreams. I pushed the clock off the nightstand to shut it off. I had set it the previous night, hoping to get in some early morning shopping. Christmas had come and gone. The new year had officially begun and Dillard’s was in the middle of its January shoe sale.

Two days before, I had finished an assignment for Lenny. I had been looking forward to three or four more days to myself before going back to work. In the last assignment, I had ruined my favorite pair of black pumps while fighting with a crack whore named Delores Sublet. I had planned to go to the mall today to pick up another pair. Instead, it looked like I was headed back to the office.

That’s OK, I told myself, I can use the money. Of course, since I’m always broke, I can always use the money.

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As I was dressing, Marlowe, my gray and white tabby, got up from where he had been lying next to me on the bed. He did a long slow cat stretch, dropped off the bed, and walked over to where I was standing. As I smoothed myself out in front of the mirror, he fell against the side of my leg and let out a pathetic squeak, which is his version of a meow.

I had found Marlowe a few years ago in a truck-stop bathroom while traveling on vacation in Colorado. When I found him, he was dirty, starving, and shivering with cold. He looked so pathetic, I bought him

some food and gave him some water. Watching him gobble down the food, I realized he needed me. He's been my roommate and friend ever since.

I went into the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. Marlowe walked to his empty bowl and looked into it. He then sat down and glared at me. I went to the pantry, opened a can of Super Supper, and plopped it into his dish. Marlowe stuck his head into the bowl and quickly sucked up the food.

I walked into the bathroom and swiped on some mascara and eye liner. I then went back into the kitchen and poured the entire pot of coffee into *The Big Pig*, my oversized travel mug. I grabbed a couple of chocolate chip granola bars and headed out the door. I power walked to the stairwell and skipped down the stairs. I ran out the back door into the parking lot and jumped into my car, a cappuccino-colored Accord. I shoved it into gear and sped out of the lot.

*Damn*, I thought, this is a lousy way to start a Monday. The client had better be cute.

~~~~~

My name is Laura Black. I'm an investigator for the law firm of Halftown, Oeding, Shapiro, and Hopkins. Last year it was listed as one of Scottsdale's top ten law firms and this year it will probably be in the top five. The firm now consists only of Leonard Shapiro. Jeff Halftown retired and moved to Pensacola years ago. Paul Oeding died two years ago in a skiing accident and Mark Hopkins died of a heart attack six months after that. Rumor has it he had his heart attack while doing the big nasty with Jeanette Simmons, a law student intern who was working for us at the time. I don't know if the rumor was true or not, but Jeanette

cried a lot at the funeral and never came back to the office. So, you never know.

~~~~~

From my apartment building I drove west on Camelback to Scottsdale Road, then south to Stetson Drive. Lenny's law office is in the middle of the Old Town Arts and Antiques District, one of Scottsdale's most fashionable shopping areas. The office is sandwiched in between two art galleries and looks totally out of place. I'm not sure what his rent is but it seems to be worth it. Lenny makes an obscene amount of money.

Don't get me wrong, he pays me double what I would make working for myself as a private investigator and I'm grateful. It certainly beats my last job, which was a bartender at Greasewood Flats. I just wish I wasn't always so broke.

~~~~~

I turned down the alley behind the law office and parked underneath the carport, between Sophie's yellow Volkswagen and Lenny's red Porsche. Covered parking is a big benefit in Arizona, where summer temperatures can go over 120 degrees.

I used my key and opened the rear security door. I walked down the back hallway, past my cubicle, through the polished wooden door, and into the front reception area. The contrast between the utilitarian back offices and the plush front offices is always a little startling.

When a client walks into the law office from the street, the first thing they see is Sophie's desk. It is beautiful and it dominates the reception area. On the wall behind her desk is a floor to ceiling bookshelf containing legal books of every description. Thick carpet and overstuffed red leather chairs fill the space. On the walls is an amazing collection of

antique legal documents. It's like being in a small law museum. Through hidden speakers, Miles Davis was playing *So What?* from his *Kind of Blue* album. Next to a casino, no better environment ever existed for extracting money from the rich, the desperate, and the unaware.

Sophie saw me and smiled with relief.

"I am so glad you made it in. Lenny's got that pulsing vein thing going in the middle of his forehead again and you know how nasty it is. Just seeing it always makes me want to vomit in a trash can."

Sophie's parents had come up from Mexico the year before she was born. She grew up in Southern California and was a surfer chick for most of her youth. Sophie had been a singer for a punk rock band in LA while working to get in her paralegal training. She then had followed her husband from California to Scottsdale when he got a transfer, about five years ago. The husband was gone soon after that, but Sophie seems like a permanent Arizona resident. She's tall and graceful, with long black hair, and dark brown eyes. She has a temper that can go from nice to nasty in a flash. Sophie knows my darkest secrets and has always been there for me.

I glanced at the doors to Lenny's office and saw they were closed. This usually means he's with a client, blackmailing a public official, or surfing internet porn.

"Lenny in with somebody?" I asked Sophie.

"Naaah, he's just on the phone. Must be something hush-hush. He's been on the call for a while now."

"So, what's up?" I asked.

"Don't know. Lenny was with the client when I got in. She wasn't in the appointment book, so she must have called him at home. I only got

here in time to see her leave.”

“Called him at home? Lenny never gives out his home number. What’s she like?”

“Well, she’s old.”

“And?”

“Lots of wrinkles.”

“And?”

“And she’s rich.”

“How rich?”

“When she left, I saw her get into this white Bentley waiting for her out front. There was a driver with a uniform and stuff.”

“How do you know it was a Bentley?”

“Because I saw a bunch of them last weekend on the Travel Channel. They had a show on European millionaires and most all of them had a Bentley. With that much money, I’d been surprised if she didn’t have a Bentley or at least a Rolls Royce.”

“Why didn’t Lenny assign Gina?” I asked. “She always handles the big money cases.”

Gina Rondinelli was the firm’s senior investigator and my mentor. Two years earlier, when I had first joined the firm, she took me under her wing and showed me the fine art of investigation; how to pick a lock, hotwire a car, bypass an alarm system, those sorts of things. She had spent seven years in the Scottsdale PD with the last three years in plain-clothes work. She’s also been trying to train me how to shoot a gun and defend myself. As a student I’m a slow learner. As an instructor she’s

more than qualified, being a police firearms instructor and having black belts in both Judo and Tae Kwon Do.

“Lenny couldn’t ask Gina,” Sophie said. “She’s in Las Vegas, babysitting the son of Congressman Berry. She won’t be back until later today.”

“Why’s Lenny having her do that?” I thought aloud. “Daniel Berry is only in his first term. He doesn’t have money *or* influence yet. Lenny usually goes after Senators. Besides, how old’s the baby?”

“He’s eighteen,” Sophie said. “Representative Berry is going to chair a sub-committee that’s going to decide what to do with a big tract of land down by Tucson. Lenny wants inside information on the bidding so he can pick it up cheap. He’s already talked to three developers about what to do with it once he gets it. I think he wants to build Lenny Town or something like that.”

“Maybe he wants to be the mayor of Lenny Town?” I asked.

“More like the village idiot or maybe the village child molester. It’s hard to tell with Lenny.”

The door to Lenny’s office opened. He stuck his head out and started waving me into his office.

“Laura, great, get in here. It’s time to save the world.”

Lenny was a good boss, but his people skills sometimes sucked. OK, to be honest, his people skills always sucked. An anger management class would be a good idea for him too. Physically, Lenny is short, no more than five foot four. His dark hair is receding and beginning to gray at the temples. He’s also starting to get a little chubby. He sometimes reminds me of Louie from the old TV show *Taxi*.

I went in and sat in one of the chairs in front of Lenny's desk. The legs of the chair were short, so both Lenny and his desk loomed over me.

"This morning I had a meeting with Mrs. Margaret Sternwood," Lenny said. "She's seriously loaded. Old money originally out of southern California, mainly from oil and natural gas. Her grandfather was one of the original oil barons out there in the 1920's. After World War II, she came out to Arizona with her husband and they began to develop Scottsdale into what it is today. She thinks her grandson, Alexander, may be in trouble. She's asked us to look into it."

"What kind of trouble?"

"The kind where she can't go to the police. Right now, she doesn't know what he's gotten into. She suspects it's something illegal, drugs maybe."

"What makes her think that?"

"From what his grandmother says, Alexander has a long history of petty crime; shoplifting, breaking and entering, and a variety of cons. Just your typical American boy. According to Mrs. Sternwood, the thing that caught up with him a few years ago was an internet auction scam."

Lenny flipped through a legal pad sitting on his desk.

"Six years ago, Alexander sold a 1967 Jaguar E-Type over the internet for \$48,200. Unfortunately, he didn't actually have a car to sell, just some pictures and forged documents. Alexander was convicted of fraud and spent 36 months in the Arizona state prison at Florence. He was released a little over two years ago and has been clean since. Until last week he had a sales position at an Audi dealership on McDowell Road and was apparently doing well at it. Mrs. Sternwood thinks he even has a steady girlfriend."

“Sounds like things were going OK.” I said. “What happened?”

“Last week, Alexander quit his job. According to his grandmother, no one at the dealership knows why he quit or where he is now. He just called his boss, a guy named William Martin, and told him he was quitting, simple as that. His grandmother found out about it and got worried. Yesterday afternoon she went over to his apartment and was let in. There was no Alexander, but she did find some troubling things.”

“Like what?”

“A new Rolex, at least there was an empty Rolex box. There was also a new computer, a new big screen TV, and new audio equipment, some of it still in the boxes. Just the sort of things a guy in his mid-twenties would get if he suddenly came into some big money.”

“Why doesn’t she just wait in his apartment for him to show up then ask him herself?”

“Yeah,” Lenny said. “I asked her about that. Apparently, there has been a falling out between the two of them. She didn’t say what it was, but I take it they no longer communicate.”

Great, nothing I hate more than getting in the middle of a family squabble.

I kept my mouth shut as Lenny went on.

“If it turns out drugs or other illegal activities are involved, Alexander’s grandmother wants to be informed. All the details.”

“If Alexander is picked up by the police in the meantime, we’ll be representing him?” I asked.

“Most likely, so use your judgment on how closely you dig into any criminal activity. If something starts to smell ugly, back off and let me

know right away. I'd rather the DA didn't call you to the stand to testify against Alexander. It's not the sort of thing a wealthy client appreciates."

Not that it would ever come to that. One of the reasons people come to Lenny is his clients almost never go to trial. By using his well-paid connections, things were usually settled out of court. Money can still do that, even in Scottsdale.

"Mrs. Sternwood is expecting you at noon," Lenny said, as way of my dismissal. "Sophie has the address."

I looked down at my watch. It was 11:19.

Damn.

I went out to Sophie's desk and asked her for Mrs. Sternwood's address. She wrote it out and handed it to me. When I looked at it, I realized Sophie was right. She *was* rich.

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I left the office and headed up Scottsdale road to Lincoln. I shoved Fall Out Boy into the CD player and turned it up loud.

As I drove, I began to reflect on my love life. So OK, maybe it was a mistake to think about that. Since my divorce, I've had a pathetic love life. Not that it was so great while I was married, but at least the sheer quantity of sex somehow made up for the crappy quality. Maybe there's something wrong with me? I think about men all the time. Maybe I'm a nymphomaniac? Of course if I am, then I'm a pretty lousy nymphomaniac. The last time I was with a man was just over six months ago and that was with a lowlife golf pro named Dusty. But, several months before, I had dated a cop named Jackson Reno. We had really gotten along great. He was warm, funny, and a terrific lover. I thought the relationship could take off. Unfortunately, the whole thing had ended

badly. More unfortunately, it was mostly my fault. By the time I tried to set things straight, he was with someone new. So, that's where I am now. It's been almost a year since I've seen Reno and maybe it's for the best. I just wish I'd stop dreaming about him.

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Margaret Sternwood lived in Paradise Valley, which is the mile-wide valley between Camelback Mountain, Mummy Mountain, and Peistewa Peak. Paradise Valley is wealthy, even by Scottsdale standards. High walls and iron gates protect most of the homes in the valley. Many of the gates also have guards to further discourage people who don't belong.

From her address, I knew Mrs. Sternwood lived in a cluster of old money estates on the south side of Mummy Mountain. I took Lincoln to Desert Fairways, then went north to Mummy Mountain Road. Here, both a gate and a guard blocked the road.

As I pulled up, a guard stepped out of his shack and held up a hand to stop me. I told him my name and he went back in the booth and typed it into a computer. I guess I was on the list of good people, because he hit a button and the gate slowly swung open.

As I drove through the gate, I was aware of being vaguely disappointed. Having someone let you into a secure area kind of took the fun out of being there.

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I drove along a narrow lane winding up the side of the mountain. High hedges of pink and white flowering oleanders lined the sides of the road. Every hundred yards, or so, I'd pass by the driveway of some beautiful house. Each house had a large tropical or floral display on either side of the driveway entrance. Occasionally, I could catch a glimpse of one of

the houses at the end of the driveway. Each was unique and magnificent. Each house said the owner had money and wasn't afraid to spend it.

After half a mile, I passed through a large open gate and into a wide cobblestone courtyard was in front of either a huge house or a small hotel. On the far side of the courtyard was an eight-car garage. I checked the address, which was on a plaque near the front door, and confirmed I was at the right place.

I rang the bell and after several moments a butler answered. He was medium height and bone thin. I guessed his age at about a hundred and fifty.

"I'm Laura Black," I said. "I have an appointment with Mrs. Sternwood."

"Yes, Miss Black," he said. His voice was wheezy and came out in gasps. "Mrs. Sternwood is expecting you. She is having cocktails by the pool and asks if you would join her." He then turned and shuffled down the hall. I followed him. Going through the Sternwood house made me again realize in Scottsdale there are the rich and the rest of us. Unfortunately, I was definitely not among the rich.

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Mrs. Sternwood was reclining on a chaise lounge by the side of a sparkling blue tropical-lagoon style pool. She was wearing a white jogging suit with a royal blue scarf and white sneakers. She had on an oversize straw hat and large white-rimmed sunglasses.

As I walked toward her she stood up. The butler announced me and she motioned me to a poolside table. As I got closer, she held out her hand and we shook.

“I’m Margaret Sternwood,” she said, “but call me Muffy. All my friends call me Muffy. You’re Laura Black. Leonard told me all about you. Says you’re pretty good.”

As we sat, the butler asked me what I’d like to drink. Mrs. Sternwood was drinking white wine, her glass half full.

I hesitated. “Go ahead,” Muffy said. “Have a belt. It’s past noon and I hate to drink alone.”

“OK,” I said to the butler. “Scotch, one ice cube.” The butler gave a little bow and turned to shuffle back to the house. I usually don’t start drinking until later in the day, but since Muffy was drinking, I thought I should too. I tend to get better answers when the other person has a drink in their hands. Alcohol has always been the poor man’s truth serum.

Muffy took off her sunglasses and I was able to get a look at her. She was a small, thin woman of about 75 years. On her fingers and wrists she wore about a hundred thousand dollars’ worth of gold and diamond jewelry. Her dark blue eyes sparkled as she spoke to me.

“Thanks for coming over,” Muffy said. “As I’m sure Leonard told you, I’m afraid my grandson, Alexander, has gotten mixed up in something again. I don’t have any real evidence yet, but I know something’s not right.”

“What makes you think something’s wrong?”

“Well, I wish I could just call it a grandmother’s intuition. But, combine my intuition with Alexander quitting his job and spending money he couldn’t possibly have? I just know he’s somehow gotten himself in a deep pile of crap.”

My grandmother never talked like that.

The butler brought my Scotch and I had a sip. It was wonderful. Chivas perhaps, but smoother. Maybe the 18-year-old stuff? I guess there are advantages to being rich.

“Alexander’s parents died while he was still quite young,” she said. “I’ve raised him since he was a pup. Even as a child, he was a hell-raiser. He was arrested for the first time when he was fourteen. He broke into the Wentworth’s house, just down the hill, while they were skiing in Colorado. Alexander tripped the silent alarm and was caught red-handed by the police. We hushed it up, of course, but it was terribly embarrassing. The Wentworths haven’t had us over since. That wasn’t such a big loss, but it’s never good to be known as the neighborhood thieves. He was arrested three more times over the next few years. Twice for shoplifting and once for stealing a car. Finally, just after he turned twenty-one, there was the business of the internet auction. Back then the idea of selling expensive items on the internet was still relatively new. I suppose Alexander thought he could somehow get away with it. When I heard about his arrest I became so upset I almost threw a clot. I told myself it was high time my grandson learned to live with the consequences of his actions. Alexander had been scheduled to receive a considerable trust fund when he turned twenty-five. I let him know he won’t receive a dime until he turned thirty, and that’s assuming he stops being a crook. I told him if anything else happens, then I’m done with him. He’s out, completely.”

“But instead of understanding or appreciating what you were doing, he just became angry?” I asked.

“Oh, he was furious. He blames me for everything that’s happened to him. Since his release from prison, he’s refused to see me or even speak with me on the phone. Of course, I don’t know if I could have done

anything to have prevented the outcome of the trial. Given his previous problems with the law, the judge threw the book at him. After he was released from prison he began working at an Audi dealership. Work was a mandatory part of his probation, you see. From what I understand, he enjoyed it and was good at it. A few weeks ago, I even spotted Alexander having dinner with a young lady. They seemed to be very fond of each other. His probation ended last month without incident. Things seemed to have turned around for him.”

Muffy saw my glass was almost empty and motioned the butler over.

“Do we still have any Balvenie Cask 191 Scotch? You remember, the stuff we had when that actor was over here last month? Get her three fingers of that.” The butler didn’t respond, he just gave a little bow and turned to shuffle back to the house.

“But, then Alexander quit his job?” I prompted.

“I first heard about it when his parole officer, David Rasmussen, called me. David had called the Audi dealership last week to see how Alexander was doing. He and Alexander had apparently developed some sort of friendship. Alexander’s supervisor at work, a man named William Martin, told David that Alexander had quit without giving a reason. David called me to ask if I knew what had happened. You know the rest.”

She sighed and watched a gardener trim a honeysuckle bush for a moment. She then turned and looked directly at me. “I can’t believe Alexander would return to crime after all the nonsense he’s been through. Nevertheless, there’s something wrong. I’d like to find out what it is and I’d like you to help me.”

I looked back into her eyes. “Muffy, I’ll do my best.”

The butler walked back to the table. He set down the Scotch, along with another glass of wine for Muffy.

I took a sip of the Scotch. It took a second for my brain to realize what was happening in my mouth. The Scotch seemed to melt on my tongue, dissolving down my throat in a wave of hot pleasure.

Damn.

A small shudder of pleasure went down my spine and I felt a smooth warmth creep through me. I took another sip and glanced over at Muffy. She had a sly smile on her face.

“Do you like it?” she asked. “I’m not much of a Scotch drinker, but hells-bells, that stuff’s expensive, so it had better be good. If I remember it right, that Scotch is older than you are.”

“Ooooh,” I moaned. “It’s like liquid sex.”

“Sex in a bottle, huh? Now that’s something that would sell.”

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We talked for almost two hours. Muffy ended up giving me the names, phone numbers, and addresses of Alexander’s friends. She also gave me the places he had worked, and the places she thought he hung out. By the time I left, I felt like Alexander and I were old friends.

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As I drove back to my side of town, I gave Sophie a call on my cell phone.

“Hey chica, looks like it’s going to be a couple of busy days, again. Do you want to do something before things get too crazy? I’m thinking dinner.”

“Sure, swing by about 6:00,” Sophie said. “Lenny has me working on a deposition until then.”

“Do you have the file on Alexander Sternwood yet?”

“I’m pulling it together now. I’ll have it for you tonight.”

TWO

I drove east on McDonald to Miller, then south to my apartment. I parked in my space in the lot behind the building.

My apartment building was originally built as a small hotel in the 1970's. The interior of the building is hollow, constructed as an enormous atrium. Standing on the atrium floor you can look up and see the walkways circling each of the five floors. On the ground level in the back corner is a 60-inch TV, surrounded by a cluster of chairs and couches. You can usually find six or seven residents here watching TV, playing cards, or just chatting. In my apartment building gossip tends to flow freely.

The combination of time and spotty maintenance has caused the building to show its age, but it has a unique style. Besides, it's close to downtown and the rent is cheap. Cheap for Scottsdale, that is.

I walked into the elevator and pushed the button for the third floor. The elevator is slow and makes a lot of noise, but it always makes it to my floor. I got out of the elevator, walked down the hall, and opened the door to my apartment.

Marlowe heard me and came in off the balcony. I share a bedroom balcony with my next-door neighbor, Grandma Peckham. We've both installed cat doors in our windows so Marlowe may come and go as he pleases. Marlowe spends most of his day with Grandma and his nights with me. I think we both feed him. It could explain why he's gotten so fat.

I put on a fresh pot of coffee. The Scotch had made me feel warm and tingly all over, but now I needed to perk back up. Sitting at the kitchen

table, I organized what I had so far on Alexander. I then went into the bedroom, stripped off my skirt and blouse, laying them on a stack of clothes on the bed. Marlowe followed me into the bedroom. He jumped up on the bed lay down on the blouse.

I pulled out a short black skirt that hangs just above my knee. It is made of a silky miracle fabric that never wrinkles, or keeps a stain, perfect for me. I also like it because it has little silver sparkles that flash and twinkle as I move. It makes me feel special whenever I wear it. I then found my favorite red knit top, the one with the plunging neckline. Sophie had given it to me a couple of weeks before, for Christmas, and I really love the way I look in it.

What the hell, it's after five.

Mug of coffee by my side, I spent about fifteen minutes doing an OK job with the make-up. Eyes, cheeks, and lips, all passable. I brushed out my hair and left it just a little fluffy. I then put on a pair of black medium heeled sandals I hadn't worn in a while. I was set.

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Traffic was heavy as I drove back to the office. I parked in my spot and went in. I found Sophie at her desk, talking to Gina. The *Black Eyed Peas* were playing over the office audio system. Lenny must have already gone home for the night.

"Hey Laura," Sophie said. "Look who came wandering back."

"Hey Gina," I said. "How was Vegas?"

"Dull," Gina said. "It doesn't matter how old the baby is, I hate babysitting. He kept trying to get laid by picking up women at the Bellagio pool. He became so annoying the manager threatened to kick him out. Then, he had the great idea of going to Circus-Circus. For some

reason, he thought the women would be easier there. When that didn't work, he started hitting on me. I was afraid he'd start dry humping my leg, like a dog. I had to threaten to cut off his balls before he would leave me alone."

"I don't know," I said, never missing a chance to tease Gina. "Maybe you missed out. An eighteen-year-old would have a lot of stamina. He could pleasure you all night."

"*Yuck*," said Sophie, puckering her lips.

"Eighteen? That's so gross," Gina said, "I don't even want to think about that."

"You ready for dinner?" I asked.

"Starving," Sophie answered.

"So am I," Gina said. "I haven't eaten anything today except for the peanuts on the plane."

We walked across and down the street to Dos Gringos, a small Baja restaurant in the middle of the Arts District. The place has always has a charm to it. The tables are mostly located outside on a patio. Each table has a large umbrella or is underneath one of several trees. Colorful strands of lights are strung everywhere. Alternative and popular music was pumping out of speakers hung throughout the restaurant. As usual, the place was packed with twenty-something's dressed in trendy casual.

We found an open table near the front, next to the low brick wall that divides the seating area from the sidewalk. This location was perfect for us. We liked watching the guys as they strolled by on foot or cruised by in expensive convertibles.

After a minute, our waitress came by. We ordered dinners along with Gringorita Margaritas for Gina and me. Sophie ordered a Top Dropper.

“How’d it go with Mrs. Sternwood?” Sophie asked. “What’d her house look like? Was it fabulous?”

“Her house is more than I could ever dream of,” I said, “and that’s even if I win the lottery.”

Our waitress brought the margaritas and Sophie’s Top Dropper. We then munched on chips and salsa until she brought over our dinners. I hadn’t realized I was so hungry until I took the first bite. Maybe it’s just the cilantro, but I love Baja cuisine. I dumped half a bowl of the hot salsa on my burrito and dug in.

“Gina and I were talking about Alexander before you showed up,” Sophie mumbled, her mouth half full. “What’s the big deal? So the guy has some money and he quit his job. From what I understand, that family has piles of money lying around. Maybe Alex just found a way to tap into some of it without his grandmother knowing about it. I know if I found a way to get my hands on a couple hundred thousand dollars, I’d quit my job too. Only then I’d disappear for a while. Too many people would want a cut.”

“It’s not like that,” I mumbled back, my mouth half full of carne asada and green chilies. “All Alex has to do is keep his nose clean for a few years and then he’s mega rich. He wouldn’t blow that on something stupid. If he goes to jail again his grandmother will cut him off, like completely.”

“Don’t be too sure,” Gina said. “Guys can be pretty stupid. Where are you going to start?”

“I’ll start with Alex,” I said. “I’ll follow him around for a day or two. Get a sense of where he goes and who he sees. It shouldn’t be too hard,

it's not like he's in hiding. Muffy gave me a list of the places I'm likely to find him. I'm sure her information is out of date, but it's a start."

"Muffy?" Sophie laughed. "You're serious? Mrs. Sternwood? Her name is Muffy?"

"Are you starting tonight?" Gina asked.

"Yeah, I imagine both Lenny and Muffy would appreciate word back sooner rather than later. Either of you interested in coming along?"

Gina lowered her voice. "Are you looking for company or backup?"

"Company, for now."

"I'll pass then, I'm beat," Gina said, leaning back in her seat. "I'm going to stop by the gym for an hour or so, and then it's off to bed. That congressman's kid had me up until five o'clock this morning."

"Well, I'm in," Sophie said. "I was supposed to have a date tonight, but the jerk canceled, the *chilito*. Men are all such worthless dog shit. I'm sure Lenny won't mind paying my way too. Besides, when we're on stakeout, you and I always seem to end up in the most bizarre places."

"Sophie," I said. "That's the best news I've had all day."

Sophie took another drink of her Top Dropper. She seemed to think about something and looked up.

"Have you pissed anybody off yet?"

"Not yet," I said.

"So, there isn't going to be anyone shooting at us? You know how I hate it when they shoot at us."

"Not that I know of," I said.

She relaxed, then brightened up, her eyes narrowing.

“We get to shoot anybody? I could bring my gun. I just bought a fresh box of bullets.”

“I just started. It’ll probably be pretty slow.”

Sophie didn’t say anything, but she slumped back in her seat, disappointment was written on her face. Our waitress appeared with three more Margaritas.

“From the guys at the table.” She gestured to a table against the back wall. Three college-aged guys were smiling and holding their beers up in the typical guy greeting. We waved back.

“Why do they always wait until we’re ready to go?” Gina asked.

“Yeah, but it was sweet,” Sophie said. She got up and walked over to their table. She talked to the guys for about a minute then stood one of them up. She wrapped her arms around the guy and gave him a long, wet, sloppy kiss. She then turned and walked back to our table. The guy just stood there with a happy dazed look on his face.

“What was that about?” Gina asked.

“I asked them whose idea it was to send over the drinks. I told them we had to go, but I didn’t want them to think we were ungrateful.”

I looked down at the drinks. “What are we going to do with these?”

“Hey, no problem,” Sophie said. “I have a Thermos in the car. For dessert, we’ll have a pitcher of Margaritas, to go!”

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Sophie and I drove to Alex’s apartment complex. It was in one of the new high-end apartment communities that have popped up all over Scottsdale the last few years. Lots of palm trees, swimming pools, tropical plants, fountains, and waterfalls.

Alex lived in a large one-bedroom apartment on the second floor of a building that contained maybe eight apartments. We drove by his unit and saw lights were on in the living room. We parked in a space that had a view of Alex's doorway and his kitchen window. His grandmother had said he drove a black Jaguar, but there wasn't one in the lot. I checked my watch. It was 8:35.

We sat and talked while Sophie slowly polished off the Margaritas. She had stopped by the time she had drained less than half the Thermos, but by then she had gotten a case of the giggles. I still needed to focus, so I had switched to Diet Pepsi.

Sophie had just broken up with her latest boyfriend and she was keeping her options open for the next one. I had no options in regards to men. After Reno and I had broken up, I had only gotten close to one other man, who turned out to be a jerk. That was a little over six months ago. He had worked as a golf instructor at the very upscale Excalibur resort. I wasn't sure if the relationship could go anywhere, but he was reasonably cute and he chewed with his mouth closed, both fine qualities in a man.

We had dated for about a month and a half and then he stopped calling. Against Sophie's advice, I decided to look into it. It only took me an afternoon to find out he had been caught in the sauna with one of the resort's aerobics instructors. Word had it when they were caught, he was giving her a lesson on the proper grip of his shaft. Both were immediately fired, and that was the reason he hadn't called.

That did it for me. Men are all lying, cheating, worthless, scum! It's just a shame they smell so good.

~~~~~

After about an hour, the conversation dwindled. Sophie went out to find some bushes to pee behind. We then sat in silence, looking up at the apartment, each of us lost in private thoughts.

At about 10:00, the light in the kitchen went out. I thought Alex might be turning in for the night and was a little relieved. Unfortunately, the porch light came on and the front door opened. Sophie had started to nod off, so I gave her a nudge with my elbow. She perked up immediately.

Alex came out, dressed in a casual suit. He turned to lock the door and then skipped down the stairs and into the parking lot. He pulled something out from the pocket of his jacket. He then pointed it to the row of cars under a long carport. Underneath a white car cover, one of the cars blinked its lights and gave a happy *chirp-chirp*, kind of like a cricket. Alex went over to the car, removed the cover, folded it, and put it in the trunk.

“Damn,” Sophie said, “Looks like Alex isn’t doing too badly for himself.”

“It was a present for his twenty-first birthday, right before he got busted,” I said.

Sophie just shook her head.

Alex got into the car and backed out. He took off down the length of the parking lot and we followed. At the entrance to the parking lot, he paused and lowered the convertible’s soft-top. He then entered the street and headed up to north Scottsdale.

We kept several car lengths back, always keeping at least two cars between Alex and us. Unless he was looking for a tail it was unlikely he would spot us.

He drove north on Scottsdale Road, then took a right on Doubletree Ranch Road. He drove east to an upscale subdivision just south of the Gainey Ranch Golf Resort. All of the houses here seemed to have been built around a similar Arizona style Southwest theme with white stucco walls and red tile roofs. Most of the lush tropical themed yards had the look of professional landscaping.

Alex parked in front of one of the nicer ranch houses. Sophie and I parked on the side of the road, about fifty yards away. Trotting to the front door, Alex pushed the doorbell and then stood there. After a moment, the door opened and he went in.

“Well,” Sophie said. “What now?”

“Guess we wait.”

As it turned out, we didn’t have long to wait. The door opened in less than five minutes. Alex came out with a woman. The lighting near the house was too dim to make out any of her features. All I could tell was she was tall with long blonde hair.

Alex walked her to his car, opened her door, then went around and let himself in. The car started and backed out of the driveway. Sophie and I ducked out of sight as the Jaguar went back up the street, past our parked car.

We eased out of our space and did a tight U-turn. We followed, again staying well behind the Jaguar. They drove to Scottsdale Road then south toward downtown. They eventually turned east on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, into the nightclub district.

We were a block behind Alex, on Sidesaddle Road, when we saw him pull in front of Nexxus. As his car slowed to a stop in front of the main

entrance, valets jumped to either side and opened the car doors. Alex and the woman went inside while a valet parked the car.

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Although best known for golf, Scottsdale is also a city of unique clubs tailored to every taste. At the top end of the glamour club scene is Nexxus. On any given night, the rich and beautiful of Scottsdale gather to spend vast sums of money and parade in front of each other. I had been here a few times over the years, usually if a new boyfriend wanted to impress me on a third or fourth date. Over the years, I had come to realize my boyfriends regarded this as the *have sex with me tonight or there won't be another* date.

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We parked at a public lot, two blocks from the club. We walked to the entrance where an enormous bouncer looked us like we were a couple of kids out past our bedtime. He pointed to a line of at least seventy-five people behind a red velvet rope. We trudged back to the end of the line.

“Jeez,” Sophie said. “This’ll take forever. It looks like most of Snottsdale showed up tonight.”

We didn’t talk lot as we inched toward the front of the line. I was keeping an eye out for Alex, hoping we would get in the club before he left. In addition, I really had to go to the bathroom. Unlike Sophie, I’ve never been comfortable about peeing behind a bush in the dark. I was nearing the bursting point and was starting to get beads of sweat on my forehead.

After almost thirty minutes, we were admitted. I paid the outrageous cover for both of us and then bolted for the bathroom.

~~~~~

The two-story club was beautiful, done up in purple, silver, and black. Up in a DJ booth, a guy wearing about five pounds of gold chains was spinning disks. He was dancing in place along with the crowd on the huge dance floor. Sound pounded out from giant speakers as several dozen lights and lasers above the dance floor moved and flashed to the beat of the music.

Even though the club was packed, Alex wasn't hard to spot. We had just walked upstairs when we saw him seated with the blonde in a semi-private alcove, just off the main seating area. The alcove had thick purple carpet, a comfortable black leather couch, end tables, lamps, and an oversized coffee table. To tell the truth, the furniture looked better than the stuff in my living room.

On the coffee table sat the blonde's large black shoulder bag and two flute glasses, each half full. A bottle of champagne in a silver wine cooler had been placed next to the end of the couch.

Sophie and I grabbed a table close enough to keep an eye on Alex, but far enough away not to be too obvious. Up close, Alexander looked pretty much like he did in his pictures. He was medium height, athletic, had short brown hair, and was clean-shaven. Overall, he had a handsome boyish face, brown eyes, full lips, and a strong chin. It looked like he was wearing the Rolex he had just bought.

We'd been sitting for about a half an hour when a waitress, who could have been the poster girl for a plastic surgery clinic, brought Alex and his date another bottle of champagne. Her costume consisted of a loose-fitting white leather vest with big black buttons and a black bow tie. A black mini skirt, black stockings, and black high-heeled pumps finished her scant outfit. She stuck her ass out as she bent to present the bottle for Alexander's inspection.

Looking at her, I'll admit she was impressive. Every inch of her body was perfect. Her nose, her mouth, her boobs, and her ass. All perfect. Her make-up looked professionally applied. Her long red hair had a skillful *just fucked* tousle. She was so perfect I began to think of her as Plastic Surgery Barbie.

Even over the music, I could hear Alexander loved to talk. He seemed to be a born salesman. He spent almost five minutes trying to get a better price for his second bottle of champagne. It seems \$600 a bottle was more than he wanted to pay. From the look of quiet frustration on Barbie's otherwise perfect face, I assumed they had this same conversation when she had delivered the first bottle. From the uninterested look on the blonde's face, I assumed she was used to his negotiation attempts.

While Alex was trying to convince the waitress to take \$100 off the price of the bottle, I took time to study his date. She seemed nice enough. She had on a mid-length sleeveless black dress, tight at the waist, with a plunging neckline revealing boobs two cup sizes larger than mine. She was tall, thin, and muscular, like an aerobics instructor or somebody that was into weight lifting. She had a beautiful face with dark blue eyes, a thin nose, and wide full lips. Her hair was natural looking-blond and hung halfway down her back. She parted it down the middle with big loose bangs that poofed out and hung down into her eyes. She wore a lot of make-up, especially around her eyes, but had applied it with skill. She seemed to radiate sexuality. I noted several men had also noticed it and were casting glances her way.

Our waitress, similar in perfection to Barbie, approached our table. Instead of taking another drink order, she sat two glasses of champagne on our table.

“From the gentlemen at the bar,” she said, then turned, and left.

We picked up the glasses and looked around. There were two guys at the bar, early thirties, well dressed, and cute. They were grinning at us and holding their glasses up in the universal guy salute. I looked at Sophie.

“Damn,” I said. “They’re cuter than the ones at the restaurant. It’s too bad we can’t fool around with them tonight. We’ve still got work to do.”

Sophie narrowed her eyebrows and gave me a little pout with her lower lip. For a second I thought she was going to argue.

“Oh, all right,” she said at last, “I’ll get rid of them, but you owe me. Did you see their shoes? Those guys have money.”

Sophie then stood up and walked over to the two men. As with the guys at Dos Gringos, she found out who had sent the drinks, then wrapped her arms around his neck, and gave him a log, wet, sloppy kiss. They talked for a minute, then she gave the other guy a kiss too. Both guys pulled out business cards and handed them to Sophie. She then turned and walked back to our table.

“Well,” I said, “that’s one way to get rid of them.”

“Hey,” he said, “don’t complain. They’re single and I got both of their cards. Can you say double date?”

~~~~~

We sat there for another hour, taking in the club, and watching Alex and his date. The Champagne had given way to Diet Pepsi for me and ginger ale for Sophie. All of the energy had drained out of us and I was considering calling it a night. From the look on Sophie’s face, I didn’t think she would object.

About five minutes later, Alex placed the second, and now empty, champagne bottle upside down in the cooler and they got up to leave. We waited until they started down the stairs and then hurried after them. They were in the valet line behind four other couples. Sophie and I left through the patio entrance and hot-footed it to my Honda.

We drove around the corner in front of the bar just in time to see the black Jaguar turn the far corner of the block. I followed closely for a few minutes until it was obvious Alex was taking the blonde back to her house.

I should have followed them to her house and made sure they were settled in before I called it a night. I should have, but I was dead tired and just wanted to go home. Sophie was already asleep, her head bouncing like a dead woman's every time I hit a bump. Besides, I reasoned, Alex's hand had been slid halfway up the blonde's dress for the last twenty minutes at the club. I doubted they were going anywhere other than the nearest available bed.

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I drove back to the office and woke Sophie up. She shook her head to clear it, gave me a sleepy "See you tomorrow," got up, and walked back to her car. She started it up and I let her go first.

I followed Sophie for a mile, or so. When we came to Miller, I turned and drove to my apartment building.

I was so tired I leaned against the side of the elevator as it slowly went up to the third floor. I went in my apartment, pulled off my clothes, put on an old ASU Sun Devils t-shirt, brushed my teeth, cleared off a pile of clothes from the bed, and then collapsed. The last thing I remember was picking up the clock from the floor and setting the alarm for 7:30.

Yuck.

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I came to consciousness as the alarm cheerfully chirped away. I hit the snooze bar and reasoned to myself the alarm must be some sort of mistake. Maybe I set it for the wrong time? Perhaps it was some malfunction of the clock? It just couldn't be 7:30 yet. I was too tired to have to get up.

Nine minutes later, when the alarm did its chirpy thing again, I had enough energy to get up and crawl into the shower. I stood there for almost twenty minutes, regaining use of my limbs and mental functions. I toweled myself off and picked out a short pink cotton dress with blue trim that is both cute and comfortable. Finally, with blue ankle socks and white tennis shoes, I was ready for a day of watching every move Alex made.

I went into the kitchen started a pot of coffee. I opened a can of Seafood Delight for Marlowe and plopped it into his dish. As always, Marlowe attacked it as if he was nearing death from starvation.

Back in the bathroom, I applied minimal makeup and brushed my hair just enough to put it into a ponytail. From the kitchen I heard an all too familiar sound: *Aaack! Aaaaack! Aaaaaaaaaaak!*

I didn't need to look. I knew the sound. Marlowe was in the corner of the kitchen, throwing up his breakfast. Every time I heard the sound, it reminded of the movie *The Godfather*. Luca Brasi, the hit man, had made the same sound when they tightened the garrote around his throat.

I knew from experience Marlowe would wait until I left the apartment. He would then privately dine on his previously warmed and chewed breakfast. The thought of this always brought on a faint wave of nausea.

Thank God he only did it in the corner of the kitchen on the tile. Sometimes, I seriously think about trading him in on a dog.

I went into the kitchen, avoided looking in the corner, and poured the pot of coffee into *The Big Pig*. I was out of granola bars, so I grabbed a couple of chocolate covered energy bars. I said good-bye to Marlowe and headed out the door.

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I decided to jog down the stairs. While staring at myself in front of the bathroom mirror, I had decided I would start to sneak in a little exercise whenever I could. Who needs a health club, I thought? I can get the same toned body and rock hard abs with the equipment I already had at my disposal, like my stairs.

I got in my Honda and headed north on Scottsdale Road to the blonde's house at Gainey Ranch. When I got there, Alex's car was still in the driveway.

"Yes!" I said, pumping my fist up and down. I felt so smug. Hah, I thought, I love getting it right. It's these small victories that keep me going.

I drove to the end of the street, but didn't see an inconspicuous place to park. Even worse, there were people out. Some were working in their gardens and some were walking their dogs. What kind of place was this? Didn't these people have jobs?

I drove around the neighborhood for twenty minutes, passing the blonde's house every few minutes. I knew I couldn't keep this up for long. Eventually one of these nosy citizens would notice something amiss and I didn't feel like explaining myself to the police. Besides, I really had to go to the bathroom. The pot of coffee had gone right through me.

I pulled out of the neighborhood and drove to a convenience store about two miles away on Hayden. Ten minutes later, feeling much relieved, I headed back to the blonde's. I turned her corner and my heart sank. No black Jaguar.

"Damn it!" I yelled.

Well, there was only one way he would have gone, probably. I peeled out and headed west down Doubletree Ranch Road. When I was about a hundred yards away from the intersection with Scottsdale Road, I had to make a decision. I could go straight into a residential area, south toward downtown, or north toward the golf resorts. I mentally flipped a coin and pulled into the southbound turn lane then waited for the turn arrow. I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel as I sat behind four other cars at the light.

"Come on, come on," I told the turn signal. Finally, I got the turn arrow and the line began to move. I had just cleared a truck in the middle lane, when I saw the Jaguar in the far right hand lane, turning north.

"Damn it!" I shouted again.

God, please don't let there be a cop nearby.

I got to the front of the left turn-lane and did a hard right. I cut across two lanes of waiting traffic and headed north on Scottsdale Road. This clever maneuver was greeted with a chorus of blaring horns and rude gestures, but fortunately, no police.

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I followed Alex north on Scottsdale to Shea Boulevard. From there, we went west to 32nd Street, just inside the Phoenix city limits. He turned north on 32nd and went a mile, or so, up the road. He stopped at a strip mall that was tucked behind a gas station.

The strip mall had seen better days. There was a take-out pizza joint, a beauty shop, a jewelry store, a bar, and a dollar store with a broken and taped window. Alex pulled into an open parking space in front of the jeweler. He got out of his car and entered the store.

I parked at the gas station where I could get a clear viewing angle and took a closer look at the store. On the glass of the picture window, behind thick burglar bars, was stenciled: *Meyer's Jewelry*. From what I could see, Meyer's Jewelry handled mostly low-end items. The shop consisted of small display cases containing watches, gold and silver rings, necklaces, and earrings.

I could only see one person behind the counter; a man about seventy years old with thick black-rimmed glasses. He was wearing a white short-sleeve shirt. His black and gray hair was slicked straight back, giving him the look of a hoodlum from the 1950's. All he needed was a pack of cigarettes rolled up in his shirtsleeve and the hoodlum look would have been complete.

Alex and the man talked for about two minutes. Alex then pulled what looked like small black pouch out of his pocket and laid it on the counter. The man looked into the bag then walked to the front door and locked it. Hanging in the window was a sign that read *Open*. The man flipped it over to *Closed*. Both men then disappeared into the back of the shop.

Ten minutes later, the old man unlocked the door and let Alex out. Alex got into his car, backed out, and then pulled away. Alex drove back to Scottsdale Road, then down to the entrance of the *Scottsdale Tropical Paradise* Resort.

Built in the early eighties, the Tropical Paradise was one of the first of Scottsdale's mega golf resorts. Back then, this part of north Scottsdale

was nothing but saguaro cactus and tumbleweeds. Now, the Tropical Paradise boasted two of the finest golf courses in Arizona. Surrounding the resort was some of the most expensive and desired real estate to be found in the city. It was the kind of place where someone would buy a beautiful two million dollar home, tear it down, and then put a four million dollar home on the same piece of land.

Alex turned into the main entrance and drove past the resort's huge tropical fountain. He then wound up the hill to the ornate building containing the main lobby, shops, restaurants, and day spa. He pulled into a no-parking space in front of the lobby's main entrance. He hopped out of his car and walked in.

I've noticed when you have a nice car, the resorts don't care where you park. Park in the lobby, park in the pool, they don't care. If you have something flashy like a Ferrari, they almost insist the car be displayed near the front entrance. If I had tried that with my Honda, it would have been towed, crushed, and melted.

## THREE

I parked on a side lot, a little way down the hill from the main building. I walked up the steep sidewalk to the pool area. Yet another chance to exercise, I thought. Ahead was a gate with a sign on it saying something about the pool only being for registered guests and all visitors needed to sign in at the lobby.

I opened a gate and went in. Still breathing hard from the climb, I was thinking maybe I should keep my new exercise routine down to once a day or maybe once every other day.

It was a beautiful Arizona winter day, warm without a cloud in the sky. Only the lightest breeze was ruffling the fronds on the dozens of queen palms and royal palms planted around the pool. The area was packed with tourists, all paying big money to sunbathe while their friends were at home, no doubt digging out of the latest blizzard.

I wound my way around bronze women in bikinis and packs of running children. To the left, I saw a tropical pool bar with a knot of tanned middle aged men, all laughing at some joke one of them had just told.

I found a back entrance to the main lobby behind a high rock waterfall. I went in and started looking for Alex. I searched a cocktail lounge, a souvenir store, and a high-end jewelry shop. All without luck.

I was crossing the lobby to look in the main restaurant when I spotted him. He was looking at some paintings and sculptures in an art gallery located just off the main lobby. The gallery was strictly high-end. I doubted there was a piece in the place less than \$10,000.

From what I can tell, Scottsdale resorts never actually sell any of the art in these galleries. I think they just have them in the lobbies to give the resorts an air of sophistication. If they occasionally do sell a piece of overpriced art, it probably surprises even them.

The wall between the gallery and the lobby was made entirely of glass. This was so people walking through the lobby had a chance to admire the art without actually having to go in. I could see only one person in the gallery besides Alex, a woman.

She was perhaps forty-five years old. She wore a black wool pants suit, a white button-down blouse, and black flats. Her dark hair was pulled back in a tight bun, held in place with black chopsticks. Her pinched face made it look like she was having a permanently bad day. To make things worse, she was wearing black cat-eye shaped glasses. The whole effect combined to give her a slightly sinister librarian look.

After fussing with a couple of paintings, she sat down behind a large wooden desk and made a phone call. When she hung up, Alex went over to where she was sitting and they began to talk.

Alex and the woman had been talking for about ten minutes when another man came into the gallery. He was medium height and thin, maybe sixty years old. He had a receding hairline and short blond-going-to-gray hair. He had a trimmed gray beard and moustache.

Now maybe it was just a bad first impression, but he gave me the creeps. He looked like the kind of guy you wouldn't want to baby-sit your kids, assuming you had some. The thing that bothered me most about him were his eyes. They were red-rimmed, watery, and looked a little insane.

The creepy man shook hands with Alex and then they both went into the gallery's back room, closing the door behind them. The woman walked to the gallery's front door, then closed and locked it. From the desk she took out a small sign that had a picture of a clock on it, along with the message: *Back in Ten Minutes*. She hung the sign on a hook next to the door so the sign was visible through the glass.

Instead of joining the men in the back she went to the desk, picked up the phone, and punched in a number. She spoke into the phone for about half a minute. While she spoke, she got a twisted smile on her sour face that gave me goose-bumps down both arms. She hung up, and then she too disappeared into the room in the back of the shop.

I parked myself on a couch in the lobby across from the gallery. Fifteen minutes later, the woman unlocked the door and let Alex out.

Walking with purpose, Alex went through the lobby toward the front entrance. I saw he would be to his car in less than a minute. I did an about-face and power walked out to the pool area, through the sunbathers, past the screaming kids, down the sidewalk, and then into the side parking lot.

Since I knew Alex couldn't see me from this angle, I sprinted the last thirty yards to my car. I hopped in and cranked the engine. It caught and I took off after him.

Alex was at the light at the entrance of the resort, turning south on Scottsdale Road, about a hundred yards ahead. I was speeding up to catch him when a black Lincoln Town Car pulled out from a side lot. I had to slam on my brakes to keep from hitting it. I expected a finger, but the driver ignored me.

Maybe it was just my Honda has anti-lock brakes and I hadn't made a lot of noise skidding the tires, but for some reason, the lack of a finger gave me a bad feeling about the black car. I drifted back and let it stay between Alex and me. The Lincoln first pulled in tight behind Alex then backed off a few car lengths. Two men were visible in the car and after a few minutes it was clear they were also following Alex.

I followed both cars. Both my curiosity and my confusion had raised several notches. Who were these men? What had Alex been doing in the art gallery? What had he been doing in the beat-up jewelry shop? He appeared to be fencing something small enough to fit in a small black bag. Was this the source of his money? Was any of this drug related?

*Help!*

With these questions nipping at me, I continued tailing both Alex and the Lincoln. We all drove south on Scottsdale Road, passing through downtown and then into south Scottsdale. Alex was almost to the Loop 202 highway when he pulled into the parking lot of Jennie's Cabaret.

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Jennie's is the Cadillac of the many Scottsdale strip clubs. From the outside, the building appears to be a small Vegas casino. Fountains, landscaping, and lighting all mingle to give an affluent and elegant appearance. I looked around and saw there were about forty cars in the lot. Not bad for a Tuesday lunch.

Alex parked and went in. The Lincoln drove to the back of the lot and the two men got out. Now I was able to get a look at them, I saw one was tall, one was short, and they both looked cranky. They followed Alex into the club.

I parked, waited two minutes, and then walked to the entrance. Standing on either side of the doorway, like immovable towers of stone, were two doormen. Each was huge, efficient, and formally attired in a black coat with tails and a black bow tie. Now, the way I look at it, the nicer a bouncer dresses the meaner he looks, and these two looked sharp. They looked me up and down, and then let me in.

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It took a minute for my eyes to adjust to the low lighting as I paid the cover and entered the cavernous room. Every time I go into one of these places, I'm amazed at what an industry is built around men watching women dance.

The first thing that caught my attention was the music. It was loud and hard classic rock. What struck me was the pounding bass line seeming to accompany every song. It was a type of tribal drumming, evoking a raw sexual response.

The room had a deep red carpet. The walls were royal blue with metallic silver stars. The ceiling was black, as were the tables and chairs. The club smelled of beer and sweat.

As I looked around, I saw the room had five stages. The main stage was attached to a long catwalk that came out from a backstage area against the back wall. The catwalk itself was six feet across and twenty feet long, leading to a circular stage maybe twelve feet across. The catwalk and stage were both lacquered a smooth glossy black. Near the end of the catwalk was a brass pole. It was bolted to the floor and rose up to the ceiling. Small tables and chairs, mostly occupied, crowded against both the runway and stage.

The other stages were similar, but without a catwalk, and were not being used. I guessed the lunch crowd wasn't big enough to support more than one dancer at a time. I could only imagine the throng that would appear here on a Friday night. There were half a dozen cocktail waitresses milling about, serving drinks, and chatting with the customers. There was also a sleepy looking DJ in a booth in the corner, spinning out the dance tunes.

An area against the far corner of the room had been set aside for lap dances. I saw an old man sitting back on a red leather love seat while a nearly naked young woman straddled his lap, her hips thrusting to the beat of the music. A look of joy was on the old man's face as the woman rhythmically ground her privates against his. Actually, it looked like the perfect date for a premature ejaculator.

A dozen men and four women were seated at the bar, which ran the entire length of one wall. Alex was near the end of the bar, drinking a beer, and occasionally glancing up at the girl on stage. The two big guys from the Lincoln were at a booth near the bar. Looking closer, they didn't act like police or trained professionals, more like hired thugs.

I went to a booth against the far wall. Looking down at it in the dim light, I silently hoped it had been wiped down recently.

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In less than a minute, a waitress appeared. She was in her early twenties, had olive skin, brown eyes, and loose black hair hanging well below her shoulders. Her eyes were gunked up with too much make-up, but perhaps that had more to do with her stage act than anything else. She was dressed in a string bikini top and a pair of red leather hot pants. I ordered a ginger ale and asked her if they served any food.

“There’s a full menu starting at 4:00, mostly steaks and seafood, some of the best around,” she said in a wistful Betty Boop voice. “This time of day we have salads that come out of a bag. We also have what I like to call the *Heart Attack Special*. That’s a platter of deep fried onion rings, deep-fried zucchini, and deep fried mushrooms – along with a bowl of ranch to dip them in. Or, we have a hot dog and chips for three dollars. We sell a lot of those. Can I get you one?”

“Umm, sure,” I said, not exactly wanting a hot dog, but the energy bars had stopped keeping the hunger away some time ago and I needed something. I was starting to get light-headed.

The girl on stage had just finished dancing and another girl came on, a tall reedy redhead. The pulsing rock music started again and she began to swing her long hair, thrust her hips, and dance to the beat of the music. Men lined up against the stage for the chance to slip a dollar into her garter.

The waitress came back with the pop and the hot dog. I glanced over and made sure Alex was still at the bar. He was on his second beer but otherwise hadn’t moved. I had a bite of the hot dog and it wasn’t bad. I took a sip of the ginger ale and my mouth puckered. It had a strong taste of plastic from whatever bucket they’d just dipped it out of.

The music from one song had died down and another one started up. As soon as it started, there was a general yell of excitement from the crowd and several additional men walked toward the stage. The music was apparently a cue for something special the regulars knew was about to happen.

I looked over to the stage and did a double take. There were seven or eight guys standing against the stage with their stiff Johnnies poking out

of their pants. The guys were holding them proudly and everyone was laughing and smiling.

As the music pounded out, the girl on stage beckoned for one man to come closer. As he came against the stage, she got down on her belly, hung her head over the side, and started go down on the man. The girl clearly knew what she was doing and the guy was clearly enjoying it. After she had performed four or five long slow strokes on the guy, she bit off the end of his pecker and spit it into the crowd. This act of genital mutilation was greeted with cheers and applause.

What the hell?

The girl on stage called for another man. He approached and she began to go down on him too. I looked again and noticed a woman was standing against the stage. Like the men, she was standing there with a stiff pecker in her hand.

Then the truth dawned on me. They weren't holding trouser snakes in their hands. They were holding *hot dogs*. I looked down at my half-eaten lunch and my stomach gave an involuntary twist.

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The hot dog girl finished her act and scampered behind the curtain. I looked over at Alex, now on his third beer. The music started up again. Alex's face brightened and he began to clap. The next girl was apparently the headliner because the DJ got on the mike and introduced her.

"Ladies and gentleman," he called out. "Jeannie's Cabaret is pleased to introduce *Player Magazine's* Miss November, Scottsdale's own -- Miss Danica Taylor."

The announcement was met with scattered applause and whistles. I looked to the stage where the new girl had just come out. Realization hit

me in an instant. She was the same girl that had gone out with Alex the night before. The same girl he had spent the night with.

I watched as she began her first dance. Last night she has seemed merely beautiful and athletic, but today every move she made seemed to be an invitation for the men in the room to come and indulge in her pleasures. From the looks on the faces of the men, all of them would have been glad to take her up on her offer. Several men went up to the stage to offer her money, just so she would spend a few seconds looking intently at them while she danced.

After ten minutes, the three songs comprising her act finished. The music faded and the room seemed to come out of a trance. Men and women again began talking, laughing, and walking around. The blonde gathered up a sizeable pile of bills that had accumulated in the center of the stage and disappeared behind the curtain. Alex again sat down at the bar. I supposed he was waiting for her to come out again as a cocktail waitress.

My waitress came to the table carrying another ginger ale. "That's OK," I started to say. I hadn't drunk more than half of my foul tasting drink and hadn't planned on ordering another.

"It's from the lady at the table over there," she said, pointing to a table by the stage.

I looked over to the table the waitress had been pointing to. I saw a woman smiling and holding up her hand, wiggling her pinky at me. This was the same woman that had been standing next to the stage, wiggling her wiener, a few minutes earlier.

The woman got up and came over to my booth. She was a few years younger than me and a little shorter. She was wearing white denim shorts

and a green button down Oxford. On her feet, she wore white socks and brown leather sandals. She had short blonde hair, cut in a style that fit her face nicely, and just a splash of make-up. Her lipstick was a shade of pink that went well with her skin and hair.

“My name’s Annie,” she said. “I saw you when you came in.”

Her soft voice had a velvety smooth and soothing quality, almost like a cat purring.

“I’m Laura, Laura Black,” I said as she slid into the booth, across from me.

“It didn’t look like you’re here with anybody, so I figured you came here to pick up a man, same as me.” She stopped for a moment as if unsure how to go on. “Umm, I was just thinking since we both are here to pick up a guy, maybe we could do it together. You know, work as a team.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But I didn’t come here to pick up a man. Actually, I’m working”

“Oh, must be some job where you can do it surrounded by a bunch of horny guys,” she said in her soft voice.

Danica, or whatever the blonde’s name was, had just come out of the back. She was now a cocktail waitress and was talking to Alex at the bar. They talked for several seconds then she gave out a squeal of joy and hugged him.

“I wish I could say my job was full of glamor and excitement,” I said, “but most of the time I end up following guys around to places like this.”

I looked at her and saw she was still glancing around at the guys in the room.

“So, you came here to pick up a guy?” I asked. “How’s it going?”

“Not so good,” she said with a sad tone in her voice. “I really want to be with a guy, it doesn’t need to be a long term thing, I’d settle for a weekend. Even a one night stand would be OK. But I’m painfully shy around men. I’ve tried the clubs and some of the bars, but I can’t seem to work up the nerve to just walk up to a man and ask him out. I never know how to start or what to say. The few times I’ve tried were disasters, I’d panic and stand there stammering while the guy looked at me like I was insane. I thought finding a guy would be easier in a strip club. All of the guys here are already horny, so it should be easier, right?”

“I’d think so,” I said. “So just pick out one you think is cute and walk over to him. You don’t need to be clever. Just introduce yourself and tell the guy you think he’s handsome and you’d like to go out with him. Don’t take it personally if the first few guys turn you down, since I suspect most of the guys here are married, ring or not. I bet by the fourth or fifth one, you’ll have a date for tonight.”

“Thanks,” Annie said. “I’ll try. I can’t do any worse.”

I saw Danica had begun her waitress rounds and the Alex was heading for the exit. The two big guys were also getting up, their eyes fixed on Alex. I threw a five on the table, grabbed my purse, and got up to go.

“I’m sorry Annie, but I really have to leave,” I said. “Good luck finding the right man, or at least one who’ll go out with you!”

She finger waved good-bye and I followed Alex out the door.

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After Alex left the club, he drove back to his apartment. Half an hour later, he came out in a swimsuit, a towel in one hand, and a beer in the

other. He walked to the apartment's main pool, swam a dozen laps, and then laid out for over an hour.

The day had gotten warmer, still without a cloud from horizon to horizon. The two guys in the Lincoln sat in the lot about a dozen spaces from Alex's apartment, trying to look inconspicuous. They had managed to find a covered parking spot.

I wasn't so lucky and I had to move my car every few minutes to take advantage of the shadow from a cluster of Mexican fan palms. Strange as it sounds, I don't think they ever made me. Maybe it was just because they were amateurs? Professionals would have made me in a heartbeat.

I called Sophie and had her run the license plate on the Lincoln. She called back ten minutes later and said the car was registered to Arizona Security Enterprises, whoever they were. She did a quick check, but couldn't find any more information on them. I knew she would also run a full report on the company, but that always takes some time.

At 4:00, I called Lenny and downloaded him on Alex's activities. All I had at this point was he was alive, had a stripper girlfriend named Danica Taylor, and was engaged in some suspicious activities, but nothing obviously illegal. I also told him about the tail from Arizona Security Enterprises.

Lenny's enthusiasm was restrained. He gave me a five-minute lecture about how important the assignment was and not to screw it up. He then barked at me to continue the surveillance in hopes of obtaining something actually useful.

At 4:45, Alex walked back to his apartment, only to emerge fifteen minutes later wearing a Phoenix Suns jersey. I followed him, as did the Lincoln, to *Duke's*, a sports bar on the Scottsdale greenbelt at Miller and

McDowell. There was a chartered bus in front of the bar and I suspected Alex was going to the basketball game.

Alex went into the bar and I sat in my car. Ten minutes later he came back out, leading a group of four men. They were all dressed in some type of basketball jersey. They disappeared into the bus, along with thirty or forty other people who'd also spilled out of the bar. I stayed until the bus pulled out of the parking lot. The Lincoln was on its tail.

Alex wouldn't be back to the bar until after 11:00. I didn't think anything bad could happen at a basketball game, so I took off. I was going to let the guys in the Lincoln follow Alex around the *US Airways* arena. I was just relieved to have the evening off.

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I drove down to Hop's Thai restaurant, just down the street from my apartment building. They've got the best green curry chicken in town. The spiciness level is somewhere between having my eyes water and outright pain. I got an order, to-go, along with a couple of egg rolls.

When I walked into my apartment, Marlowe strolled in from the bedroom balcony. I opened a Diet Pepsi from the fridge and flipped channels until I came across the Phoenix Suns game. I put the Thai food on the coffee table. Marlowe came over and sniffed at it, then went back out the balcony. I knew he was going back to Grandma Peckham's to see if she had anything better.

On the TV, the Suns were outclassing the Lakers and were beating them badly. I looked for Alex in the crowd but didn't spot him. After a half an hour of watching the hot, sweaty, men run back and forth on the court, my mind drifted back to sex. Thinking about this brought me back to Reno and the two months we had spent together.

Funny as it sounds, I had met Jackson Reno at a Pimps 'n Ho's Halloween party Gina had a little over a year ago. When Gina first told me about the party, I told her I wasn't looking to meet anyone new. It was too soon after my divorce. She finally convinced me to go, just for fun.

To get into the spirit of the party, I slutted myself up by wearing a see-through red top with a black push-up bra, a black leather mini-skirt, four-inch *come-fuck-me* pumps, and ragged black fishnets. I then put on enough eye make-up to look like a raccoon.

When I got there, Gina introduced me to a guy she had worked with in her former life as a detective with the Scottsdale police department. He was dressed in full pimp splendor with a plum zoot suit, gold chains, and a red hat with a long yellow feather.

He got a drink for me and we started talking. I found out his name was Jackson Reno and he was a plainclothes cop for the city of Scottsdale. He found out I did investigations for Lenny's law firm. I found out we both liked Thai food, Mexican beaches, and old Humphrey Bogart movies. I told him I was turned on by slow backrubs and firm butts. He told me he loved having his earlobes nibbled and he liked firm butts too. We started laughing and before long we were sitting close to each other on Gina's couch.

After what seemed like only a few minutes it was after midnight and the party was winding down. I apologized to Reno for keeping him to myself all night. He leaned over and softly kissed me. He then wrote his phone number in the palm of my hand.

We went out the next night, and the next, and the next. Reno was sweet, patient, understanding, and was a better cook than me. Not only did he have a great body, he was also a fantastic lover. He just seemed to know

where to touch me. He made me feel things I didn't think were possible. Week after week flew by. Looking back, that November was probably the happiest month of my life.

Starting in early December, life started encroaching on us. Reno had to work a series of night assignments. Gina and I were busy night and day trying to get evidence an internet millionaire named Rocco Moro was being unfaithful to his wife. Rocco had signed a prenuptial contract with a clause if he were ever unfaithful, the contract would become invalid. If that happened his wife, Lenny's client, was going to dump his ass and get half of his millions.

Even with our scheduling conflicts, Reno and I still spent every moment we could together. I was so happy. I had a real relationship with a normal guy who seemed stable. It was the first time since my divorce I felt like things were going the right direction.

But then on Christmas Eve, it all fell apart. The night had started well enough. After Reno and I had a beautiful dinner at Frankie Z's, our favorite Italian restaurant, we went back to his place and had some seriously wonderful sex.

As we lay in bed, we exchanged presents. I gave Reno a new watch. His had broken in a fight with a drug dealer a month before and he needed a new one. I could tell he liked and it made me feel great to see him put it on. Then I opened my present. It was a gun. The box said it was a 9-milimeter Glock, Model 26. I picked it up with my thumb and forefinger. It wasn't much bigger than my hand.

"Hey," I said. "What a cute little gun."

"Your .25 caliber pistol wouldn't stop anybody," Reno said. "This one is small enough to fit in your purse, but it's scary enough to make the bad

guys think twice. It's so small it's called the *Baby Glock*."

"Ahhhh," I said. "Our first baby."

I was expecting him to come back with something sarcastic, but instead he looked at me and asked:

"Why don't you move in with me?"

I was stunned. My mind went blank. I even think I stopped breathing.

"You're over here most of the time anyway," he said. "It would save you a ton on rent. Marlowe would like it here too."

I sat there with my mouth open, making "*ahhh, aahhh*" noises. I didn't know what to say.

*What, just give up my independence? Are you nuts?*

Reno was wonderful, but I had just gotten out of a rotten marriage. Did I want to jump back into something serious again? After only two months of dating? Reno looked at me for a moment, reading my thoughts, and then his face fell.

"You don't want to?" he asked.

"Wow," I said. "It's not I don't want to, it's just kind of sudden."

"OK, do you have *any* interest in moving in with me?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe, probably," I said. "I'm sorry. This is all just happening sort of fast. Let me sleep on it and we can talk about it tomorrow morning. I'll come over first thing and make you a Christmas breakfast. Will that be OK?"

I could tell this wasn't OK as I got out of the bed and got dressed, but he gave me a hug and a kiss anyway. I knew I should have stayed and worked it out with Reno then, but I was feeling trapped and I just wanted to go home and think. Even so, the front door to Reno's house made a

very sad and lonely sound as I closed it and stepped out into the warm Arizona night.

When I got to my apartment it felt empty. Since I had been gone so often, Marlowe had taken to sleeping next door at Grandma Peckham's. I sat on the couch, flipping channels for an hour, trying to convince myself I wasn't in love with Reno. It wasn't working and at last I gave up.

OK, I thought, I'll go back over to Reno's and see about starting a new adventure with him. Who knew? Maybe this was just the way it was meant to happen.

I was walking out the door when my phone rang. I figured it was Reno. Instead it was Lenny.

"We've located Rocco Moro," he said. "He's with his mistress at a place in Valle d'Aosta, that's in Italy. The locals are keeping an eye on him, but we've got to get solid evidence of his affair, along with a proper chain of custody, before he disappears again. Gina will meet you at Sky Harbor airport in 40 minutes. It's time to save the world. Grab your camera and move your ass."

In my rush to get out the door, I didn't take my toothbrush, my make-up bag, or a coat. I figured I could call Reno from Sky Harbor airport, but by the time I got there I had to run just to get on the plane. There was a blizzard in New York and the flight was forced to circle JFK for an hour, which meant I also had to run to catch the Milan flight. Before I dashed onto the plane I tried to call Reno, but he didn't answer. Given the time, he was most likely still asleep or in the shower. I left a message telling him I had to miss breakfast but would call him back as soon as I could.

Before I knew it, it was eighteen hours later and I was creeping along the snow covered second story bedroom balcony of a château in the Italian countryside. Gina was keeping lookout on the ground below me. It was dark, the wind was blowing snow against my face, and I had never been so cold in my life.

I ended up taking some great pictures of Rocco Moro doing some very naughty and nasty things with his teenage mistress. Now, I don't know about the laws in Italy, but I'm pretty sure some of the things they were doing would be illegal in Arizona.

I swung my leg over the balcony and started climbing down. The plan was for Gina and me to fade into the Italian countryside, find the car we had stashed along the side of the road, then drive back to Milan.

Gina heard noises from the house and whispered for me to hurry. I had lowered myself about five feet when my foot slipped on the ice. I tried to catch myself but my numb fingers couldn't get a grip on the snowy ledge. I fell almost fifteen feet and landed badly on my leg. There was a loud snap and a bolt of pain. I knew it was broken.

Gina was able to get me to a rural clinic. Only the doctors spoke any English, my cell phone was dead, and there wasn't a telephone in sight of my bed. Gina said she stayed with me for the first two days, but I was too doped up to remember much about her being there. She then flew back to Scottsdale to deliver the pictures to Lenny.

He was thrilled. Rocco's wife used the evidence to force a generous divorce settlement from her cheating husband. Lenny ended up making a pile of cash, as usual.

Sophie came to Italy two weeks later to help me get back to the States. By then, I had a walking cast on my leg and was able to move around on

crutches. On the trip back, she asked if I had straightened things out with Reno. I told her “No.”

“Laura, you gotta call him,” she said. “You know, he’s going to think you’ve dumped him. Gina said he called her last week to see if she knew what was going on. She told him you were out of the country and would be back soon. She didn’t think Reno believed her.”

“I know,” I said. “I was supposed to see him on Christmas, but that was two weeks ago. I can’t just call him now. I still don’t even know what I’m going to tell him. When I get back to Scottsdale, I’ll go over and see him. With the cast, maybe I can use the sympathy ploy.”

Only that didn’t go as planned either. I couldn’t drive and I didn’t want to take a cab. After I got back, it was another three days before I got up the courage to have Sophie drive me over to Reno’s house. When we got there it was eight at night and Reno wasn’t home. Sophie and I parked across the street and sat for an hour and a half.

At 9:30 Reno’s car came down the street, but we saw he wasn’t alone. I didn’t recognize who she was, but she had big blonde hair and was wearing a red dress. We both ducked down while Reno pulled into his garage. Lights went on in the living room and then ten minutes later in the bedroom. We stayed until it was obvious there were shadows of two people on the bedroom window shade. I started crying and Sophie drove me home.

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The Suns beat the Lakers 115 to 98. At 11:00, I drove back to Duke’s. Fifteen minutes later the bus pulled into the lot. The people were in a rowdy mood as they spilled out. Alex got into his car and drove directly

to his apartment, the Lincoln following almost on his bumper the whole way.

I was going to stay around for half an hour to make sure he wasn't going anywhere else. But, in less than 20 minutes the living room light went off. Five minutes later, the bedroom light went off as well. Alex was in for the night.

I drove home to Marlowe.

FOUR

The alarm started chirping and I hit the snooze bar to shut it off. I remembered setting the alarm the night before in hopes of getting to Alex's before 8:00. Nine minutes later it went off again. I hit the snooze again, opened one eye, and looked at the clock: 6:09. Nine minutes later the happy chirping started again. I shut it off again and looked at the bedroom window. It was still dark outside.

Damn.

Four more times the alarm went off and four more times I shut it off. The fifth time it went off, I realized my heart was pounding and my crotch was throbbing. That woke me right up. I vaguely remembered dreaming about Reno doing a slow strip tease and then doing an amazing thing to me with his finger.

Damn.

I felt cheated. How unfair is it I can have another great dream about Reno and I didn't get to enjoy it?

I pulled myself out of bed and stumbled to the shower. The hot water felt great. I washed my hair and loaded it up with conditioner. I then had a brief, but meaningful, affair with the shower massager.

One of the nice things about living in an apartment is the hot water never runs out. I stood there for almost half an hour feeling life come back into my body.

After the shower, I made a pot of coffee and fed Marlowe. From the closet, I picked out a short paisley print skirt and a sleeveless cotton top. I gave Marlowe a hug and scooted out the door.

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When I pulled into the entrance of Alex's apartment complex it was 8:45. It was later than I had wanted to get there. I didn't expect Alex to be up so soon, but I didn't want to take the chance of losing him, especially now he had picked up some friends.

I drove around to the back of Alex's building and spotted the Lincoln in a space across and down from Alex's apartment. There were two men in the front seat. I wasn't close enough to make out their faces, but they appeared to be the same two following Alex the day before. Alex's car was under the car cover and parked in the same spot it was in the night before.

I parked on the street just outside the entrance to the apartment complex and waited.

For me, the hardest part of surveillance is I start to crave cigarettes. I had quit about six months ago and I'm OK about it, except when I get stressed or have to sit for long periods. Until six months ago, I would pass the time while sitting in the car by smoking cigarettes. I preferred the long skinny ones. It took about fifteen minutes to smoke each one, so I could tell how long I had been there by how many butts were piled up on the ground. Six butts equaled an hour and a half. Twelve butts meant I had been there three hours. A month ago, I had bought a pack while doing surveillance. I had gone as far as putting a cigarette in my mouth and keeping it there, unlit, for half an hour. Finally, I threw away both the cigarette and the pack. That was the last serious craving I've had, until today.

*I could really use a smoke.*

At 9:20, Alex pulled out of the lot, followed ten seconds later by the Lincoln. Alex drove east to the Loop 101 freeway and then headed south. It appeared he was headed toward Mesa or maybe Chandler, two of the suburbs on the East Valley side of Phoenix. We passed the exits to Thomas, McDowell, and McKellips. Alex was in the middle lane of the freeway, about to pass the exit ramp for the Loop 202 freeway.

Without warning, Alex turned sharply to the right and shot across a lane of traffic and onto the Loop 202 exit ramp. I saw smoke as the car behind Alex hit the brakes. Alex almost hit the plastic crash barrier mounted at the end of the exit ramp, but he made it. The Lincoln saw him exit, but was blocked by a semi-truck in the right-hand lane. They tried to get around the truck by speeding up and diving in front of it. I had to hand it to their courage because they almost made it. With a tearing *thump*, the semi clipped their back end and sent the Lincoln in a spin, bringing the entire freeway to a screaming halt. I hit the brakes, as did everyone around me. Tires screeched and there were several loud *thuds* as cars behind me rear-ended each other. Blue smoke and burnt rubber filled the air.

For a moment there was an eerie calm as every car the highway came to a stop. When the smoke cleared, I was in the front of a rapidly-forming traffic jam. The Lincoln had hit the same crash barrier Alex had managed to miss. It had come to rest in the middle of the Loop 202 freeway entrance ramp. All four tires had blown, the right rear quarter panel was in tatters, and there were pieces of car scattered all over the road. The semi had locked its wheels and jack-knifed, but fortunately had not turned over. Unfortunately, the truck had an open bin in the back and had been carrying a full load of oranges, several thousand of which were now scattered across the freeway.

After a minute, traffic began to filter around the accident. I heard sirens in the distance. In the age of cell phones and OnStar, freeway accidents are now reported in real-time. The tattered Lincoln completely blocked the off-ramp Alex had taken. There was no way I could get around them. I supposed it didn't matter. Alex was already lost for the day.

I followed the trickle of cars going around the jack-knifed semi. I felt the soft squish under my tires as I ran over several oranges. The smell of citrus mingled with of burning rubber.

As I passed the Lincoln, I saw the two men were out of the car, both looking a little shaken. Apparently neither had been wearing a seatbelt. The tall guy was holding a towel to his bleeding nose. The short guy was holding his right arm close to his side, as if in pain. His good arm was holding a cell phone. Although I couldn't make out the words, the sound of his shouting into the phone carried to my car. As usual, neither man looked happy.

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I drove back home to decide what to do next. Since my day of surveillance was turning out to be a bust, I decided maybe this would be a good time to get some more background on Meyer's Jewelers and the creepy people at the Tropical Paradise. I also thought this might be a good excuse to talk to Jackson Reno. Who knows, I thought, maybe my erotic dreams about him were a sign? I took a deep breath, opened my cell phone, and called him at his old number. He answered on the third ring.

"Hey," I said. "Remember me? It's been a while. What are you doing for dinner tonight?"

The phone was silent. The kind of silent where you know the person is still on the other end, but they just aren't talking. I was about to ask again when he spoke.

"Laura Black," he said with a sigh. "I always knew someday you'd show up again."

"And, that's a good thing, isn't it?" I asked.

"No."

"We always had a good time together."

"Good time?" Reno said his voice starting to rise. "As I recall, you dumped me. I also remember while we were dating, before you dumped me, you had people trying to kill you. I mean, seriously trying to kill you. How is that a good time? Do you know how it feels to have people actively trying to kill your girlfriend?"

"It was only a couple of times and never while we were actually on a date."

"There was that guy who rammed into your car and made you crash through the side of a car wash. Remember that?"

"Well, yeah. But it was only a rental and nobody got hurt."

"And, there was the crazy woman who put all of those scorpions in your bedroom. Remember that?"

"Well, yeah. But wait a minute," I said, my voice also starting to rise. "You're a cop. People try to kill you all the time too."

"No they don't, and besides that's completely different."

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is," he said. "You said we always had a good time together? I don't remember it that way. What'd we ever do together that was so

good?”

“The sex was pretty good.”

There was another pause on the other end of the phone. Then he sighed, again. “OK, the sex was great. But that doesn’t mean I had a lot of fun the rest of the time.”

“Yes you did. You’re just upset because we stopped seeing each other.”

“Stopped seeing each other? As I recall, you dumped me. No good-bye, no kiss my ass, nothing.”

“I didn’t dump you, I was tied-up and couldn’t see you.”

“For over a year?”

“Well, it was only for a few weeks. But when I got untied-up, you had already started seeing someone else.”

“I won’t even begin to tell you I understand a word you are saying. Besides, I haven’t had a serious girlfriend since you dumped me.”

Oh, really?

“I didn’t dump you. And what about Cynthia Redburn? Tall with long blonde hair? You were seeing her. She spent the weekend over at your house less than a month after we stopped seeing each other.”

“So you dumped me and then stalked me?”

“I didn’t stalk you, Sophie did. You still haven’t said anything about Cynthia.”

“Cynthia was my rebound after I hadn’t heard from you for like three weeks. And yes, I did spend the weekend with her, but after that I never saw her again.”

“Why not?”

“It’s really none of your business, but she spent the entire weekend trying to get me to suck her toes. I mean all of them, all at once. I’d wake up and she’d have her foot shoved in my mouth.”

“*Eeeyuuww*, gross.”

“Exactly.”

“OK, so let me buy you dinner,” I said. “To make up for it. And actually, I wanted to talk to you about business.”

“I don’t think so. Besides, dinner wouldn’t make up for it. What kind of business?”

“Cop business.”

“What kind of cop business?”

“Like, where would I go to if I wanted to fence some expensive merchandise?” I said.

“You’re trying to fence something? Your old engagement ring perhaps?”

“Maybe. Where would I fence it if I just wanted cash and no questions asked?”

“You could go to a lot of places,” he said. “Did you have anywhere particular in mind?”

“Maybe at Meyer’s Jewelry or maybe at the art gallery in the lobby of the Tropical Paradise?”

The phone went silent again. I waited it out.

“So,” he said. There was an edge to his voice. “You want to tell me what this is about?”

“Sure, over dinner?”

“No, not over dinner. Dinner would make it seem like a date.”

“OK, how about lunch? Frankie Z’s today at 1:00?”

Again with the sigh. “OK, sure. But I’m going to regret this. Don’t say I won’t, because we both know I will.”

“You won’t.”

~~~~~

Frankie Z’s is a small, family-run, Italian restaurant off Hayden and Via Linda. Reno and I had been there several times before. I suppose if anywhere could be considered as *our* restaurant, Frankie Z’s was it.

As I drove closer to the restaurant and thought about seeing Reno again, some long forgotten feelings of excitement began to wake up in the pit of my stomach. I pulled into Frankie’s parking lot at 1:10. Hey, almost on time.

Walking in the door, the aroma of oregano, baked garlic, and olive oil wrapped around me. I hadn’t been here since I was here with Reno, over a year ago. Walking in the door felt good, sort of like coming home.

As I walked in, Frankie saw me and greeted me with a warm smile. Frankie Zappitelli is not only the owner, but also the full-time hostess and part-time chef. She is a small, ageless, Italian woman. As always, her black and gray hair was pulled back into a tight bun. She had on her usual long black cotton dress and black flats. She stopped and gave me the once-over. Her dark eyes sparkled as she spoke.

“Where you been?” she asked. “It’s been too long. You used to come here all the time, and then you disappear. Look how skinny you are. Hey, that’s OK. I fix you up good now. Both you and your cute boyfriend.”

I followed close behind as she went through a maze of tightly packed tables. She led me out to the patio where Reno was waiting. He looked up and saw me. He took me in with his eyes as I walked over and sat.

Even though I hadn't seen him for almost a year, he was exactly as I remembered. His body was the kind you see on the covers of fitness magazines -- strong and tight. He was dressed in a faded Hawaiian Aloha shirt, blue jeans, and cross trainers. This was his typical uniform for surveillance and undercover work. I took a moment to look him over. Yup, those feelings were awake all over now. I was starting to tingle and sweat in some unusual places.

I've never been able to explain why I've always felt this way about Reno. It isn't just because he's good-looking. I know lots of guys who are good-looking. It isn't just his great sense of humor or his firm body. I think it was more Reno knows where he wants to go. He has a real direction in his life. He also knows the difference between right and wrong and it seems to draw me to him. Plus, he can touch the tip of his nose with his tongue. Just thinking about it always makes me tighten up a bit.

"Well, Laura Black," he said. "You look great. I hear you're still working for Lenny. I suppose he's doing well, even though he's probably still a jerk."

"Sure," I said. "Lenny's doing great. He has more money than he could ever spend. And yes, he's still a jerk."

"I ran into Gina a few months after you dumped me," Reno said. "She said you were dating a golf pro?"

"Yeah, him. Well, his name was Dusty and it didn't last more than a few weeks. Since then, I really haven't had time to get involved with

anyone else.”

OK, so that was a big fat fib. After I found out about Dusty boinking the aerobics instructor, I totally swore off men for a couple of months. *Jeez*, I thought, an aerobics instructor. How 80’s can you get? She probably wore pink leg warmers while he was doing her. Since then, I haven’t found anybody I wanted to be with, at least anybody who wanted to be with me too.

Dominic, the waiter, came by with a basket of bread. The menu hadn’t changed from the last time we were here and we each ordered our favorite lunch. His was still the grilled chicken breast and a side of steamed vegetables. I had the sausage sandwich, an extra side of marinara, fries, and garlic bread.

“You wanted to talk cop business?” Reno asked.

“I’m looking into a guy named Alexander Sternwood,” I said. “He’s from a wealthy Paradise Valley family, although he hasn’t inherited his share yet. All of the sudden he’s come into a lot of money. It’s possible he gets his money by selling things that don’t belong to him. Do you know anything about a fence at a store called Meyer’s Jewelers on 32nd Street over in Phoenix?”

Reno thought about it for a moment. “The guy who runs the jewelry store is Jimmy Meyer. He’s been around for years. He used to be muscle for a crime family out of New York. If our information is right, he still maintains a loose connection with organized crime through the DiCenzo family. Twenty years ago, he was one of Arizona’s biggest fences for high-end merchandise: paintings, sculptures, jewelry, and those sorts of things. Now he’s semi-retired and is only involved in small stuff, at least as far as we know.”

He leaned closer to me. “The part that interests me is how you know about the art gallery at the Tropical Paradise. We just found out about it last month. Since the Tropical Paradise is controlled by the DiCenzo family, we think there is a connection between the family and the fencing operation there.”

The DiCenzos are Scottsdale’s largest crime family. Of course, since we’re talking about Scottsdale, the DiCenzos are pretty much Scottsdale’s only crime family. They have a controlling interest in about a quarter of the Scottsdale resorts including the upscale Scottsdale Blue Palms and the Scottsdale Tropical Paradise.

If you believe what they print in the paper, they also handle illegal aliens coming into the U.S., private gambling, high-end prostitution, and illegal arms traffic -- both in Phoenix and those smuggled over the border into Mexico and Central America. Rumor also had it they were in the process of trying to broaden their influence into narcotics. Maybe it was because of the economic cycle we were in.

The head of the family is Anthony “Tough Tony” DiCenzo. According to an article I had read, he had relocated to Scottsdale from New York about twenty-five years earlier. Some say the move was voluntary, some say otherwise. In either case, after he had taken over, things had always remained relatively quiet in Scottsdale, at least quiet as far as turf wars were concerned. Stories in the paper about organized crime were rare in Scottsdale. The family’s activities were usually kept well below the public radar. Tony DiCenzo ran crime in the city like a business and everybody got their share.

“I take it you saw Sternwood make a sale at the Tropical Paradise,” Reno said. “When was this?”

“Yesterday, about noon.”

Reno pulled his cop notebook from his back pocket. He flipped a few pages, then looked up at me. His face had an odd expression.

“When your guy was at the Tropical Paradise, who’d he make the sale to?”

“At first there was just a woman there. Then a man showed up. He got there just after Alex arrived.”

The man,” Reno asked. “What did he look like?”

“Umm, he was medium height and thin. Somewhere in the neighborhood of fifty. He looked like he worked out a lot. He had a short blonde hair, a gray beard, and moustache. He was businesslike, but the guy gave me the creeps. He had these small watery eyes and the lids were red, like he had allergies or something.”

Dominic brought the lunches to the table. The wonderful aromas wafting up from the plates reminded me how hungry I was. Neither of us spoke for several minutes, each attending to business.

“The woman who works there is named Ingrid Shanker,” Reno said between bites. “She isn’t so much involved with the high-end fencing, more of a bookkeeper. The man you saw is most likely Albert Reinhart. He’s better known as the Iceman. He spends most of his time in Europe, but is known to come into the U.S. two or three times a year. Usually to Palm Springs or Scottsdale. His specialty is jewelry and fine art, usually acting as a middleman. He has a reputation for being an honest broker for his clients. He can spot a fake within seconds and apparently won’t let a client pay money for something not genuine; at least that’s what we hear.”

“So how do you know so much about this guy?” I asked. “You sound like freakin’ Google.”

“It’s funny you ran into him,” Reno said, ignoring me. “We knew he came into town last week for what was supposed to be a major buy. Word had it he was going to be a middleman on something special. I was on a team monitoring him when the deal seemed to fall apart. Reinhart’s usual MO is to come into town in the morning, conduct business, and then leave that same night. Instead, he just checked into the Scottsdale Princess resort and has spent a week golfing and laying by the pool. It’s possible he just came here for a vacation, but I doubt it. I think something went wrong.”

“But what about my guy?” I asked. “Is it possible Reinhart came into Scottsdale for a buy with Alex?”

“We’ve had people shadowing Reinhardt since he came into town last week. Our guys saw him meeting with an unknown man at the art gallery at the Tropical Paradise yesterday, possibly even making a minor buy. They’re in the process of tracking him down, but I’ll let them know it was your guy Alexander.”

“Why didn’t they stop the buy?”

“It was the detective’s judgment it wasn’t important enough to interfere in or even call for backup. You can tell when something big is going down and our guys didn’t think this was it. It’s doubtful the Iceman flew here for Alexander. He only deals in amounts above a million dollars, usually over ten. Unless your guy had a suitcase full of merchandise, the Iceman didn’t come here for him. We know Reinhardt always leaves the country immediately after his buy goes down. Since he’s still here, we’re assuming it hasn’t happened yet. Perhaps he took on Alex as a spur of the

moment thing, or maybe his main deal fell through and he was looking for something to make the trip worthwhile, who knows?”

“If you have people on Reinhart, that still doesn’t explain why didn’t you go after him when he bought from Alex?”

“You know how this works,” Reno said, his tone patient. “You never go after a big fish unless you catch him doing something big. If you picked him up every time he spit on the sidewalk, you’ll never make the big bust.”

I knew this, of course, it just bothered me something like that could take place without anybody making too much of a fuss about it.

“Do you know anything about Arizona Security Enterprises?” I asked. “They’ve been following Alex around since yesterday. They look pretty serious, but more like thugs than anything else.”

“No, but they’re not one of ours. I can ask around.”

As he was talking, I looked at his wrist and saw he was wearing the watch I had given him the year before.

“You’re still wearing the watch?” I asked.

He looked down at it and shrugged. “It’s a good watch.”

“Do you think of me when you put it on?”

“I try not to.”

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence as Dominic brought over coffee. Reno picked up the small pitcher of cream and poured it into his cup. He stared at it, watching the coffee as the cream blended in.

“So why’d you really call me?” he asked. “Don’t you know any other cops you can pump for information?”

“Let’s just say I’ve had some very positive thoughts about you over the last few days.”

He arched his eyebrow, but to his credit didn’t say anything.

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After lunch, I drove up Hayden to Gainey Ranch. I doubted Alex was with Danica, but I had to start looking somewhere. I went into Danica’s neighborhood and then did a slow drive-by past her house. Most of the interior shutters had been closed and there wasn’t a sign of life in any of the other windows.

I parked a block away and strolled over to her house. Walking past it didn’t yield any more information than the drive-by. I continued to the end of the block and turned the corner. Danica lived in a newer subdivision where the backyards butted up to each other and there were no alleys. I continued around the block until I was directly behind Danica’s house. Unfortunately, the view from this angle didn’t show anything new. I was debating the merits of hopping the wall and seeing if Danica had left a door or window open when my cell phone rang.

“Hey Laura,” Sophie said. “Lenny says to get your skinny butt down here right away.”

“You can tell Lenny he can kiss my skinny butt.”

“No way, I can’t tell him *that*. He’d spend the afternoon fanaticizing about it. I think he’s going commando today and I don’t want to see him walking around the office all afternoon with a stiffy. You know how that grossed me out the last time.”

“Alright, I’ll be right over. What’s Lenny want?”

“I don’t know, but he asked for Gina too. She’ll be here in about ten minutes.”

“Didn’t Lenny even give a hint?”

“No, but he’s in with a client now. Probably has something to do with him. Speaking of butts, you should see the client. This guy’s got an ass as good as Jon Bon Jovi.”

“Bon Jovi? Have you been watching his old videos again?”

“They had a Bon Jovi special on VH-1 Classic last night. The man might be getting older, but I still want to have his baby.”

“I’ll be there in about twenty minutes, but save butt man for me. My libido’s running in the red zone right now.”

“So, you’re interested in men again? It’s about time.”

“I’ve always been interested in men, just more so today.”

“Really? How bad is it?” Sophie asked.

“Just do me a favor. If I proposition Lenny, throw some cold water on me. Or better yet, shoot me.”

“Sex with Lenny? *Eeeeyuuww* gross!”

“I was kidding!”

~~~~~

When I got to the office, Sophie and Gina were having an animated conversation about Shawn Phillips, a guy Sophie had met at a Christmas party a few weeks before. They had been having this exact same conversation ever since Sophie found out Shawn was married. Of course, she had found this out on their second date and she’d dated him several times since.

“Hey Sophie,” I said. “I thought you said you had broken up with that loser?”

“Well I am now, for good this time. I was telling Gina we had a date set up for tonight. He was going to take me to that amazing rotating restaurant at the top of the downtown Hyatt, the *Compass Room*. But he just called ten minutes ago to tell me he couldn’t make it. His wife got tickets to an opera at the Herberger Theatre for tonight and she had forgotten to tell him about it until today. He’s leaving me to sit home alone just so he won’t cause a scene at his house.”

“But you knew he was married,” Gina said, in a motherly tone. “I would imagine this sort of thing is just going to happen from time to time.”

“Well,” Sophie said, waving her finger at Gina. “That does it for me, epic fail. That man is a good-for-nothing lying piece of dog shi...” Sophie’s words trailed off. I looked at her. It’s not like Sophie not to finish her favorite insult.

She was staring at the door to Lenny’s office. Her lips puckered and I heard her give a soft “Oooooohh.”

I saw Gina glance over, then she give a little moan of pleasure. “Yummy.”

I turned my head to see what was causing the commotion.

There, in the doorway to Lenny’s office, stood a man. I saw he was looking directly at me through an expensive pair of tinted glasses. I saw his eyes going down to my feet and then slowly back up, stopping to linger over my boobs.

That’s just great, I thought to myself. He’s staring at me like I’m a piece of meat.

*Who is this guy?*

He was somewhere in his mid-thirties and tall, well over six feet. He looked lean, solid, and strong. I turned towards him, taking him in. His hair was short and dark. His face was angular, his lips were full and sensuous, his expression was serious. His skin was the color of mocha and he was gorgeous. He reminded me of the former pro-wrestler, now actor, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson. He was wearing a closely-tailored gray suit, black shirt, and metallic silver tie. His black shoes looked Italian and soft as butter. My eyes started back up from the shoes and I couldn’t help noticing the sizeable bulge of his package.

*Wow.*

I felt my face flush with heat.

*Get a hold of yourself.*

My eyes lingered a moment longer on the ample bulge. I felt my heart start to pound and my stomach did a flip-flop. I looked back up into the tinted glasses, wanting to see his eyes. I searched his face and then felt his eyes lock onto mine. The air between us seemed electric as he sized me up. He stared for a second longer and cracked a slight smile. He then slowly walked toward me.

I seemed to enter into a dream world. The music faded into the distance and the lights seemed to dim. The only thing I could see was this man walking towards me. My libido, which had been awakened by my meeting with Reno, now kicked into high gear. The fluttery feelings in my stomach had now traveled south.

*Who is this guy?*

He stopped in front of me and looked down into my eyes. His face was calm, betraying no emotion. My face was hot, my breathing fast. He paused for a moment, then bent down and pressed his lips against mine.

*You bastard!* I inwardly shouted. But then my outrage was slowly replaced by a wave of pleasure starting from his lips and washing over my entire body. My breathing stopped, the whole of my being was taken over by the mounting excitement. My lips took on a mind of their own as I began to kiss him back. He curled his arm around my waist and gently pulled me toward him. All thoughts of who might be watching faded as I slowly pressed myself against him. Even through the layers of clothing, I felt his body responding to mine. His tongue worked to seduce me, I felt helpless. The heat from his body was intense, taking me to a point I hadn't experienced with a man in way too long. I was floating on a cloud of erotic passion. I didn't even try to stop it. I let the sensations take me closer and closer, until I knew the moment was at hand.

*How could this happen with just a kiss?*

Then, just as I felt myself start to let go, he withdrew his lips and loosened his grip around my waist. A feeling close to panic set in.

*No, no, please, not yet!*

But his lips were already gone. He gently released me, holding my waist without pressing against me. My face contorted and my body shook with desperation. Tears of frustration came to my eyes.

*Oh, damn it!*

I looked up into his eyes but was unable to speak. He regarded me for a moment, then reached out and touched my cheek with his fingertips.

“Who are you?” I managed to croak out.

He again cracked a small smile. “Later, gorgeous,” he said in a voice that was soft but deep and powerful. He then turned and walked out of the office.

I turned to see Gina and Sophie staring at me, mouths open, stunned. Sophie was the first to come out of it.

“Damn girlfriend, did you just do what I think you did?”

“No,” I gasped. “But I was so...damn...close.” The truth was I was still close. My body was still shuddering with short spasms of desire.

*Damn all men!*

“Who was that guy?” Gina said.

“Well, whoever he was, why didn’t he come over and do the same thing to me?” Sophie said. “I’m pretty sure I could use a standing O too.”

“So why did he just *do* that?” I wondered aloud.

Gina started laughing. “Laura, you were giving him bedroom eyes and staring at him like he was a piece of meat. A guy like that? You didn’t give him a choice. He had to do it.”

Lenny heard the laughing and stuck his head out of his office.

“Hey Lenny,” Gina called. “Who was that guy?”

“Forget it,” Lenny called out. “He’s out of your league.”

“What do you mean, out of our league?” Sophie said. “Three fine ladies in their prime like us? He only wishes he was in our league.”

“His name is Maximilian,” Lenny said, walking up to us. “He runs with the big money out of the DiCenzo resorts.”

“What would a DiCenzo goon want with us?” Gina asked.

“He’s hardly a goon,” Lenny said. “He seems to be more in the finance side of the family rather than in the leg-breaking side.”

That didn’t exactly boost my opinion of him. But to be honest, all I was thinking about was my next date with the shower massager.

## FIVE

Gina and I followed Lenny into his office. He waited for us to come in, and then closed the door behind us. Gina took one of the seats in front of his desk. I took the other.

“For some reason, the DiCenzo goon wanted you to take this assignment,” Lenny said, pointing at me. “I told him Gina has more experience in this sort of thing, but he still wanted you. I finally told him you were on assignment already and couldn’t be the primary, but you could act as a back-up investigator to Gina. After that, he seemed satisfied with the overall arrangement.”

“Way to go girl!” Gina said, giving me a high five. “Looks like you’re getting a reputation out there as a real bad-ass.”

“To get on with it,” Lenny said. His eyes flicking back and forth between us. “There was a theft last week over at the Scottsdale Blue Palms resort. A very wealthy Russian businessman has had a piece of luggage stolen, or more correctly, it appears his bag was switched with a look-alike bag. The original bag apparently contained not only a substantial amount of cash, but also several sensitive papers and computer disks they are very anxious to retrieve.”

“How do they know it was a switch?” Gina asked.

“They didn’t until a few days ago,” Lenny said. “The bag was reported stolen to hotel security last Tuesday afternoon. The hotel first thought someone had merely stolen the contents of the bag, but from the first the Russian was insistent the bag itself was switched. It took hotel security

several days of reviewing the tapes for them to have a guess at how it was done.”

In the corner of Lenny’s office was a big screen TV with a DVD hooked up to it. Lenny hit the button on a remote control. The TV flicked on and the DVD began to play. What I saw was the main lobby of the posh Scottsdale Blue Palms resort. As resorts go, the Blue Palms is one of the best. The year before, *International Resort Traveler* had listed it as one of the 50 best golf resorts in the world. The ownership of the resort by Arizona’s largest crime family apparently didn’t enter into the voting one way or the other.

The black and white image on the screen was grainy and jumpy. The DVD was probably a copy of a hotel security tape that had been recorded on too many times. The camera showed about half of the cavernous main lobby. Groups of people came and went. Knots of people stood talking and bellboys walked by with luggage piled high on carts.

“Look at this group here.” Lenny said as he pointed to a group of three people standing near a grand piano. From the angle and distance of the camera, I could make out they were men dressed in dark suits. I couldn’t see a lot of detail. I could see there was a short and slender man standing between two enormous men, apparently bodyguards. The large man on the right was carrying a suitcase in each hand. The large man on the left was holding a bag with one hand while another bag hung on a strap from his shoulder. The short man in the middle was only holding a small black bag.

As we watched, there was some sort of commotion off camera to the right. The big man on the left pointed and I could just make out all three heads turned to look, but with the quality of the video it was sort of hard to tell. The man in the middle and the man on the right set down their

bags. The man on the right took two steps to the right, stopped for maybe five seconds, then returned to the group. The men picked up their bags then walked off to the left, out of camera range. The scene went on for maybe half a minute longer, and then it ended.

“Did you see anything unusual?” Lenny asked.

“No,” I said. Lenny looked at Gina, but she just shook her head.

“I didn’t see it the first time either, the DiCenzo goon had to show me,” Lenny said. “I’ll slow it down. Look closely at the black gym bag the little guy in the middle is holding.”

Lenny then went frame by frame. As the big man on the left man pointed to the commotion, the other two put down their bags. The big man on the right took one step then another, in jerky slow motion. I then noticed a new man walk behind the group of three men. He didn’t seem connected to the group and I had ignored him until now. He was medium build and medium height, meaning he could have been anybody. He was also carrying a small black bag. He passed behind the group of men and went on. The big man on the right came back to the group. Then all three gathered their bags and walked in jerky slow motion to the left.

“Let me have the control,” I said.

With an annoyed sniff, Lenny handed me the remote.

I rewound back to when the commotion started. I then went forward, frame-by-frame, to the point where the new man passed behind the group. As he passed, I looked at the position of the small black bag the small man in the middle had set on the ground. It moved as the new man walked by. It wasn’t much, but it was a definite move. At the same time the bag moved, the new man seemed to duck or maybe trip slightly.

“Either the new guy kicked the bag as he walked by, or he somehow switched it with the bag he was caring,” I said.

“That’s exactly what security at the Blue Palms thinks too,” Lenny said. “They think the bag was switched as part of a scam last Tuesday. They want it back.”

“Why don’t they go to the police or look for it themselves?” Gina asked. “They have plenty of people at their disposal.”

“The DiCenzos wouldn’t go to the police on general principle,” Lenny said. “And from what the DiCenzo goon Maximilian said, they have been looking for it with their own people with no luck. They need outside help.”

“OK,” Gina said, “I’ll get on it.”

“Call me if you need help,” I said.

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I left the office at about 4:30. Before I left, I downloaded everything I had on Alex to Sophie. I love the way she can take my rambling story and turn it into a crisp report for Lenny.

I got back in the car and went home to feed Marlowe. As he ate, I told him everything that had happened during the day. I told him I was worried about Alex and whatever he had gotten mixed up in. But I don’t think Marlowe heard much of what I said, over the noise of his chewing and swallowing.

Next, it was back out to my Honda to try and pick up Alexander’s trail again. Closest, and first on the list, was Jennie’s Cabaret. Alex’s car wasn’t in the lot and the bartender said Danica wasn’t working tonight. Next was Alex’s apartment. Same story; no lights, no black Jaguar, and no Alex. I cruised the valet lots of the downtown clubs without success.

At about 11:00, I drove back up to Danica's neighborhood at Gainey Ranch.

Bingo.

There was the Jaguar sitting in Danica's driveway. The lights were on and I saw movement inside the house.

I parked on the street, two doors down from Danica's driveway. I got out of the car, walked up to the house, and rang the doorbell. After maybe a minute, I heard footsteps approach. I saw the peephole go dark as someone looked through it. A moment later the door opened to the length of a thick security chain. Danica was visible just beyond, dressed in a red silk robe belted at the waist.

"I'm Laura Black," I said to her through the crack in the door opening. "My employer is having me look into Alexander's activities at the request of his grandmother. I hadn't planned on talking to him but something's come up and I need to speak to him."

She stared at me for a moment with a puzzled look on her face. Without a word, she turned and closed the door. I wasn't sure what to make of that. I stood there, not knowing if I should ring again or not. I heard voices in the back of the house, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. The voices grew louder as they came closer to the front. The door opened again but this time it was Alex behind the chain, dressed only in long navy blue silk pajama pants.

"My grandmother sent you to spy on me?" Alex asked. The tone of his voice was half anger, half disbelief.

"She's worried about you," I said. "And to be honest, I'm starting to get worried too. I have some information you may be interested in. I'd like to come in so we can talk about it."

From the look on his face I didn't know if he was going to open the door or slam it in my face. Finally, he slid off the chain and opened the door.

The inside of Danica's house was as beautiful as the outside. In the typical Scottsdale southwest style, the ceilings were high and the rooms were open with wide archways. The walls were off-white and the windows were fitted with white plantation shutters. Bright original oil paintings and tropical plants provided splashes of color. A shorthaired black cat was laying on a white leather love seat. He looked at me with bright gold eyes while his tail flicked from side to side. Joni Mitchell's *Blue* album played quietly in the background.

Alex led me out to the back yard. The landscaping in the back yard was as nice as the front, done up with queen palms, royal palms, orange trees, and flowering lantana, all surrounding a large swimming pool. Near the pool was a small patch of grass that had been recently mowed. The pool itself was inviting. There was a noisy little waterfall and a fiber optic lighting system that changed the color of the water every few seconds.

Alex motioned me poolside to a white picnic table. He sat on one side. I sat on the other. Next to the picnic table was a brass fire pit with a crackling fire in it. Danica was pacing back and forth on the far corner of the patio, a half empty drink in her hand. As we sat down, she took a few steps closer. She hovered and paced near the fire, not sitting down, but still within easy listening distance.

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence as we each waited for the other to speak.

"We haven't been introduced," I said. "I'm Laura Black. Yes, I've been following you at the request of your grandmother. After you quit your job

she became worried. It's also been noticed you've been spending some serious money. I've been asked to look into things to make sure everything is OK."

"Well," Alex snapped. "Now you've spent your time spying on me, what is your assessment? Is everything OK? Do my activities measure up?"

"Look, I usually don't talk to the people who I investigate. It's not very professional. It's none of my business what you do with your life. But, I know you no longer have a visible source of income. I know you're spending a lot of money. I also know you have been fencing things all over town with some pretty nasty people."

Alex flinched when I mentioned the fencing. I looked over and saw Danica had stopped pacing. Her intense gaze was shifting between Alex and me.

"So I have money," Alex said, now more boisterous than angry. "What's the big deal? Hell, my family has more money than most developing countries. OK, so I've spent some of it recently, and sure I quit my job. Who cares? I'm no longer required by the state to be employed. You did know I just got off parole, didn't you?"

"Yes," I said, "and to be honest, I could care less about your money or how you got it."

Alex stopped and looked at me. I could tell my remark had puzzled him. "So, why are you here?"

"Do you know you are being followed? Not just by me, but by a couple of seriously mean guys."

"Followed?" Alex asked. A wave of initial shock, then fear, passed over his face, replaced quickly by a forced look of casual unconcern.

“Yeah,” I said. “They picked you up outside the Tropical Paradise yesterday afternoon after you fenced whatever it was with Albert Reinhardt and Ingrid Shanker at the art gallery there. The reason they aren’t parked across the street right now is you lost them in traffic today. You put them temporarily out of commission, accidentally I assume. I only knew you’d be here because I’ve been following you since Monday.”

While we were talking, Danica had been inching closer to the table. When she heard about the tail, she came over and slid on the seat next to Alex. She was looking at me, her eyes wide.

“There are men following Alex?” she asked. Genuine worry and panic crept into her voice. She then turned to Alex. “What is she talking about?”

I expected some sort of reply from Alex, but instead something weird happened. After I told Alex about the tail, a change seemed to come over him. His head cocked a bit to the side and he got a knowing little smirk on his face. As soon as he spoke, it hit me; Alex had just gone into his car salesman mode. Maybe that was his way of handling stress? All he needed was a lime-green plaid jacket and the transformation would have been complete.

“Well, I tell you what, Laura Black, if that’s even your real name,” he said in his smooth salesman’s voice, “I wouldn’t worry about anybody following me. I’m sure you’re either mistaken, or more likely my grandmother has hired two or maybe even three firms to check up on me independently. It really wouldn’t surprise me.”

I gave him a look of mild disbelief. There is a fine line between being thick-skinned and being stupid and I think Alex just crossed it.

“I don’t think you understand the situation,” I said. “These guys could have picked you up at any time. They are following you to see where you go and what you are doing. They’ve also seen the two of you together. It’s obvious you two are more than just friends. It’s only a matter of time before they’ll come over here looking for you. When they find you, they might want more than a friendly chat.”

“No,” he said. “I think you are the one who doesn’t understand the situation. You don’t know my grandmother. It really would be her style to have more than one group looking in on me. She’s done it before, mainly out of guilt over what she’s done to me the past few years. So sure, keep following me if you need to, if it’s your job. But I can assure you I can look after myself and my girlfriend.”

As he was assuring me, he was patting Danica on her leg. She too was giving him a look of frank disbelief, maybe mixed in with a little anger. I wanted to ask him about the guys tailing him. Did he know who they were? What did he have someone else would want? Instead, Alex just stood, came around the table, and firmly took me by the arm.

“I think it’s best you leave, now,” he said.

Danica started to protest. She obviously wanted to know more about what was going on, but Alex ushered me through the house and out to the front door.

As a rule, I don’t let anybody manhandle me. I was tempted to give him a quick kick to the kneecap. But, I didn’t think it would be a good idea to get into a fight with the guy I was supposed to be secretly watching from a distance. Lenny tends to be fussy on that point.

As we got to the front door, he released my arm. I turned and faced him.

“Look,” I said. “You could be in real trouble here. These guys look like mob, plus you’ve pissed them off. I’d seriously consider going to the police. They could pick them up and at least find out what they’re up to.”

“No,” he said, his salesman’s voice was back. “That won’t be necessary. You can tell my grandmother you’ve done your duty. Your conscience is now clear. I trust you won’t feel the need to bother either myself or my girlfriend ever again.” He said it more as a statement rather than a question.

He opened the door and I again found myself on the front porch. The door slammed shut behind me.

Well, damn.

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The next morning, I woke up early and drove over to Alex’s apartment. Lenny was expecting me to follow the guy around and that’s what I intended to do. At least Alex would know he’s being tailed. I hoped it would prevent him from doing anything stupid. Hope is a beautiful thing. It doesn’t cost anything and it makes you feel good all over.

My first problem was Alex wasn’t there. My second problem was the two guys who had been following him weren’t there either. I had expected the same two guys in another car. Of course, if the first two guys were too banged up from the crash, then maybe two new guys would be tailing Alex today. Only there wasn’t anybody in the parking lot or outside on the street. Well, I reasoned with myself, Alex is still over at Danica’s and the two guys are still driving around looking for him.

Hope sprang back to life as I drove to Gainey Ranch and Danica’s house. Hope was dashed when Alex’s Jaguar was again a no-show.

Hope's a funny thing. It can go just as quickly as it comes. In a way, I suppose hope's worth what you pay for it.

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I drove by Meyer's Jewelry without seeing anything interesting. I then drove to south Scottsdale and Jeannie's Cabaret. The bouncer didn't know Danica's schedule, but he let me in without paying on the promise I wouldn't stay more than a few minutes.

I went to the bartender and found out she was scheduled to work from 6:00 to midnight. If I couldn't find Alex before 6:00, then there was a good chance he would come here to watch Danica dance or meet with her here after she got off.

Looks like I'd be back.

~~~~~

I went out to my car and gave Sophie a call at the office. Lenny answered.

"Hey Lenny. Is Sophie in?"

"If Sophie was in, do you think *I'd* be answering the phone? She went over to Apache Junction to pick up some exhibits. She'll be back in an hour or two. And that's assuming she doesn't get distracted along the way."

I called Sophie on her cell phone.

"Hey Sophie, you had lunch yet?"

"No," she said. "And I'm about to starve to death. You know, I was looking at myself in the mirror last night. My ass looked so big I felt like throwing up. I decided I was going to start a fasting diet. I was thinking about fasting until my ass went down to about a size four. But since I've

been fasting since last night, I'm starting to get one of those hungry-headaches. So now I'm thinking, screw the fasting. I'll start the diet again tomorrow. I'm going to do lunch up at the lake. Did you want to come along? I'd love the company."

"Great idea," I said. "I could use a lunch at the lake. When'll you be there?"

"I'm about to leave A.J., so I'll be there in about twenty-five minutes. If you leave now, we'll get there about the same time."

"I'll see you there!"

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Saguaro Lake is located in the Superstition Mountains, southeast of Scottsdale. It's the closest of four huge reservoirs along the Salt River that hold irrigation and drinking water for the Phoenix area. On a hill on the west end of the lake is a restaurant overlooking both the lake and the high cliffs on the eastern shore. During the day, it's a good place to day drink and to watch the boats on the lake. In the evening, it's a great place to drink and watch the sun go down.

Since both the restaurant and the lake are located alongside a scenic highway that runs through the mountains between Scottsdale and Apache Junction, a lot of tourist traffic comes to the restaurant. There's usually a long wait to get a table for dinner. This is especially true during winter when the snowbirds are in town. Lunch isn't so crowded. You can usually go right in and get a seat on the covered patio overlooking the marina.

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The hostess led me out to the patio. I saw Sophie had beaten me there and was already working on a margarita. She looked up and waved me

over.

It was a beautiful day and there were several boats and jet skis on the lake. Since this was January and the temperature might drop below seventy degrees, the management had thoughtfully scattered several industrial-size heaters throughout the seating area.

“Hey girlfriend,” Sophie said as I sat. She looked at me for a moment. “Why so glum today?”

“Does it show? I lost Alex.”

“Where did you lose him?”

“Actually, I never had him today.”

“So, when was the last time you did have him?”

“Last night. I found him at Danica’s house. I talked to him and warned him about the guys who were following him.”

The waiter came over, a sullen guy in his early-twenties. He had a pouting lower lip, small square glasses, and brown hair that hung into his eyes. He looked like a young Johnny Depp.

I ordered a French Dip with fries and a margarita. Sophie ordered the lobster bisque, the fried mushroom appetizers, the Malibu chicken sandwich, and another margarita. The waiter turned and walked back to the kitchen.

As he walked away from us, I noticed that even though he seemed a bit dour, he did have a nice butt. From the way her eyes followed him, Sophie had noticed it too.

“You talked to Alex?” Sophie asked, raising her eyebrows. “Isn’t that breaking the official private investigator rules?”

“Well, yes, sorta, but I think the guy’s in trouble. I can’t just stand by and see somebody getting hurt. Somebody needed to convince him he could be in real danger.”

“Did he listen?”

“No, I didn’t get through at all.”

“What about his blonde girlfriend, Danica? At the club the other night she looked like a bimbo. What’s she really like? Dumb as a box of rocks?”

“At first, I thought she’d probably be some sort of airhead. I didn’t get much of a chance to get to know her, but she seems all right. Actually, she seems more in touch with what’s going on than Alex. Oh, you should see her house. I’d love to get a chance to go through her closets. I think strippers make way more than we do.”

“What time did you leave her house?” Sophie asked.

“It was before midnight. I would have liked to have stayed longer, but Alex wasn’t in a talkative mood. I figured he’d either spend the night at her house or just do her and go home. I was back over at Alex’s apartment by 7:30 this morning, but he was already gone.”

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The waiter with the nice tush brought out our lunches. Sophie and I chatted for another half-hour. The waiter brought the bill and we paid it. As he walked away, I saw Sophie follow him with her eyes. I started gathering my things, but Sophie just sat there.

“Umm, you go ahead,” she said. “I’ll be along in a few minutes.”

I knew the tone in her voice. I also saw the light pink blush that had started on her cheeks. The one she gets when she mixes alcohol and men.

“The waiter? You want the waiter?” I asked. “You’re serious? He’s not even your type.”

“Well, maybe, but did you see his butt? After seeing Jon Bon Jovi on the TV and that guy that kissed you yesterday, all I’ve been thinking about are butts and how much I love them. It’ll be worth buying him a dinner just to get a peek at it. I wonder what his butt feels like. It looks really firm. I bet he works out a lot. I wonder if he’s into having his naked butt spanked. I hope it’s all not hairy. You know I like a smooth butt, like a baby’s.”

“Don’t you think you should know more about him, before you start spanking him?”

“Like what?”

“Like, is he a nice person? Does he have any ambition? Does he even like women?”

“Hey, I’m not going to marry the guy. Besides, I know everything I need to know about him just by watching him walk back and forth in front of our table.”

“You know Sophie, most women get more conservative as they get older. You’re getting looser.”

“I know and it’s killing me. I’m horny all the time. What’s it going to be like when I reach my sexual peak? According to Cosmo I’ve still got about ten years to go. How many men a week will I need when I’m at my sexual peak?”

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I left Sophie, who had already started up a conversation with the waiter, and went down to my car. I got in and took off down the two-lane

highway that winds its way through the mountains and eventually back to Scottsdale.

I had gone about half a mile when a black Mercedes sedan pulled in tight behind me. The car stayed on my bumper for a quarter of a mile and then pulled up beside me. Rather than pass me, the passenger side window came down and I saw there were two men in the car. Both were big middle-aged white guys in dark suits. Both had military haircuts and full moustaches. The passenger had a semi-automatic pistol and was pointing it at me while waving that I should pull over.

*Like that's going to happen.*

I hit the gas and started to pull forward. The Mercedes easily stayed with me.

A car suddenly crested a hill in the oncoming lane. The Mercedes stomped on its brakes and darted behind me to avoid a head-on. I had the Honda up to seventy, but after a moment the Mercedes had smoothly pulled next to me again.

The passenger had his gun out the window and was now shouting something at me while waving his hand. The driver eased his car against mine and started to force me off the road. I had the steering wheel in a death grip trying to keep control. There was the grinding sound of metal on metal as my car was shoved onto the dirt shoulder.

I had just started to slow down when we came to a dirt road that branched off the highway and wound down into a narrow gully. The Mercedes gave me a hard push and I was forced onto the side road.

I managed to keep the Honda straight for a couple of seconds but I was going too fast to keep control. The road turned to the right and the Honda skidded sideways. I hit the brakes and the world spun in circles.

When it stopped, I was facing back toward the main highway and the Mercedes was coming to a stop thirty yards ahead of me. Through the cloud of dust, I saw I had gone about sixty or seventy yards down the dirt road and was completely out of view of the highway.

*Shit.*

I locked my doors, pulled my 9-mm Baby Glock out of my bag, and chambered a round. My heart pounded as I peered over the dashboard.

I looked up and saw the two men were now were standing behind their open doors, guns drawn. They started shouting to each other in what sounded like Russian. The driver motioned to the passenger, who then came out from behind his door. He walked toward my car, gun held tightly in his hand.

I unrolled the window enough to stick my gun out. I aimed as best as I could and fired off a shot. The front windshield of the Mercedes exploded.

Both men hit the deck. There was more shouting and then an argument as the man slithered back to his car. I guess the idea of an uppity American woman with a gun didn't fit into their plans.

As I watched them arguing, I became convinced these were the two Russian bodyguards I had seen on the hotel security tape earlier in Lenny's office. They were the same size and who else would be shouting in Russian? My only question was what did they want with me?

Apparently they came up with a new plan, because after a moment the shouting stopped. The driver reached in the car and released the car's emergency brake. The Mercedes began to slowly roll down the hill, the men using the open doors as shields. They had gone about twenty yards, and were almost to my car, when the driver set the brake to stop their car.

“Miss Black,” the driver shouted. “Please do not shoot us until you hear what we have to say.” He spoke in a thick Russian accent. He sounded like Boris Badenov from the old *Rocky and Bullwinkle* show. “We will not harm you. We just wish to discuss certain matters that are of interest to both of us.”

“Sure, what do you want to talk about?” I shouted back.

“Please, Miss Black. We are standing in the middle of the American Sonoran desert. Nothing but saguaro cactus, creosote bushes, and mesquite trees surround us here. Why don’t we go to our hotel suite back in Scottsdale? We can be much more comfortable there.”

“I like the desert,” I said. “It’s a great place to talk.”

The Russians quietly talked for a moment amongst themselves.

“As you wish,” Boris said. “We merely wish to know the location of a small black bag. We have reason to believe you know where it is.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” I shouted back.

“Please Miss Black, we can resolve this matter without the use of violence. All we ask is you come with us now and show us the location of the bag.”

“I don’t know where it is. It seems like you’re the ones who lost it, you find it.”

“You may know certain friends of ours are helping us recover our property. We know they have hired the services of the lawyer Leonard Shapiro to help them locate it. Now, it seems strange our friends would need to hire a lawyer to find what was stolen from us, no? We also have information they asked that you lead the investigation into the recovery of our bag. We know the methods of our friends. They would not have asked for you specifically unless you already had some association with

our property, even if you did not recognize the importance of what you knew.”

“If by friends, you’re talking about the DiCenzos, then you can forget it. I’m not even on that assignment. Lenny gave it to someone else. You got your facts wrong on this one.”

“I think not. You will now return to Scottsdale with us and we will question you further.”

The passenger aimed his gun at me. He was very tall and very broad. If the driver was a Boris, then this guy was an Ivan.

“I will inform you that we are under strictest orders not to kill you,” Boris said. “But we have been granted permission to freely torture you if you do not voluntarily cooperate. If you again attempt to shoot us, or do not immediately come into our automobile, we will repeatedly shoot you in non-fatal areas of your body. We will then take you with us and question you at our leisure until you tell us what we wish to know. You will decide, *now!*”

Boris joined Ivan in sighting his gun on me as I ducked behind the dash. I then heard the slam of car doors and the sound of shoes walking on gravel. I stuck my head up just enough to see both of them slowly walking to my car, their guns still trained on me. I pulled my head back down and held my breath as the sound of the Russian’s footsteps grew louder.

*I really hate it when this happens.*

The footsteps approached the front of my car. Then the footsteps were on either side of my car. I could feel them looking at me through the car windows.

There was the loud and rapid *Thump-Thump-Thump-Thump* sound of gunfire and bullets hitting metal. I expected to feel my car buckle as the bullets tore through it. But, to my surprise, my car didn't move. Instead, it sounded like the Mercedes was taking the hits.

As the gunfire continued, I stuck my head up in time to see a line of holes appear in the side of the Mercedes. Boris and Ivan were running to the far side of the Mercedes, firing up the hill as they ran. Their rear window shattered, then the side windows. The Russians reached their car and then each fired two or three more shots in the general direction of where the bullets had come from.

There was a pause, then another *Thump-Thump-Thump-Thump-Thump* as a fresh line of holes streaked from the trunk of the Mercedes, to the front fender, then to the dirt between our cars, and then to my car! I felt my car shudder as a bullet slammed through the side of my trunk.

"Damn it," I shouted. "That's *my* car!"

Screaming at each other, both Russians fired shots in the direction of the highway. They scrambled back into their car and slammed the doors. Gravel flew as they whipped their car around and flew back to the highway. The dust cleared and it became very quiet.

*OK, that was weird. Damn, I could use a smoke.*

I stayed low for about five minutes until I was pretty sure nobody else wanted to shoot me. I stuck my head up and looked around to make sure no one else was in sight. I then got out of my car and looked at the damage.

The paint on the driver's side was scraped. Streaks of black paint were now ground in with the original brown. Part of the front fender was crumpled, but it still looked drivable. My side mirror was smashed. It

dangled against the door, held on by a cable. And I had a bullet hole in my trunk.

*Great, how am I going to explain a bullet hole to my insurance agent?*

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I drove back to the office. Sophie had beaten me there and was filing a stack of papers. She took one look at me and her eyes opened wide.

“Yikes! What happened to you?”

“I’m having a shitty day,” I said.

“Again? What happened?”

“Two Russians forced my car off the road. They were either going to kidnap me, or shoot me first, then kidnap me.”

“No shit? Real Russians? I’ve never seen a real Russian. So, what happened? How’d you get away?”

“Somebody started shooting at them. They got scared and left.”

“Do you know who the Russians were?”

“I think they’re the ones from the Blue Palms Gina’s looking for.”

“No shit? Do you know who shot at them?”

“No, but I definitely owe someone dinner.”

“Sounds like you owe someone sloppy doggy sex. You going to call the police this time?”

“Maybe, but not until I find out more about what’s going on. Every time I bring the police in, things just get muddled.”

“How bad’s your car?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Scraped paint, crumpled fender, broken mirror, bullet hole.”

“Damn, I’m glad we drove separately.”

SIX

I still didn't know where Alex was, or where else to look, so I decided to spend the afternoon getting some more background information. I was hoping I could pick up some clues as to what was going on.

I left the office and headed south. Just west of Scottsdale Road on McDowell is the Scottsdale Motor Mile, a group of a dozen car dealerships, mostly high-end. Within that one mile, you can see over ten thousand new and used cars.

Nestled between the Ferrari and the Lexus dealerships is Scottsdale Desert Audi. I pulled into a visitor's space, got out, and was met by a smiling man in a blue plaid suit. He was short and starting to bald, but he had an engaging smile.

"Hi," he said, holding out his hand. "My name's Bob. Let me know if I can answer any questions."

He walked over and looked at my car. He grimaced as he ran his finger against the scraped paint. He bent down and examined the crumpled fender. He wiggled the broken mirror, which was still only hanging on by the cable. He walked to the trunk and stuck his finger in the bullet hole. He then turned to me with a big friendly grin.

"Good thing you live in Arizona and it's so dry. Bullet holes can rust out pretty quickly. If you lived back East, the rust would rot out the entire side of your fender in a year or two. Maybe you'd like to test drive an Audi A6? They're the greatest."

"Not today," I said. "I'm just looking for William Martin."

“OK, sure,” Bob said, not missing a beat. “He’s probably in his office. There’s a hallway in the back of the showroom. His office is the big one, second door to the right.”

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I found William Martin’s office and knocked on his open door. William was sitting behind a behemoth of a desk. He was no less of a behemoth himself. He was six two or six three and must have weighed 300 pounds. He had a round face, a full mustache, and a thin comb-over of reddish hair, which only partially covered a large bald patch on the top of his round head. Hanging on the wall behind him were several awards for excellence in sales, outstanding customer satisfaction, and sales manager of the year. When he saw me he came around to the side of his desk and held out a huge hand.

“I’m William Martin,” he said. “What can I do for you today?”

“I’m Laura Black,” I said while shaking his hand. “I called yesterday.”

“Sure,” he said. “You’re interested in Alex Sternwood. You’re working for his grandmother, if I recall correctly.”

I sat down in one of two wooden chairs stationed in front of his massive desk. I noticed the office smelled a lot like a new car.

“She hasn’t heard from him since he quit. She’s really worried about him.”

“Well, I’d like to help, but I don’t have a firm grasp on why Alex left. He was one of our best sales associates.”

“He didn’t give you any indication he was unhappy or was thinking about leaving?”

“None at all. I was as surprised as anyone when he quit. And, before you ask, no, I haven’t heard from him since. I’ve had other employees who’ve quit, but I thought Alex was going to be here for the long haul.”

“Is there anyone here who was close to him? Maybe they would know more about this?”

He thought for a moment. “As far as I know,” he said, “the only person he was close to was Joan. She’s working today. Perhaps you’d like to talk to her?”

“Sounds great,” I said. “Where can I find her?”

“She’s working the pre-owned lot. She has on a green coat, you can’t miss her.”

“Thanks,” I said standing up. I appreciate your help.” I handed him a card. “Would you mind giving me a call if you think of anything else?”

He took the card then made a gun with his thumb and first finger. His thumb let loose with a couple of rounds, the *gunman’s salute*. I took this as his way of telling me he would.

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I left the office, walked through the showroom, and then out to the lot. I spotted a woman I took to be Joan. Her lime green pantsuit shouted the woman’s location like a neon billboard.

She was a little shorter and a little older than me. She had sort blonde hair that wrapped around her face in a pleasant way. She had a clipboard in her hand and was writing down numbers from a sticker in the window of a small yellow sports car. She finished and looked up to see me. She broke into a smile and walked toward me, her hand extended.

“Hi,” she said, “I’m Joan. I hope you’re in the mood to buy a car. We just got this Miata in today and I’m itching to test drive it with somebody.”

She seemed likeable enough and had a great smile. “Sorry,” I said, “I’m not buying today. I’d like to talk to you about Alexander Sternwood.”

“Sure,” she said, her smile fading. “But I’m afraid Alex doesn’t work here anymore. He quit last week. Didn’t even tell anybody good-bye. He just called in and said he quit.”

“Do you have any idea why he’d quit like that?”

“None at all,” she said. “But, I’ve been thinking since his family has money, perhaps he got his inheritance?”

“This may seem like a strange question,” I said, “but do you know if he had something else going on the side? Something that would give him a better income than he could get here?”

“Like what?” Joan said. Her tone and body posture switched to being slightly defensive.

“Could be anything,” I said. “Alex’s grandmother asked me to look into what’s going on. It’s not like somebody to just quit a good job unless they have another source of income.”

She relaxed and paused for a moment, thinking. “I don’t think Alex is involved in anything outside the dealership. Well, nothing other than his girlfriend, Danica. He talks about her all the time. Alex and I went out a few times when he first started working here. We even had a romantic weekend in Vegas. That was about two years ago, just before he met Danica. But once he started seeing her, he cut it off with me. It sorta pissed me off at the time. But I was just using him for sex and they seem happy together. Maybe it worked out for the best.”

“Do you know how they got together?”

“Sure, they met right over there,” she said, pointing to the far side of the lot, the side facing McDowell Road.

“Danica came in last year looking for a car. I talked to her first, but then she saw Alex and only wanted to deal with him. I suppose she felt an attraction to him from the start. Alex ended up selling her a low-mileage Porsche 911 convertible. They started going out right after that and they’ve been together ever since. They never fight and he’s totally loyal to her. I sometimes wish I’d been a little more serious about him. He turned out to be a real catch.”

“Do you know if he ever dated anyone else who worked here? Maybe he had another close friend he would have confided to?”

“No,” she said. “I was the only one he ever showed an interest in. He never went out with any of us after work for drinks or anything like that. He pretty much kept to himself. I know he considered his parole officer a friend, go figure. His name is David Rasmussen.”

“I know about David. I still need to talk to him. Alex’s parole ended a month ago. Perhaps that had something to do with his quitting?”

“Sorry,” she said, “I wish I could help, but Alex and I aren’t as close as we were.”

“Thanks, I appreciate your help,” I said, and handed her a card. “If you can think of anything else, feel free to give me a call.”

“Sure,” she said. “When you catch up with Alex, tell him to give me a call sometime.”

“Will do,” I said. With that, I walked back to my car and took off.

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I took a chance and called Alex's former parole officer, David Rasmussen. He answered on the second ring. I introduced myself, told him I was looking into Alexander Sternwood, and asked if I could get twenty minutes of his time. He said he had an appointment due in a few minutes, but he would be free for a half hour after that.

I went into Downtown Scottsdale and drove in circles until I found the Maricopa County Social Services building. I parked in a visitor's space of the bleak concrete parking structure and walked in.

I got out of the elevator on the third floor and found David's office. A small reception area held mismatched chairs, toys, children's books, and several out-of-date magazines, all of which had had the address labels cut out of the covers. The door to the inner office was closed, which I took to mean David was still in with his client. I took a seat and waited.

From the inner office I heard a deep voiced man, whom I assumed was David, explaining to someone that leaving the state without permission was a violation of his probation, even if was just for the afternoon. He then went on to explain this was serious and would not be tolerated in the future. Following that was a stream of muffled talking, which I assumed was the guy explaining it would never happen again. Everything apparently worked out for the best and the door to the inner office opened a minute later.

A man of 55 years walked a man of 20 years out into the reception area. The older man was of medium height and a stocky build. He wore a white-short sleeve shirt with a navy blue tie. He had short blond hair cut in a GI flattop and thick glasses with black frames. He looked sort of like Drew Carey. The younger man left. The older man turned and held his hand out to me.

“I’m David Rasmussen,” he said.

“Laura Black,” I said shaking his firm hand. “I appreciate you seeing me.”

“Not a problem,” he said, ushering me into the inner office. “I need to make a few notes on my last client. Have a seat, I’ll be with you in a minute.”

As he wrote, I took the opportunity to look around the office. The only personal item in the office was a framed picture on the desk of a woman, which I took to be David’s wife, along with three smiling children. The picture was taken on a beach with a turquoise blue ocean and palm trees in the background. They looked like a nice family.

“I’m glad you could come over,” David said as he looked up from his papers. “Ever since I talked to Mrs. Sternwood last week, I’ve been feeling uneasy. Have you found out what’s going on with Alex yet?”

“Not yet, but I’m working on it,” I said. “I think he’s just trying to keep a low profile, but I’m still concerned about him. When’s the last time you spoke to him?”

“I tried calling him last Thursday to see if he wanted to meet for drinks after work. I wanted to make sure things were still going OK. Alex’s parole was successfully discharged a little over a month ago. Some parolees use the end of parole as an excuse to get into trouble. I called up the Audi dealership and found out Alex had quit. Alex hadn’t mentioned to me he had been planning anything like that. I tried calling him at his apartment and on his cell. When I couldn’t get a hold of him, I called Alex’s grandmother. I hadn’t meant to worry her. I just thought she might know what was happening with Alex, but she knew less than I did.”

“Do you have any idea why he would quit his job?” I asked. “From what I can tell he was pretty good at it.”

“No, and that’s the thing of it. Alex seemed happy there. I could tell he felt good about what he was doing there. Plus, the job made him a good salary, at least enough to tide him over until his inheritance came through.”

“Do you know if Alex has been involved in any criminal activity since his parole ended? Anything involving art or jewelry?”

He looked at me with concern. It gave him a crease in the middle of his forehead.

“As far as I know,” he said. “Alex hasn’t been involved with any sort of criminal activity since his release from prison. You may know I would have been required to report any criminal activity during the period of parole. Is there something I should know about?”

“No, it’s only vague suspicions for now,” I said. “I’ve been following Alex around for a few days and there may be innocent explanations for everything that’s been happening. I just don’t know enough yet to make any connections. You know him. Do you think he would go back to crime?”

“Honestly, no. I think Alex has seen that crime really doesn’t pay. Although, there is one thing I’ve noticed with both con-men and hustlers. Some can live a crime-free life for years, then something will come along that tempts them back into crime, perhaps just the one time, but it can happen.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like the perfect con will just fall into their lap. I’ve spoken to some of the men afterward. It’s always the same thing: A sucker presented them

with an easy opportunity and it's like they didn't even think about what they were doing. They just pull the con out of reflex. It's like a reformed alcoholic accidentally going into a bar that happens to be offering free drinks. It's a temptation too big to resist. I'm not saying this would have happened in Alex's case. But I have seen it happen."

"Do you know anyone whom he was close to? Someone he may have confided too?"

"Only his girlfriend," he said. "Her name is Danica. I have her phone number in the file if you need it."

"I've already talked to her. So far, she seems completely out of whatever Alex is into."

"Let me know if you find out anything on Alex. He's a good man and I would hate to see anything happen to him."

I said that I would. I handed him a card and asked him to call me if he could think of anything else.

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I drove to my building and took the elevator to my floor. Unlocking my door, I went in and looked for Marlowe. I searched the apartment without any luck, then went out into the hall and knocked on Grandma Peckham's door. She answered wearing a purple jogging suit and white running shoes. Her silver-gray hair was tightly curled and today her cheeks were bright pink. In her hand was a Diet Pepsi.

"Why Laura," Grandma said. "I haven't gotten a chance to talk to you for days." She rested her fingertips against my arm. "Come on in. We need to catch up."

I walked in and saw Marlowe laying on the afghan on his chair. Two years before, Grandma had crocheted the cat-sized afghan and designated

a chair for him to sleep on. As I came in, Marlowe turned his head toward me and yawned.

I was sort of hoping he'd jump down and rub against my leg or sit at my feet and meow to be picked up. After all, he was my roommate and my friend. Instead, he closed his eyes and laid his head on the afghan. Within seconds, he was asleep.

Some friend.

Grandma went to the refrigerator. She came back holding a fresh Diet Pepsi and handed it to me. As far as I know, Diet Pepsi is all Grandma Peckham ever drinks. I'd never had a Diet Pepsi before I met Grandma Peckham, and now it's about the only soda I drink.

When she's feeling frisky, Grandma Peckham has been known to add a little Appleton Rum to her Diet Pepsi. She calls her drinks Jamaican Jerks. With one Jerk in her, Grandma starts talking and you can't get a word in. After two Jerks, Grandma stops talking coherently and just mumbles while staring glassy eyed into space. After three Jerks, Grandma leans over in her chair and falls asleep.

We sat on the sofa next to Marlowe and his cat chair. "So, what did I miss?" Grandma asked. "Has everything been all right?"

"I got shot at and almost kidnapped this morning, but it ended up being nothing serious."

"I'm glad to hear that. To tell the truth, I've been a little worried about you. I'm somewhat psychic, you know, and I've been having some troubling visions about you lately."

"What kind of visions?" I asked.

"So far there hasn't been anything specific, mostly visions of you surrounded by a threatening masculine aura."

“Being surrounded by anything masculine doesn’t sound so bad right now.”

“Oh, I know you think I’m nuts, but you also know my visions usually come true. Just tell me you’ll stay away from strange men for a few days. You haven’t started seeing anyone new, have you?”

“I keep trying, but no luck so far.”

“Well, maybe it’s just as well,” Grandma said. “It’s been nice and quiet over at your place the past year, not like when you were dating that policeman. Land sakes alive, when you were with him you made *a lot* of noise. The first night you had him over, I thought he was slapping you around and hurting you. I almost called the cops on him. But when I saw the two of you in the hall the next morning, you both seemed really happy. So I figured he was slapping you around and maybe you enjoyed it. Of course, after the first few nights I figured out you were just a moaner and a screamer, so I let it go.”

I felt my face flush with heat.

God, how embarrassing.

“I haven’t been close with anyone lately.” I said. “But, I did have some Scotch the other day almost as good as sex.”

“Really? What was it called?”

“It was *Balvenie* or *Ball Vinny*, something like that.”

“Humm, good as sex? Maybe I ought to learn to drink the stuff. It’s been years since I’ve had sex. The last time I even tried to have sex was about two years ago with Walter Dobson from the drugstore. He worked in the pharmacy and I’d known him for years. We went over to his house one afternoon and tried to do it, but he couldn’t get his penis to work. Figure that, and Walter wasn’t even seventy then. I tried every trick I

knew to make it work. I even did the *Velvet Hummingbird* thing I had read about in *Cosmopolitan* magazine. That one had been guaranteed to drive any man to ecstasy, or at the very least give him a good stiffy, but it was nothing doing. You'd think working in a pharmacy he could take something to fix that."

Grandma sighed and looked a little melancholy.

"My granddaughter says I should just get a vibrator and that way I wouldn't ever want a man again. She said after her divorce she got a vibrator and now she doesn't even think about dating men anymore. My granddaughter said she wishes she had found out about vibrators before she got married. She said, if she had a chance to do it all again, she'd just get a vibrator and adopt children from Africa rather than get married and have children the normal way."

As Grandma was talking, I got up and made my way over to the cat chair. I had also read about the *Velvet Hummingbird* and the thought of Grandma Peckham doing that to Walter Dobson from the drugstore was giving me the heebie-jeebies.

I picked Marlowe up and set him against my shoulder. He yawned, but otherwise didn't protest. I thanked Grandma Peckham for the Diet Pepsi and returned next door to my apartment.

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I got back to Jeannie's Cabaret about 9:00 that night. I drove around the parking lot looking for Alex's car without success. The parking lot was packed and I was forced to park in one of the few remaining spots near the back.

As I walked to the front, I noticed a red velvet rope had been stretched across the entrance. There was a small line of men standing behind the

rope; all were waiting to be let in. I was walking to the back of the line, when the doorman called me over. He was the same one who I had talked to earlier in the day.

“After 6:00, and on weekends, ladies don’t pay a cover and they go right in,” he said, opening the rope and waving me in.

As I walked in, I could see why they encouraged women patrons at night. The room was filled to capacity with men, mostly in small groups, but there were also many singles. Most of the singles had a look of quiet desperation and confusion. It was as though they couldn’t understand why giving a naked woman ten or twenty dollars didn’t make her hop off the stage and follow them home for a night of passion.

I scanned the room, looking for Alex or Danica. Instead, I saw Annie, the girl I had met the last time I was here. She was seated with another woman at a table near the main stage. I started winding my way towards them. About halfway to their table, I caught Annie’s eye. She smiled and waved me over to the table.

The other woman was several years older than Annie, somewhere in her late forties. She looked very stylish, wearing a low-cut blue designer evening gown and gorgeous blue suede pumps. She was decked out in sparkly rings, a diamond studded watch, and a tastefully gaudy amount of gold jewelry, including a thick ruby and diamond bracelet. Her long auburn hair was nicely styled and looked great. Her makeup was flawless, as was her skin. She had the thin body, the perfect nose, and the oversized boobs of a woman who has both a personal trainer and a favorite plastic surgeon. She also had what looked like the remains of a gin & tonic in front of her. Annie’s glass of white wine was still half full.

“Hi Annie,” I said, talking loudly to be heard over the pounding music. “Has Danica Taylor been out yet?”

“You just missed her. She got off the stage about five minutes ago.” Annie waved me to a chair across from her, next to the woman. “But don’t worry, I’m sure she’ll be back on stage again tonight. She seems to be very popular.”

“I just wanted to talk to her. Do you know how long it takes for the women to come out to waitress after dancing?”

“It seems like they come out almost right away. It looks like they get good tips from the guys who weren’t able to make it up to the stage.”

Annie then seemed to remember the other woman at the table. “Oh, sorry, I’m being so rude. Jackie, this is Laura; Laura, this is Jackie.” I reached over to shake her hand. She eyed me as she offered her hand, knuckles toward me, fingers hanging down. She gave me a strange look, like she was trying to decide why I was here.

“You must be helping Annie to find a man,” I said.

“Oh, you know about her problem around men?” Jackie asked, her face brightening.

“I met Jackie the same day I met you,” Annie said. “We were both over at the Casablanca Lounge and I told her about my problem around guys. She said picking up a guy isn’t a big deal. She does it all the time. She said she’d even come back over here where the guys are already horny and help me pick one out.”

“I’m not sure why Annie can’t talk to men,” Jackie said. “For some reason she gets tongue tied. I’ve been dating a lot since my divorce, mostly younger guys. I think we can find her a man, especially in a place like this.”

“I hope so,” Annie said, smiling. “I have a lot of needs and this is driving me crazy.”

“Why date younger guys?” I asked Jackie. “Why not guys your own age?”

“What you have to understand was I was married to a man who treated me like shit for almost fifteen years. He thought just because he made a lot of money he could treat me like a slave. It was always cook my dinner, clean my house, do my laundry. A few years ago, he started having these mood swings that would last for weeks at a time. It was a nightmare. I divorced him a year ago and I’ll be damned if I ever marry anybody else. I started out dating guys my age, but lately I’ve been dating younger guys and it’s been great.”

“OK,” I said. “I get they are young and have nice bodies. But then isn’t it just sex?”

“Yes, and that’s the beauty of it.” She saw my puzzled look and went on.

“There are few things clingier than a fifty year old divorced guy. It’s impossible to be with a guy like that for more than about three dates before he wants to introduce you to his kids. I have all the money I’ll ever need, so I don’t need a man to provide anything for me. I just want to find a guy, use him a few times, and then toss him away. I get want I want and they always seem to enjoy themselves.”

“Seems reasonable to me,” I said.

“Annie told me about this place, and I thought, why not,” Jackie said. “I usually hit the nightclubs, along with some friends of mine, but I thought it might be easier for Annie to just go to a room full of extremely horny men. There won’t be a lot of talking involved. We’ll pick up a

couple of men and use them tonight. If they're good, maybe we'll see them again. If not, we'll grab a couple of new ones for tomorrow. I know there's a man for Annie out there somewhere."

"That sounds like a plan," I said. "Good luck."

Jackie looked over at Annie.

"Are you ready?"

Annie looked a little nervous, but nodded her head. Jackie got up and led Annie to a table where two men in their twenties were sitting and watching the girls on stage. Jackie was doing the talking. In less than a minute they were both sitting at the table and one of the guys had called a waitress over. I noticed Jackie already had her fingers casually resting on the guy's arm.

As I got up, Annie looked up and gave me a finger wave good-bye. I went over to an empty seat at the end of the bar.

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Danica came out from backstage less than five minutes later. She headed toward the waitress station next to my barstool.

"Hi Danica," I said as she stood next to me, organizing her waitress tray.

She looked over, but didn't seem to know who I was. After looking at me for about three beats, recognition flooded into her face. What followed was a wave of something I took for fright or worry. She bent down and I caught a whiff of an expensive perfume. She put her lips next to my ear, her soft voice barely audible over the pounding music.

"Have you seen Alex today?" she asked.

“No,” I said. “And I’ve tried his place, your place, here, and every other place I could think of. I haven’t seen him anywhere.”

“I think he’s missing. He left my place about 2:00 this morning. He was supposed to meet me for lunch today, but he never showed up. He never breaks a date without calling. I’m really worried.”

“Do you have any idea where he could have gone?”

“That’s just it. He wasn’t supposed to go anywhere. He said he was beat and he was going home to sleep all morning. When he didn’t show up for lunch, I called his apartment and his cell phone several times, but he doesn’t answer. I drove over to his place, but his car’s not in the lot. I even called the emergency room at Scottsdale Memorial in case he had gotten into an accident.”

“Do you have a key to his apartment?”

“Yes, but I don’t know if I should just walk into his place. What if he’s there and he just wanted to be left alone for the day?”

“Do you believe that?”

“Well, no. Maybe you’re right, but I don’t want to go there alone. I get off tonight at midnight. Meet me outside the stage door at about 12:20. We can go over and look together. OK? Maybe he’ll be back by then.”

Great, another late night.

“I’ll be there,” I said, hoping my lack of enthusiasm didn’t show.

SEVEN

I walked out to my car and called Sophie on her cell phone. I didn't know if she already had a date tonight, but I figured it was worth a shot. If she was busy, I'd try Gina. I really didn't want to go home and flip channels until midnight.

Sophie's phone rang several times. It was about to go into her voicemail, when she answered. I heard music and voices in the background.

"Hey Sophie," I said. "Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Hey Laura. No, you caught us at a great time. Gina and I are at the Beach Club. Come on over. Drinks are half price tonight and some of the guys are really cute."

In the background I heard Gina yelling "Hey Laura, get your skinny butt down here!"

"OK," I said, "I'll be there in ten minutes."

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The Arizona Beach Club overlooks the Salt River, just south of Scottsdale in Tempe. Of course, since this is Arizona, the Salt River is dry throughout the year. Any rain or snow that falls in Arizona stays up in the mountains in a system of huge reservoirs. A few years back, somebody got the idea of damming this part of the dry river and filling it up. The result is Tempe Town Lake. It's now a popular recreation destination with the students from Arizona State University, which borders the lake to the south.

The Beach Club is a notch down from the glamour clubs of Scottsdale, but the drinks are cheaper and you can park without using a valet. It consists of a cavernous room with a high ceiling, a big dance floor, and a bar stretching the entire length of one of the walls. It is famous for having forty-five different beers on tap. Of course, being so close to the University, the crowd is inevitably several years younger than the clubs in Scottsdale.

I walked in and looked around for Sophie and Gina. They weren't in the main room, so I walked out the back of the main building and onto the large outdoor patio. I always prefer the patio whenever I come here. There are two bars, a stage, several flickering Tiki torches, and a big fountain that splashes in a friendly way. It's a little quieter than inside and a lot more pleasant.

I found Sophie and Gina sitting at a table against a white wall, next to the trunk of an enormous royal palm tree. There were three full drinks in front of each of them. I slid into an empty chair and they each handed me a drink.

I turned and looked around the patio. "Is it me or do the guys here look younger than last time?"

"Sorry girlfriend," Sophie said. "They stay the same, you're just maturing."

"I hear you met the two Russians I've been looking for," Gina said.

"I wouldn't exactly say met. They sort of ran into me and invited me up to their place."

"Any ideas on who shot up their car?" Gina asked.

"Not a clue, but I owe somebody big time. The Russians are still looking for the missing bag. They think I know where it is."

“Wow! Do you?” Sophie asked, concern on her face.

“Not as far as I know. How close are you to finding it?”

“Not very,” Gina said. “The bag was switched a week ago and all I have to go on is a piece of grainy video. What I’ve found out so far is the two guys who threatened you were Russian Mafia bodyguards for *the Courier*, that’s what everybody is calling the little guy in the middle on the videotape. The bodyguards are still out looking for whoever switched the bag, so they’re accounted for. The courier’s a no-show.”

“As in, he’s disappeared?” Sophie asked.

“Yeah. Everyone I talk to gives me a different answer on where I can find him. I get the feeling I’m getting the runaround at the resort. I’ve been chasing my tail all day.”

“On the tape there was some big commotion right before the switch. Did you find out what that was?” I asked.

“I was lucky there. I talked to a bellman who was working at the time. A woman wearing a red string bikini had just come in from the pool. She was walking through the lobby when she apparently tripped over a chair and somehow lost her top. She had a hard time getting it back on, so naturally every guy in the lobby came over to help her, or at least get an eyeful.”

“That sounds like a diversion,” Sophie said. “Did you find out who the woman was?”

“Nope, the bellman just remembers her as a tall brunette with huge breasts and great tan lines.”

“Well, Jeez, that’s not very helpful,” I said. “That describes half the women in Scottsdale.”

“Yeah,” Sophie said. “The other half are blonde.”

“Did the bellman see the guy who did the switch?” I asked.

“No,” Gina said. “Nobody remembers anything other than the brunette and her boobs.”

“Were there any other camera angles of the lobby when the bag was switched?”

“Don’t know yet. That’s next on my list tomorrow. Somebody named Milo is delivering copies of all of the security tapes made that day. He should have them to the office by 10:00.”

“Milo?” Sophie asked. “Is he hot?”

“How should I know?” Gina said. He’s probably just another goon.”

“I don’t know,” Sophie said. “That goon who kissed Laura was damn fine. Maybe they’ll send over a hottie for me too?”

“Everything’s revolving around the bag,” I said. “Did you ever find out what’s really supposed to be in it?”

“No, I don’t even have a good idea what it looks like. The official story is still money, documents, and computer disks,” Gina said. “I get the feeling there’s more to it, but so far everybody is being very closed-mouthed. The higher up I go, the less they seem to know about it. It must be something pretty big.”

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We talked until midnight. I had my keys out of my bag and was getting ready to go when the waitress brought over three more drinks. “From the table over there,” she said and pointed.

The table was behind me, so I let Sophie and Gina look.

“Well, anything worthwhile?” I asked.

“Yummy,” Gina moaned. She began biting her lower lip.

“Oooooohh,” Sophie moaned. Her lips puckered.

I turned to look. The drinks came from two boys who looked barely old enough to shave. They were smiling and holding up their beers. I turned back to look at Gina and Sophie. They were both holding up the drinks and waving.

“You can’t be serious,” I said. They look like they’re still in high school. They probably snuck in here. You should go for older guys, you know, the ones with *money*.

“Don’t think of them as young,” Gina said, still waving. “Think of them as vigorous.”

“Yeah,” Sophie said, “vigorous, good stamina.”

“Hey,” I said. “The other day we were talking about that eighteen-year-old who was trying to seduce you. Didn’t we agree that was way too young? Didn’t you say it was gross?”

“Oh sure,” Gina said. “Eighteen is way too young, but twenty-one is *completely* different.”

“Oh yes, completely different.” Sophie said, her face taking on a light pink glow. It’s like you said the other day, these boys could pleasure us all night long.”

“Well, I can’t fight against your liquored-up libidos,” I said. “Just do me a favor and make sure they’re legal. Check their IDs before anything happens.”

“Hey Laura, good advice,” Gina said, staring at the boys, slowly running her tongue over her lips.

“Yeah, umm, I’ll keep it in mind too,” Sophie said, absent-mindedly fluffing her hair.

I stood up and waved the two guys over to our table. They came bouncing over like two puppies.

“Boys,” I said. “This is Gina and Sophie, they’ve been drinking, and they’re not as young as they used to be, so please be gentle with them tonight.”

The boys sat down. Gina waved good-bye, and Sophie blew me a kiss. Smiling, I just shook my head and headed out to my car.

~~~~~

At twenty minutes after midnight, Danica came out of the stage door and spotted me in my Honda. She smiled and gave me a little wave. As she walked over, I got out and stood next to my car. During the night, the temperature had dropped into the upper 50’s. Being a seasoned Scottsdale girl, I had put on a thick jacket.

“Alex’s place isn’t far,” Danica said. Did you want to go in one car?”

I was about to say no, when I saw she was pointing towards a blue Porsche 911 Carrera, parked four spaces over from my Honda.

“Is that your car?”

“Yeah, I got it a couple of years ago. It’s really fun to drive.”

*Jeez, how much money do you make by taking off your clothes?*

OK, so I’ll admit it. I didn’t want to pass up a chance to ride in the Porsche. I locked the Honda and walked around to the side of her car. Danica beeped the remote and unlocked the doors.

There is something wonderful about climbing into a Porsche. The black leather seats seemed to wrap around me. It felt like sitting in a big soft

hand.

Danica started the motor and the car trembled with energy. Personally, I don't think I could ever have a car this fast. I'd be too tempted to do eighty or ninety down every quiet country road I came across. I wouldn't be able to help myself and my insurance company already hates me enough as it is.

"You'd better put on your seatbelt," Danica said. "I drive sorta fast."

"Don't you get tickets?" I asked. "A car like this practically calls out for the police to stop it."

"Well, I get stopped a lot, but they never give me tickets. I guess I'm good at talking my way out of them."

*You don't get tickets?*

I mentally chalked up one more reason to be a beautiful sexy woman.

With the engine giving out a low powerful growl, we pulled out of the parking lot and headed up Scottsdale Road to Alex's apartment.

"I love your car," I said. "Now, you don't have to tell me, but I'm curious. How much do you make dancing?"

"Well, I make about \$800 a night in salary and tips, but between taxes and what the club takes it knocks down what I get to keep. Lately I've been clearing about \$500 a night. Being Miss November last year helped give me some recognition."

I did a quick calculation in my head. \$500 a night was \$2500 a week. Multiplied by fifty-two weeks gave \$130,000 a year, and that's after taxes.

*Damn, I'm in the wrong business.*

Danica looked over and saw what I was thinking.

“Yes, the money’s good, but it’s not easy. I’m always on a diet. I have to work out five days a week. I also go to the dermatologist once a week. When you dance for a living, getting a zit is a disaster.”

*I guess there are plusses and minuses to everything.*

“Alex seems to have come into a lot of money recently,” I said. “Did he tell you where it came from?”

“He said his grandmother had released some of his trust fund. But I’m not sure if I believe that. From what he had told me, his grandmother was holding off giving him anything until he turned thirty. Then you came and said he was selling things and was being followed. It seems like the money and the sales must be related to Alex being missing.”

After that we drove in nervous silence. We were driving through a retail district, about three miles from Alex’s apartment, when I saw something out of the corner of my eye.

“*Stop the car!*” I yelled. Danica obliged by slamming on the brakes, throwing us both forward. I turned my head to look down a street we had just passed. Danica saw it at the same time.

“Alex’s car! I know it’s his,” Danica yelled.

She pulled over to the curb and started to take off her seatbelt.

“Stay here,” I said. “Let me at least see what we’re dealing with.”

I looked over to see if Danica understood. Her eyes were wide and she was breathing hard, but she nodded. I opened the car door and got out. The wind had started to pick up and I zipped up my jacket. I had my LED penlight out of my purse.

“Oh God, please don’t let Alex be dead. Please don’t let Alex be dead.” I walked up to the car repeating the words. It was as if just saying the

words would keep anything bad from happening.

I got to the car and shone my light through the window and onto the front seat. No Alex and no other dead bodies visible. With my heart pounding, I angled the light around to look in the back seat.

*“Is he there?”* yelled a voice directly behind me.

I jumped so hard I almost wet myself. I turned and snapped at Danica, who was standing less than three feet from me. “Don’t sneak up on me like that!” My heart was pumping so hard I felt my head pulse with each rapid beat.

“Sorry,” Danica said in a small and shaky voice. “I couldn’t wait. Is Alex in there?”

“Not that I’ve seen so far. As long as you’re here, let’s look on the inside. Do you have keys to his car?”

With a trembling hand, Danica pulled out a set of keys. She used the beeper to unlock the doors.

I opened the driver’s side door and looked in. The car was spotless. I then walked over to the passenger’s side, opened the door, and sat down. The glove compartment was empty except for the registration and the owner’s manual. I used the button in the glove compartment to unlock the trunk. With a click, the trunk lid popped up an inch.

Danica went around to the back, but didn’t seem in a hurry to open the lid. I was climbing out of the car, when I saw a yellow CD case on the floor between the passenger seat and the door. There wasn’t any writing on the case. I opened the case and took the disk out. I turned it over, but there were no labels or writing anywhere on it. I couldn’t tell if it was a CD, a DVD, or even a Blu-Ray. It appeared to be a homemade recording.

“Danica,” I asked. “Does Alex have a CD or DVD burner?”

“No, but I know he wants one. I think he wants it to copy some of my old CDs. He loves music, he just doesn’t like paying for it.”

I shoved the disk into my coat pocket. I then walked around to the back of the car. Danica was just looking down at the trunk lid. I knew what she was thinking. Alex could be in there. And if he was, he was probably dead.

I took a deep breath and opened the trunk. No dead body, nothing. Clean as a whistle.

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We poked around the car for another five minutes but didn’t find anything useful. When we were done with the search, I turned to walk back to the Porsche.

“We can’t leave his car here,” Danica said. “Wherever Alex is, he’ll get upset if somebody steals his car. This isn’t the best neighborhood.”

My first instinct was to leave the car here and call the police. Moving the car would destroy any evidence that hadn’t already been compromised by our noising around the interior. But Danica was right. If we took off now, the car wouldn’t be here for long. I was amazed it hadn’t been stolen already. As Danica had said, even considering this was Scottsdale, it wasn’t the best neighborhood.

“One of us will have to drive it back to his apartment,” I said.

“I’ll do it,” Danica said. “I’ve driven it before and he doesn’t mind. Besides, if anything happens, he won’t get as mad if I’m the one who did it.”

She took the Porsche key off her key ring and handed it to me.

“Be careful, the brakes are sensitive.” She then turned, climbed into the Jaguar, and closed the door.

Smiling, just a bit, I climbed into the Porsche and started it up, cursing the bad luck that Alex’s apartment was only three miles away.

Two and a half minutes later, we both pulled into the parking lot of Alex’s complex.

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We walked up the stairs to Alex’s apartment. Danica rang the doorbell, while I tried to look through the kitchen window. The lights were off and I couldn’t make out any interior details. Danica opened the door with her key and we went in. I found the light switch and flipped it on.

Crazy as it sounds, it took two or three seconds for us to see something was wrong. Then it hit us both like we’d been slapped.

The entire apartment had been trashed. The couch had been flipped and gutted. Shredded books littered the floor in front of an overturned bookshelf. Chairs were overturned and torn apart. The lamps and TV were smashed. Even the stereo speakers had been knocked over and ripped apart.

In stunned silence, we walked into the kitchen. Every drawer had been pulled out of the cabinets. Loose stacks of utensils littered the floor. The refrigerator and the cupboards were standing open. Boxes of cereal, pancake mix, rice, French fries, and frozen corn had been dumped out in a pile in the center of the floor.

We heard a noise, a soft scraping sound that seemed to come from the back of the apartment. It wasn’t loud, but we both jumped. I pulled my Baby Glock out of my bag and loaded a round into the chamber.

I looked over at Danica. Her eyes were bugging out, staring at the Glock.

“Stay here,” I whispered. “I mean it. Don’t move.”

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I inched my way into the living room, then down the hall toward the bedroom. I mentally thumped my head for not checking the entire apartment when we first came in. Whoever trashed the apartment could still be here. Gina wouldn’t make a mistake like that. I guess the sight of the destruction threw me for a few minutes.

The first door in the hallway was to the bathroom. It was open and I peered in. There didn’t appear to be anyone there, but the door to the shower was closed. I didn’t see a dark shape hiding behind it, but you never know. Crouching low, I pulled open the shower door. Nothing.

I crept farther down the hall to the bedroom. Here the door was closed. I listened, but the sound had stopped. I again crouched down low and turned the handle. I gave a light push and the door opened smoothly, without a squeak. I looked inside, the Glock following the movement of my eyes.

Sitting on the bed was a man with his back resting against the wall. I noticed two troubling things about him. First, it wasn’t Alex. Second, there was a large bullet hole in the middle of his forehead. His mouth was contorted open in a silent scream. His milky eyes were staring into nothingness. As I slowly stood up, I saw both of his hands were gone, hacked off at the wrists. So OK, make that three troubling things about him.

“*Oh my God!*” a panicked voice behind me cried out.

I jumped and there was a loud *Boom!* I looked down to see smoke coming from the end of my gun.

“*Don’t do that!*” I yelled, turning to Danica, my voice rising almost to panic level as well.

“There’s a dead guy on Alex’s bed,” Danica said, her voice coming out more as a high squeak than anything else. “*Oh my God*, he doesn’t have any hands. That is so *gross*.”

The world started to spin and nausea knotted in my stomach. Black and white dots danced in front of my face and I went down to one knee to keep from passing out. After a minute of breathing deeply, I was able to stand and scan the rest of the room.

A set of mini-blinds were hanging in front of an open window. As I watched, small gust of wind blew into the room, causing the mini-blinds to softly bang against the window frame. This was causing the noise we’d heard.

I then searched to see where my bullet had gone. I didn’t see any holes in the wall. The ceiling was unmarked. The floor looked OK too. I looked over at the bed and saw a hole in the dead guy’s shirt. I didn’t remember it being there before.

Jeez, the paperwork on this is going to take all night.

“Don’t touch anything,” I said. “I’m going to have to call this in.”

I opened my cell phone and called 911. Danica and I went into the living room. I knew, from previous experience, it would take about ten minutes for the first blue & white to show. I used the time to look around the shattered apartment, being careful not to disturb anything.

I didn’t find anything useful, but one thing was obvious. The destruction in the apartment hadn’t been random. Whoever was here had

been searching for something specific. I wondered what they were looking for and whether they had found it or not.

I went back into the living room to wait for the police. I looked over and saw that Danica was staring into space and shaking. She looked like she was about to lose it.

“Are you doing OK?” I asked.

“Who could have done this?” she asked, her voice shaky and distant. “What did they do with Alex? He has no enemies. Do you think it was the same men who were following him?”

“I don’t know. But I promise I’ll get to the bottom of it.”

Outside, we heard the first police car pull up, just below the apartment.

“Listen to me for a minute.” I said, taking both of her hands in mine. “There’s going to be a ton of police here in a few minutes. They’ll ask a bunch of questions, most of them pointless and repetitive. Try not to get angry with them. Just answer all of the questions as truthfully and completely as you can. I know you don’t think you know anything about this, but maybe one of their questions will jog your memory into giving them something useful. We still don’t know if this has anything to do with Alex’s disappearance. He may be in partying in Vegas for all we know.”

Danica nodded her head, went outside, and stood on the small porch. Although I was trying to be brave for the both of us, the truth was I had a very bad feeling about what had happened to Alex. I didn’t know how I was going to tell Lenny, or Muffy, about this.

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The police came up the stairs and then into the apartment. I recognized them both. The senior officer was Chugger McIntyre. I had gone to

school with Chugger, both of us having grown up in the Granite Reef section of south Scottsdale. Chugger was six foot four and easily weighed two-hundred and fifty pounds. His short cropped red hair and freckles showed his Irish heritage. Living in Scottsdale had given him a year round sunburn.

His partner was Arnulfo Montoya, better known as Arny. Arny was originally from Mexico, but had become an American citizen a few years ago. Although not nearly as tall as Chugger, Arny was solid. He had short curly black hair and a full black moustache. When Chugger saw me, he began to laugh.

“Hey Arny,” Chugger said, a happy grin on his beefy face. “Didn’t I tell you last week Laura Black was due for another dead body soon? Hey Laura, how long has it been? Two, three months?”

“Hey Chugger,” I said. “He’s in the bedroom. He was dead when we got here, but I sorta, accidentally, shot him.”

Chugger’s grin broadened.

“You shot a dead guy? No shit? Really? Oh man, they’ll never believe this down at the station.”

Arny stayed to keep an eye on us while Chugger went into the back of the apartment. He didn’t stay long. When he came back his face was pale and his smile was gone.

“Wooah,” Chugger said. “That guy’s hands were chopped off. Not a lot of blood though, he was probably killed elsewhere and brought up here. What kind of sick fuck does that?”

I went out with Danica. Arny had his clipboard out and was taking Danica’s initial statement. Chugger called in the report on his walkie-talkie and then walked over to me.

“Let’s clear the apartment,” he said. The M.E. and forensics team will be here in about half an hour, same with the homicide detectives. Expect everybody to be in a bad mood. Nobody likes getting up this time of night.”

Chugger was right about the bad moods. Fortunately, they kept it relatively short.

By 4:30 am I was back at my apartment. Marlowe was asleep on the bed. When I turned on the light he opened an eye, stretched, and yawned. He rolled over with all four feet in the air. I rubbed his tummy for a minute, then pulled off my clothes and collapsed next to him on the bed.

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It was a beautiful warm day and I was driving Danica’s Porsche in the wide Arizona desert between Gila Bend and Yuma. The road was flat, clear, and there wasn’t another car in sight.

My hands gripped the leather wrapped steering wheel tightly as I jammed the Porsche into high gear and floored it. The car shot forward like a bullet from a gun. Faster and faster I drove until the dashed lane-dividing stripe blurred into a solid yellow line. My foot was pegged to the floor and the car kept going faster. The roar of the motor sounded like a jet engine running full out. It felt like the car was flying.

I felt the warm sensation of a hand touching the inside of my leg. Looking over, sitting next to me was Maximilian, the gangster from the office who had almost given me an orgasm with just a kiss.

The car motor briefly sputtered, but then caught again. He smiled a beautiful smile and blew me a kiss. A wave of lust and desire washed over me as he gently ran his hand up my thigh.

The motor sputtered again, sounding almost like my cell phone. That's weird, I thought, Porsches don't usually sound like cell phones, especially cell phones with Sophie's ringtone.

The engine smoothed out for a second, but then cell phone ringtone sound happened again.

What?

By the fourth time it happened, I knew what the sound was. Both the Porsche and Maximilian faded as I felt around blindly on the nightstand. I found my phone and managed to pick it up without dropping it.

"Hello," I muttered into the phone, as always hoping it was a prank call so I could go back to sleep.

"Hey Laura. Wow, you really sound terrible. How late did they keep you up last night?"

"Sophie? I'm sorry, but I'm not awake right now and this phone call isn't likely to wake me up any time soon. Maybe you should call me back around lunch time?"

"Did you really shoot a dead guy? They're saying you found a dead guy in Alexander Sternwood's apartment and then you shot him. Didn't you know he was already dead and you didn't need to shoot him again? Or was he coming after you, even though you knew he was already dead, like a zombie? You know, if he was a zombie, you'd have to shoot 'em in the brain. The brain's the only place you can kill a zombie, unless he was a vampire. But you know, lead bullets wouldn't have stopped him if he was a vampire, even if you shot 'em in the brain. You'd need a silver bullet for that."

"Sophie, I think that's werewolves and why are you calling me?"

“I’m pretty sure silver bullets work for both vampires and werewolves.”

“Sophie?”

“Sorry, Lenny’s in a panic. He says he wants you down here right away. He got your voice mail from last night. You know you sounded terrible then too, by the way. He’s been on the phone with the police for the last twenty minutes. He has an appointment set up with Mrs. Sternwood at one o’clock. I think he wants to hear what happened from you first. Lenny’s really stressing over this.”

“Great. How bad is he?”

“I wore my loose red top today and he hasn’t tried to look down it. Not even once. When that happens, you know he’s distracted.”

“Down to the office? It figures,” I said. “What time is it now?”

“It’s almost nine. Girlfriend, you’re burning daylight!”

Great.

EIGHT

I took a quick shower and got dressed in white tennis shoes, a short yellow skirt, and a cream cotton knit top. The drive over to the office was pleasant, but I wasn't looking forward to talking with my boss. In court, Lenny is always calm and in control, but that's because he's had weeks to prepare. When confronted with the unexpected, Lenny tends to get a little hysterical.

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I walked into the office and saw Sophie was hunched over her keyboard, furiously typing. She looked like she was trying to keep low and away from any flying shrapnel. From previous experience, I knew she only does this when Lenny is on the warpath.

"Hey Sophie."

"Hey Laura," she said quietly without looking up. "That dead guy you found last night has really stirred up the shit around here. The Mayor's office called twice and Mrs. Sternwood's called three times. The last time she called, she told Lenny he was a useless asshole."

"How'd you know she called Lenny a useless asshole? Were you listening in again?"

Sophie stopped typing and then looked around the office to see if anyone was listening. She motioned for me to bend over so she could whisper to me.

"Well, yeah, sorta. She also said if Lenny didn't have his head pushed so far up his butt, he would have been able to see something like this was likely to happen to her grandson. She even mentioned if Lenny didn't

spend all day playing with himself, he could have protected Alexander better.”

“Muffy can turn a phrase,” I said, my voice lowered to a whisper to match Sophie’s.

“Yeah,” said Sophie, still whispering. “But that’s not the worst of it. After Mrs. Sternwood hung up, Tony DiCenzo called. The actual *Tough Tony*, the mobster.”

“What’d he talk to Lenny about?”

“Are you crazy? I’m not going to take a chance I might overhear something Tough Tony DiCenzo says. What if he found out I knew something? It would be good-bye Sophia and hello shallow grave in the desert.”

“Well, you answered the phone. What did he sound like?”

“He sounded like the devil.”

I looked at Sophie to see if she was kidding, but she had grown pale and her eyes were big.

“How do you know he sounds like the devil? Have you ever heard the devil before?”

“I’m Catholic,” she said in a slightly offended tone. “All Catholics know what the devil sounds like and DiCenzo was it. After I hung up the phone, I even said ten Hail Mary’s.”

“But you’re only Catholic when something bad happens,” I said.

“If you think the devil calling me on the phone isn’t something bad, then I don’t know what is.”

“Did Gina stop by the office yet? I’d like to compare notes with her. It’s weird that Tony DiCenzo keeps popping up for both of us.”

“Sorry, Gina’s come and gone. Lenny scolded her for not finding the missing bag. She got so mad I thought she was going to smack him. I almost wish she would have. He can get so irritating when he’s like this. Well, you’d better go talk to Lenny before the Governor of Arizona or maybe even the President calls him.”

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I walked into Lenny’s office and found him pacing in front of his window. He had a lit cigarette in one hand, a half full glass of Jim Beam in the other. I looked on his desk and saw there were already half a dozen cigarette butts in the ashtray. He saw me and raised both arms in a gesture of frustration.

“I thought both of these cases were going to be easy money,” he said. “Watch a guy for a few days, find a missing bag. How hard could it be, I asked myself. Really, how hard could it be? Now, on one hand, you’re back to finding dead bodies, but you lose the guy you’re supposed to be watching. Both the Mayor and the millionaire client have become unglued. On the other hand, Gina’s come up with squat on the missing bag and I’ve got the Godfather breathing down my neck. DiCenzo’s telling me he’s all in a rush to get the bag back. He says maybe he should send over a couple of guys to help me out. What’s that supposed to mean? If I say yes, then I’m admitting I’m incompetent. If I say no, and we don’t find the bag, then I’m dead meat.” He stubbed out his cigarette, then ran his fingers through his hair. “Maybe I should move back to New Jersey with my cousin and drive a cab.”

I gave Lenny everything new I had on Alex, which wasn’t much. I then told him all I knew about the dead guy, which was even less.

“I need that Alexander guy found,” Lenny said. He was facing the window, almost mumbling the words to himself. He then started pacing again.

“I might need some help,” I said. If something comes up, do you mind if I borrow Sophie?”

He turned to me and almost shouted: “Borrow whomever you want. Sleep with whomever you need to. Go ahead and shoot somebody else if you think it will help. Just find Alexander Sternwood. *The sooner, the better!*”

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I went back to my desk and tried to organize my thoughts. My assignment had just gone from watching Alex to finding him. Problem was, I was out of leads. In addition, the mental picture of the dead guy kept swimming in front of my eyes. I needed to talk to somebody who would understand what I was going through.

I called Reno, but he didn’t pick up. I got his voice mail and waited for the beep. “Call me,” was all I said. I figured he would still remember the voice.

OK, so I wanted to talk to Reno about the murder, but I also wanted to see him again. The lunch at Frankie Z’s had sort of been an experiment. After my erotic dreams about Reno, I wanted to see how it felt to be with him again. Turns out he is still as hot as ever and seeing him brought back some wonderful memories. Every time I thought of Reno, I got a warm and fuzzy tingle that made me feel good all over.

I went back into the reception lobby. Sophie was still hunched over her computer, typing away. I walked over to her and touched her shoulder. She jumped and let out a loud squeak.

“Don’t do that!” she said, breathing hard. “You almost made me diarrhea my pants.”

“Sorry. I might need some help on this Alexander thing. If it’s OK with you, Lenny said we could partner up.”

“Hey girlfriend, anything to get out of this office. When do you need me?”

“I don’t know yet, I’m waiting for a phone call from Jack Reno. I’ll need to see him again before I figure out where to go next. Maybe tomorrow or the next day?”

“Reno? You’re seeing Reno again? That *mango* is truly fine. But, after what you did to him last time, I’m surprised he’d let you get within twenty feet of him.”

“What do you mean *what I did to him*? Besides, he doesn’t know we’re dating again. So far, we’ve only seen each other once.”

“Ah huh? And when are you going to tell him he’s back to dating you?”

“I figured I’d let him ease into it. Maybe even have him figure it out for himself. There’ll be less stress on him that way.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

*Me too.*

My cell phone rang. I looked on the caller ID and saw it was Reno. My heart did a little skip and I walked into the back offices before I answered.

“Hey,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “I need to talk to you.”

“Can it wait?”

“No.”

“I heard you shot a dead guy last night.”

“Oh, you heard about that?”

“Christ, Laura, the entire department’s heard about that.”

“The dead guy I found in Alexander’s apartment is really bugging me. You find dead bodies all of the time. I thought maybe I could talk to you about it.”

“I don’t find dead bodies all the time. You find more than I do. I think you find more than anyone else in the entire department. You’re like a dead body magnet.”

“OK, maybe, but this one’s different.”

“Look, I can’t meet you now. I start working in about an hour and a half.”

“It won’t take long, really.”

I heard his famous sigh. “OK, I’m working across from the Phoenician today. I can meet you for a few minutes there at the *Oasis*. Do you remember where it is?”

“You mean the cute tropical bar in the middle of the resort’s pools? The one where you felt me up under the table on our third date?”

There was a pause on the phone and I heard a *thump*. I could visualize Reno hitting his palm against his forehead.

“Yup, that’s the one,” he said.

“I’m at the office,” I said. “I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

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The Phoenician is one of the most beautiful resorts in Arizona. It sits on the south side of Camelback Mountain, about three miles west of Lenny’s office, and has prime views of both Phoenix and Scottsdale. I

drove west on Camelback Road, until I came to the huge fountain and tropical display marking the entrance to the resort.

About seventy-five yards inside the entrance is a security shack. Next to the shack is a small metal fence that acts to narrow the road down to one lane. As I stopped my car, a guard stepped out of the shack. He gave both me, and my car, the once over. I did a little grimace as I saw his eyes linger over the side mirror, still hanging by the cable, and then over the bullet hole in the trunk.

He bent over and politely asked how he could help me. I told him I was just going to the Oasis for drinks. He paused, as if he was having an internal debate. He then directed me to the visitor's garage. I found a space and locked my car. I walked out and found a path that wound through an immaculate flower garden. The path ended at the gate of the main pool area. With a deep breath, I opened the gate and walked in.

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The Oasis is a cozy bar and grill siting in the middle of three levels of Arizona-sized swimming pools. To get there you need to walk through a maze of sunbathers, waterfalls, lounge chairs, waiters, palm trees, and then down a narrow path between two of the larger pools.

I managed to make it to the restaurant and remain dry. Reno wasn't there yet, so I walked to the bar.

My nerves were doing flip-flops and I thought maybe a drink would help to calm them down. I glanced over the menu and debated between the eight-dollar, the twelve-dollar, and the twenty-dollar Scotch. I thought about my rent and settled on the eight-dollar version. I found an empty table and sat. As I waited, I took my finger and swirled the ice cube around the glass.

In the restaurant and bar were about thirty people, mainly couples. The women, for the most part, wore shorts and bikini tops or some other sexy summer outfit. Fortunately, most of the women had the toned bodies that come from aerobics classes and having a personal trainer. The Phoenician is one of the few places in the city a woman will sunbathe in full make-up and jewelry. I pity the man who splashes water on one of them as they lay next to the pool.

The men at the bar were generally ten or fifteen years older than whatever woman they were with. They mostly wore khaki shorts, brown shoes, no socks, and unbuttoned short sleeve shirts. Many of them wore as much jewelry as the women.

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I had positioned myself in a chair facing the hotel. After about five minutes, I saw Reno come out of hotel and down to the pools. As he trotted down the steps leading to the uppermost pool, I could see the muscles ripple underneath his Aloha shirt. I also noticed more than one bikini clad woman follow him with her eyes as he walked through the upper pools and then into the restaurant.

Reno stood at the entrance and scanned the crowd. I waved and he saw me. As Reno made his way through the crowd, I had a brief memory of a clever thing he did to me with his fingers the last time we were here. The thought of that gave me a pleasant smile.

“Well, Laura.” Reno said as he sat. “Fancy meeting you here at the Oasis. Haven’t we been here before?”

I looked at him and saw the sparkle in his eyes. It was the same look Reno had given me so many times just before we climbed into bed. Just seeing that look turned up the tingles that were going all through my body.

It also filled me with a feeling of relief that was hard to explain. Somehow I knew he wanted me as much as I wanted him, even if he didn't know it yet.

The waitress came over and Reno ordered a Coke.

"I can't stay more than fifteen minutes," he said. "I'm relieving a team working across Camelback Road in a half hour."

"What happened to your Iceman, Albert Reinhardt?" I asked. Has he made his buy yet?"

"Not that I should be telling you any of this, but no. There is a team on him twenty-four hours a day. So far, all we know is he sunburns easily and shoots scratch golf. Have you heard from Sternwood yet? The detectives want to question him about the murder."

"Nobody knows where is," I said. "He disappeared the night before last. Lenny gave me the lead in finding him. I don't think he had anything to do with the murder. I think it's more likely whoever did the killing is also after Alex."

"I get that feeling too. If you hear from him, have him get in touch with homicide right away. There are a lot of people looking for Alex and everybody's getting rather anxious. Margaret Sternwood has connections and has already been to see the Mayor. There is a lot of pressure to wrap this up quickly."

The waitress came over with the Coke and Reno handed her a five. He picked up the coke and took a long drink, draining most of the glass.

"Did you shoot the dead guy with the Glock I gave you?" Reno asked, setting down his glass, a slight smile forming at the corners of his lips.

"I didn't mean to. Alex's girlfriend, Danica, came up behind me and it just went off."

“Well, I’m glad you at least found a good use for the gun.”

“That’s not funny,” I said. “I’m never going to live this down, plus it’s giving me the creeps. When I walked into the bedroom he was just staring at me. Did you hear his hands had been hacked off? Why would anybody do that to somebody?”

“Cutting off the hands is usually associated with an organized crime ritual,” Reno said. “It could signify he was killed because he took something that didn’t belong to him. Of course, the hands could also have been used as proof the job was done. Or, maybe the killer just likes to collect trophies, who knows?”

“Did you get anything on Arizona Security Enterprises?” I asked.

“Turns out ASE is a private security company affiliated with the Tropical Paradise, so maybe they just decided to have Alex followed after he made the sale to Reinhardt. Of course, Tony DiCenzo ultimately controls the Paradise. It may mean nothing, or it may mean he’s involved too.”

I took a drink on my Scotch and Reno took a drink of his Coke. We both sat there for a moment in silence.

“So why did you dump me?” he asked, looking up. “I know all of this happened a long time ago, but it still bothers me. We were getting close, and then you disappeared. You were going to come over to my house on Christmas morning for breakfast. You were also going to let me know if you wanted to move in with me or not. You left me that lame phone message, but I assumed you not showing up was just your way of saying no.”

“It wasn’t like that,” I said. My mind raced. I wanted to say more, to tell him I had planned to move in with him, I had wanted to be with him,

but I couldn't form the words.

"I spent days wondering what I'd done wrong," Reno continued, ignoring me. "I asked around and started looking for you. I thought if I could talk to you, maybe we could work things out. But nobody knew where you were. I called Gina and she said you were out of the country, but I wasn't sure I believed her. After a couple of weeks, I just figured I'd scared you away and you'd gone off to greener pastures. I ended up with Cynthia, for a weekend, but that was my way of trying to forget about you. I think I told you she had this foot fetish thing going on. It was all just too much."

"You slept with another woman to forget about me?" I asked.

"Then, a week after Cynthia, you called me up just to yell at me and tell me I was a jerk." Reno said, still ignoring me. "That wasn't easy for me."

"No," I said, trying not to get pissed off. "You've still got it all wrong. After we were together on Christmas Eve, Lenny sent me to Italy with Gina, very hush-hush. I ended up busting a leg and had to spend a couple of weeks in a clinic in the middle of nowhere. At first I was too doped up to even remember my name. Then I was going to call you, but I didn't know what to say. I wasn't even sure you'd believe me. I got back to Arizona in the middle of January, but by the time I got the nerve see you again, I found out you were sleeping with Cynthia. You blame me for being upset? OK, so maybe I didn't call you when I was supposed to, and maybe I was a little late in coming over, but it didn't take you long to forget about me and find somebody else. After I thought I was over being upset about Cynthia, I called you. I had planned to ask you if we could start over again. Then I started thinking about you sleeping with her and I

got upset all over again. So, yeah, I ended up yelling at you and I called you a jerk.”

“But it wasn’t serious with Cynthia,” Reno said. “I went on a total of two dates with her.”

“You slept with her after only two dates?”

“I was trying to get over you.”

“We didn’t sleep together until we had three dates.”

“I respected you.”

“So,” I said. “Sounds like we had a little bit of a misunderstanding.”

Reno gave a little shrug. “Sounds like.”

“What do you want to do about it?” I asked.

“What do you mean, do about it?” Reno asked. “Like, do you want us to start dating again?”

I smiled my sexiest smile at him. The one that always softened him up when he was annoyed with me.

He paused, and then got a horrible look on his face. It was like he had just tasted something awful.

“Are you insane!” he said, almost yelling at me.

Oops, wrong reaction.

“Do you know how many shitty sleepless nights I’ve had because of you?”

People at nearby tables stopped talking and turned to look at us.

“I would lay there, worrying about you and blaming myself for whatever I did to make you go away. I lost almost fifteen pounds because I didn’t feel like eating for a month. Now, I find out you put me through

that hell because you had of some kind of weird ‘misunderstanding’ and you want to do it to me all over again? Are you nuts?”

This definitely isn’t going well.

“Look,” he said, standing up. “Don’t get me wrong. This has been a lot of fun, but I have to relieve the team in a few minutes. I’ll see you around.” He got up and made his way through the tables and then walked into the hotel.

Maybe I should have been depressed, but somehow I wasn’t. Sure he was pissed, but I saw how he looked at me when he first saw me. I could tell he still wanted me. He wanted me bad, he just didn’t know it yet.

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I finished my Scotch, walked back to my car, and then drove back to my apartment. The only lead I hadn’t followed up yet was the CD in the yellow case I had found in Alex’s car. I had no idea what was on it, most likely just music. But all of my other leads had dead-ended and I was running out of options.

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I was up for another burst of exercise, so I walked up the three flights of stairs to my floor. By the time I got to the top, my heart was pounding and my breathing was coming in short gasps. I unlocked the door to my apartment and went inside.

Marlowe was asleep on the floor in front of the window. He had positioned himself so his body was lying in a shaft of sunlight while his head was in the shade. He’s not so dumb.

I went to the closet and from my coat pocket I pulled out the disk I had found in Alex’s Jaguar. I put it in my DVD player, but when I pressed the

play button nothing happened. I took the disk from the DVD player and slipped it into my computer.

After a few seconds of whirring sounds and flashing lights, I was able to learn the disk contained a computer file. I clicked on the file to open it and after a few more seconds of whirring and flashing, a message popped up. The message said the file was locked and to unlock it I needed to enter the password.

OK, so what would Alex use as a password? I typed in *Alex*. Nothing. I tried *Danica*. Still nothing. I tried *Sit-on-my-face*. None of these were the correct password.

OK, I thought, who knows about these things? The answer popped into my head right away. There was a woman who lived on the second floor named Suzie Lu. Suzie was a professor of Computer Science at Arizona State University, about five miles to the south in Tempe. I didn't know her very well, but we had talked a few times at parties and we were on a friendly *hello* basis on the elevator. I figured if anybody could figure out how to read the computer file, it was Suzie Lu.

I walked down the flight of stairs and knocked on her door. No one answered. I walked back up the stairs to my apartment. I looked up her number and called, but only got her answering machine. I was going to leave a message, but at the end of her greeting she gave out her cell phone number. I wrote down the number and gave her a call. She answered on the third ring. Suzie said she was downstairs in the apartment atrium watching TV with a friend. She said she'd be glad to meet with me. I took the elevator down and went over to the TV area.

Suzie is a slender Asian woman, a few years older than I am. She has long black hair, intense dark eyes, and big fake boobs. Today she was

dressed in black leather pants and shiny black boots with five-inch stiletto spike heels. Instead of a shirt, she only had on a red leather vest, unbuttoned almost down to her navel. She was seated in the middle of the large couch sitting directly in front of the big screen TV.

Suzie's friend was a man, about fifty years old. His face was round and pleasant-looking. He was dressed in a conservative navy blue suit, with a white shirt and red silk tie. On his fingers he wore some expensive gold rings, including a wedding band. Around his neck he wore a black leather dog collar. The collar had long silver spikes and a leash attached to it. Suzie was holding the other end of the leash in her right hand. The man was on the floor in front of Suzie, on his hands and knees. She had her boots resting on his back, as if he was a footstool.

The only other person the TV area was Mrs. Nottingham, a woman who lives on the fourth floor. Mrs. Nottingham's is a tiny woman with short curly silver hair and thick glasses. She's about two hundred years old and spends most of her afternoons watching TV in the atrium.

On the TV was an episode of a reality TV talk show. From the caption, I saw the show was about a teenage boy who was having a secret affair with his girlfriend's mother. As I watched, the mother and daughter got into a catfight while the boyfriend looked on. He had a big smile on his face, watching the two women fighting over him. For some reason, this didn't strike me as being especially weird. Maybe it had something to do with the man on the floor redefining weirdness for me today.

I walked around to the front of the couch. "Hi Laura," Suzie said in her soft and velvety smooth voice. She saw me eyeing the dog-collar man. "Oh, don't worry about him, he's in training."

"Training for what?"

“Training to be in my stable. He thinks he’s worthy, but he’s wretched and quite pathetic. I doubt he’ll even last the afternoon.”

The man shifted his position. I’m not sure how long he had been there, but his knees were probably getting sore.

“I didn’t give you permission to move, bitch,” Suzie said to the man, now with a menacing undertone to her voice.

“So, this is sort of like an audition?” I asked.

“You could look at it that way. I’ll see if he has the ability to obey and serve me without question. If so, then perhaps he’ll become one of my boys.”

“What happens then?”

“Then I’ll let him come over to my apartment and perform menial tasks for me. He’d be allowed to clean my bathroom, to do my laundry, or maybe clean my kitchen. If he is especially obedient during our session, I might even let him paint my toes.”

As soon as Suzie described the chance for the man to paint her toes, the potential slave let out a nervous giggle. Suzie cast a stern glance at him and with her left hand picked up a long, leather-wrapped, wooden paddle. She then swung it down hard. With a *whoosh* it landed with a loud *slap* across the man’s ass. He let out a surprised yelp, like a frightened small dog.

“Listen slut,” Suzie said to the man. “You’re on thin ice here. I won’t tolerate any further disobedience from a worthless little turd like you. Today, you are nothing but a piece of my furniture. Shut your hole, don’t move a muscle, and let me have a quiet conversation with my friend. Got it?”

Dog-collar man hung his head down. “Forgive me, Mistress McNasty. I’m not worthy.”

A small smile spread across Suzie’s lips. I was amazed at this. I turned back to Suzie.

“*Mistress McNasty?* Do you pay them to act like this?”

Suzie’s eyes opened wide and she laughed a deep laugh that made her whole face light up. She used the spiked heel of her boot to give the man a firm poke in the ribs.

“Slug, tell this woman how much you pay for the privilege of serving me.”

“I gladly pay one hundred dollars an hour, Mistress McNasty. I am grateful you have allowed this lowly one to serve you.”

“*Damn,*” I said. “You’re kidding, right? Why would anyone pay you to abuse them?”

Suzie again prodded the man with her heel. “Slave, explain your sick perversions to this woman, be quick about it.”

“My deviancies include submissive behavior, masochistic behavior, and I also enjoy public humiliation.”

“*Eeeeyuuuw, yuck,*” I said.

“Disgusting, isn’t he?” Suzie said with a giggle. “Have a seat and we can talk. If you would like, you can use him as a footstool too. It’s quite relaxing.”

I sat, but my stomach was twisting at the idea of putting my feet on the man. He looked clean enough, but I didn’t know where he’d been.

Mrs. Nottingham looked up from the TV. “Dear, would you mind if I used your young man? When you get to be my age your feet hurt all the

time. I always thought they should put in a footrest down here.”

Suzie nodded and waved her over. Mrs. Nottingham got up and tottered over to the couch. As she sat, she slipped off her loafers and lowered her feet on the man’s back. She then leaned back on the couch and smiled.

“Actually,” I said to Suzie. “I just wanted to know if you could help me with a project I’m working on. I have a disk with a computer file on it. My problem is when I try to open the file, a message comes up saying I need a password. Is that something you can get around?”

“It depends on the software they used to encrypt the file. Some are simple and some are tough. But sure, give me the disk and I’ll have one of my graduate students work on it. I’ll give you a call when I find something out.”

With the extra weight of Mrs. Nottingham’s feet on his back, the man had begun to fidget again. Suzie gave him a warning kick in the ribs. This produced another giggling fit from the man. Suzie shook her head and again picked up the paddle.

“Dear,” Mrs. Nottingham said to Suzie. “He’s getting a little out of hand. Would you mind if I punished your slave?”

“Please, be my guest,” Suzie said.

Mrs. Nottingham slowly got to her feet and Suzie handed her the paddle. She shuffled into position next to the man and clasped the paddle in a two handed grip. Lifting the paddle over her head, as if it were a golf club, she brought it down with surprising force on the man’s ass.

Slap!

He cried out in pain and flew forward a good five feet, smashed his head against a chair leg, then skidded to a stop on the carpet.

There was a moment of shocked silence. Then all three of us went and bent over his unmoving body.

“I wonder if I killed him.” Mrs. Nottingham said.

Suzie used the toe of her boot to roll the man over. As she did, he let out a low moan.

“Wow,” said Suzie, her face had broken out in a big smile. She turned to Mrs. Nottingham. “That was great! You know, sometimes my clients want some two-on-one action. I might give you a call sometime.”

“Any time, dear. If you’d like, I’ll be glad show you how to properly train your bitches. I’ve watched you, and to be honest, you’re a little soft on them.”

With this, I’d seen enough and got up to go.

“Umm, thanks Suzie,” I said, handing her the disk and one of my cards. “My cell phone number is on the card. I appreciate your help.”

“Sure, glad to help,” she said. “I’ll call you as soon as I have something.”

As I walked away, I heard a feeble voice moan: “Mistress McNasty, I’m so not worthy.”

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I walked up to my apartment and opened a Diet Pepsi. I then sat at my kitchen table and spread out all the notes and information I had on Alex. The police had been looking for him all day in the obvious places. My only hope of finding Alex was to look somewhere that wouldn’t be obvious. I had just started sorting through the piles, when my cell phone rang.

“Hey girlfriend. Mrs. Sternwood wants to see you as soon as possible. She’s at the Barrett-Jackson auto auction over at Westworld. She’ll be there until about 11:00 tonight. She’ll have a ticket for you at the will-call window.”

“Why does she want to see me? I thought Lenny already told her everything we knew?”

“Well, he did,” Sophie’s voice was now dropped to a whisper. “But I don’t think Mrs. Sternwood was very impressed with Lenny’s explanations. She called him a useless little twerp. She also said she didn’t think he could find his own ass, even if he used both hands and was given a map.”

“So, she wants me to go over and tell her exactly the same thing as Lenny did?”

“That’s about the size of it. Although I imagine you’ll do it in a nicer way. You know how Lenny gets when he gets worked up.”

“I know. He tends to spit when he talks. It always grosses me out too. Is Lenny OK with me talking to her?”

“He *told* me to call you. Mrs. Sternwood just about chewed him a new butt-hole today. I think he wants to spread the pain around.”

## NINE

I went to my closet and found a silky white blouse and a nice navy blue pants suit. I put on a pair of navy flats and touched up the make-up. I took the elevator down to the atrium floor and then walked out to my car.

The Barrett-Jackson auto auction is held once a year at Westworld, a big indoor arena in north Scottsdale. Each year, 1600 of the rarest and most collectable cars in the world are sold at auction during the weeklong event. People fly in from all over the world to buy expensive cars with their friends, outbid their enemies, and to parade their wealth in front of anybody who will watch.

I drove north on the Loop 101 freeway until I found a flashing traffic sign that said all Barrett-Jackson traffic had to exit at Hayden. Traffic wasn't bad until I got a quarter-mile from the exit. At this point traffic came almost to a dead stop. It took me ten minutes to go the last half-mile to the lot.

Once in the lot, I was directed to a parking space. From there, it was another five-minute wait for the shuttle bus to take me to the arena. I got off the bus and walked to the line at the will-call ticket window. After showing the woman my driver's license, she gave me a ticket and a VIP pass to a seat on the bidding floor.

I walked into the main building then past several hundred beautiful cars. Once in the huge arena I walked down to the auction floor. Here there were 8,000 seats, all full of people talking loudly to each other. There were telephones ringing as phone bids came in and the sound of

motors as the cars drove on and off the stage. Over this noise was the amplified voice of the auctioneer shouting out the bids.

I showed my pass to an usher and he escorted me to the front row. Muffy Sternwood was there and beside her was an empty seat. She saw me and invited me to sit down.

“I’m glad you could make it. This business with Alexander has me so unnerved. I talked with Leonard this afternoon, but he’s such a jackass. I know he’s the best lawyer in the city, but I find it hard to even speak with him on the phone without wanting to choke him.”

“He has that effect on a lot of people.”

“Is there any word on Alexander?”

“Nobody’s heard a thing. But, there are a lot of people looking for him, I’m sure he’ll turn up soon.”

“I just hope you’re right. I also hope you don’t think I’m callous being at an auction while Alexander is missing. My late husband and I would come here every year to buy and sell cars. I know it makes him happy that I keep the tradition alive. Hey, what do you think about that one? I’ve been waiting for it to come up.”

I looked at the stage, where they had just driven a small silver car. The announcer said it was a 1953 Ford Vega Roadster, one of a kind. The bidding started out at \$50,000 and went up quickly from there.

“It’s cute, I said.”

“I think so too,” Muffy said. She then waved a young woman over to her side. The woman had on a blue suit and was holding a bright yellow square of cloth. From her badge, I saw her name was Amy. Muffy nodded her head to Amy, who then waved her yellow cloth and shouted

at the auctioneer. The auctioneer pointed at Muffy, then talked for a minute and pointed at someone else.

“Did you get it?” I asked.

“No, I’m being outbid. What have you found out about Alexander so far?”

“It appears he’s been selling things to dealers around town. I don’t know what he’s selling, but they seem to get him some good money. Unfortunately, they also may have brought on this trouble. Not all of the people who he has been dealing with are legitimate.”

“Leonard alluded to that, but he was vague about the details. He frustrated me into losing my temper and cursing at him. He can be such a jerk.”

The bidding was now at \$250,000. Muffy nodded to Amy, who again waved her yellow cloth and shouted at the auctioneer. The auctioneer pointed at her, talked for a minute, and then pointed at someone else.

“Leonard confirmed Alexander has a girlfriend. What do you know about her?”

“I’ve talked to her a couple of times. Her name is Danica and she’s all right. She seems to really care about Alex and from what I can tell he feels the same way about her. She’s as worried as you are.”

“Please be honest with me,” Muffy said. “Do you think Alexander had anything to do with the dead man they found in his apartment?”

“According to the police, the man was killed somewhere else and brought to his apartment. Most killers don’t commit murder elsewhere and then drag the bodies back to their home. I also can’t see Alex tearing up his apartment like that. I think it is more likely Alex happened to walk

in on whoever killed the man and was ransacking his apartment. I think they then took him somewhere.”

The bidding was now at \$300,000. Muffy nodded to Amy, who waved the cloth again. The auctioneer pointed to Muffy, talked for a moment, and then pointed to someone else.

“The police apparently think the same thing,” Muffy said. “There is a man monitoring both the house phone and my cell phone. From what the police say, if somebody calls they will be able to trace the call instantaneously. They say that these days most kidnappers use e-mail because it is harder to trace. Of course, I don’t have a computer or use e-mail, so it will be hard for them to use that in my case.”

“It would be my guess they’re looking for information from Alex. I’d be surprised if they called in a ransom request.”

“I think so too,” Muffy said. “I think if they wanted money, they would have stolen property from his apartment. If what you say is true about Alexander selling things, then he is probably in serious trouble with these people.”

“I’m afraid that’s probably true.”

The auctioneer had moved the bidding to \$340,000 and was asking for \$350,000. He held his gavel over his head. He shouted, “Going once!” then “Going twice!” I heard Muffy mutter “*Oh, fuck it,*” under her breath. She nodded to Amy who shouted and waved again. The auctioneer pointed at Muffy and shouted “\$350,000!” He then tried to move the bidding up to \$360,000. There weren’t any takers. He shouted, “Gong once!” then “Going twice!” He gave a fair warning, and then brought his gavel down shouting, “*Sold! Sold! Sold!*”

There was scattered applause and a man in the row behind us patted Muffy on the shoulder. Amy bent over to shake Muffy's hand, but Muffy stood up and instead gave her a hug. A man in a blue suit hustled over to Muffy. He was holding a clipboard with several papers on it.

I got up leave. Muffy looked at me.

"I know you're doing your best. If you find out anything, call me directly so I don't have to speak to that idiot Leonard."

I told her I would.

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I made my way back to my car and drove home. It was getting late and I was beat. I took off my clothes and tossed them into a pile on the floor. I went to the back of a drawer and found Reno's old tee-shirt, one I had borrowed from him back when we were dating. I hadn't worn it for months, but putting it on gave me a warm feeling. I crawled into bed and was asleep within seconds.

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I woke up to the sun streaming in my bedroom window. I looked at the clock and it was almost 7:30. I had run out of leads and I wasn't sure where to go next. I put on a pot of coffee and spent an hour going over my notes, but that didn't give me any brilliant new ideas.

I then took a long shower and that helped me perk up, but didn't do a lot for my mood. I put on a pair of white shorts and a comfortable blue scoop-neck T-shirt. That didn't help either. I decided it was time for the heavy mood enhancing drugs.

What I needed was Bar-B-Que. I needed Honey Bear's. I needed a pulled pork sandwich and a side of beans and cornbread. I wanted to lick

the spicy sauce as it dripped down my chin. I didn't care about calories or trans-fats. I just wanted to gorge on Bar-B-Que.

I grabbed my keys and headed out the door. Honey Bear's was on Van Buren down by the airport. Somewhat of a long drive for most things on a Saturday morning, but not too far a drive for my favorite Bar-B-Que.

I walked out to my car in the parking lot. I had the key in the door and had just unlocked it when I heard a voice behind me: "Miss Black, please do not make any sudden moves. It would be a shame to have to shoot you."

*Oh shit.*

I took my key out of the lock and turned. The man with the gun was tall and dark with broad shoulders and an angular face. His dark hair was cut short. His face was clean-shaven except for a full black mustache. He was dressed in cream-colored linen slacks and jacket over a black shirt. Only his eyes gave away he was cruel and wouldn't hesitate hurting me. His eyes showed he might even enjoy it.

It was only then I noticed the gun in his hand. It was a cheap chrome plated semi-automatic, a .25 or a .32. It struck me as ironic a man his size had such a small gun. It looked like a toy in his hand.

"Miss Black, you will please come with us." He spoke with an educated British accent with deep undertones of some accent I didn't know.

"Sorry," I said, holding my hands up and backing up. "You've got the wrong girl. My name's Susan and I'm just on my way back to the cathedral. Father O'Brien is saying mass in half an hour and I need get there early to help light the candles."

I had taken half a dozen steps backwards towards my building when I bumped into something solid. I felt a hand grab a fistful of my hair and pull up hard.

“Look,” the voice behind me said with the same strange accent. “This American slut doesn’t want to talk with us. Shall we teach her manners by now forcing her to pleasure us upstairs in her very own bed?”

“Perhaps later, my brother” the first man said. “Before that, I will talk to her. If her answers displease me, then you may use her in any way you wish.”

The guy behind me must have liked this answer because he started chuckling to himself, even as his grip on my hair tightened. He took my purse from where it was hanging on my shoulder and tossed it to the guy with the gun.

Holding my purse in one hand, he used his gun to wave me to a white Chrysler 300M. I saw the car was parked behind a yellow rental truck on the far side of the lot, out of sight of my apartment. He opened the rear door and followed me in, the gun never wavering. The other man got into the driver’s seat. Only then did I get a good look at him.

He wasn’t as tall as the man next to me and he had an ugly scar that went down the right side of his face. His hair had also been cut short; just a half-inch of curly dark stubble remained. His face was square with a full black mustache and the same cruel eyes. I saw he was about ten years younger than the first man, maybe around twenty-four or twenty-five.

He must have seen me looking at him in the mirror, because he turned to look at me. He broke out in a nasty little grimace and chuckled. He then grabbed his crotch and gave his package a hard squeeze. My

stomach knotted up as the implications of the conversation and his actions started to sink in.

“To make things simpler for you,” the first man said. “You may call me Mr. Smith. My brother you may call Mr. Jones. I suggest you use the next few minutes to decide if you want to live.”

The car took off and we headed south. I was hoping these guys would get careless. Each time we slowed for a stop sign or a red light, I glanced sideways at Smith and the gun he was holding. The driver hadn't locked the doors so I knew I could make a run for it. If he became distracted or took the gun off me, I'd go for it. Of course, my plan rested on the assumption they wouldn't shoot me as I ran down a crowded city street. I suppose that's a lot to bet your life on. Unfortunately, each time I glanced over, Smith had his eyes locked onto mine and the gun was pointed squarely at my chest. I was forced to remain still and just go along for the ride.

*Damn, I could use a smoke.*

We drove down into the manufacturing and warehouse district of south Scottsdale, just south of Curry Road. The driver turned down a side street, then another, then another. This street, which was more dirt than pavement, dead-ended at a group of shabby one and two story block buildings. As close as I could tell, we were just north of the Salt River.

The driver pulled into a dirt-and-gravel parking lot, next to one of the larger buildings. I looked at the parking lot through the car's window. It was a depressing sight, full of rusted machinery, broken cinder blocks, and trash. A high chain link fence topped with rusted barbed wire surrounded the entire lot.

The driver stopped the car and opened my door. Smith waved his gun as an invitation for me to get out. The three of us entered the building, going into what had been the office reception area. It was empty now, nothing but trash and broken plastic chairs remained.

With Jones leading and Smith following, we went through a battered wooden door. Past the door was a short hallway, which then opened up into a large room.

The room appeared to be the manufacturing area for the former business. It was apparent that at one time this had been a commercial printing shop. The place smelled like a cross between a meth lab and a hot day in a public restroom. Broken glass crunched under our shoes as we walked.

A weak light came in from two dirty skylights. The light showed splotches of dark colors on the otherwise bare concrete floor. A partially disassembled printing press sat in a corner of the room next to a broken-out window. Tall shelves against the wall contained dozens of battered cans of ink. The bright reds, yellows, and blues had dripped over the sides of the cans and seemed out of place when compared to the dead feeling of the rest of the room.

Against the far wall was a large iron bed frame with a torn and filthy mattress sitting on top of it. Next to the bed were two battered wooden chairs. On the floor around the bed were several empty beer bottles and half a dozen used syringes. Smith waved the gun, indicating he wanted me on the bed.

“No!” I said, stopping in my tracks.

Now, I should have kept my mouth shut, but these guys were starting to piss me off.

“Look, you jerks,” I said turning to the men. “I’ve gone along with your bullshit games, but I’ve had enough. If you want to talk to me, fine. If you want to make up stupid names for yourselves, that’s fine too. But put the guns away and cut the crap.”

All right, so I don’t normally talk like that. But jeez, enough was enough.

“My brother,” Smith said. “Perhaps you are correct. This whore has no manners. Please teach her some.”

Jones came toward me but as he did, I snapped into my defensive position. From my recent training, I spun around with a high, hard, roundhouse kick. Gina would have been so proud of me. The kick was well timed and I caught him with the sole of my shoe square in his face, just below his right eye. The blow made a loud wet *slapping* sound.

I was about to follow up with a snap kick to his knee, when I felt a hand grab the back of my hair and pull me upwards. I was off balance and swung my arms wildly. Without warning, I felt a rough *thump* as Smith’s fist hit the side of my head.

Hot pain radiated outward while white spots flashed and danced in front of me. Stunned, I staggered sideways on my feet. My eyes cleared enough to see Jones come at me, his cheek already reddening and starting to swell. A trickle of blood flowed out his nose. Looking at his smashed face made me feel proud. Jones raised his fist and walked toward me. I stiffened myself to take another blow when Smith barked out: “No! Wait! I need her undamaged. Later!”

Jones hesitated, took another step towards me, and then stopped. He stared at me with a look of pure hatred. He then lowered his fist and

smiled. Blood was now running down his face and covered his teeth in a red grimace. The smile sent a shiver of fear through me.

Through blurry eyes, I saw Smith pull a pair of handcuffs from his jacket pocket. He took my arm, dragged me to the bed, and forced me to sit on it. He fastened one cuff onto my left wrist, the other cuff to the bed frame, at the top where the pillow would go. This left me enough slack to sit on the side of the bed.

Smith arranged one of the wooden chairs so it faced me. It was so close that when he sat our knees touched. Lights were still dancing in front of my eyes, but Jones had moved his chair to the foot of the bed and was still staring at me. He had found a dirty rag and was holding it to his bleeding nose.

*Cool, maybe I broke it.*

I then saw the hatred in his eyes had been replaced with something worse. He was still grinning but now his eyes had a sickening look of lust and anticipation.

“Now then,” Smith said. “You will tell me where my property is.”

“What property?” I asked.

“Do not play games with me, you diseased whore! My brother wants you to give untruthful answers so he may use you for pleasure, but I do not. I know it is true the filthy pig Alexander Sternwood has my property. I want to know where they are. Where did he hide them?”

OK, so Alex had something belonging to a couple of pissed-off guys. With that information, a few things fell into place, but still not enough for me to figure out what was going on. My problem was I had no idea what they were talking about. Alex had been selling things but I didn’t know what they could be. My only chance was to tell them what I knew.

“He sold them,” I said. My head was still throbbing. It made it hard to think clearly. “He’s been selling them all week. He sold some at a place called Meyer’s Jewelry and then he sold some at the Tropical Paradise. That was three days ago.”

“That is false!” Smith shouted. “Without help, he could not sell all of them. Without Reinhardt that would be impossible.”

“I saw him,” I said. “He made a sale at Meyer’s Jewelry and then he went to the Tropical Paradise. He met Reinhardt there. They went into the back room of the art gallery there and didn’t come out for ten or fifteen minutes. After he left, two big guys in a black Lincoln began following him. They’ve been following him ever since.”

“You lie!” Smith screamed. “You cannot have heard of the name of Albert Reinhardt until I mentioned it just now. You have no idea who I’m talking about, do you?”

“It’s true,” I protested. “I did see Alex make a sale to Reinhardt.”

“Lying whore!” Smith’s face turned red as his anger mounted. He stood up and threw his chair against the wall where it shattered with a loud crash. His chest heaved as he began to pace back and forth. He walked toward me and brought his arm up to backhand me, but for some reason didn’t. He then resumed pacing in front of the bed.

After thirty seconds he stopped. He seemed to have made up his mind about something. He walked over to a metal cabinet next to the broken printing press, opened the door, and slowly pulled out a knife. It was almost a foot long and had a thin pointed tip. There were ink spots of various colors all along the blade and handle.

Smith stared at the knife for a moment, then turned, and looked at me. His eyes were open wide with excitement. His lips were parted in a cruel

smile.

He walked over to where I was shackled to the bed. Bending down, he took the knife and lightly held it against my nose. He held his face less than three inches from mine. As he spoke, I felt his hot, foul breath against my face.

“Listen carefully, bitch,” he said. “Your life depends on your next answer. If you do not speak truly, my brother will harshly use you for his enjoyment, and I will cut you. I have not yet decided in which order these things will occur. Although it is most likely Reinhardt would have called me if he had possession of my property, I must know for sure. If you have truly seen Alexander Sternwood with Albert Reinhardt, then you will be able to describe to me what Albert Reinhardt looks like, no?”

For a moment I panicked. My head throbbed and my mind was blank. I couldn't remember what Reinhardt looked like.

*Come on, Laura. You saw him just three days ago. What did he look like?*

“Answer me!” Smith screamed. As I watched, he took the knife and slashed it across the top of the mattress. A deep cut opened in the mattress, less than three inches from where I sat. Little black spots danced in front of my eyes as I stared down at the mattress, horrified with the knowledge the knife could just as easily slice open my leg. Smith took the knife and pressed it against my stomach. I shuddered and took a deep breath.

“He's a little shorter than you and thin. He's about sixty years old and has an athletic body, like he runs a lot. He has short blonde hair and a gray beard and moustache. And he had bloodshot watery eyes, like he had allergies or was on drugs or something.”

Smith's eyes opened wide. He started yelling in to Jones in some language I didn't understand. Jones stood up, waved his arms, and yelled back. This went on for a full three minutes. They looked like a married couple having a spat.

It stopped as quickly as it had started. Jones turned and walked out of the room. Smith looked at me for a moment then spoke. "We will now visit the Iceman, Albert Reinhardt. If what you say is true and he has my merchandise, then Reinhardt will answer to me and you will live. We may even release you, after you amuse us and my brother pays you back for what you did to him. If what you have said is false, then I will come back and deeply slit your belly. I will then watch with joy as you bleed to death in front of me."

Smith then stalked out of the room. I heard the front door of the office open and close. After a minute, the engine of the Chrysler turned over and then grew faint as the car pulled out of the lot.

*Jeez, I hate it when this happens.*

I sat on the edge of the bed and my whole body began to shake. At times like this, I think I should work in a beauty salon or maybe at the library. I'd be good at that stuff. Nobody at the library threatens to gut you like a fish if you tell them they owe a three-dollar fine for an overdue book.

~~~~~

It took me almost five minutes before I could think again. When my heart had slowed to a fast trot, I looked down at the handcuff locked to my wrist. Out of desperation, I yanked hard to see if I could pull my hand out. I was rewarded with a bolt of pain as the cuff bit into my wrist.

It reminded me of a Stephen King novel I had once read. It was about a woman who was also handcuffed to a bed. As I recalled, before she could slip the cuff off, she had to slice off part of her thumb with a piece of broken glass. I hoped I could get myself free without having to resort to that.

By lifting the mattress, I could see the other end of the cuff was securely attached to the bed frame. I swung my legs around and stood up. I wrestled off the mattress and took a good look at the frame. Disappointment hit me, as I saw the frame was a solid piece of welded iron. It didn't have an opening, a gap, or any way to simply unbolt it. The bed frame itself was too big and heavy to just drag it out of the building.

OK, let's go to plan B.

My problem was I didn't have a plan B. I didn't know how long they would be gone. If they decided I knew too much, they might come back and finish me off before finding Reinhardt. Thinking about that made my heart kick back into high gear again.

I looked around the room. If I could find a metal bar, maybe I could pry the cuff off the bed. The bar would have to be thin enough to get between the cuff and the frame, but strong enough not to bend when I put my weight behind it.

I pulled the bed across the concrete floor toward the old printing press. As soon as the heavy bed started moving, it made a deafening screeching sound. Ignoring the noise, I scanned the broken machinery, hoping to find some sort of metal rod. I spotted one piece that might work, but it was securely bolted to the body of the press.

I then tugged the bed to the metal cabinet Smith had gotten the knife from. I opened the cabinet door and looked in. There were old cans of ink

and some wooden sticks, but nothing useful. In frustration I turned and screamed:

“Damn it! Give me a freaking break!”

As I yelled, my eyes glanced to a stack of shelves on the far wall. Sitting on the uppermost shelf, next several old cans of ink, was my purse.

I stopped breathing. My mind was racing. Jones had taken my purse and tossed to Smith. Had Smith gone through it? I couldn’t remember. Why had he put it there? Was there still anything in it I could use?

Well, only one way to find out.

Once again, I pulled the screeching bed across the concrete. Sweat was running into my eyes and I was close to exhaustion by the time I had crossed the twenty yards to the shelf. I reached up to get the purse, but was two feet short. I grabbed the bed with my cuffed hand and lifted it, but still couldn’t get it high enough to grab the strap of the purse.

I looked around for anything that could help. On the floor, twenty feet to my left, I spotted a wooden paint stirring stick. I tugged the bed over to the stick, picked it up, and then drug the bed back to the shelf.

Holding the paint stick, I stretched my arm to its limit. By using only the handcuff chained to my wrist, I pulled the bed several inches off the floor. The cuff dug into my wrist and the pain was intense. I took a deep breath and held it.

With one last jab, I hooked the strap of my purse with the stick. I gave the strap a yank and it tumbled off the shelf. I caught my purse, one-handed, before it hit the floor.

Panting and drenched with sweat I sat down hard on the edge of the bed frame, clutching my purse to my chest. With my whole body shaking, I

opened my purse and peered in.

When I saw what was inside, I began to giggle. The giggles rose until they became full blown laughter. I laughed so hard I couldn't breathe and tears rolled down my face. So OK, maybe I was a little hysterical.

Gradually I calmed down, tears still streaming down my face. Inside the purse were my Baby Glock and my cell phone.

I pulled out the gun and felt the weight of it in my hand. I held the gun with my shackled left hand while I chambered a round with my right. I switched the gun to my right hand and carefully aimed at the chain stretched tight between the cuffs. I angled the gun so I wouldn't shoot either my hand or the bed. After all of this, I didn't want the bullet ricocheting back and hitting me. With a deafening *Booom!* I yanked my arm up. I was free.

With a handcuff still attached to my wrist, I got up and crossed the room to the door leading out to the offices. I opened the door a crack and then eased it open, the Glock following my every movement. Nobody was in sight. I peered out of one of the grimy windows to see if anyone was waiting for me in the dirt parking lot. Of course, if there were anybody there, the gunshot would have alerted them to my escape. Well, I thought, it's tough luck to anybody who gets in my way right now. I'm in a real bitchzilla kind of mood.

~~~~~

I walked outside, first to the parking lot, and then out to the street. I half walked, half ran a block to the west, then a block to the south. I crossed the street and went over the embankment. This put me on the north bank of the Salt River. I walked west a half a mile, following the river along a city maintenance path, until I came to the Scottsdale Road

Bridge. I was about to climb the embankment up to the road, when I noticed I was still holding the Glock. I ejected the round from the chamber and reloaded it back in the magazine. I then slipped the gun back in my purse.

I climbed the slope to Scottsdale Road and began walking north. I opened the cell phone and called Sophie. She answered on the second ring.

“Sophie,” I said. “You’re not going to believe the shitty day I’m having.”

“Again?”

“Yes, again.”

“Where are you?”

“In south Scottsdale, about five miles south of the office. Can you come get me?”

“Yeah, but you’ll owe me.”

“I always owe you. OK, I’ll meet you . . .”

My voice trailed as I looked around. OK, so where was I? Then I saw it, less than a quarter a mile up the road.

“I’ll meet you at Jeannie’s Cabaret. And, umm, would you bring a handcuff key?”

~~~~~

I walked into the club and collapsed on a seat at the bar. For some reason, the handcuff and chain dangling from my wrist wasn’t getting a lot of attention. I suppose the people here sort of expected to see things like that.

I had been there about five minutes, when I got a call on my cell phone from Suzie Lu. One of her graduate students had cracked the password and she had my file open. She'd be home all afternoon and I could stop by and pick it up any time. I told her I'd stop by later in the afternoon.

~~~~~

I was still at the bar and working hard on a Chivas when I saw Sophie walk in. She took three steps into the club then stopped. She opened her mouth and stared at the stage. Two women, a blonde and a brunette, had come out a few minutes earlier and were dancing on the main stage next to the brass pole.

After briefly looking at the women on the stage, Sophie's eyes slowly went from table to table and then from man to man. I saw her eyes linger on a couple of younger guys next to the main stage. After the song ended, Sophie turned and walked over to where I was sitting at the bar. As she sat, I saw her face had the pink glow she always gets when she starts thinking about men.

"This is the most amazing place," Sophie said. "There are fifty men in here who are ripe for the plucking. Those naked women did all the work of getting them hot and ready. All I need to do is to pick one out."

"Haven't you ever been in a strip club before?" I asked.

"First time ever, I swear." Sophie said. "I knew they stripped, but I never thought about what else happens strip clubs. Now I'm in a room full of horny men, it's got me all horny too. I'm thinking I gotta find me a man to use hard and nasty. You know, I can already feel the pressure building. I gotta relieve the pressure soon or the results won't be pretty."

"Well, go pick out a man," I said. "But give me the handcuff key and drop me off at my apartment first?"

## TEN

Sophie dropped me off at my apartment building then took off to find a man. I first looked to make sure the two creeps who had just grabbed me weren't anywhere around. I then took the stairs, two at a time, to the second floor. I walked down the hall and knocked on the door to Suzie Lu's apartment. The door opened and Suzie let me in.

Today she was dressed in a short red silk robe with black fishnet stockings and red spike heel boots. I walked in and looked around, but I didn't see any naked men chained to the wall.

Suzie led me to a desk in a corner of the living room. On the desk she had three computer monitors lined up in a row, looking like something from a science fiction movie.

Suzie took two disks out of her purse and handed one to me. "This is your original, I didn't know if you wanted it back or not." She held up the other disk. "This one has the unlocked file on it. Turns out the encryption software they used on it is an old Department of Defense program. I had a graduate student download the code breaker program from an encryption group bulletin board. It took the program about a minute to find the password for your file. With the password, I opened the file and then saved it as a clean copy on this disk."

Suzie took the disk and slid it into her computer. The computer whirled and the little light on the front blinked. As we waited for the file to open, I asked her a question that had been bugging me since the day before.

"Did that guy yesterday really give you a hundred dollars an hour just so you'd smack his ass with a paddle?"

“Well sure, but it’s not just the spanking the guys are paying for. Most of these guys want the complete fantasy. I do the *Cruel Teacher and the Bad Student*, the *Naughty Nurse and the Helpless Patient*, the *Sadistic Prison Guard and the Shackled Inmate*, almost anything. It sometimes gets into some pretty involved role-playing, but I don’t mind. The guys appreciate having someone who understands their needs. Besides, I make more from being Mistress McNasty than I do being a tenured university professor. Ironical, isn’t it?”

Don’t you worry the University will find out about it and get upset?” I asked.

“Not really. The Chairman of the Board of Regents has a weekly appointment with me. He goes for the *Stern Mother and the Naughty Boy* fantasy, that one’s very popular.” She leaned over and said in a confidential tone; “Personally, I think he was weaned a little too early.” Then she shrugged her shoulders, as if to say *what are you going to do?*

As Suzie was talking, I was watching a small digital timer sitting on her desk. It was in the shape of a chicken and was in the process of counting down to zero.

*Three seconds, two, one, zero.*

At zero, the timer started to cluck. It was as if the chicken had just laid an especially large egg. Suzie reached over with her slender fingers and lightly touched the reset button. The timer went back to fifteen minutes and started counting down again.

“You’ll have to excuse me for a moment,” Suzie said. Her voice was so quiet she was almost whispering.

She walked over to a bedroom door, slipped off her robe, and hung it on a peg by the door. Underneath the robe, she was wearing a black lace

and red satin *Merry Widow* bustier complete with a black G-string and red garters. The breast cups of the corset looked like two big red pointy ice cream cones. Suzie had transformed herself into Asian Dominatrix Madonna.

A large sliding bolt was used as the lock on the bedroom door. With some effort, Suzie slid the bolt to unlock the door. It slid open with a loud metallic *Snap!*

“I got the loudest bolt I could find,” Suzie turned and said to me with a grin. “The guys are usually blindfolded and I like them to know I’m coming in. Waiting for the sound of the door to be unbolted really drives them crazy.”

She went in and closed the door.

Curiosity overcame my better judgment. I got up and stood close to the bedroom door. I couldn’t hear anything from the inside but muffled talking. The room must be pretty well soundproofed. Annoyed, I pressed my ear to the door.

“You filthy pervert,” I heard Suzie say in a soft but menacing voice. “You’ve been touching yourself again while I’ve been gone, *haven’t you?*” There was the muffled sound of a strenuous protest. He must have been gagged.

“How dare you lie to me!” Suzie shouted. I’ll show you what happens to naughty little boys who touch themselves without permission and then lie to their Mommy!”

There was a *whoosh*, followed by the loud *slap* of leather smacking against bare flesh. This was followed by a muffled moan.

“That was for touching yourself,” Suzie said. “This is for lying to Mommy.”

Whoosh-*Slap!*

Whoosh-*Slap!*

Whoosh-*Slap!*

With each stroke, his moans became louder and more urgent until they became one long muffled cry, begging for mercy. This went on for two or three long minutes. The man's screams then trailed off into a series of sobs and moaning.

I heard approaching footsteps and I backed away from the door. Suzie came out and slid the bolt home. On another peg on the wall there was a small red towel. Suzie took the towel and dabbed sweat from her neck and forehead. She then hung the towel back on the peg and put her robe on.

"I just love that guy," she said to me, a little out of breath, but still with that infectious smile. "He takes one hell of a hard spanking and then complains I was too soft. It's the belt for him and plenty of it."

"You're saying he *likes* it?"

"He's one of my best clients. He has a three-hour appointment, same time every week." She bent closer and whispered to me confidentially: "His wife thinks he's golfing."

"But, that's three hundred dollars!"

"Plus, he usually tosses a tip on top of that. He's so sweet. I always try to think of new punishments, to surprise him." Again, she broke out in the smile.

Jeez, and I sometimes think I'm the one with the issues.

~~~~~

We went back to Suzie's computer and looked to see what was in the file. What had popped up on the screen was a spreadsheet. It contained a dozen columns of numbers and letters; each with a heading in a language I assumed was Russian. I scrolled down through page after page of numbers. Each page was the same as the last, just different numbers. The spreadsheet ended at line 287.

"Do you have any idea what these numbers and letters mean?" I asked.

"Not a clue."

"I don't suppose you read Russian?"

"Not a word."

"Do you have any friends at the University who read Russian?"

"Not a one."

Great, another dead end.

Suzie sat at the computer, digging into the file, looking for hidden macros, or anything else that might be in it. Finally, she gave up.

"The file is just as it appears," she softly said. "A simple spreadsheet with twelve columns and almost three hundred rows of numbers. The only words on the sheet appear to be Russian, but I'm no expert. Maybe you could try translating with Google."

She hit a button and ten pages printed out from her printer. I folded the papers and put them in my purse. I'd need to find someone who could read Russian to let me know what I was looking at, or maybe I'd try the Google thing.

The chicken started clucking again and Suzie stood up. "Sorry, can't keep the councilman waiting."

“Thanks for all your help. I hope everything goes all right in there,” I said, nodding to the door.

“Him? Don’t worry. He’s putty in my hands.”

~~~~~

Keeping my eyes open for the homicidal brothers, I went back to my apartment and tried to think. If the file on the disk was in Russian, what did it have to do with Boris and Ivan, the two Russians who had tried to kidnap me? What did the Smith and Jones know about the Iceman, Albert Reinhardt? I decided to call Reno and see if he could help me put together the connection. He answered on the third ring.

“Are you still keeping track of Reinhardt?” I asked.

“Yes, and I’m back on the team shadowing him. The captain is getting nervous. Reinhardt never stays in Arizona this long. He’ll either make the buy soon or pack up and go home. He’s still up at the Scottsdale Princess. But so far, all he’s done today is shoot a round of scratch golf.”

“I might have some information on him.”

“It figures. I’m scheduled go back on shift at the Princess tonight at 7:30. There’s a Bistro there with an outside patio. It’s on the lower level next to the pool. I’ll meet you there at 5:15.”

I looked at the clock and it was almost 3:30. I’d have to leave my apartment by 4:30 to make it to the Princess on time.

*How did Reno expect me to get ready in an hour?*

~~~~~

After a quick shower, I spent several minutes and did a passable job on both the hair and the make-up. I put on a shiny purple top and a black skirt I save for special nights on the town. Between the low-cut top and

my push-up bra, I was showing a respectable amount of cleavage. I put on a pair of black medium-heeled sandals and I was out the door.

~~~~~

Reno was waiting for me at a table out on the patio, overlooking the main pool. He stood up when he saw me and I saw his old smile was back. Although I had told myself I wouldn't give him any goofy smiles, or go the least bit schoolgirl on him, I also broke out into a smile. Once I saw him I didn't care if I looked goofy or not, I couldn't help myself.

The waiter came over and we each ordered a coffee.

"Have you found your Alex yet?" Reno asked, still smiling.

"No, there hasn't been anything. His girlfriend is beyond worried, his grandmother is still calling the Mayor, and Lenny's in a near panic."

"Just your typical day at the law office?"

"Don't joke about it. I'm worried about him too."

"I wasn't joking. This is actually pretty calm for you."

"Did you forget about the dead guy I found in Alex's apartment?"

"Nope, I'm just surprised you've only found one so far."

"You're such a jerk. Have they found out anything on the dead guy?"

"Only that we still don't know who he is. Some of his clothing had Russian tags, for what that's worth. He didn't have any ID and without hands he doesn't have any fingerprints. Nobody matching his description has been reported missing. And, his dental records and DNA don't match anything in the database."

"So, he's still just the dead guy?"

"Yup," Reno said. "He's still just the dead guy."

“Did you find anything in Alex’s apartment?”

“Not a thing. No drugs, nothing that had been stolen. They broke and smashed everything, but didn’t seem to take anything obvious. You said you had news about Albert Reinhardt?”

“I was with two men, supposedly brothers, today,” I said. “They were foreign, with accents I couldn’t place. Middle Eastern or Asian maybe. They were convinced Alex had some things that belonged to them and Reinhardt would want to buy these things. They were upset they couldn’t locate Alex or their merchandise.”

“Any idea what the something’s could be?”

“Not a clue, but whatever they are, they’re probably responsible for Alex’s disappearance.”

“Can his girlfriend help? Maybe she knows what Alex was fencing?”

“I don’t think so. I get the feeling she’s in the dark about all of this.”

“She may know more than she thinks she knows. Talk to her. You might get more information than if a badge interviews her again.”

“Do you think Reinhardt could have anything to do with Alex’s disappearance?” I asked.

“It’s possible, but I still don’t see more than a minor connection between Alexander and Reinhardt. We saw him possibly fencing something with Reinhardt at the Tropical Paradise the other day. But, it’s not the kind of exchange Reinhardt’s usually involved in. There’s a structure to his buys. It’s never in a public location, there are always bodyguards, and there are usually multiple groups involved. You said Alex was out on parole as a con man and working as a used car salesman? Any dealings with Reinhardt would be out of his league. I

don't even see how Alex could be a middleman on a sale like that. It doesn't make sense. Who were these brothers you were with?"

"Jealous?"

"No, but they must somehow fit in with this."

"All I know is they called themselves Smith and Jones. Smith had an English accent with something foreign thing mixed in. They were operating out of an abandoned printing shop south of Curry Street. It didn't look like they had set up an office there or anything. I think it was just a place they found and were temporally using."

"Let me know where it is and we'll check it out. Do you know anything else about them?"

"They were driving a white Chrysler 300M. It looked like a rental."

"Did you get the license?"

"Sorry, I was sorta preoccupied at the time."

Reno arched one eyebrow. "That's not much to go on, but I'll hand the information over to our squad leader and to the detective handling Alexander's case. Maybe they can put something together."

~~~~~

We sipped coffee for another 20 minutes, watching the sun drop below the horizon. There were several clouds in the western sky and they had turned a bright yellow.

"It looks like a nice sunset tonight," Reno said. "Let's go for a walk. I know a good spot."

He stood up and tossed a ten on the table. We walked off the patio, around the pool, and onto a path running down to the golf course. About fifty yards from the hotel building, a side path branched off from the

main path. This path led to a secluded bench facing west. It was empty and Reno walked me to it.

Although Reno didn't sit very close to me, he was right about the sunset. It was beautiful. We watched as the clouds turned a brilliant orange and then to a dull cherry red.

We talked a little at first and then watched the darkening sky for almost ten minutes without speaking.

As it got darker, small lights along the path turned on, as did thousands in the trees throughout the resort.

"I love the lights here," I said. "It gives everything such a soft glow."

"Yeah, you always looked better in the dark."

"Reno, you're such a jerk."

Reno looked at me. "I've missed you."

My heart jumped in my chest. Once again, I broke out in the smile. *Damn him.*

"Oh yeah? So now you miss me? What do you want to do about it?" I asked and leaned over to him. "You got any ideas? Like maybe you want to kiss me?"

"Listen, cream-puff, I don't need you to give me any ideas."

"Cream-puff? I'm nobody's cream-puff."

"Sure you are," he said. "You're crusty on the outside but all tasty and soft underneath, a cream-puff."

"I'm not crusty and I'm not soft," I said in a tone I hoped sounded both tough and angry. As I said it, I saw him smiling at me and I didn't feel tough. I *was* soft. I wanted to be held, and kissed, and touched. I desperately wanted to be touched all over.

Reno must have read my thoughts. He bent over and kissed me. It was the lightest of kisses, our lips barely touched, but I felt the kiss down to the tips of my fingers. It was like a starter's pistol firing to wake my entire body up.

He kissed me again. His mouth was slightly parted and I felt his tongue flick against my lips. If the first kiss had been a pistol shot, then this one was a cannon blast. My heart sped up and I felt my face get hot. His hands slid around my waist and pulled my body to his. I reached up and grabbed his face, holding it against mine. I found my body responding to each new kiss. It was getting hard to breathe and I was again starting to tingle all over.

As we kissed, he lightly ran his hand up and down the inside of my thigh. The feeling was maddening and I knew I couldn't stand it any longer. I pulled away from him, gave him my sweetest smile, and looked into his eyes.

"I want you Reno."

"I know I'm going to regret this, but I want you too," Reno said, giving me another soft kiss.

"You won't regret this," I said, kissing him back.

"Oh, I probably will. God help me." Reno moaned.

Yes! The time has come.

"Do you want to go to my place or yours?" I heard myself ask.

"I can't. I have to be back up here in an hour," Reno said. That's hardly enough time to drive down to my place and come back. Your place is even farther."

My heart sank.

It's always something.

"My car in the parking lot?" I asked.

As I looked at him, I saw he was smiling and giving me *that* look.

"You want it bad, huh? Why don't we just get a room here?" he said. "We could get a good start now." He leaned over and softly kissed me. "And then, after I'm done with my shift, we could stay up and watch the sunrise from the balcony in the room. They say room service here serves a great breakfast."

I got a flashback to my dream about Reno and me making love here at the Princess.

"You aren't wearing your red silk boxers, by any chance, are you?" I asked.

He smiled, but didn't say anything.

Oh God!

My heart pounded harder. I could feel my body tighten at the thought that Reno and I would soon be together. I leaned over to kiss him again.

My cell phone rang.

There was an uncomfortable moment while we both pretended it wasn't ringing. I ignored the phone and after half a minute it switched over to voice mail.

We stood up. Reno put his arm around my waist. I snuggled against him as we walked toward the main lobby and the reception desk.

My cell phone rang again. I ignored it again. Reno looked at me.

"You should either answer it and get rid of them or just turn it off."

I pulled the phone out of my bag to shut it off. As I was about to hit the power-off button, I saw it was Danica.

“Hold on one second” I said as I opened the phone. “Danica might have some word on Alex.”

“Danica?” I said as I put the phone to my ear.

From the phone came the unmistakable sound of a woman in the depths of hysteria.

“Danica? What’s wrong?”

She wasn’t speaking words, merely making loud moaning sounds.

“Danica?”

Now there was sobbing and crying mixed in with the loud moaning sounds.

“Danica? Where are you?”

“I’m . . . at . . . home,” came the answer between deep sobs.

“Don’t move,” I said. “I’ll be there in 20 minutes.”

Shit.

I closed the phone and looked up at Reno. I expected him to be pissed.

“Go,” he said. “It sounds like she needs you. If it’s anything big, call me right away. I’ll have a car there in five minutes.”

“But, our night?” I asked.

“There’ll be another night.”

I hugged him, then turned and ran out to my car.

~~~~~

I sped down Hayden to Danica’s house. I had crazy thoughts of Alex lying dead in Danica’s living room. I pulled into her driveway and I knew something was very wrong.

Danica was sitting on the front edge of the small front porch, her legs hanging over the sides. I got out of my car and walked up to her. She had a look on her face I'd seen before; the dazed and vacant look of a woman who has just been traumatized.

"Danica?" I asked, "Are you all right? What happened?"

She looked up at me. Her face was wet from tears. "My house, go in and see what someone did to my house. It's terrible."

I eased open the front door and slipped in. The house was trashed, just as Alex's apartment had been, but on a much larger scale. The couch had actually been ripped in half. Jagged pieces of it were lying on either side of the living room. Chairs were gutted and overturned. Pictures were ripped off the walls and flung onto the floor. Everything that could be turned over was. Everything that could be ripped open had a hole in it. Someone had been looking for something and they didn't care about being restrained.

I reached into my bag and pulled out the Baby Glock. I'd learned my lesson from last time. Whoever trashed the house could still be there. I went from the living room to the kitchen, then to the garage, and then to the master bedroom. Each room was as bad as the last. Satisfied the house was now empty, I went outside, where Danica was still staring into space.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"About half an hour. I got home and found the house this way. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know if I should call the police. I had your card, so I called you."

"Well, I doubt this was a random act," I said. "Is anything missing?"

“That’s the strange thing,” Danica said, “I don’t think anything is. All of my jewelry is in a pile in the bedroom. The paintings are on the floor, but they’re still here. Some are worth over ten thousand dollars. The TV and stereo are broken, but they didn’t take them. Nothing seems to be missing.”

“You’d better call the police. It somehow ties in with whatever has happened to Alex. Besides, the insurance company will need a police report to get the paperwork started.”

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The police came, took pictures, and dusted for prints. Danica filled out a statement and some forms. An hour and a half after the police arrived, they packed up and left.

The police didn’t see a direct tie-in to Alex’s disappearance. Since nothing seemed to be missing they didn’t see it as anything other than kids or perhaps an angry former boyfriend. I still thought somehow it had to be linked to Alex. But why would someone ransack her house now? It’s been my experience that the timing of these things isn’t random. What were they looking for? Why didn’t they do it yesterday or the day before? Why not tomorrow for that matter? I just didn’t know enough to come up with the answers.

As I was going over the facts in my head, I looked over at Danica. She was staring at the mess that had been her living room, absent-mindedly petting her cat, which fortunately had escaped unharmed.

“Are you going to be OK?” I asked.

“I don’t want to stay here tonight,” Danica said. “My mom lives over in Sun City. I don’t work tomorrow. I think I’ll stay rest of the weekend with her. Maybe by Monday I’ll be ready to start cleaning up the mess.”

I told her I'd call her if I got any information on Alex.

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I drove back to my apartment and climbed up the three flights of stairs to my floor. I heard noises down the hallway so I eased the Baby Glock out of my purse. I carefully rounded the corner and saw Grandma Peckham standing in front of her door. She was holding two large bags of groceries and was trying to balance them with one hand, while trying to push the key into the lock with the other. I stashed the gun and took both bags from her. She then used her key to open the door.

"Thanks," she said. "I hate to set the bags down, it hurts too much to bend over and pick them up again."

We walked into her apartment and I sat the bags down on the counter.

"Thanks dear," Grandma Peckham said. "Would you like a Diet Pepsi?"

"That sounds great," I said. "It's been a long day."

"Really? What happened? You were being careful, weren't you?"

I sighed and confessed.

"Two guys grabbed me this morning and handcuffed me to a bed. They apparently were brothers."

"Oh? Brothers?" Grandma asked, a slight smile on her lips. "You know, I once had a boyfriend who had this brother. This was before I met Grandpa Peckham, of course. I was going to college in Cambridge at the time. There were both a couple of years older than me. One night we were all at my place having cocktails and before I knew it all three of us were in bed. I'd never done such a thing before but, *land sakes alive*, they were tigers between the sheets. They made me sore in places I didn't even think could get sore."

Grandma sighed then sat there for a moment, staring into space with a grin on her face. She shook her head as if to clear away a happy memory.

“If you don’t mind my prying?” Grandma asked. “How old were they?”

“One was in his mid-twenties, the other in his mid-thirties.”

“*Oh mercy!*” she said, fanning herself. “And they handcuffed you to a bed?”

“Well, yes, but it wasn’t like that,” I protested.

“Not that I’m saying there’s anything wrong with being handcuffed to a bed by two men,” Grandma said. “After all, at my age, I don’t know what’s considered kinky and what’s considered normal anymore. I mean, in my day, having a man use his tongue on a woman *down there*,” she whispered and pointed, “was considered kinky. In some parts of the country you could even get arrested for doing that. But, I read in *Cosmo* last month sex can’t be considered successful nowadays unless the man first makes the woman orgasm at least three times by doing that. Well,” she sighed, “if that’s the case I guess neither of us has been too successful lately.”

She rested her fingertips on my arm and leaned close to me.

“With the thin walls in this building,” she said. “I think we’d both know if the other was having any success or not.”

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I went back to my apartment, but after what had happened at Danica’s I didn’t feel like sitting home by myself. Plus, the thought Smith and Jones might come back for a second try was weighing on my mind.

Sophie had called earlier and said she was still on the hunt for a man. She and Gina would be going over to Maya Day and Nightclub, a great

place across the street from Nexxus. Maybe that would be just the thing to take my mind off the assignment. Who knows? Maybe later on tonight I'd be able to hook up with Reno after all.

I spent a few minutes in front of the mirror. I refreshed the make-up and fluffed up my hair. I put on a pair of black high-heeled pumps, which gave me the appearance of actually having legs and a butt.

I took the elevator down to the atrium, and then walked out to the parking lot. The night was warm and there wasn't even the trace of a breeze.

I was unlocking my car when a black Cadillac pulled next to me. The car stopped and two guys got out. One was merely big while the other was huge. The big one was in his late twenties, while the huge one was in his late forties or early fifties. Both were dressed in matching dark suits, white shirts, black ties, and black shoes. They almost looked like the Blues Brothers.

Shit. Not again!

I dug in my purse until I found the Glock. I pulled it out, but then realized I didn't have a round in the chamber.

"Miss Black, Tony DiCenzo would like to have a word with you," the merely big one said, unfazed I was pointing a gun at him.

My heart sped up to about one-forty and I felt sweat break out on my forehead.

"Tough Tony DiCenzo wants to talk to me?" I said, trying to sound calm. "You're serious? Why would he want to talk to me? I've never even met the man before."

"I have no idea why he wants to talk to you, but you can be damn sure it's important," the huge one said. "Otherwise, why do you think he'd

send us out to get you? However, we aren't here to make you do anything against your will. You don't have to come with us. But, honestly, it has been my experience it isn't wise to upset Mr. DiCenzo."

I couldn't come up with an argument against that. Besides, I told myself, the DiCenzos are somehow tied in with this. Maybe I'd learn something.

ELEVEN

I climbed into the back of the Caddy. The huge guy came in close behind me. The merely big guy got in front and started the motor. I felt around on the seat.

“Hey, wait a minute,” I said. “There aren’t any seat belts back here. How do expect me to ride in a car without seatbelts?”

“Not to worry,” the huge one said. “Milo is a very good driver.”

“I don’t care how good of a driver Milo is. You can’t just expect me to get in a car with two guys I don’t know from Jack and ride around with no seatbelt. Are you nuts?”

The huge one just looked at me like I was a slug. “So you don’t feel uncomfortable not knowing who we are, I’m Johnny Scarpazzi and that’s Milo.”

From the front seat, Milo turned his head around and smiled at me. The smile revealed a bright gold tooth.

“The seat belts are just wedged under the seat,” Milo said. “None of the guys we drive around want to be seen wearing them. It’s bad for their image. After a while, the belts just slip into the crack and fall behind the seat. If you reach in, you can probably pull one out.”

I reached down into the crack and fished out both halves of my seatbelt. I put on the belt and felt better when it clicked. I looked over and noticed both Johnny and Milo were fumbling around, putting their seat belts on too.

What is it with men?

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Milo put the Caddy in gear and we drove in silence. After ten minutes we pulled in front of the Carmine Hotel.

The Carmine was built about twenty years before my apartment building, but has been much better maintained. It now serves the upscale business clientele who travel to the downtown Scottsdale area. We walked around to the side of the building and descended a wide deep stairwell. Johnny went down first. I was next. Milo brought up the rear. A large flashing red and blue neon sign reading *Junior Baker's Blues Club* bathed us in its glow as we descended.

At the bottom of the stairwell was a large red wooden door. Johnny opened the door and the sound of music and laughter poured out. We went into the dim club, walking past the doorman, the cashier, and the coat check girl.

The club wasn't large, but it was packed. There were maybe thirty tables and a small dance floor all in front of a low stage. The high tin ceiling was painted flat black. A half-dozen ceiling fans blew around the warm air. The walls to the sides and behind the stage were covered with thick red curtains. Along the far wall was a bar with two dozen people leaning against it or sitting on stools. Between the bar and the seating area was a rail with another dozen people standing against it. They all seemed to be talking, laughing, and swaying with the music.

Playing on the stage was a quartet of older black men. I recognized Junior Baker as the man sitting in the middle of the group playing electric guitar. Baker had been playing blues his entire life and was a Scottsdale music legend. The band was playing an Arizona version of Chicago Blues. It had a fast beat with a pounding bass line. The dance floor was packed. People were crowding and bumping into each other, but I noticed nobody seemed to mind. Everyone was laughing and

smiling, having a great time. If I hadn't been with the two goons, I would have liked to have stayed and enjoyed myself too.

We walked to the back of the club where three steps led up to a small room. As we approached, a large guy held up his hand to stop us. He patted me down and searched my bag. Without a word, he took out my Glock and put it in his coat pocket. To my surprise, my two escorts also surrendered their guns. OK, so I guess guns weren't allowed beyond that point.

I stepped into the room and I saw it had a great view through a large cutout in the wall. The room was elevated just enough to be able to look over the heads of the people sitting at the tables and right onto the stage. The music was clear, but at a softer volume than in the room outside.

The room had several small tables in the front and a couch in the back with end tables on either side. A dozen candles in red glass were scattered on the tables and provided the only light in the room.

Sitting at a table by the door were two grim-looking goons. I recognized Maximilian, sitting alone at the far table. Just seeing him again made my pulse raise another notch, but in a way that had nothing to do with the fear I was feeling.

Sitting alone at a table in the back corner of the room was a tall, graceful woman. She had long black hair and piercing blue eyes. I would have described her as beautiful, but her eyes sent a tingle of fear down my spine. They were the eyes of a hunter sizing up her prey. I also recognized the man standing between the two tables. It was Tough Tony DiCenzo.

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I walked over to DiCenzo. Physically he was only slightly taller than me, but he was built like a bull. He had the tanned skin of a man living year-round in the desert. He had a round pockmarked face, a bulbous nose, and piercing dark eyes. His black and gray hair was short and slicked straight back. I knew from news reports he was in his late fifties. I knew by reputation that he didn't take a lot of crap from anybody.

"So, you're Laura Black," he said. He offered his hand as he looked me up and down. "I've heard some good things about you. Welcome to my club. So, what do you think about it?" His voice had a Brooklyn accent mixed in with the raspy overtones of a two-pack-a-day habit. "You and me have business to discuss, but first, what'll you have to drink?"

"Scotch," I said. "Whatever you have handy, one ice cube."

"I got a twenty-one year old Glenlivet single malt. You oughta try it. It's not too bad. In fact, I think I'll have one myself." He motioned to Milo, who in turn relayed the drink order to a waitress who was walking by the alcove. DiCenzo then walked over to the couch and sat. He motioned me to a chair next the end of the couch.

"Well, Mr. DiCenzo," I said. "This is your club? It's nice."

"I'm glad you like it, and call me Tony. Do you know I bought this hotel almost twenty years ago? Back then, this room was just part of the hotel basement and was used by the Scottsdale Memorial hospital for document storage. Where the stage is now was nothin' but a pile of dusty boxes going nearly up to the ceiling. Twenty years ago Junior Baker's records had stopped selling and he was flat broke. As it so happened, I met him and found out he wasn't such a bad guy. On a hunch I opened this club and let him run it. Now, he's a household name all over the world and his record sales have never been stronger. This club has turned

a profit every year for the last eighteen years. See, that's what can happen if you find someone you believe in and you give 'em an opportunity."

The waitress came into the alcove carrying the tray of drinks. She sat them on the end table next to the couch.

I picked up my glass and took in a mouthful that I swallowed in a gulp. Hey, at this point I needed it. Hot pleasure spread from my throat outward. I looked up to see DiCenzo watching me.

"Damn," I said, smacking my lips together. "That's amazing."

DiCenzo picked up his glass and leaned back on the couch, a slight smile on his face. We sat in silence for a few minutes; DiCenzo enjoying the music, me sipping the Scotch and trying not to shake.

"Now then," DiCenzo said, leaning forward again. "To why we are here. What do you know about diamonds?"

"They're a girl's best friend?"

"Oh, they're much more than that. Let me give you some background on the situation I find myself in, or perhaps I should say, the situation we find ourselves in. Through the years, I have found that the more information a person has, the better decisions they are able to make. And, over the next few days, Laura Black, I want you to make some very good decisions."

Something about the way he phrased that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

"Now then," he said. "Some weeks ago, I was approached by a representative of an organization outta Russia. Seems they had acquired a large quantity of high-quality diamonds. As luck would have it, they had found a buyer in a group called the Consortium. The Consortium is made

up of various factions in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. They asked for my help, so they could make the sale.”

“Why’d they want you to get involved?” I interrupted. “It seems like it would be a straightforward deal. Wouldn’t having you involved just increase their risk?”

“Yeah, you’d think that,” DiCenzo said, apparently not minding my interruption. “But the sad truth is these things never go smoothly. You put a dozen stressed-out guys in a room with guns, money, and a briefcase full of jewels? Christ, something always goes wrong. Feelings get hurt, cultures clash, somebody says the wrong thing, or God forbid, somebody tries to change the terms of the deal just as the money is exchanged. The results are never pretty. The two Consortium brothers who are currently calling themselves Smith and Jones have somewhat of a reputation for violence, as you may have noticed. That tends to put people on edge. Also, there was the question of which country to do the exchange in. Turns out there’s a general dislike of Russians in the Consortium. Too much bad blood over the years. The Russians didn’t feel none too safe going on their territory. On the other hand, the Consortium refused to travel to Russia because of some recent government interference in this sort of transaction.”

“So how do you fit in?” I asked. I was so proud my voice was still steady. On the inside, my guts were starting to knot up.

“I’m the broker, the middle-man, the referee you might say. I provide a neutral location for the sale. I provide an independent expert to verify both the quality of the merchandise and the method used to pay for it. What’s more, I provide nonaligned security for all parties. You might say I make sure nothing goes wrong. In exchange for those services, I receive a percentage of the sales price.”

“But something went wrong?” I asked.

“You’re damn right something went wrong!” DiCenzo yelled, slamming his hand down on the table. Everybody in the alcove turned to look at him. “The goddamn Russians no more than checked into my hotel before they lost the fuckin’ bag with the diamonds. That simple fuck of a Russian courier got distracted when some girl flashed her tits at him. Then some little jack-off switched the bag and just walked off with the diamonds. It took us two days of questioning people and reviewing security tapes until we found out what had happened. Then even after we found out what had happened, we still didn’t know who’d done it. We’d never seen the guy before, had no idea who he was. Now, I’ve been doing this sorta thing for years and believe me when I say security was airtight. Nobody other than my top guys knew merchandise was even coming into Scottsdale. It shoulda been impossible for anyone to get at the diamonds, but it happened anyway. I’ve lost sleep over this one, and let me tell you I *never* lose sleep over business.”

“But other than losing your commission, how can this go badly for you? No one could blame you for it.”

“No, that’s not how it works,” DiCenzo said, shaking his head. “The bag switch happened in my territory and in my hotel. That makes it my fault. If I don’t get the diamonds back and make sure the sale takes place smoothly, I look like a world-class asshole. And believe me I ain’t going to be known as a world-class asshole.”

“Did you find out who switched the bag?” I asked. “I saw the hotel security tape. You couldn’t make out any details of the man who made the switch. I suspect you know my partner Gina Rondinelli has been looking for whoever took the bag. So far she’s come up with zip.”

“That’s true, I do know. And you’re right, the tapes don’t show shit. If the prick had just taken the diamonds and laid low, we might never have known who’d done it. But he got greedy. In the end they always get greedy. In the bag was a pouch containing three diamonds, samples you might call them. We put word out to the street to keep a lookout for them. They’re easy to spot because they’re big, three to five carats, blue-white, and internally flawless, rather rare. Turns out the first diamond was sold to a pawn shop in downtown Scottsdale a week ago Wednesday. The jerk sold it for half of what he could have got from a proper fence. The pawnshop owner gave us a call to let us know he had one of the diamonds. We still didn’t know the guy’s name because he used a bogus ID, but the pawn shop owner let us have the disk from his security camera. Much better resolution than the tape from the hotel. But except for showing his picture around we were forced to wait. Not to worry though, we knew if he sold one diamond, he’d sell the other two. People are stupid that way.”

DiCenzo paused and held up his now empty glass. Milo took off to get two more.

A bag with diamonds? Alex?

“A few days later, my old friend Jimmy Meyer called to tell us a guy matching the photo had just sold him the second diamond. Jimmy also told me he had set him up with Ingrid at the Tropical Paradise to sell the third. Ingrid was going to handle the buy, but I also called in the Iceman in to verify the diamonds were the ones we was looking for.”

Milo came back in with fresh drinks. I was grateful for the Scotch. It was the only thing keeping me from running out of the building, screaming at the top of my lungs.

“At this point we only wanted to find out who the guy was and where he lived,” DiCenzo continued. “After the sale at the Tropical Paradise we had additional pictures of him and from Meyer’s parking lot security camera we got his license plate. From that we discovered his identity.”

“So who was it?” I asked, although I knew the answer.

“I thought you would have guessed by now,” DiCenzo said. “It’s your buddy, Alexander Sternwood.”

Well, I saw that coming.

“How could he have been so stupid?” I said aloud.

DiCenzo just made a small grunt of disgust and continued. “So, Sternwood makes the sale to Ingrid. Then, what do you know? When we reviewed the Tropical Paradise security tapes, we found someone was following him. That someone was you.”

Shit, I should have seen that coming too.

“From the cameras in the parking lot, we got your license plate. From that, we found out who you were and that you worked for that shyster Lenny Shapiro. So now you can see how you are beginning to fit in.”

Yeah, just what the hell did I walk into?

“I sent Max over to Lenny’s to do two things. The first was to find out what you knew about Sternwood and the diamonds. The second was to press you into helping us look for the bag. Sometimes people get lucky and maybe you had come across it without knowing what it was. As it turns out, you were approaching Sternwood from the angle of keeping an eye out on him for his grandmother. For us, that was perfect. You had a legitimate reason to follow his every move. I’ve had a team following you to see where you went and who you’ve talked to.”

OK, so hearing this pissed me off. I knew I should have kept my mouth shut, but hey, that's just me.

"You've had guys following me? Did they happen to notice almost got shot by the Russians and was kidnapped by Smith and Jones? If I'm so freaking important to you, why'd you let them almost kill me!"

As I was yelling, I glanced over to see Max break out in a small smile. Milo had crept over to where we were sitting, presumably to get between Tony and me in case I got out of hand. Tony absent-mindedly waved Milo away.

"Laura, Laura," DiCenzo said. "No need to get your panties in a twist. We were aware of your confrontation with the Russians. Matter of fact, it was Max here who fired the shots that got you outta that one. Maybe he shouldn't have done it. We're not supposed to be taking sides in the recovery of the diamonds, but it seemed to have worked out for the best."

I looked over at Max, who was still smiling and holding up his glass in a salute. It was a sweet gesture and seeing his eyes on me gave me a warm feeling. It was a nice distraction.

"We also saw Smith and Jones take you," Tony went on. "But, at the time we didn't know if you were working with them or against them. By the time we found out they were trying to pump information outta you, you had already helped yourself escape. We didn't interfere because we weren't needed. Actually, you handled yourself pretty good in there. It made me think you were somebody that maybe I could do business with."

Well that's just great. I almost get killed just to impress the freakin' Godfather.

“Tony,” I said. “If you knew Alex stole the diamonds, why didn’t you just pick him up and question him until you found out where they were?”

“Yeah, that mighta worked,” DiCenzo said. “But what if he had a partner who was holding the diamonds and would bolt if Alex didn’t call in every half hour? We might never have found them. We figured if we just followed him, he’d lead us right to them, no need for a heavy hand.

“You probably already know this,” I said. “But Alex disappeared two days ago. They also found a dead guy in his apartment, minus his hands. Do you know what’s going on?”

“Matter of fact, I do,” DiCenzo said. “You know Alexander’s gone missing, but what you may not know is the Russians have him.”

“Boris and Ivan?”

DiCenzo smiled. “That’s not their names, but yeah, those two.”

“Is he all right?”

“At the moment, he’s doin’ OK.”

“What about the dead guy?”

“After the diamond courier lost the bag, Moscow sent orders to get rid of him. This was not unexpected. You can’t just lose that much merchandise and expect to come out in one piece. After taking care of the courier, the two Russians left the body in Alex’s apartment. That was after they had chopped off the hands. I heard they sent them FedEx to Moscow as proof of the job. After placing the body in the apartment, they performed that messy search. We, of course, already knew the apartment was clean because we had already searched it. Unfortunately for Alex, he came home while they were still there. The Russians had been keeping an eye out for him, just like us, in hopes he would lead them to the diamonds. This, however, wasn’t yielding them results. They

saw Alex's appearance as a golden opportunity to learn what he did with the diamonds directly."

"Why did they put the guy in the apartment? It doesn't make sense," I said.

"Leaving the courier there was stupid. All that did was to pull the police into it. The Russians were going to use the courier to send a message to Alex. Come up with the merchandise, or else. Of course, since they snatched him as soon as he came home, the message was probably lost on him. From what I hear he has confessed only to giving the bag away to someone else."

"Tony, there were two guys following Alex around on Tuesday and Wednesday. They were involved in a smash-up on the highway Wednesday morning. The car was registered to Arizona Security Enterprises. Were those two guys working for you?"

DiCenzo looked at me, a spark of surprise in his eyes.

"So, you knew about those two? Yeah, they're mine. Damn shame about them losing Alex. We didn't pick him up again until he came back to his apartment later that night when he was grabbed by the Russians."

I took another sip of my Scotch and gathered my thoughts.

"OK," I said. "I'm confused. You said Alex already sold all of the diamonds in the bag. What's left to look for?"

"Like I said, the three diamonds in the pouch were only samples," DiCenzo said. "Hidden in the lining of the bag are more diamonds."

"How many more?"

"A lot more."

“Tony, that doesn’t help me much. I’ll need to know what I’m looking for.”

DiCenzo looked at me for a moment; he then hardened his eyes, staring right at me.

“All right, you’re looking for almost three hundred diamonds. That’s a little over half a pound. They’re all big, three to five carats, perfect color, and most are internally flawless.”

“Half a pound?”

“Exactly,” he said. “Half a pound. So now you know why everyone’s so stirred up.”

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DiCenzo paused to take a drink. “Laura Black,” he said, his voice softer now. “Since we are going to be working together on this one, let me ask you something. The past few weeks the city has been uneasy, maybe not so you’d hear about it. Something fundamental has shifted but I can’t put my finger on it.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“When something’s about to happen, something big I mean, you tend to get warning signs. Sometimes they’re subtle, but I have had warning bells going off in my head for about a month now. Nothing on the surface, you understand, but on the loading docks, the warehouses, and in the back rooms, people are uneasy. My guys tell me a lot of the illegals have disappeared. I don’t think they actually went anywhere, but they are keeping off the street. The heads of the three gangs in south Phoenix have dropped outta sight. From what my sources tell me, even the cops have felt it. Since you get around during the course of your daily activities, I was thinking perhaps you might have felt something amiss.”

“Not a thing, but I’ve been busy with an assignment, and then this thing with Alexander came up.

“At first, I thought this Alexander Sternwood thing might have something to do with it, but now I’m not so sure. Nevertheless, keep your ears open and let me or Max know if you see something that doesn’t feel right. Can you do that?”

I was about to tell Tony the whole situation didn’t feel right when Johnny came over and whispered something to him, waving his arm in the direction of a door along the back wall. The whispering and arm waving continued for almost a minute. DiCenzo spoke a few sentences to Johnny. Johnny nodded his head and left the room through the back door. Three men then appeared in the door and DiCenzo waved them in.

Two goons walked a third man over to where DiCenzo was sitting. Everyone in the alcove turned to see what was happening. As soon as the third man came into the alcove, he started talking.

“Tony, I just want you to know I’m so sorry about what happened. I was out of my mind. I just went nuts. I’ll pay for everything and I swear to you it’ll never happen again.”

“You’ll have to excuse this interruption,” DiCenzo said to me. “I have to take care of some unfinished business. This piece of shit standing here is Sonny Boy Muzzi. He used to work for me, bringing merchandise up from Mexico. He’s been hiding in his sister’s basement for a week, but she ratted him out to us this afternoon. Seems she didn’t want any part of hiding his sorry ass any longer.” Although DiCenzo was talking to me, he was keeping his voice loud enough so everyone in our little room could hear him speak, even over the music being played on stage.

“A few months ago, Sonny Boy here took it into his head to start banging the wife of the manager of the Headhunter lounge at the Tropical Paradise. She also works there, as a cocktail waitress.” DiCenzo paused and looked at Sonny. “And in case you didn’t know, that’s one of my bars.” DiCenzo paused again and took a sip on his Scotch. “It got to the point where he was nailing her two, three times a week. They even started renting rooms at the Tropical Paradise so they could meet on her lunch hours. The manager of the lounge caught wind of it and started missing work. He’d wander through the hotel, listening at doors trying to catch her in the act. It was starting to affect his performance at my lounge. Not to mention it was starting to creep out the hotel guests. I mean, here’s this guy walking up and down the halls, pounding on room doors whenever he hears someone inside having sex.”

DiCenzo motioned for two more drinks.

“In order to help straighten things out, I sent a couple a guys over to have a little chat with Sonny. No violence you understand, just a friendly conversation. Personally, I think it is unseemly that the wife of one of my guys is disrespecting him like that. In my heart I just couldn’t let it go on. Things like this always lead to trouble. So after we have our little chat with Sonny here, what does this piece of shit do? He goes over to the Tropical Paradise, walks into the Headhunter, and smashes up the whole goddamned lounge. He smacked around both the girl tending the bar and the waitress. The waitress wasn’t the one he was banging, you understand, she was a different one who just happened to be working in the lounge that day. He then kicked in an antique jukebox. He even used a chair like a baseball bat to break the lights that hung over the tables. Then just to top it off, he throws the chair over the top of the bar. It shatters the mirror and wiped out a dozen bottles of my best booze, all

top shelf stuff. By the time hotel security got there, Sonny had bolted. You know the rest. So, now that I have him, I've gotta figure out what to do with him."

Sonny started up again. "Tony, look, I've learned my lesson. I'll pay for everything and leave the state. I'll never bother you or your business ever again, ever. I swear."

DiCenzo turned to look at him. He spoke in a low menacing tone. "Just what the hell do I look like to you? Do I look like someone you can fuck with? Do I look like someone whose bar you can smash up and then just walk away?" DiCenzo dope-slapped him across the top of his head. "Well, do I?"

Sonny started shaking his head back and forth like a bobble-head doll. DiCenzo looked over at me. "So, Laura Black, help me out. If you were me, what would you do with this piece of shit scumbag?"

*Jeez, how do I get myself into these situations? I'm giving a gangster advice on delivering mob justice to a wayward henchman? OK, stay calm. Just think like a mobster.*

I took a long sip on my fresh Scotch and put on my best gangster face. I looked over at Sonny Boy Muzzi. He wasn't acting much like a tough guy today. His head was hanging down and he looked like he was about to cry.

"Hey, having an affair is a two-way street," I said, adding as much bravado to my voice as I could without having it shake. "He didn't make her do nothin' she didn't want to do. So, I'd give him a pass on that one. Maybe your lounge manager is lousy in the sack, who knows? But, tearing up your lounge, that's completely different. He smashed the lamps? Kicked in the jukebox? Slapped around the women? Threw a

chair over the bar and shattered the mirror? Wiped out the good booze? Hell Tony, if I was you, I suppose I'd shoot him."

*Shoot him? Why did I say that? I didn't mean to. It just slipped out.*

DiCenzo looked at me for a moment and then nodded his head. "Shoot him? OK, we'll shoot him."

Sonny Boy's head shot up, his eyes bugging out, his entire body shaking. Terror filled his moist red eyes. "No, please Tony, no. I'm so sorry. Don't do this and I'll make it up to you, Tony, I swear on my children. Please don't do this!"

DiCenzo dismissed him with a slight backwards wave of his hand. "Get that piece of shit outta here." The two goons began to drag Sonny out.

*Oh Jeez! Did I just hand that guy a death sentence? Shit! OK, Laura, stay calm. How the hell can I fix this?*

"Hey," I said. "Hold it a minute."

Everyone stopped and turned to look at me. DiCenzo's drink was in his hand, stopped halfway to his lips. He was staring at me, opened mouthed.

"Umm, in thinking about it, we probably shouldn't shoot him. Hell, if we shot somebody every time they smashed up a bar, there wouldn't be many of us left. Come on, haven't we all smashed up a bar once or twice before? I mean, it's a *bar*, they're sorta made to get smashed up."

There was a general murmur of assent. Everyone in the room nodded their head and there was some laughter from the two goons at the table near the door. Even DiCenzo nodded his head and got a small smile, probably remembering the last bar he'd smashed. This went on for a few seconds then DiCenzo spoke:

"Now, you're not suggesting we just let him go, are you?"

“Umm, nooo,” I said. “You’ll need to teach him a lesson, of course. People can’t go around feeling they can smash up one of your bars without suffering some sort of consequences.”

DiCenzo grinned again. “OK then, if we’re *all* in agreement.” He looked at Johnny and the two guys holding Sonny Muzzi. “Take him out and do what we’d talked about earlier.”

With Sonny muttering tearful thanks, the two guys walked him through the back door. I looked over at DiCenzo who was sipping his Scotch and watching Junior Baker and the band.

“Umm, Tony, you weren’t really going to have him shot?” I asked. “Were you?”

“Well personally, I thought shooting him was a little severe. But since you’re my guest tonight, I thought I’d cut you some slack. But, if the truth be told, his fate was decided before we even brought him here.” DiCenzo let out a small chuckle. “But from the look on Sonny’s face, he thought we’d go through with it. That’s what’s important.”

DiCenzo took a sip on his Scotch then waved his hand. “Besides, word of this will get out and people will be less eager to mess with my interests. In addition, as an interesting turn of events, Sonny Boy now owes you a favor. You saved his life. You never know when that could come in handy.”

*Owes me a favor? Yeah, or else he’ll just shoot me for handing him a death sentence.*

“What’s going to happen to him?”

“Oh, they’ll just rough him up a little then maybe, you know, break a couple a fingers.”

“Rough him up and break a couple of fingers!”

“Don’t worry about it,” DiCenzo said with a dismissive wave. “It will be a simple beating. They’ll be sure to leave the family jewels undamaged. After that, he’ll be so numb that when they break his fingers, he’ll hardly know what’s happening.

I just stared at DiCenzo, open-mouthed.

“No, it’s true. A beating sorta acts like anesthesia. Trust me, I know.” He paused to sip his Scotch. “Besides,” DiCenzo said, again waving his hand in a dismissive gesture. “That guy acted like an asshole and he knows he’s getting off damn lucky. That’s just how things are done here, so get used to it.”

DiCenzo lit a cigarette and leaned back on the couch. Five minutes later, the band had finished their set and headed backstage. DiCenzo turned back to me.

“Now then, back to our business. I got a hunch about you, just like I had a hunch about Junior Baker. I think you got what it takes to be somebody. So I’ll make it simple. I need you to find the diamonds and bring them to me. I’ll broker the sale and everything will be aces. You’ll even get a cut for helping me out.”

“What if I can’t find the bag?” I asked.

“Then, we’ve got a problem,” DiCenzo said. “And trust me, Laura Black, you don’t want to be in the middle of one of my problems.”

“Fine,” I said. “But if I’m on your side either call off your watchdogs or at least tell them to help me out the next time I get in a jam. And make sure Smith and Jones don’t come anywhere near me. I’ve been looking over my shoulder ever since I got away from them.”

“Fair enough, Laura Black, you’ll have nothing to worry about from them. OK, enough business for one night. I’ll have Max give you a ride

home. He's a nice guy. You should get to know him."

Max stood and walked over to where I was sitting. I stood up and followed him out of the room. I collected my gun from the goon at the bottom of the stairs. We then wound our way through the club and went outside.

## TWELVE

A black Mercedes roadster was waiting by the curb. An attendant opened the passenger door and I got in. As I sat, a man came out of the hotel and motioned to Max. Max closed my door and began talking in a low voice to the man.

The feeling of sitting in the Mercedes was similar to sitting in Danica's Porsche. But while the Porsche was all about raw power and speed, the Mercedes was more about elegance and sophistication. Sitting in the big leather seat gave me a feeling of being safe. The knot in my stomach started to unwind. As I started to breathe normally again, the events of the last hour played through my mind.

*What was I thinking? Agreeing to work with a mob boss?*

Without warning, hot tears began to run down my face. I couldn't stop them and didn't even want to try. They were helping to wash away the memory what had just happened.

The door opened and the interior lights came on. Max got in and as he did I could see him looking at me.

When faced with a crying woman, most men handle it badly. I was expecting him to attempt some words of comfort or maybe even offer me a hug. Instead, he just gave me a small nod and closed the door. For some reason that simple nod of understanding made me feel better than if he had tried to comfort me.

He put the car in gear and we became enveloped in the hum of the engine and the glow of the dashboard lights. After a full minute of silence, he spoke.

“You did pretty well in there with Tony. He brought you in because of your abilities, but now he respects you. Actually, I think you charmed him.”

“I charmed Tough Tony DiCenzo? How can you know that?”

“I’ve been with him for years. Most people either fawn over him or try to act tough. You treated him with respect, but also as a friend. He values that more than anything. Of course, this diamond business is serious. It’s about the worst thing that’s happened in the last four or five years. Charming or not, if this doesn’t work out, we’re all in some very deep shit.”

I let that last sink in for a minute.

“Who was the woman in the corner table?” I asked. “The scary one in the leather.”

“That’s Gabriella.”

“What does she do?”

“She’s for emergencies.”

“Emergencies?”

“I don’t think you don’t want to know.”

We rode in silence for another minute. My mind was racing in a dozen different directions at once.

“What was Tony talking about when he said something’s wrong in the city? It seemed to bother him as much as the missing diamonds.”

“That is a big mystery. Some people have gone missing. Some payments haven’t been made. Some shipments never arrived. And we have no idea who’s behind it.”

“No idea?”

“Just a possible name, Valentino. Ever heard of him?”

“No, but everything that’s happened tonight has been new to me. If I do hear anything I’ll let you know.”

“Anything else?”

“Tony said you were the one who shot up the Russian’s car when they were about to grab me. Thanks for doing that. It pulled me out of a tight spot.”

He gave a short bark of a laugh. “No problem. It’s just lucky for you I was there. Those Russians aren’t nice guys.”

“Some things about the shooting still bother me.”

“Like what?”

“Why were you there in the first place? Do you normally follow women around and shoot at people who bother them?”

“After Alex took out our two guys, I thought I’d fill in for a while. No one knew where Alex was, so I followed you. I figured you’d run into him eventually. We hadn’t yet put together that Danica was a close girlfriend or else we could have found him sooner.”

“How did you know where I was?”

“We put a tracking device on your car.”

“It figures. Do you always carry around an assault rifle?”

“Not always.”

“I’m a little upset you shot my car. I just got it paid off and up until last week it didn’t have a scratch.”

“Sorry gorgeous, that couldn’t be helped. The Russians had to see that both cars were getting hit. Otherwise they might have decided to stick around and have a war. I didn’t want anybody getting killed, I just

wanted them gone. Besides, from what I've seen of your car, no one will even notice a bullet hole."

I took the opportunity to slug his arm. It felt like hitting a brick wall. He turned his head and smiled at me.

"Last question, we're almost there" he said.

"Why did you kiss me the other day?"

He didn't answer right away. I could sense him thinking about it. At last he said: "I don't know why I did that. It's out of character for me to kiss a woman I don't know. I usually wait until I'm at least introduced to her. There was just something about the way you were looking at me."

"And how was I looking at you?"

"It was like I had opened the door to my bedroom and unexpectedly found you lying naked on my bed. It was a look that said: *Make passionate love to me now, or go away and close the door. You're letting in a draft.*"

"Oh."

The car glided into my parking lot. Max found a space and pulled in, but left the motor running. He got out then walked around and opened my door. I got out and faced him.

He pulled a card out of his shirt pocket and held it out. "Here's my cell phone number. I keep it on 24/7. If you find the diamonds or need me for anything else, give me call."

As I took the card, our fingers touched. It sent a warm tingle up my arm.

"Are you married?" I asked.

"No, not married."

“You have a steady girlfriend?”

“No, but I’ve been having some very naughty thoughts about a woman I met a few days ago.”

“Hmmm, lucky girl,” I said, as I felt a flood of warmth go through my body. He was standing so close I could feel the heat from his body. I was hoping he’d want to kiss me again. Who knows, maybe this time he would even finish what he started with the first kiss? Maybe he’d like to go up to my apartment and make a night of it?

*God help me, I’m such a bad girl.*

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way,” I said. “But, as a rule, I don’t get romantically involved with organized crime figures.”

“I figured that, you seem like a nice girl. But, I’m not going anywhere and there’s always a first time for everything.”

*Yikes!*

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I went up to my apartment, checked to make sure no one was hiding anywhere, and fell into bed. Although I went to sleep within minutes, I tossed and turned all night. I had dreams about Reno holding me while I sank my face against his chest. I had dreams about when I first saw Danica and Alex at the dance club. I had dreams about Max and the kiss. Mostly, I had dreams about Tony DiCenzo and the missing bag. In the last dream, DiCenzo appeared in my bedroom. He was standing over my bed, talking in his soft voice: “*Trust me, Laura Black, you don’t want to be in the middle of one of my problems.*”

I woke up with a start and looked at the clock, 5:42. My heart was beating fast and I knew sleep was over for the night.

I went in the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. Marlowe came in and looked up at me, wondering why I was up so early.

I fixed us both a big breakfast. Partly because it was something to do and partly because I had a killer headache. The headache mostly coming from stress rather than from the Scotch I drank in the club the night before. I almost never get a hangover with the good stuff.

As we ate, I told Marlowe about Junior Brown's and my meeting with Tough Tony. Marlowe is always a great listener but not much in the way of an advisor. In talking with Marlowe, I decided that after my meeting with DiCenzo, I most likely had everything I needed to solve this puzzle. I just needed to put the pieces together.

I took a hot shower and put on a black T-shirt, black parachute pants, and black stomper boots. I put my hair up in a ponytail and only put on enough make-up to cover up the bags under my eyes. I felt like a commando going into enemy territory and I wanted to look the part.

I went to the kitchen table and made a list of every place that was relevant in the case. I was determined to go to each one and see if I could turn up anything new, or at least find something that would jog my memory. Then I called Sophie and asked her to meet me at the office. She was still in bed and not happy to be woken up on a Sunday morning, but said she would meet me there in an hour.

While driving to the office I called Gina. She was also still in bed, but woke up immediately. I gave her the basics of my meeting with DiCenzo the night before.

"So it *was* Alex who switched the bag," Gina said. "That would explain why DiCenzo wanted you to be on the assignment. His grandmother had already given you permission to snoop into Alex's private life."

“Do you think I should go to the police and let them know the Russians have Alex?” I asked.

“Tough call,” she said. “But I would say no. You don’t know where they are holding him and it seems likely he’ll be safe, at least until the diamonds are found. Besides, if the police start questioning everybody about the Russians, Tony DiCenzo will know where the information came from. Not a good position to put yourself in.”

“Anything new with the bag hunt?” I asked.

“The hotel sent over security tapes from every available camera angle during the time period when the bag was switched. The tapes are on my desk, but they didn’t seem to show anything new. I’ve almost completed the interviews with everyone who was working in or around the lobby at the time of the switch, but I haven’t come up with anything helpful. I have more two more interviews scheduled today, one at 10:00 and at 2:00.”

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I made it to the office and started reviewing the tapes Gina had on her desk. Gina was right they didn’t show anything new. I could only find Alex on one camera angle other than the one we had already reviewed in Lenny’s office. That camera showed him walking from the back lobby into the main lobby. He was carrying the empty black bag and disappeared from camera view as he crossed into the main lobby to meet the Russians. I made a mental note to check which parts of the hotel he would have to pass through to come in from that angle.

I then read Gina’s notes of the interviews she had made with the people working in or near the lobby that day. There was a checklist of twenty-eight names and twenty-two had been checked off. The names not

checked off had notations that the person was either out sick, on vacation, or not scheduled to return to work until next week. Two of the names had times written next to them. Gina would be interviewing these people today.

From Gina's notes, several people remembered seeing the Russians, but nobody had remembered seeing either Alex or the bag switch. Several of the men remembered the brunette and how she had lost her bikini top, some going into amazing detail about the woman and the event, but again, there was nothing helpful.

Sophie came into the office holding a big cup of coffee she had bought at a convenience store. Her hair was a mess and she didn't have on a lot of make-up.

"This had better be important," Sophie said. "I only had about four hours of sleep before you woke me up."

"How was dancing at Maya?" I asked.

"We had such a great time. Girl, why didn't you come over? I was hoping you would. We had a cabana near the pool and everything. I even had a guy lined up for you. He was single and had money. He was real disappointed you didn't show up after I told him how skinny and sexy you were. Where were you anyway?"

"Oh, I had a shitty night."

"Again? Really? What happened? Somebody smash up your car again? Somebody shoot at you again? Somebody handcuff you to a bed again?"

"Two of DiCenzo's goons invited me to a meeting with Tough Tony. DiCenzo said Alex was the one who made the bag switch. He also said from now on I'm personally responsible for finding the bag. If I don't, then I'm in it deep."

“No shit? You got to meet Tough Tony DiCenzo? What’s he like? Is he as creepy in person as he sounds over the phone? Did he shoot anybody while you were there? From what I hear he orders people dead all the time.”

*How do I explain I was the one giving out the death sentences last night?*

“Nope, nobody killed, but I still didn’t have a lot of fun. Now I need to find the bag and I need your help.”

“You need me to ride along with you again? Should I bring my gun?”

“You shouldn’t need a gun. I just need someone to help me look around for things I might have missed. I’ve looked through the tapes and read Gina’s notes, but they don’t help a lot. We’re going to have to check out a few places.”

“OK, you’ve got me until 4 o’clock. My cousin’s getting married tonight and the family will disown me if I don’t show up. You should come too. It’ll be fun. They’ve hired the band *Dog Farts* for the reception.”

“Thanks, but Alex and this gym bag thing is going to keep me busy full time.”

“I figured. Speaking of those tapes, you should have seen the guy who brought them over. His name was Milo and he is gorgeous. I like my men big and solid. It’s too bad he didn’t know how much I like to be hugged and kissed in the office, like when that guy kissed you.”

“I’ve met Milo. Next time I see him I’ll let him know about your needs.”

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The first place we went to was Alex's apartment. Crime scene tape was still on the door, but there was nobody watching and Danica had given me a key. We slipped in and started searching. Although some of the clutter had been rearranged, the place was still a mess. Somebody had cleaned up the kitchen, throwing away the perishable food that had been thrown on the floor. I guess the police thought rotting peas and French fries weren't going to help in the investigation.

Sophie searched the kitchen and the living room. I searched the bathroom and the bedroom. I didn't find anything useful in the bathroom, but the bedroom looked more promising.

In the corner of the bedroom was a desk. I remembered it as having a computer, along with several stacks of papers. The computer was gone, presumably still in the crime lab, but the papers were still there. The piles had been rearranged but everything was still as I remembered it. I sat down and started on the first pile. It seemed to consist mainly of old bills. Unfortunately, as I went through the stacks I didn't find anything helpful.

I had just finished the last stack when Sophie came into the bedroom holding a small key.

"I found this in a drawer in the kitchen," She said. "Looks like a mailbox key."

While Sophie searched the living room, I went down and used the key in Alex's mailbox. There were two flyers from Wal-Mart, a catalogue from Land's End, and a couple of pre-approved offers for credit cards. There was also a letter from *Catalina's*, a high-end jewelry store in downtown Scottsdale.

I took the letter and went back up to the apartment. Opening it, I saw it contained two diamond appraisals dated four days before Alex

disappeared. The first stated the object being appraised was a 4.21-carat diamond. There were a lot of numbers and letters describing the diamond, but my eyes went to the bottom of the page. The appraised value was listed as \$33,500 per carat for a total value of \$141,000. The second was an appraisal for another diamond. This one was valued at \$31,700 per carat for a total value of \$147,000.

I took the appraisals and put them in my purse. Sophie didn't find anything in the living room except for a handful of hundred-dollar bills, which had been hidden in the pages of an old Bible. I wondered how the people who ransacked the apartment could have missed it. Maybe they weren't looking for money.

"You know, it's a damn shame we don't know if Alex is dead or not," Sophie said. "If he were dead, he wouldn't need this money. As it is, I have to put it back. If I took money from his Bible and he was still alive, I'd probably burn in Hell. Maybe even *La Llorona* would come for me."

"Who is *La Llorona*?" I asked.

"*La Llorona* is the weeping woman of the river. A long time ago she drowned her children in a river, in order to keep a man. I guess he hated kids. Then she killed herself out of grief over what she had done to her children. Her spirit still roams lakes and rivers, looking for her kids. Since now she is so old and blind, she can't tell if you are one of her children or not. If she finds you, she just grabs you and pulls you under the water."

"Then you're probably right to leave the money there," I said.

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The next stop on our list was Scottsdale Audi. Sophie stayed in the showroom looking at the new cars while I went in and found William

Martin. Even though it was Sunday morning, he was energetic and seemed happy to see me.

“On the Tuesday before he quit, was Alex at the Scottsdale Blue Palms?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But, I can find out in just a second.”

He turned to his computer and typed for several minutes on the keyboard. At last he looked up.

“Yes, that Tuesday, Alex delivered a new TT Roadster to a client who was staying at the Scottsdale Blue Palms. Is it important?”

“I don’t know. I’m just checking out a story I heard. I’ll let you know if I come up with anything.”

I stood up to leave. He again gave me the thumb and forefinger gunslinger’s salute.

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Next we drove over to the Scottsdale Tropical Paradise. Ingrid wasn’t working the art gallery. Instead there was a pushy older man who kept telling us he could arrange financing on any piece in the gallery. We left without making a purchase and without finding out anything new.

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From the Tropical Paradise, we made a stop at the Scottsdale Blue Palms, and the scene of the bag switch. Sophie and I walked around the main lobby then into the back lobby. The tape from the hotel security camera showed that Alex had come into the main lobby from this semi-hidden back lobby.

As we explored, we found there was nothing in the back lobby but a few shops and a rear entrance. Sophie decided to look around in a shop

that sold high-end, shoes, purses, and dresses. I went out to see what was beyond the back entrance.

I opened the door and went into the warm Arizona sunshine. I followed the path from the back lobby and saw it wound down to a parking lot and the main pool area. I assumed Alex had come up this way to make a quieter entrance into the lobby.

I turned and climbed back up the path to the rear lobby. Sophie had moved to a souvenir shop. She was holding up a paperweight of a dead scorpion encased in clear plastic.

“Isn’t this the nastiest thing you’ve ever seen in your whole life?” Sophie said. “I hate scorpions. Just looking at it makes me want to throw it on the floor and stomp on it.”

“So, go ahead. Buy it and stomp on it.”

“Nah,” she said, now holding the paperweight up and looking at it from the side. “You know what I’m gonna do instead? I’m gonna buy it. But then I think I’ll keep it on my desk. It’ll be sorta like having the world’s ugliest pet. The best thing about this kind of pet is I never have to feed it, or walk it, or pick up its crap from the carpet. Then, if I ever do get tired of it, I’ll take it out and stomp it. Maybe I’ll even run it over with my car.”

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Meyer’s Jewelry was our next stop. Jimmy Meyer was there, still looking like the world’s oldest hoodlum. We browsed the store for several minutes without finding any clues. Sophie bought a nice silver and turquoise ankle bracelet. She stopped outside the store and added it to the collection on her ankle.

It was getting late in the afternoon. I dropped Sophie off at the office in time to go to the wedding. She flipped me off when I told her to catch the bouquet.

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I called Max and my heart did double-time when he answered. I asked him if the bag had been found.

“There hasn’t been any word of it,” he said.

“What if the Russians or the brothers find it first? Won’t they just take the diamonds and leave the country?”

“The Russians are the sellers. If they find the bag they’ll call and tell us they have the diamonds. Then the sale would take place and everybody’s happy. If the brothers find it first, they might try to sandbag us for a day or two. They’d then most likely insist they had been insulted and try to leave the country with the diamonds. We’ve taken safeguards against that possibility.”

“So, what do you think? Does anyone have the bag yet?”

“I don’t think so. I just talked to both groups about an hour ago. I didn’t detect anything like that. They’re all the same ill-tempered jerks they’ve always been. Both groups are still demanding we find the diamonds and conduct the exchange. We have men shadowing both groups. Other than the fact that the Russians are still holding Alex, nothing of note is happening.”

“Any word on how Alex is doing?”

“None at all. The Russians are playing this pretty close. But it wouldn’t make sense for them to kill him or even seriously harm him. Every move they make is directed by Moscow and they don’t kill or maim without

reason. As long as there still is a chance to get the diamonds back, he should be OK.”

I said good-bye to Max and hung up the phone.

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I drove through the now-darkened streets of Scottsdale, ending up in front of Dos Gringos. I was feeling more than a little hungry and I knew a three-pack of street tacos would hit the spot. I went to a booth and ordered the tacos, along with a Diet Pepsi. The sound of the people laughing and the music playing in the restaurant helped me think.

In about ten minutes, the waitress delivered my dinner. As I slowly munched the tacos, I started at the beginning, piecing together what I knew:

The Russians brought the bag containing the diamonds into the country a week ago Tuesday. Alex delivered a car to the Blue Palms that same morning. While there, he stole the bag from the Russians. I had confirmed Alex was leading his usual life up until the point when he was asked by his boss to drive the car to the resort. Until he went to the Blue Palms, Alex didn't seem to be involved with any of it.

After he stole the bag, Alex most likely took it back to his apartment. He had probably looked into the bag on the way back to his apartment. This could account for where I found the CD, under the seat next to the passenger door. If Alex had just found the pouch with the three diamonds, he wouldn't have noticed if a disk had fallen out.

Alex had two of the diamonds appraised, but once he was told they were real, he didn't wait for the official reports to come in. He fenced the first diamond at a pawn shop in downtown Scottsdale. He got a pile of dough, quit his job, and then went crazy spending the money. A few days

later, while I was following him, he fenced the second diamond at Meyer's Jewelry, and the third at the Tropical Paradise.

Jimmy Meyer alerted Tony DiCenzo that he had just bought one of the missing diamonds. Ingrid Shanker, the pinched-faced art dealer, called DiCenzo and told him Alex was in the gallery fencing the third diamond with the Iceman, Albert Reinhardt, at which point DiCenzo's men began trailing him.

Since Alex was fencing the diamonds, DiCenzo's guys naturally assumed Alex was the one who had the bag and was acting alone, but they couldn't know for sure. If they were wrong and they just grabbed Alex, his partner would bolt, diamonds and all, never to be seen again. Instead, they followed Alex around for a couple of days to see if he would lead them to the bag and the rest of the diamonds. They had already searched his apartment and knew the diamonds weren't there.

DiCenzo found out about my involvement through the hotel security tapes at the Tropical Paradise. He then used Lenny to hire Gina and me to help him search for the missing bag independently. DiCenzo probably told both the Russians and the Consortium brothers he was going to have me assigned to the case. Tony didn't realize how quickly the Russians and brothers would become impatient and both groups would try to kidnap me to find out what I knew.

The Russians then tried a more direct approach. They trashed Alex's apartment. When they didn't find what they were looking for, they kidnapped Alex in hopes of torturing him to find out what he knew.

The brothers were also frustrated the diamonds hadn't been found. Since the Russians already had Alex, they decided I would be the next best hope of finding out what they wanted. Unfortunately for them, I

escaped. I know they would have come after me again if DiCenzo hadn't warned them off. So now there was nothing for them to do but to wait, at least I hoped they would wait.

Danica's house was trashed the day after the Russians kidnapped Alex. Under torture Alex must have spilled the beans that Danica was his girlfriend and where she lived. The Russians must have thought her house would be a likely place for him to hide the diamonds. I also assumed the reason my apartment hadn't been trashed was that DiCenzo's men had already gone through it and had told everyone it was clean. Maybe I need to install another deadbolt.

So where was the bag? If Alex thought the gym bag was empty, there was a real possibility he had thrown it away. A shudder went down my spine at the thought of that. No, if Alex had simply thrown the bag away he would have confessed that to the Russians. They would have then tortured him until they were convinced he was telling the truth. Everyone would have stopped looking for the bag, or at least be looking for it in the Maricopa County landfill. Since that hadn't happened, it must still be around somewhere. The question is, where?

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After dinner, I got back in my car and drove around Scottsdale. This helps me think and sometimes I'll drive past something that will jog my memory. I shoved a Katy Perry CD in the player and turned the sound up. The light bouncy music helped me concentrate.

I drove around Old Town. I drove the neighborhood around Alex's apartment. I drove around Gainey Ranch. I even drove back up to the north Scottsdale golf resorts.

After almost two hours of driving, I had to admit I had nothing. I drove back home to Marlowe and went to bed.

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I had another sleepless night and got up in a bleary-eyed depression. A hot shower helped clear my head. I pulled on jeans and my favorite red knit top, swiped on some make-up, and again did the ponytail thing with my hair.

I got in my car and drove to the office. It wasn't there was anything going on there. I just didn't want to sit at home waiting for another idea to pop into my head.

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Sophie had just arrived. I could tell this because she was still reading the southern California surf report on her tablet. I had seen her do this a hundred times. In her youth she had been a California surfer chick and old habits die hard. She heard me coming in from the back offices.

"They must be having a storm in the Pacific today," she yelled back at me. "Laguna has overhead waves this morning. I'd love to be back there. It would give me a chance to wear my purple wet suit. I haven't worn it in years."

I walked into the front part of the office. Gina was nowhere to be seen. I plopped down on the chair besides Sophie's desk.

"Wow," she said, "you look terrible. No luck in finding the bag last night?"

"Nope," I said, "And I'm out of ideas. I just don't know where to go next. How was the wedding?"

“It was great. I met a cute electrical engineer. He works at the Intel plant in Chandler.”

“Did Gina come up with anything yet?”

“She has an interview with a man who knows the woman in the lobby who lost her bikini top. Gina hopes to get a line on whoever paid her to flash her boobs. Apparently, bikini woman works at Jeannie’s, so Alex probably knew her and it was most likely him.”

“We’ve assumed it was Alex, but if it wasn’t we’ll have something new to go on. I’m out of leads. I have no idea where the freakin’ bag is.”

After that we both sat in silence. Sophie had stopped looking at her computer. She instead was staring into space, chewing on her lower lip, apparently deep in thought. I was about to ask her about it.

“There’s one thing I don’t get,” Sophie slowly said. “We don’t think Alex had anything to do with this until he showed up at the Blue Palms to deliver the car.”

“True,” I said. “Before that, he seemed to be leading a normal life. I talked to his parole officer about it. He said con men sometimes have a relapse. Sometimes an easy con just falls into their lap. They can’t help themselves. They just steal out of a knee-jerk reaction.”

“OK, I get that part. But, if that’s true, then Alex didn’t know he was going to steal the Russian’s bag until he saw it that morning. Maybe he went to the front desk to ask about the person he was delivering the car to? Maybe he saw the little guy holding the bag tightly to his chest? Maybe he could tell it was valuable? Maybe he somehow talked bikini girl into losing her top to create a distraction? I get all that. What I don’t get is where did he get the bag he used to make the switch? Odds are

pretty low he just happened to be carrying around the exact same color and type of gym bag.”

It was like somebody turned on a light in my head. It was so obvious. Where *did* Alex get the bag? A bag that was so identical the Russians didn’t know it was switched until they opened it? I had been assuming Alex had some time to plan this out, but Sophie was right. This was most likely a spontaneous event for Alex. He had to get a bag from somewhere in the hotel. If I could find out where Alex got it, maybe I’d have a clue to finding the one that was switched. We didn’t see any gym bags in the hotel when we were there the day before. But we really hadn’t been looking for one. Maybe I should look again.

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I got to my car and drove up Scottsdale Road to the Blue Palms. For the second day in a row, I walked into the lobby and looked around. Several shops were located in both the front and the back lobbies, but none of them sold gym bags. One shop carried luggage, but the smallest piece there was much larger than the bag Alex had on the videotape. I asked the woman behind the counter if they sold gym bags or anything small enough to look like a gym bag. She said no, but suggested I try the souvenir shop.

The souvenir shop sold backpacks and beach bags, but no gym bags. I walked around and looked for a locker room or a weight room, without luck. Dejected, I walked over to a comfortable couch and sat. Where could Alex have found a gym bag on a moment’s notice? He would have had five or ten minutes, at most, before both the Russians, and the bag, disappeared forever. Not to mention he also had to convince a woman to flash herself in public.

I let my eyes wonder around the back lobby. I ended up glancing at a shop I had seen before. Again it was like somebody had turned on a light in my head.

When Gina and I first saw the security videotape, Lenny said the small black bag was a gym bag. I hadn't questioned it. Gina hadn't either. It sort of looked like a small black gym bag and we just assumed Lenny knew what he was talking about. Could Lenny have been wrong? Up until now, nobody knew exactly what the bag looked like. With the poor quality of the videotape it could have been any type of bag. All of the guys have assumed it was a gym bag. Mobsters are tough guys, after all, and tough guys carry black gym bags.

I got up and walked into the shop. Thirty seconds later I knew where Alex had gotten his bag. I also knew what he did with the bag after he took the three diamonds out of it.

THIRTEEN

I sped down Scottsdale Road, hung a hard left at Doubletree Ranch Road, and raced into Danica's subdivision. I pulled into her neighborhood and drove to her house.

When Danica answered the door she looked better than she had Saturday night, but I could tell she still hadn't gotten a lot of sleep. She had on a short tropical print sundress with spaghetti straps and flat sandals. She was only wearing a hint of make-up and her hair was bunched in a loose knot on top of her head. It was the closest I had ever seen Danica to being messy.

"Hey," I said, letting myself in. "How's the clean-up going?"

"Oh, it's going OK. There's just so much damage. It's going to take a few days to go through everything. The police came over again this morning and were here for almost an hour. They just left a few minutes ago. I think now they're trying to see if this has anything to do with Alex or not."

We walked through the destruction of the living room and into the kitchen. Danica pulled an open bottle of white wine from the refrigerator. She poured out a full glass and handed it to me. She then refilled her glass, which had been almost empty. Danica held up her glass and looked at it.

"For some reason they decided not to break my wine glasses. I thought I should celebrate by using them a lot today."

I held up my glass and she tapped it with hers. It made a pleasant dinging sound.

“The other night you thought nothing was taken,” I said. “Have you found anything that’s missing yet?”

“I’ve spent all morning sorting through the mess. The insurance company wants me to make a list of everything that’s missing or damaged. I’ve gone through the entire house and I haven’t found anything missing. Damaged yes, destroyed yes, missing no.”

“What about your purse?” I asked. “The big black shoulder bag you’ve been carrying around all week.”

She looked at me like I was just short of insane. “I don’t know. I put it in the closet a couple of days ago. I’ll go see if it’s still there.”

We got up and went into the living room. She walked into her bedroom, only to return a moment later. I knew the answer by the look on her face. I felt my heart sink.

“It’s gone. How did you know?” she said, wonder in her voice. “Who would ransack an entire house, ignore thousands of dollars’ worth of jewelry and art, only to steal an empty purse? Sure, it was a Farucci, but there wasn’t a wallet or a checkbook in it. Not even any make-up, nothing.”

Two chairs in this room were more or less intact. I sat in one and waved for Danica to sit in the other.

“Tell me about the bag,” I said. “When did you get it?”

“There’s not much to tell,” she said. “It’s a Farucci Spy bag. I got it last week, on Tuesday, I think.”

“I saw you at Nexxus last Monday. You had it there, so you must have bought it before then.”

Danica blushed two shades of red.

“Danica,” I said. “What is it? Tell me what’s wrong.”

“If I tell you something, you’ve got to promise never to tell anybody. I’d never do anything to hurt Alex.”

“OK,” I said, mentally crossing my fingers. “I promise. Now what is it?”

“Well, the Saturday before he disappeared, Alex and I had dinner at *A Different Pointe of View*. It was so wonderful. That restaurant has one of the nicest views in the city. I could tell Alex was excited about something. He can’t ever hold a secret. After dinner he gave me a handbag. He even tied a red bow to the strap. Just seeing the look on his face as he gave it to me made me so happy. He hasn’t been able to afford many presents, so this was a big deal to him. I think it was the first spontaneous present he had ever given me. It was a Farucci, a Spy bag, just like the one they took from my closet.” Danica then leaned over and whispered to me: “But that one wasn’t a real Farucci. It was a knockoff, like they sell over the border in Rocky Point or Nogales.”

“Did Alex say where he got it?”

“He was a little vague about that at first, but he eventually said he found it.”

“He said he found it?”

“He said he found it in the trash in the back of the Scottsdale Blue Palms.”

“In the *trash*?”

“I know, but he said the rich women staying there are always tossing away things like that. He said that for some women, spending two thousand dollars for a purse isn’t any more of a big deal than me paying two hundred dollars for a pair of shoes. When they get tired of their

purses, they just toss them. I know I've sometimes done the same thing with shoes when I'm tired of them."

Man, I'd really like to take a crack at her closet.

"But since the bag was a fake, I thought maybe the woman was just too embarrassed to keep it."

"Did he say what he was doing up at the Blue Palms? That's quite a ways from where he lives or worked."

"He was delivering a sports car to a woman who was staying at the resort. He said he was driving the car around to the back and he saw the purse sitting on top of a pile of boxes in a dumpster."

"Was there anything in the bag when he found it?" I asked.

"I don't know. When he gave it to me it was empty. I even checked the pocket."

"Tell me more about it. You said it was a knock-off? Are you sure? How do you know it wasn't real?"

Danica just sat there, giving me a look.

"Hey," I said. "Don't give me that look. I need to know. I wouldn't know a real Farucci from a fake Farucci if it hit me in the head."

Danica looked down at my bag, \$18 at Bargain Barn. This brought a sad smile to her face.

"OK," she said. "Well, the exterior fabric and the hardware were OK. Maybe those parts were even real Farucci. But there were several parts of the bag nowhere near Farucci standards."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Well, first of all, it felt wrong. Real Farucci's are light and have a very smooth and balanced feeling. They just sort of *swing* as you walk with

them. This bag felt too heavy and wasn't balanced at all, like maybe the straps were stitched in the wrong position. And, there was a cheap leather insert sewn into the bottom. The quality of the leather and the stitching was nowhere near the quality of stitching on the rest of the bag. It seemed like they were using the leather to stiffen the bottom of the purse so it didn't sag when you put a wallet in it. You could also tell it was a fake Farucci because they used a cheap interior fabric, that's always a dead giveaway."

"I take it you didn't tell Alex it wasn't real?" I asked.

Her eyes softened. "Oh no, I didn't have the heart. You should have seen him. He was so proud of it. I didn't care he gave me a bag he pulled out of the trash, or wherever he got it. It was just sweet he thought of me. He thought he had found a real Farucci, a two thousand dollar bag. It would have crushed him if he found out it was just a knock-off."

"Where is the bag now? The fake Farucci?"

I saw that Danica was searching her mind. I didn't want to make it worse for her, but if she had thrown the bag away, the Russians would probably kill Alex, but not before I choked her to death first.

"Umm, I'm sorry, I don't remember," she said.

"Come on Danica," I said. "Think. When was the last time you had it?"

"Well, the only time I took the bag out was when we went to Nexxus for champagne. That was two nights after Alex gave it to me. We went to celebrate Alex getting his trust fund money. I couldn't help noticing our waitress kept staring at it. I could tell she knew it was a knock-off. It was so embarrassing. While we were sitting there drinking the second bottle of champagne, I decided to get a real Farucci and get rid of the fake.

Alex would want me to use the bag whenever we went out, but I just couldn't be seen in public with a fake Farucci."

"So you went shopping for a real one? When was this, the next day?"

"That's right. I remember I didn't know what to do with the fake. I had the bag in the car with me when I drove to Biltmore Fashion Park. I was thinking I had to get rid of it so Alex wouldn't find it. I stopped by work first to pick up my Cowgirl costume. I needed to drop it off at the dry cleaners. A guy had thrown up on it."

Ughh, gross!

She saw the look on my face.

"It happens sometimes," she said. "Oh, now I remember. I stuck the fake in my locker at the club."

Yes!

Mentally, I pumped my fist up and down and made mental *whooo-hooo* noises. Outwardly, I did my best to remain calm.

"OK, that's great," I said. "Now then, is it still there?"

"I don't know. Christy saw me put it in the locker. She dances at the club too. I've known her since I started there. She said it was a hot-looking purse. I told her it was a fake, but she said it looked real enough to her. I told her she could have it if she wanted it. She told me I was sweet and she'd pick it up later. I think she knows my locker combination, so unless she forgot she might have it by now."

I felt my heart sink again. It looked like I had found DiCenzo's missing bag of diamonds and now it was most likely gone again.

Why does my life suck so much?

Danica was watching me. She could see something was wrong.

“What is it?” she asked. “Why is a fake Farucci is so important? There isn’t anything in it and it can’t be worth more than about thirty dollars.”

I decided to level with her, more or less.

“Anthony DiCenzo is looking for that bag. He was sorta responsible keeping it safe, and then it disappeared. I had a meeting with him and he asked me to help him get the bag back. He’s not the kind of guy you refuse.”

Danica’s eyes got so big I was surprised they didn’t fall out of her head. Her breathing sped up and her face became a light crimson.

“You mean the bag that I loved, and the bag I was embarrassed by, and then the bag I gave away? That was Tony DiCenzo’s bag? Tough Tony? The mobster?” Her voice came in a loud but squeaky shout. “*Oh My God!* You’ve got to get it back to him! Nobody messes with Tough Tony and I mean nobody. People who mess with Tough Tony have a habit of disappearing. You had a meeting with him? *Oh my God*, Alex? Do you think Tough Tony took Alex?”

“When I talked with DiCenzo, he said his people didn’t have Alex, but I get the feeling we’ll need to get the bag back to DiCenzo before Alex is released.”

Danica stood up and began pacing back and forth, not knowing what to do.

“Look,” I said. “This should be easy. Is your friend Christy working today?”

She shook her head back and forth. “No, it’s her day off.”

“Why don’t you call her and see if she has the bag.”

“I can’t. She doesn’t believe in phones. But, I know where she lives.”

“Great,” I said. “Why don’t you go over to her house and see if she has it. I’ll go to Jeannie’s and see if the bag is still in the locker. You call me if you get it and I’ll call you if I get it. Before you go, call the manager over at Jeannie’s. Let him know I’m coming to get something out of your locker. Is there a lock on it?”

“Yeah, you need to keep things locked up there. The combination is 36-24-34.” She paused and blushed again. “My measurements.”

I just looked at her.

“Well,” she said, “I wanted a combination I could remember.”

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I almost flew the eight miles down Scottsdale road to the club. I pulled into Jeannie’s lot, parked in the first spot I saw, and ran to the door. The bouncers knew me by now and let me in without a word.

I made my way backstage and found the door to the dressing room. An unfamiliar bouncer stood at the entrance, looking very unhappy I was there. My explanation that I had permission to get a purse out of Danica’s locker didn’t seem to impress him. I talked to him for five long minutes before he ultimately called the manager to see what to do about me. Fortunately, Danica had put a call through to him and I was allowed to go in.

The dressing room was larger than I expected. There were four make-up chairs on either side of the room, each in front of a well-lighted mirror. Several of the mirrors were covered with photos of kids, men, and pets. I counted six women in the room. Two were changing costumes. One was gunking up her eyes with mascara in front of one of the make-up mirrors. The last three were having a conversation about a guy who had dated all three of them, but not at the same time, as far as I could tell.

Nobody seemed to care I was there. I guess they supposed if the bouncer let me in, I must belong there.

I went to the woman who was in the make-up chair. She had just finished with the mascara and was now outlining her lips with a dark crayon.

“Excuse me,” I said.

“Oh, hi,” she said. “I’m Cheri. Is this your first day? Just go and grab an empty locker. The costume racks are two doors down the hall, on the right. Go and pick out whatever you think will fit. I’ll help with your make-up if you’d like.”

I was getting frustrated. I just wanted to get to the damned locker.

“Thanks, but I’m just I’m looking for Danica’s locker. She sent me in to get something out of it.”

“Too bad,” the woman said looking me over, “a lot of the guys like skinny girls and you’d make some good tips. Danica’s locker is the one on the far right, but I think it has a lock on it.”

“That’s OK,” I said. “I’ve got the combination.”

With my heart pounding, I went to the locker. It had a cheap dial lock with a stainless steel body and a black dial. It was the kind of lock we had back in high school gym class.

I looked at the lock and realized I had forgotten how to open them. Was it left-right-left or right-left-right? After the first number, did the dial have to go around once to the second number, or twice? It took me three tries until I heard the soft metallic snap and the lock opened.

Danica’s locker was stuffed to the bursting point. Clothes were crammed onto the rack and shoes were stuffed in every possible opening.

I started pulling out things at random. There was a sequined red, white, and blue outfit with a matching bikini top and thong bottom. The outfit was held together with Velcro. For quick tear-away action, I assumed.

I took the outfit out of the locker and tossed it on a chair. Next was a blue silk harem girl costume with the same Velcro fasteners. This outfit joined the first on the chair. Next, I pulled out the red and white leather cowgirl outfit. I looked, but didn't see any throw-up stains on it. That went on the chair too.

At the bottom of the locker was a pair of red cowboy boots, probably for the cowgirl costume. I pulled out the boots.

Then I saw it. Underneath the boots was a black bag. I pulled it out. There was the Double "F" on the clasp signifying the bag was indeed a Farucci, real or fake.

I was so excited I almost squealed. I closed my eyes and held the bag to my chest, waiting for my heart to slow. I allowed a tiny thought creep into my head. *Perhaps things would work out? Perhaps Tony DiCenzo wouldn't have me hunted down? Maybe I could still get Alex back alive?* Naaah, it was too much to hope for. I decided I would just stick to finding out what was in the bag and hope everyone came out in one piece.

I was dying of curiosity about what was in the bag, but I didn't know who might be watching me. I took the bag by its straps and swung it back and forth. Danica was right. It did feel too heavy and it did seem out of balance. I've never owned a Farucci, but I was so pleased I could feel that for myself.

I looked inside the bag and saw it was empty. I also saw the leather piece sewn to the bottom, although to me it looked like it belonged there.

I felt the sides and bottom of the bag but I didn't feel anything that was lumpy or felt out of place.

I wanted to rip the bag in half to see if anything was inside, but I decided the dressing room of a strip club probably wasn't the best place. There, I thought, that was a good decision. Tony DiCenzo would have been proud of me.

My heart was still pounding and I felt like throwing up as I carefully returned the clothes to the locker and walked back to my car. My first thought was the office would be a good place to meet up with Danica and find out if anything was in the bag.

I pulled out my phone and gave her a call. No answer. I supposed she was still busy looking for Christy, wherever she lived. I left a message to meet at the office and gave her the address.

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I drove into downtown Scottsdale and pulled into my parking space behind the office. I looked around to see if I had been tailed. I didn't see anyone. Of course, that didn't mean anything. These guys had been following me for days and I never knew.

I unlocked back security door and went in. I pushed the door shut and I felt relieved when I heard the heavy lock snap into place. Sophie was up front typing at her computer, but Gina was nowhere to be seen.

"Sophie," I said. "Where's Gina?"

"She's still out on the interview. I thought she'd be back by now."

Great, of all the times for her to be gone.

I held the bag up. Sophie looked at it and her eyes grew wide.

"Is that what I think it is?"

“You’re not going to believe how I got it and you’re gonna poop kittens when you see what’s inside. We’ve got to open it up. Is Lenny here?”

“Naaah, he’s out greasing palms at the Courthouse. He won’t be back for another hour or two.”

“Good, that works. Give Gina a call and have her get back here as soon as she can. I’ll lock the doors. We can use Lenny’s office.”

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Two minutes later we were both sitting at Lenny’s desk. I grabbed a letter opener that had once belonged to J. Edgar Hoover and used it to rip open the seam holding the leather insert to the bottom of the bag. It was sewn in better than I had originally thought and it took a while to pull it apart.

“So, are you going to tell me what’s supposed to be in there?” Sophie asked, sticking her head halfway in the bag.

“Hey,” I said, “move your head. What’s in this bag is maybe nothing, but what’s in this bag is maybe something that will save my butt.”

With one last yank, the leather pulled free. I reached in and jerked on a cloth-wrapped bundle that was glued to the bottom of the bag. With a ripping sound, the bundle tore free.

I held it up to look at it. It was about six or seven inches wide, a foot long, and inch thick. Surprisingly, it was flexible and supple. I supposed this helped hide the fact it was sewn into the bottom of the purse. A stiff bundle would have given it away.

I took out a pair of scissors and cut the cloth away to reveal a large piece of opaque blue gel, sorta like a big gel shoe cushion. I felt around on a corner of the gel and found a hard lump. I pushed on the backside of

the lump and something popped out the front. It fell on Lenny's desk with a gentle *Clink*.

Sophie and I just sat there, stunned. We both stared at it for a full ten seconds. Sophie then reached down and gave it a light flick with her finger. It rolled a few inches across the desk then came to a stop.

"Umm, is that a diamond?"

"Sure looks like one," I replied.

"It's a big one."

"It sure is."

"I don't think I've ever seen one sparkle quite like that."

"Me either."

"Think there're any more diamonds in that big hunk of blue goo you're holding?"

"Yup."

"Any idea how many more?"

"Oh, two hundred and fifty, maybe three hundred."

"*You're shitting me?*"

"Nope."

"Umm, you wouldn't mind telling me a little bit more about this, would you?"

"Sure," I said, popping out another diamond from the strip of blue gel. It too fell onto the desk with a *Clink*.

"These diamonds belong to members of the Russian Mafia, who have kidnapped and are torturing Alex Sternwood in an effort to get them back."

*Clink.*

“These are the same Russians who tried to kidnap me out by Saguaro Lake.”

*Clink.*

“The Russians brought the diamonds to Scottsdale to sell them to two brothers from a group called the Consortium.”

*Clink.*

“These are the same two who kidnapped and threatened to kill me.”

*Clink.*

“Alex stole the bag from the Russians in the lobby of the Scottsdale Blue Palms. Well, to be technical, he switched it with an identical bag he had just bought or stolen from the hotel dress shop.”

*Clink.*

“Inside the bag Alex found three diamonds and a computer disk. Alex didn’t know the bag contained anything else, so he gave it to Danica, as a present.”

*Clink.*

“Danica thought the bag was a fake Farucci and was too embarrassed to be seen in public with it. So, she bought another bag, a ‘real’ Farucci. She put this one in her locker at Jeannie’s Cabaret, where it’s been sitting since last week.”

*Clink.*

“The Russians found out from DiCenzo that Alex had the bag. They ransacked his apartment looking for it. Under orders, they killed the diamond courier, cut off his hands, and left him in Alex’s apartment.

They did this as a message and warning to everybody they were serious about getting the bag back.”

*Clink.*

“Unfortunately, Alex walked in on them and they took the opportunity to kidnap him.”

*Clink.*

“Alex must have told the Russians he gave the bag to Danica. They searched her house on Saturday and took the Farucci she had just bought. I imagine they got pretty upset when they found out there was nothing in it.”

*Clink.*

“Anthony DiCenzo, the mobster, is brokering the sale of the diamonds between the Russians and the Consortium. He asked me to help him find the bag and get the diamonds back before more people get killed, or worse, before everybody gets upset and goes home.”

*Clink.*

“Oh, umm, OK,” Sophie said. “Thanks for clearing that up!”

We sat in silence as I pushed out diamonds, one by one, *Clink, Clink, Clink*, from the blue gel. The diamonds were starting to form a pretty little pile.

As I was pushing, Sophie picked up one of the diamonds and rolled it between her fingers. “How big do you think these are?”

“According to DiCenzo, they’re all three to five carats and most are internally flawless.”

“Not bad. Did he happen to mention what color grade they are?”

“Must have slipped his mind.”

I sat there for almost fifteen minutes popping out diamonds. My fingers were starting to get sore. Sophie had turned to Lenny's computer and was looking up something on the Internet.

With a final push, the last diamond popped out and landed on the glittery pile.

"Any idea of how much is there, all together?" Sophie asked.

"Oh, about half a pound," I said.

"Oh really? Half a pound, huh?" Sophie said, and started punching numbers into the calculator on Lenny's desk. After a moment she stopped.

"OK," she said, taking a deep breath. "Half a pound of diamonds is roughly two hundred and thirty grams. I looked it up and there are five carats to a gram, so there are a little over eleven hundred carats there. Now, according to the Internet, a diamond that is in the three to five carat range, is internally flawless, has an ideal cut, and a good color is worth about \$33,000 a carat. This means your pretty little pile there is worth about, umm, *thirty-seven million dollars!*"

*Thirty-seven million dollars?*

*Shit!*

We both just sat there for a minute. My brain had temporarily gone numb. Sophie was pushing the pile of diamonds around on the desk with the tips of her long fingernails. I watched as the diamonds sparkled.

"What's going on? *And what the hell is on Lenny's desk?*" a loud voice from behind us demanded.

We both turned to see Gina standing in the doorway.

“Hey Gina, good news!” Sophie said, holding up the ripped and battered Farucci by one strap. “Laura found your missing bag.”

“Right at this moment,” Gina said. “I wasn’t really talking about *the bag*. I was talking more about these.” Gina went to the desk and picked up a handful of diamonds, letting them fall through her fingers. They tumbled back on the desk to again form a shimmering mound.

“Umm, they’re diamonds,” I said.

“Yeah, big sparkly ones,” Sophie added.

“So, why is there a pile of big sparkly diamonds on Lenny’s desk?”

“We didn’t think we should have them on Sophie’s desk,” I said. People could see them from the street.”

“Yeah,” Sophie added. “You know, you can’t be too careful when you have thirty-seven million dollars’ worth of diamonds sitting out on a desk.”

Gina sat down next to us and we again sat in silence for a couple of minutes. We all started to run our fingers through the pile. I picked up a few diamonds and let them fall back on the mound. Sophie broke the silence.

“So Laura, what’s you gonna do with all these big sparkly diamonds?”

Ok, good question. It was the same question I had been asking myself. So what was I going to do with the diamonds? I should have just said I was taking them straight over to DiCenzo, but I didn’t.

Instead, my fingers were still dancing over the shining mound. My mind was thinking about what I could do with thirty-seven million dollars. What would I do first? An around-the-world cruise? A red Ferrari? Buy shoes that weren’t on the clearance rack?

*Damn, the possibilities were endless.*

I shut my eyes and shook my head to clear it.

*OK girl, back to reality.*

“Oh, I need to get them back to DiCenzo,” I heard myself saying. “A lot of people are likely to get hurt if I don’t, including me.”

“You know,” Gina said. “We could disappear down into Mexico with that pile of rocks. We could each live like a Persian Princess.”

“Yeah,” said Sophie. I have a cousin near Guadalajara who has been known to sell things like this, from time to time. He could help us out. I always thought I should have been born rich. This would help make up for it.”

“Oh, I know and it’s tempting,” I said, “but I can’t. I don’t want to spend my life on the run, no matter how much money I get out of it.”

“Maybe we could each take just one then?” Sophie asked. “They’d never miss a couple of little ones.”

“It would be the same thing as taking the whole lot.” I said. “I’d never be sure who knew I did it, or who might want to get even someday. If I’m going to do this, it’s with a clean conscience.”

“You know,” Sophie pouted, “sometimes I really hate that conscience of yours.”

## FOURTEEN

I grabbed the phone on Lenny's desk and called Max. He answered on the first ring.

"Max, I have the diamonds. What do you want me to do with them?"

"Lock the doors and stay put. Milo and I will be down in ten minutes."

"You already know where I am?"

"Of course."

"Then you already knew I had the diamonds?"

"Not exactly knew, but yah, I suspected. Tony got a call about twenty minutes ago from the Consortium brothers, Smith and Jones. They've got your friend, Danica."

"*Oh my god!* Danica? Is she all right?"

"She's OK, for the moment anyway. They apparently picked her up just after she visited a friend of hers who also works at the club."

My voice dropped to a whisper. "That would be Christy," I said, becoming very afraid for Danica. "She thought Christy might have the bag, but it was still in her locker at the club."

"Well, after the brothers kidnapped your friend they apparently slapped her around some. They threatened her with worse violence unless she talked. She told them all she knew about the bag in her locker and that you were on your way to get it. The brothers are convinced you've recovered the diamonds. They're demanding the exchange take place at three o'clock, that's a little over an hour from now. Tony agreed, on the condition you've actually been able to locate the diamonds. I've called

Reinhardt and the Russians and told them to stand by. I also told the Russians to make sure they bring Alexander Sternwood with them. The exchange will take place at a secure location in north Scottsdale.”

On the phone I heard the muffled sounds of Max telling DiCenzo it was me on the phone and I had the diamonds. I then heard DiCenzo giving orders to several men, one after another. After a pause, he took the phone from Max.

“Laura Black, this is Tony DiCenzo. Maximilian tells me you’ve found the diamonds. Is this true?”

“I’ve got them right here. Milo and Max are coming to get them.”

“Yeah, it’s a good idea not to have you or the diamonds unprotected from here on out. You’re at your place of employment I hear? That’s good. You’ll be safe there until they arrive. Then we’ll all head to the exchange.”

“Tony, are you still having me followed?”

“Yeah, I’ve got two of my best guys on you. They’re very discreet, but per our agreement they’ve been told to give you a hand if you need one. They’re parked down the street, keeping an eye on things.”

“Tony,” I said, starting to get upset. “If you knew I already had found the bag, why didn’t you just come get the diamonds?”

“Because I didn’t know for sure. Besides, that’s not how I operate. You’re on my team. I knew if you had the diamonds, you’d let me know.”

“Yes, but how could you be sure? What if I just found the diamonds and took off?”

There was a pause at other end of the phone.

“You seem like a nice girl, Laura Black. Let’s not even joke about that, OK?”

*Yikes!*

“One last thing,” DiCenzo said. Is there anybody with you but your two coworkers, Miss Rondinelli and Miss Rodriguez?”

“No, it’s just the three of us. How did you know?”

“How I know is not important. If you will, put me on the speaker phone.”

I hit the button so Gina and Sophie could also hear DiCenzo. Sophie crossed herself.

“I have some information about your friend Danica. The brothers are keeping her in the same abandoned print shop they took you a few days ago. I assume you remember the one I’m talking about? The brothers will be leaving there shortly to come here for the exchange. From the way they talked, they’ll be keeping Danica around for a celebration party afterwards. To be honest, it didn’t sound none too pretty for your friend.

Now, normally I wouldn’t interfere in something that wasn’t none of my business. But, since you helped me recover the diamonds, I feel I owe you. Besides, those two fuckin’ guys give me the creeps.”

“Tony,” I yelled at the phone. “You don’t know what they’re going to do to her. We’ve got to get her out of there!”

“Oh, I gotta pretty good idea what they’re gonna do to her, but no, Laura Black, I need you up here with me. Besides, I can’t be directly involved. I’m officially neutral in all of this, but perhaps one of your friends would be willing to help her?”

“Mr. DiCenzo,” Gina said. “I’ll get her. After what they almost did to Laura, I wouldn’t want them to have another chance to do that to somebody else.”

“That’s Miss Rondinelli speaking, isn’t it?” DiCenzo said. “Good. I’ve also heard good things about you. Please, call me Tony. Maybe you and I can do business together someday.”

“Sure Tony,” Gina said. “Maybe we can.”

“OK, Laura Black,” DiCenzo said. “You’ve done real good so far, but don’t let your knees get weak. Milo and Max will be there to get you in a few minutes. We still got a shitload of stuff to do, and trust me, this is gonna be an interesting day.” With that DiCenzo hung up the phone.

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I went into the bathroom and found a metal bandage box in the first aid kit. I dumped out the bandages and walked back into Lenny’s office. Sophie helped me scoop the diamonds into the box. Then I pushed the box into the front pocket of my jeans. There was a bulge in my pants and the box barely fit, but it was unlikely I’d lose them.

Sophie and I walked back to the cubicles and found Gina getting into her combat gear. She had just fastened on a bulletproof vest and was in the process of strapping on a Velcro web belt, complete with her Beretta, handcuffs, stun gun, and pepper spray. Watching Gina gear up I began to realize just what I had gotten myself into.

“Sophie,” I quietly said. “You gotta come with me.”

“Me?” Sophie asked. “Oh no, no way! Tony DiCenzo didn’t say nothin’ about bringing me. Take Gina, she would be way better than me. Too many guns give me the diarrhea. Those two brothers are just nasty, not to mention those Russians who tried to shoot you. I don’t want to be

anywhere near any of them. Just look at Gina here, she lives for this shit. Take her instead.”

“Gina’s going to get Danica and I can’t wait for her to get back. Please Sophie, I need you. I can’t do this alone. Besides, if you don’t go you’ll be cranky for weeks because you missed everything. Remember the last time?”

Sophie nodded her head then gave an exasperated sigh.

Gina opened a drawer in her desk and pulled out a chrome-plated .32 caliber semi-automatic. “You’ll do great, but you may need this.” I saw Sophie look at Gina, then at the gun.

“Well, all right, I’ll go,” she said. “I’ll use my own gun though, not that little pea-shooter. But Laura, I swear, if I get shot, I’ll be so pissed at you.”

We followed Sophie out to her desk where she opened her bottom drawer and took out her bag. She reached in and pulled out a Smith & Wesson .357 magnum.

“*Holy shit*, that’s a Dirty Harry gun! Where’d you get that?” Gina asked.

“It’s my brother’s. There was some trouble back home last week. I’m holding it for him until things settle down.”

“Well,” said Gina. “That should do the job.”

Outside we saw a black BMW sedan pull up. Milo was driving. Max got out and stood next to the car. He was dressed in a white linen suit with a black collarless shirt. A black Town Car pulled out from where it had been parked, halfway down the block, and slid into place behind the BMW.

“Well girls,” I said. “It’s show time.”

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We drove in silence toward the resorts of north Scottsdale. Sophie sat up front with Milo. I was in back with Max. As if my heart wasn’t already beating hard enough from outright fear, sitting next to him had kicked it up a couple more steps.

Other than questioning me with a raised eyebrow, Max didn’t object to Sophie coming with us. For her part, Sophie seemed be handling the situation as well as could be expected. She had smashed herself against to Milo, but in her case it wasn’t because of her libido. She had the fingers of her left hand embedded in Milo’s thigh while her right hand was fingering some rosary beads she had pulled out of her purse.

*Damn, I could really use a smoke.*

We drove north until we came into the heart of the resort district. Instead of pulling into a resort, we turned down a side street, then another, and then another. We ended up on a dirt road that wound through a desolate desert area near the back of a golf course.

After half a mile, the road ended in a dirt parking lot in front of a large blue metal building. The parking lot was at least an acre in size and was surrounded by dozens of half-dead fan palms and stunted orange trees. Parked in the dirt lot were several pieces of golf course maintenance equipment, all in various states of repair. There were lawn mowers, tractors, and carts full of irrigation supplies. The large metal building looked to be the garage and workshop for the bigger pieces of equipment.

Max collected our guns and put them in the glove compartment. He smiled as Sophie handed over the magnum. Sophie and I just looked at each other and shrugged.

We got out of the car and walked toward the building. Sophie grabbed my hand and held it in a death grip. She was so scared I could hear her teeth chattering.

Standing in front of the large open doorway was Tough Tony DiCenzo. Flanking him on either side were two beefy guys, each dressed a blue sport coat, each holding an assault rifle.

Although DiCenzo was dressed casually in slacks and a Polo shirt, the look on his face was far from casual. The look on his face was all business. I'd sometimes seen the same look on Reno. I'd always thought of it as his cop face. This face would give nothing away.

DiCenzo stood like a bull in the center of the doorway, his eyes intent and narrowed. He glanced toward Sophie, then to Max. I saw Max give a barely perceptible nod. With this, Tony's face softened slightly. We reached the doorway and Tony held out his hand to Sophie.

"I'm Tony DiCenzo," he said. "I take it you are Sophia Rodriguez?"

Sophie put out a shaky hand. She opened her mouth and let out a small squeak we all took for a yes.

"The others will be here shortly." Tony said to all of us. "Come on back to the office and have a seat."

We followed DiCenzo into the building. The interior of the building was a large open room with an oil-stained concrete floor. It smelled of gasoline and freshly-cut grass. A half-assembled tractor was sitting off to the side. Against the left wall was a machine shop with various industrial tools. The entire right side of the building consisted of a single enclosed office. This is where we headed. The two goons with the guns stayed at the main door.

We had almost reached the office when we heard the sound of an approaching car. DiCenzo told us to go in the office and wait. He then went to welcome the newcomers.

The interior of the office consisted of a beat-up couch, some metal chairs, a large wooden table, and a couple of green Formica-topped desks. Last year's calendar was nailed to the wall. It featured a bikini-clad brunette straddling a muffler. Against the back wall was a row of mismatched metal filing cabinets. From the fresh scratch marks on the floor, I could see the furniture had been moved around recently. There were windows looking both into the interior of the building and into the outside yard. The air smelled of oil and cigarettes.

In the back corner of the room was a portable bar, along with four black bar stools. It looked so out of place I assumed it was brought here just for our meeting.

Behind the bar was the woman I had seen at Junior Brown's, two nights before. Max had said her name was Gabriella. He had also told me she was only used in emergencies. She was dressed in black leather pants and a red leather shirt. Her shirt was open to expose an eyeful of cleavage. Her long black hair had been pulled back into a ponytail. She was just as beautiful, and just as dangerous, as I had remembered from seeing her that night in the club.

Ingrid Shanker, the pinched-faced woman from the art gallery in the Tropical Paradise, was sitting behind a desk and table that had been set up near the side of the room. She was typing on the keyboard of a notebook computer. The table was partially covered with a large piece of black velvet. The cloth was positioned so it sat in a shaft of sunlight coming in from the window. Next to the computer was an expensive-looking digital scale.

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We heard the opening and closing of car doors, and then the muffled sound of DiCenzo talking to two men. After moment, DiCenzo came into the office. Following him were Boris and Ivan, the two Russians. Held between them was Alex Sternwood. He looked terrible. His hands were cuffed behind him and he was having a hard time keeping up with the Russians. His face was a mass of angry red and purple bruises. His nose was bent to one side. Both of his eyes were blackened and one of them was swollen shut. The Russians stopped and flung him to the floor in front of Sophie and me. Alex tried to get up, but then collapsed. If it weren't for his moaning, I would have assumed he was dead.

I started to take a step forward but DiCenzo held up a hand to stop me. He spoke to the Russians in a firm, but courteous, voice:

“Thank you for bringing this man. I consider it as a personal favor to me. Do you have any conditions for his release?”

Boris stepped forward. “Do you have possession of the diamonds?”

“I do,” DiCenzo said.

“Then you may have this one. We have extracted all needed information and we have taught him it is a mistake to steal from us. I had wished to eliminate him, but we are under strictest orders not to do so. He is very fortunate that he got off so lucky.”

Ivan took a step towards where Alex was lying. He pulled a handcuff key out of his pocket and casually flicked it. The key bounced off Alex's back and landed on the floor with a ringing sound.

Alex made another attempt to push himself up. Again, he collapsed, this time falling on his side. He lay there with his eyes wide open. He was panting but at least the moaning had stopped.

Even though I was horrified at what had happened to Alex, I was also touched by what DiCenzo had said. I told Tony I had the diamonds, but I'd never actually shown them to him. DiCenzo was risking his reputation, and possibly even his life, that I was being honest with him. In a way, he was very sweet.

DiCenzo walked over to where Alex was lying and bent down to quietly talk to him. "The Russians may be done with you, but I'm not. You've cost me time, you've cost me resources, and you almost fucked up my reputation. I'm not through with you and that's a fact."

DiCenzo stood up and turned towards Sophie. "In the meantime, Ms. Rodriguez, would you please go with Mr. Sternwood? It would be best if he has someone kind and understanding near him for the next few hours. Milo will take you both to a clinic where they will fix him up and not ask a lot of questions."

I saw Max talk into his hand, like the Secret Service agents do. I noticed he was now also wearing an earpiece. Sophie and I went over to see about Alex. I picked up the key and gave it to Sophie, who unlocked Alex's handcuffs.

Thirty seconds later, Milo pulled into the building and parked a black Town Car in front of the office. Two goons appeared out of nowhere, scooped up Alex, and laid him on the back seat. Sophie got in on the seat next to Alex. Milo backed out of the building and took off.

The sound of Milo's car had just faded down the road when we heard another car come into the yard. DiCenzo didn't even have time to walk out of the office before there was the skid of tires and the slamming of car doors. There was loud shouting in that weird foreign language. I had

never figured out what it was, but I hated hearing it. My stomach tightened to the point I thought I was going to throw up.

Hearing their voices brought back all of the horrible details of a few days before. Hate and rage welled up inside of me. I thought about just grabbing a gun and shooting them both as they came in the room. OK, so maybe it wasn't the way to solve anything, but it still sounded like a good idea.

Smith and Jones strolled in looking smug as ever. Each had on a brown leather bomber jacket and gold-rimmed sunglasses. Jones's nose was swollen and he had two black eyes. The brothers loudly complained that DiCenzo should have personally driven them from their hotel. They were offended that representatives of the Consortium were being treated so disrespectfully. DiCenzo gave them a clenched teeth apology and the brothers seemed temporally mollified. Jones saw me standing against the wall. Our eyes made contact and he flew into another rage.

"What is this one doing here?" he shouted. "We will not conduct business with this slut in the building."

I know I should have kept quiet, but I was pissed. "What have you jerks done to Danica? Where is she?"

"We haven't done anything to her, yet," Smith said, amusement now in his voice. There hasn't been enough time to do more than to teach her a few manners."

He then smiled a small sick smile. "Although, my brother has told her in some detail what he will do to her when we get back. I'm afraid that after what you did to his face, he is very much in the mood to abuse an American *harridan*."

“If you two assholes hurt her, I’ll hunt you down like dogs. I’ll shoot you in places that won’t kill you, but you’ll wish the hell it had.”

“Still you tongue, bitch,” Jones shouted. “Why do you anger over that one? She is only a filthy American whore, an unclean slut who dances naked for money. For the first time in her life she will be with a true man. I have already told her how I will use her for pleasure. If she pleases me, then she will live. If she does not, then I will cut her for the joy of watching her bleed.”

I took a step forward. I really needed to hit someone. Max had hold of my arm and I wasn’t able to get any closer. I tried to get loose of his grip, but it was no use.

Tony stepped between the brothers and me. “People, there ain’t no reason to act like this. I don’t give a damn if you like each other or not. We’re here for business, not to go off on each other.”

DiCenzo turned to the brothers. “Gentlemen, this woman is here at my invitation and under my protection. I expect you to treat her with some courtesy. Miss Black,” he said turning to me. “What these men do with your friend ain’t none of my business. Any problem you have with them needs to be taken up after our business is finished.”

DiCenzo then took a step back and smiled. It really was a friendly smile. “Now as a favor to me, and to help things go smoothly, would everybody keep their emotions in check for the next couple of hours? After that, I don’t give a fuck what you do to each other.”

DiCenzo looked at me. I nodded my head that I would comply with his request. He then looked over to the brothers.

Smith waved his hand impatiently. “Let us proceed,” he said in a tone filled with disgust. “That one is not important enough to waste further

breath on.”

Still wanting to hit someone, I walked over to the window and looked out at the dirt parking lot. A Town Car pulled into the lot and came to a stop. A driver got out and opened the rear door. Albert Reinhardt, the Iceman, stepped out. He was carrying a stainless steel briefcase, the kind popular with drug dealers and concert promoters. The driver got back into the car and it pulled away. Reinhardt walked into the office and Tony introduced him to the group.

Boris pulled out a yellow CD case and handed it to Tony. “On this disk is a list of every diamond that will be exchanged,” Boris said. “You will see this list exactly matches the information that has already been provided to you.”

Tony handed the disk to Ingrid, who put it in her computer. After a moment, a spreadsheet opened on the screen. It was the same spreadsheet I had seen in Suzie Lu’s apartment two days ago. I felt the room go still as everyone turned to look at me.

“All right Laura Black,” Tony said. “It’s time for the diamonds.”

I reached into the front pocket of my jeans and pulled on the bandage box. I tried three times, but I couldn’t pull the box out of my tight pants. It was wedged in and I couldn’t get a grip on the slippery metal sides. Panic began to set in as I looked up to see everyone in the room staring at me. I had an uncomfortable vision of having to unzip my pants in order to get the box out. Finally, with a sense of desperation, I gave a hard yank and the box pulled free.

I walked to the table and slowly poured the half-pound of diamonds in a pile in the middle of the black velvet. Sunlight from the window shone down on the pile and shot thousands of bright rainbows throughout the

room. It was like standing next to the world's brightest disco ball. Gabriella let out a gasp. I also heard a collective sigh from the men in the room.

DiCenzo walked to the table and bent over. "These things have been causing me nothing but trouble for weeks, but Jesus, they're fuckin' beautiful."

Reinhardt pulled a chair next to the table. He opened his briefcase and took out a case containing jeweler's tools and a small box. He set the box on the table next to the scale and then opened it. Inside was a row of seven or eight diamonds. The diamond on the left was a brilliant white. Looking down the row, each diamond was a little more yellow. The diamond on the far right was a golden honey color.

Under the watchful eyes of the Brothers and the Russians, Reinhardt took out a pair of tweezers and picked up a diamond from the top of the pile. He pulled out a small jeweler's magnifying glass and looked at the diamond for about 20 seconds. He brought out a small light that cast a purplish glow and he held it against the diamond as he continued to look at it. He then held it close to his mouth and breathed on it for a moment. He again looked at it underneath his magnifying glass. He then compared the diamond in his tweezers with the diamonds in his box, moving it back and forth over the row of diamonds. He then put it on the scale and weighed it. He spoke to Ingrid, who then typed some numbers into her computer. She gave a nod and pointed to the spreadsheet. At this, Reinhardt brightened.

"The first stone I have examined is a true diamond," Reinhardt said. "It exactly matches a diamond on the list, number 247."

With this announcement, the tension in the room noticeably dropped. Reinhardt placed the diamond on a piece of blue paper that was on the desk in front of Ingrid. She folded the paper into a rectangular packet, about three inches wide by two inches tall. She wrote some information on the paper then put it in a long, sturdy-looking, zippered carrying case.

Reinhardt and Ingrid repeated the operation with the next diamond. Ingrid checked off another diamond from the list and now the leather case contained two blue packets.

Walking to Max and me, Tony said, “This is going to take about two hours, Ice is the best there is, but there’s almost 300 diamonds to look at. This is where tempers begin to flare. People don’t like to stand around doing nothing. Makes them feel too exposed.”

Tony then nodded to Gabriella who started dropping ice cubes into a row of glasses she had lined up on the bar. The sound of the ice seemed to lighten the mood a bit. The brothers walked over to the bar and demanded Jack Daniel’s American Whisky. The Russians stayed at the table, not taking their eyes off the diamonds. Tony went to the bar and began talking to the brothers. It sounded like they were discussing golf swings.

Max also went to the bar and talked for a minute with Tony and the Consortium brothers. He then came back to where I was standing, holding a drink in his hand.

“I thought you might need this,” he said, handing the drink to me. It was a Scotch, with one ice cube floating in it. A tingle of electricity shot up my arm as our fingers brushed against each other.

“Scotch with one ice cube?” I asked him.

“Surprised I remembered?”

“No, I bet you have a very good memory.”

“I’ve been remembering lots of things about you lately.”

“Really? Maybe we should get together sometime and see what’s been on your mind.”

“Maybe we should,” said Max. He then walked back over to where Tony was standing.

Jeez, what is wrong with me? I’m at a Criminals-R-Us convention and I’m flirting with one of the hoodlums.

I watched him walk away and for a moment I forgot all about being in a room full of diamonds, guns, and dangerous people. It was a nice distraction.

As the Reinhardt and Ingrid continued with the inspections, I noticed there was never a point that either Max or Gabriella wasn’t within three or four feet of Tony. I also noticed whichever one was nearest Tony, they stood so they were looking past DiCenzo and into the people standing in the room. They were clearly acting as his bodyguards but they transitioned so smoothly I doubt anyone else even noticed.

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After what seemed like forever but was actually less than two and a half hours, Reinhardt finished examining the last diamond. He spoke to Ingrid who typed the information into the spreadsheet. There was another brief conference between Reinhardt and Ingrid, after which the Iceman stood up.

“Mr. DiCenzo and gentlemen, every diamond on the inventory sheet has been accounted for and is as represented. There are a total of 283 diamonds with a total weight of 1,163 carats. The remaining three diamonds have previously been accounted for.”

DiCenzo turned his head to me and gave a nod. Max, who was seated behind DiCenzo, held up his hands and silently clapped for me.

*Damn, I'm glad I didn't pinch one.*

Ingrid put the last of the blue packets in the leather case and zipped it up. Reinhardt took the case and placed it in his steel briefcase. Acting with utmost care, he locked the briefcase and sat it on the table, in the middle of the black velvet. With this final task completed, he gathered up his tools and tucked the scale under his arm. Ingrid turned off her computer and put it in a brown leather briefcase. They made their goodbyes to DiCenzo, the brothers, and the Russians. They both walked out of the office and a moment later, I heard cars starting up in the parking lot.

Smith pulled out a cell phone and hit a speed dial number. When the phone was answered, he spoke five or six rapid sentences. He then passed the phone to Jones, who also spoke half a dozen quick sentences into the phone.

DiCenzo walked over to where Max and I were standing. "The exchange will be in the form of an electronic funds transfer. Much safer than carrying cash and if done correctly won't leave an incriminating paper trail. It will be just one business legitimately transferring money to another. Happens millions of times a day."

Boris pulled his cell phone out. He speed dialed a number and spoke into the phone for thirty seconds in a low murmur. There was a pause as Boris passed the information to Ivan. Ivan took the phone and listened intently for almost a minute. Ivan spoke one sentence and gave the phone back to Boris who listened for a full minute. Boris then spoke two or three sentences. Without disconnecting the phone, Boris placed it on the

table. Boris and Ivan talked to each other in rapid-fire Russian and then seemed to come to a mutual agreement.

Ivan separated from Boris in a way that made me think of a two-man military team preparing to go into combat. Boris spoke to DiCenzo in a loud voice that was meant to carry, not only to all of us in the room, but to those on the phone as well.

“Mr. DiCenzo, there is a problem here. The electronic transfer was for two million dollars fewer than we have agreed to. Please explain the meaning of this!”

Smith spoke up, “That is for your incompetence in losing the diamonds. It is our fee for making us hunt like dogs to get them back. You are lucky to get as much as you did, take our money and be at peace.”

Boris pulled a semi-automatic pistol from a shoulder holster and leveled it at Smith’s head. “I must inform you we are under strictest orders to not permit you to leave until Moscow is wired the additional two million dollars.”

Jones pulled a pistol from behind the small of his back and pointed it at Boris’ chest. “Take the diamonds,” Jones quietly said to Smith, who in turn walked over and picked up the briefcase. Ivan pulled his piece and brought it to bear on Jones.

From behind the bar, Gabriella brought out an Uzi and leveled it at the two brothers. A smile of pleasure was lighting up her face. Max was next to Tony in an instant, pistol drawn. Smith had also pulled a piece and was pointing it at Ivan. It had quickly become a stalemate, a Mexican standoff.

Tony and Max looked at each other. I saw volumes of information pass between them, although neither spoke a word. Tony then looked at the ground and shook his head. I heard him mutter, “I don’t fuckin’ believe it.”

Max lifted his free hand to his mouth and quietly talked into it. He then gave Tony a slight nod. Tony seemed to relax slightly.

“Boys,” Tony said. “This don’t help nobody. The price was agreed on weeks ago and the merchandise has been delivered as promised. So, Mr. Smith, either wire Moscow the rest of the money or this deal don’t go down at all. I’ve got a dozen men in and around this building. You ain’t gonna get even one diamond out of here unless this whole deal goes down smooth.

“Oh, but you are wrong, filth, we *can* take the diamonds. We will now be allowed to walk out with the diamonds, or everybody here dies.” Jones then unzipped and opened his jacket. He was wearing a vest packed with enough explosives to blow the building apart three times over.

“*Jesus Christ!*” Tony moaned, more in exasperation than from fear.

I dove behind a desk and looked around to see if there was a way out. So, OK, guns I can sorta tolerate. Bombs I can’t.

Gabriella stood there looking at Tony and Max for instructions. From the look of joy on her face, I could tell she was hoping for a shootout. It’s funny, but as I looked closer, I saw her look was more than just joy. She was panting and her face had taken on a light pink glow, the exact same look Sophie gets whenever she is about to be with a man. It was a look of growing erotic ecstasy.

*Wow! Go figure that one out.*

Tough Tony DiCenzo just stood there. His eyes had narrowed and he looked pissed. Max was talking into one hand. His gun was still in the other.

The brothers started yelling in their weird language and the Russians started yelling in Russian. Neither side was doing a lot to calm the situation.

On the back wall of the office, underneath the window, a panel approximately three feet wide by four feet high swung open, creating a small doorway to the outside. Johnny Scarpazzi's face appeared in the opening, beckoning DiCenzo to come through.

Moving with the grace of a cat, Gabriella moved from behind the bar and positioned herself next to this new door. Max pushed DiCenzo in her direction. I saw Max was acting as Tony's bodyguard while Gabriella covered their escape. Max looked over and motioned for me to follow.

We formed a line. DiCenzo was in the lead. Max was in the middle, acting as sentry. I was at the end, hoping they would both go faster. The yelling was getting louder and I didn't think it would be very much longer until somebody started shooting.

DiCenzo made it to the door. I saw several pairs of hands waiting to pull him to safety. Suddenly, a voice cried out. It was Smith.

"American! You will not escape. If I am to die today, so shall you!" With that, Smith spun around and fired at DiCenzo.

As soon as Smith turned, Max was in the air, diving in front of DiCenzo. The bullet from Smith's gun hit Max squarely in the chest. The impact of the slug knocked him into Gabriella, who was sighting the Uzi at Smith. The arm holding her Uzi was knocked upward. There was a

loud *Buuuurp* as a dozen bullets sprayed the ceiling. As she pulled the trigger, I saw her lips had tightened into a tight moan of ecstasy.

Arms reached in and pulled Max through the opening. Gabriella was on her back. She was trying to get up, but the impact of Max's body had knocked her senseless. I saw her shaking her head in an effort to clear her vision.

Smith took aim at Tony's head. DiCenzo just turned and stood facing the man. He didn't try to run. I guess he's not the type to back down, even in death.

I was crouched along the back wall, next to the window. Jones was still in a standoff with the two Russians. Their eyes were all locked onto each other. Each was waiting for the other to flinch.

Seeing that DiCenzo wasn't running, Smith smiled, savoring the moment. I saw his finger tighten on the trigger. Without thinking, I lunged at Smith's gun. I hit him against the side of his arm just as he fired. He was solidly built and I merely bounced off, but it was enough for his shot to go wild. The bullet struck the wall slightly to the left of where DiCenzo still defiantly stood.

At the sound of the shot, Jones turned. It was just for a moment, but that was enough. Boris and Ivan each shot simultaneously. I didn't see where Jones was hit, but I saw him start to go down. That was good enough for me.

Gabriella had made it to her knees and was bringing the Uzi to bear on Smith, who had just turned back to fire at the Russians. Then everybody started shooting.

I felt a hand grab me by the shoulder and DiCenzo tossed me across the room in the direction of the escape door. I landed hard and I felt my

lungs empty out with an *ooof*. Several pairs of hands yanked me through the door.

I stood up and turned. As if in a slow motion dream, I looked back and saw DiCenzo being pulled out of the building. Gabriella was next. She was still firing her Uzi into the building even as she was being drug out. Goons surrounded us and we all limped toward a waiting line of cars.

I heard more shots being fired from the inside of the building. It seemed like Boris, Ivan, Smith, and Jones were going to finish each other off after all.

I looked ahead and saw Max being helped into the back seat of a car. His eyes were dazed but open and very much alive. I looked but didn't see any blood. In my slow motion time frame, that sight both surprised and pleased me. I wanted to go to the car and find an explanation as to why he was still alive but my legs weren't responding. Johnny Scarpazzi was waving his arm and shouting that we had to get out on the back road.

I stumbled four or five steps away from the building when there was a blinding flash and a tremendous explosion. Something that felt like a big warm hand gave me a hard shove. I flew forward ten feet and landed on my face. Pieces of the building landed all around me.

I got up and took a step toward the car. Suddenly, something smashed against my head. Bright lights danced in front of me. I went down to my knees as I felt the pain of the impact. The bright spots were now black spots. The blackness grew until the daylight faded and was gone. The pain faded. Then there was nothing.

## FIFTEEN

When I came to, I was in a semi-private room of a very modern hospital and I had a bitch kitty of a headache. On the bed next to mine was Max. His shirt was off and there was tape wrapped around his ribs. He looked surprisingly good for someone who had taken a bullet in the chest. He was awake and he smiled when he saw me.

“I thought you’d be dead,” I mumbled. I found it hard to focus my thoughts and my words were coming out with difficulty.

“Hope I didn’t disappoint you.”

“No, I’m happy to see you’re alive. What happened? I saw you get shot.”

“Bullet-proof vest.”

“Oh, I didn’t think tough guys like you were into things like that.”

“After today, I may never take it off.”

I looked out the window and saw the orange glow of a sunset or maybe a sunrise. It was hard to tell which it was.

“How long have I been out?”

“You’ve been out about 14 hours, but you haven’t been unconscious the whole time. You woke up a couple of times last night. They’ve wheeled you in and out of the room several times. You’ve had X-Rays, CAT scans, MRIs, and I don’t know what else. So far, they’ve been letting you sleep it off and no one’s in a panic over you. I take that as a good sign.”

“That still doesn’t explain what happened to me.”

“You got hit with a shoe. I saw it happen. The explosion must have shot it pretty high in the air. When it fell, it landed on your head.”

“A shoe shouldn’t have knocked me out.”

“Well, umm, there was still a foot and part of a leg in it. I think it was Smith’s.”

*Uggh.*

Black spots danced in front of my eyes and I fell back on the pillow.

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When I woke up again the room was much brighter. I was guessing it was around mid-day. Max was still there, now with a shirt on, reading a book. Somehow, I was disappointed he was fully dressed. I kind of liked it the other way.

“Welcome back,” he said. “How do you feel?”

I thought about it for a moment. The headache was gone and I wasn’t feeling fuzzy anymore. “Better,” I said. “I actually feel better.”

“Good,” he said. “When we get out of here, you and I have some unfinished business.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault the building blew up. They just started shooting at each other. You can’t expect bullets and bombs to live in harmony. Sooner or later something’s going to explode.”

“I’m not talking about the building. I’m talking about the kiss we had at Lenny’s office. After all we’ve been through I think you owe me another one. Although this time I’m going to kiss you without your friends watching. I hate short kisses.”

Oh, boy.

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Five minutes later, Tony DiCenzo came into the room. Milo and Sophie followed him. She was carrying a bouquet of flowers. My heart was still pumping double time from my conversation with Max.

“Hey Laura, these are for you,” Sophie said, laying the flowers on the table by my bed. “I thought you’d never wake up. We’ve been in here most of the night and all morning. The doctors say you check out OK. You can go home anytime you want.”

“Tony,” I asked. “Is everything OK?”

“It’s been a long night for all of us. Everybody’s been very busy. Milo, would you mind escorting Miss Rodriguez back to her place of employment so she can pick up her car? Max and I need to talk with Miss Black for a few minutes longer.”

Milo acknowledged the order and turned to leave.

“Looks like I’ll be seeing you *later*,” Sophie said.

From the look on her face and the tone of her voice, I doubted she would let Milo stop at just taking her back to her car. I hoped Milo had a good strong heart.

When we were alone, DiCenzo pulled up a chair and positioned it between Max’s bed and mine.

“We’ve had us quite a time yesterday and last night,” He said. “I thought those guys were going to conduct business with some honor. Maybe I shoulda known better, but I’ve dealt with them before and everything went OK. Of course, if somebody goes into it with the intention of stirring things up there isn’t a lot you can do about it.”

“Did everybody get away OK?” I asked.

“Everybody but Reinhardt. We knew the cops had been trailing him so we had set up a diversion to free him up. After that, he drove his car to within a few miles of the buy. One of my guys then shuttled him back and forth, I thought that would do the trick. Unfortunately, the cops weren’t fooled as long as we had hoped for. One stopped Ice just after he got back to his car and had driven about a mile. Ice didn’t have anything incriminating on him when he was stopped, of course. The cop questioned him for a while, wanted to know what he had been doing all afternoon, and searched his car. Then the cop let him go. They might later try to tie him with the explosion and the bodies, but I doubt it. When the cop stopped Reinhardt he was a good five miles away from the building that blew. They might not even make the connection at all. But, in the end, they’ll have nothing.”

“Won’t the police make a connection with the guys in the building and you? They must have come into the country using passports. They stayed in your hotel. Doesn’t that leave a trail?”

“Fortunately, none of them were traveling under their real names. The police won’t have a clue who they were. We show them as checking out the day Alex disappeared. How could any of this be out fault?”

“What about your building?” I asked. “Buildings don’t just blow up by themselves.”

“We had a team in the building before the fire department arrived. They scattered enough money and drugs around to give the cops something interesting to think about. I don’t think we’ll have any problems there. They know the resort belongs to me, but other than there is nothing to tie our guys to it. It’ll just go down as another drug deal that went bad.”

“Won’t the police find the diamonds scattered in with the bodies?”

“Fortunately, my guys were able to recover most of the diamonds. The steel briefcase they was in took most of the explosion. It was burnt and ripped but still mostly intact. We’ll be able to turn over all but five of the diamonds, including the three Alexander sold. The Consortium is sending over a couple of new guys to pick ‘em up. Max will lead the team in charge of the handover.”

“You’re still giving the diamonds to them? After what happened?”

“Sure, they paid for them. We’ve found out the Consortium never authorized the reduction in payment. As far as they knew, the full sum was transferred. Smith and Jones decided to skim on the deal themselves. The loss of the bag made too perfect of an excuse for them to pass up. With the help of an accomplice in the Consortium, they diverted the two million into a private account in the Cayman Islands. Fortunately, the deal was set up so quickly they were sloppy about it and the transaction was easily traced.

The Consortium has already wired the remainder of the money to Moscow. They’ve apologized to both the Russians and to me for their irresponsible men. They even offered to buy me a new building to make up for the one that blew up.”

“Are the Russians in Moscow OK with the apology?” I asked.

“OK enough to wire my fee. Our two Russians left their phone line open after they had finished receiving instructions. Moscow heard the whole thing. There’re convinced our two dead Consortium friends were acting independently and both paid for their stupidity with their lives.

What I can’t believe is Smith and Jones thought the Russians would accept less than full payment, or they could steal all those diamonds just because they had a bomb. If that were the case, guys would be bringing

bombs every time anybody made an exchange. They made a serious miscalculation and it cost them.”

“I’m surprised Moscow and the Consortium aren’t more upset.”

“Actually, the deal went down pretty smoothly, all things considered.”

“Tony, *people were killed.*”

“Yeah, but the brothers brought it on themselves. You can’t walk into a deal like that, ready to double-cross everybody and expect to come out clean. Their superiors were more than happy to wash their hands of them. The two Russians died with honor. Moscow considers the two guys you called Boris and Ivan to be heroes. Their pictures are probably already up in a bar somewhere in Moscow.”

“Seriously?”

“Dead serious. And I imagine their families will be well taken care of.”

DiCenzo shifted in his seat and looked at me.

“We’re almost done here, but we got something personal to settle between us. I ain’t ever had my life saved twice in one day before. Max and me have helped each other out more times than I care to remember. He’s the only person I completely trust and that’s saying something. But you, Laura Black, that’s completely different. You stuck your neck out to help me. I won’t forget it. We now have a bond between us that’s formed in blood. As such, I owe you a favor. For me to repay this debt, you may come to me at any time. Whatever you ask of me, if it is in my power to do so, I will. Now Laura Black, this is not something to be taken lightly or to be used without desperate need. Once the favor is used, it can never be used again. Of course, as a friend, you can come to me anytime, in case something minor comes up.”

*Yikes! It was like talking with Don Corleone.*

“Tony, is Danica alright?”

“Your co-worker, Miss Rondinelli, did a good job of getting her out of the building where they were holding her. She’d been roughed up a little and got bruised in a couple of sensitive areas, but she is otherwise all right.

She came in and spent the night in Alex’s room. He had a broken nose, a couple of cracked ribs, four broken fingers, and a lot of bruises, but he wasn’t otherwise seriously injured. They were both released this morning.”

“What about the police? There was a dead guy in Alex’s apartment then he disappeared. They’re going to want to know what happened.”

“Alex knows he stole a bag from three guys in the Blue Palms two weeks ago. He knows in the bag were three diamonds. He knows he fenced the three diamonds and made a nice chunk of change. He knows the same three guys met him in his apartment four days ago, only one of them was dead. He knows they grabbed him and broke his fingers until he told them he had given the bag to his girlfriend. When Alex is questioned by the police that’s all he’ll know. He’s smart enough to know he stole from the wrong people. He also knows what’ll happen if he guesses too much about what happened.”

“What are you going to do to him?”

“The toughest thing I had to do last night was to figure out what to do with that little prick. I got the diamond he sold to the Iceman at the Tropical Paradise, but the first two diamonds he fenced came out of my commission. Plus he almost got me into more trouble than I knew how to get out of.”

“Tony, please let Alex off the hook. You can use that as my favor. He didn’t know he was doing anything against you. He was just stupid.”

“No need to use your favor on that. I’ve already made an arrangement. Last night I called Muffy Sternwood and let her know what had happened to Alex, well, the basics of it anyway. I wanted her to know the actual truth of the matter. Her late husband and I used to do business together in the old days. She knew what a tight spot Alex was in. She reminded me she owns a prime piece of land in north Scottsdale. She also knows I’ve wanted to buy it for years. She’s been sitting on it, even though I’ve always offered her a good price for it. She said she’d let me have it to build a new resort on, but only on the condition we split ownership fifty-fifty.”

“Muffy Sternwood? You and Muffy?”

“Yeah, go figure. I hate having partners, but that’s how the world works.”

DiCenzo stood up. “I know you’re both anxious to get out of here, but walk with me for a moment, Laura Black.”

I stood up and we walked out to the hallway. At the end of the hall were two goons. One was near the elevator and one was posted at the stairs. Down at our end of the hall it was just Tony and me. It was the first time I had ever been alone with him. It was kind of a creepy feeling.

“Now that business is out of the way,” DiCenzo said. “I think you should consider going out with Max. Do you know he’s mentioned you a couple a times over the past few days? He’s a great guy. I think the two of you would work out swell.”

“Thanks Tony, but I think I’m already in a relationship. He’s a Scottsdale cop.”

At that, Tough Tony DiCenzo starting laughing. An honest laugh that came from deep down.

“Well, Laura Black, I won’t comment on your choice in boyfriends, but I’m truly happy for you. Of course, these things sometimes have a way of falling apart. If that day comes, then I think you should consider Max.”

“I’ll keep it in mind, Tony. I really will.”

With that, Tony stuck his head back into the room. “Max would you mind driving Miss Black back to Lenny’s office? Her car is still there.”

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Twenty minutes later, Max and I were sitting in the parking lot behind Lenny’s office.

“Before you go,” Max said. “Tony wanted you to have this.”

He handed me a small white envelope, the size of a thank-you card. There was something lumpy in the envelope, along with what felt like a card. I fingered it and wondered what was in it. Tony had said if everything worked out he’d give me a cut. My first thought was it was too small to hold cash. My second thought was it was probably also too small to hold a check. That is, unless it had been folded two or three times.

“Do I need to open it now?”

“It can wait.”

“Good, I’ve had all the excitement I can handle, plus the explosion ripped my favorite shirt. Tell Tony thanks for whatever it is.”

“You did great yesterday,” Max said. “Not many veterans could have done as well as you did in your first time. If you ever consider a career change, we could probably find a place for you with us.”

“Thanks, but I hope you understand I only helped out Tony because I didn’t have a choice. If Alex’s life wasn’t on the line, I never would have done it. The type of work you do isn’t for me.”

“I understand. It’s not a lifestyle for everybody. But what about you and me? Would you like to get together sometime? Maybe see where it could lead?”

“Well, yes, but no. I’m becoming involved with a Scottsdale cop. I need to see where it’s going before I can get involved with anyone else. Besides, I think I told you, as a rule I don’t get romantically involved with organized crime figures.”

“True, you did. Nevertheless, I’m still not going anywhere. Go and find out if you and this cop are right for each other. If you are, then I’m happy for you. If not, then give me a call.”

“It’s a deal,” I said and I held my hand out. Instead of shaking it, he bent over and softly kissed me. His kiss was brief but had the effect of igniting every nerve in my body.

How can he do that?

Max leaned back and saw my reaction to his kiss. “Yeah, it’s a deal,” he said.

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I checked in with Lenny and gave him an edited version of how we found both the bag and Alexander. But Lenny wasn’t interested in hearing the details. He was thrilled things had worked out so well and really didn’t care how it had happened. He was going to get a huge fee from DiCenzo for finding the bag and an even bigger fee from Muffy for finding Alex. He even made a vague reference about giving Gina,

Sophie, and me a bonus for the great work we had done, like that would ever happen.

I then drove home for a shower and a change. As I drove, the events of the past few days kept replaying in my mind. I think I was looking for an explanation for everything that had happened. By the time I pulled the car into my parking lot, I had decided I needed a Scotch.

A good Scotch.

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I took the elevator up and unlocked my door. As I walked in, Marlowe greeted me with a rub against my leg. I apologized for being gone for so long and opened up a can of Super Supper to make up for it. He sucked down the entire can of food, then walked to the corner of the kitchen and threw up. Things in my apartment had returned to normal.

I stripped off my shirt and blue jeans with relief. The shower I took next was hot and delicious. I felt the tensions of the day drain out of my body. By the time the shower was over I decided in addition to a good Scotch, I needed Reno.

He answered his phone on the first ring. I suggested we meet at Frankie Z's at seven o'clock for drinks and conversation.

"I heard Alex turned himself in," Reno said.

"He had apparently been kidnapped by the two men who killed the dead guy in his apartment. The two men have since disappeared. Lenny is representing him, so you know he won't let Alex say a word."

"And, knowing Lenny," Reno said. "He'll make the whole thing fade away. In two weeks, nobody will even remember there was a dead guy."

"It wouldn't surprise me."

I hung up and went to my closet. After two false starts I put on a backless mid-length red dress. The dress was moderately sleazy, with a plunging neckline. Since I couldn't wear a bra with the dress, Reno's mind would be steered in the proper direction. I put on a simple gold chain necklace and black high-heeled strappy sandals.

As I drove to Frankie Z's, my body again started to respond to the thought of seeing Reno. I recognized these feeling for what they were. Lust certainly, but maybe something more. It felt good to be with a man like Reno. I didn't know if he would turn out to be the great love of my life, but he was as close as I had gotten so far. I pulled into Frankie's parking lot at 7:10, almost on time.

Frankie was playing hostess again and greeted me with a warm smile. Reno was in a corner table in the lounge. He looked up and saw me as I walked into the room. He took me in with his eyes then a grin spread across his face.

"You cleaned up well today," he said, the grin still wide.

I took the moment to look him over. I was starting to tingle in all the usual places.

"You know" I said, "I think this may turn out to be a *very* good day after all." Reno's face reddened as he started to catch my not so subtle drift.

Dominic came over before Reno could say anything. We both ordered a Scotch.

"I'm glad you found your Alex," Reno said. "Homicide has all but cleared him already."

"What about your guy, Reinhardt? Did he ever make his buy?"

“We don’t know. We lost him for about three hours yesterday. It’s possible he made the deal then.”

“How’d you lose him?”

“I didn’t lose him. Two detectives from the day shift were watching him. Every day at 2:00, Reinhardt has gone into Bucket’s restaurant over on Shoeman Lane. He reads the paper, drinks three beers, and has a bowl of shrimp chowder. Yesterday, he went in the front door and then apparently went straight out the back. Our guys were parked out front and didn’t notice it for over 25 minutes.

Reinhardt’s been using four different rental cars. All of them have a tracking device on them. When they called in to get Reinhardt’s location, dispatch told them all three of the other cars were parked in various parts of the city. One was in north Scottsdale, in a city park near the resorts. One was in a parked on the street in downtown Scottsdale, near the art galleries, and one was up in a group of high-dollar houses on the south side of Camelback Mountain.”

“Sounds like your guys had a dilemma,” I said. “What did they do?”

“Knowing Reinhardt’s MO, they converged on the art gallery location. Unfortunately, Reinhardt’s car was still parked and there wasn’t anybody in it. They canvassed the area, but they never found him. The call had gone out for Reinhardt’s other two rental cars. One was then reported to be on the move, coming off of Camelback Mountain. The guys converged on that one only to find it was being driven back to the airport by a guy from the rental car agency. About two hours later, the third car, the one by the resorts, was reported to be moving. A rookie patrolman was the first to Reinhardt’s location in north Scottsdale. Instead of just

calling it in, he decided to stop Reinhardt. He then gave Reinhardt the third degree on the side of the road.”

“Doesn’t sound like a good move,” I said.

“Nope, Reinhardt consented for the officer to field-search his car. There was nothing in the car and we had nothing to hold him in Scottsdale. He flew out of the country last night. We don’t know if it was because we spooked him or if he was finished with whatever business he had. We’ll probably never know.”

“I heard on the news a building caught on fire up near the resorts yesterday. Could he have been involved in that?”

“It was more like the building blew up,” Reno said. “But, it isn’t likely Reinhardt was involved. The lab guys are still checking it out, but it appears to be some kind of drug deal. As far as we know, Reinhardt never handles drugs or anything that explodes. It is interesting the building that blew up is located at a resort controlled by the DiCenzos. I can’t help but think there’s something more to this. There’ve been too many DiCenzo coincidences, but I can’t see any direct connections. If there were, I wish I’d spot one. I’d love to get a crack at bringing down Tough Tony.”

As Reno was talking, I couldn’t help wondering how I kept getting myself in the middle of everything. Reno must have seen my thoughts on my face. He looked like he was about to ask me something, and then let it go. Instead he took a long sip of his Scotch.

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The evening crowd had started to come in. The Scotch had relaxed me and being with Reno felt wonderful. Talking and laughing with him made it feel like we hadn’t just spent a year apart.

Dominic came over with the bill for the drinks. I told Reno I would get it and dug in my purse. As I pulled out my wallet, something fell out and landed on the table.

“What’s that,” Reno said as he bent closer to look at it.

It was the small envelope Max had given to me from Tony. I had put it in my purse and forgotten about it.

I knew it was a bad idea to open it in front of Reno, but my fingers had taken on a will of their own. I blame the Scotch. I pushed my finger in the envelope and ripped open the flap. Inside was a folded piece of blue paper. My heart started to race as I unfolded it. Something bright fell out and landed on the table with a *Clink*.

*Shit!*

It sparkled like fire even in the dim lights of the lounge. I picked it up and looked at it.

“Damn,” I said.

In the back of my mind, I remembered asking Tony about the diamonds. He said he was turning over all but five of them to the Consortium. I guess I knew where the first of the five was.

“Wow, it looks real,” Reno said.

I thought about telling him everything, and then decided against it. I wasn’t exactly sure how illegal my involvement had been. I *was* sure Tough Tony DiCenzo wouldn’t be pleased if I talked about his business to a cop.

“Umm,” I said, “I asked Gina to get me a fake diamond last week when she was in Vegas. She must have put it in my purse. You’re right though,

it does look real. They sure can do wonderful things in the lab these days.”

Reno looked at me for a moment. It was hard to read that look. Finally he asked: “Can you imagine what this would be worth if it *was* real? It looks perfect and it must weigh four or five carats. You’d be talking about having a hundred and fifty, maybe even two hundred thousand dollars rolling between your fingers.”

“Do you know what I’m thinking?” I asked. “I’m thinking this would make a beautiful pendent or maybe even a ring.”

“A ring?” Reno asked. He had a twisted look on his face, as if I had just said something scary.

“Umm,” he said, “exactly what kind of ring did you have in mind?”

I just smiled at him.

His face blushed bright red.

“Uh, maybe we should discuss this over dinner?” he said.

I smiled at him again and said in my smoothest voice, “Dinner’s a start. But, maybe we should discuss this over breakfast.”

Reno caught my meaning and smiled back at me. It was his old smile, the one that always made me melt.

“All right,” he said, “over breakfast.”

*Yes!*