

My Gun Is Not So Quick

by Craig Strete

CHAPTER ONE

I was drunk that day. And I had been drunk the day before that. I might have been bombed ten days in a row but had no actual memory of it.

My secretary eyed me with a sorrow she could never quite explain. While her face seemed to mirror a sincere pity, her voice had a customary disdain. She said, in a tone dripping plant fertilizer, "Well, Jack, you seem to have a client who maybe hasn't shot anybody all week."

I nodded weakly.

"I'm in no shape to see anybody."

"She seems a decent sort and you could use the work," she said.

"I'm drunk."

"You have to work, Jack. I have to be paid."

I shrugged and stared for a second at a place on my desk where a photograph used to sit. I sighed and said sadly. "Well, my head may fall off but what the hell. It's a civilian. Great. Send 'em in."

I sat up a little straighter in my chair and tried to comb my hair back into place but that hurt too much so I quit.

The office door opened and my secretary ushered in a woman. I didn't look at her. My secretary saw that she was seated and, without preamble or introduction, left the office. There was an awkward silence. The woman fidgeted in her chair, waiting for me to acknowledge her presence. I was uncertain of my voice, whether it would be slurred or not, and was not about to offer to shake hands. I had no doubt my hands would shake.

"I need a private detective."

"I need a drink more than you need a private detective." I decided suddenly that honesty was the best policy and looked at my prospective client for the first time.

It was a woman and she was beautiful all over except where she was pregnant.

"You look like you've already had several," she said. "I can't drink myself because I'm pregnant."

"I kind of noticed," I said.

"Don't worry," she said. "You aren't the father."

I suppose it was meant to be funny but I felt like crying. My eyes strayed to that empty spot on my desk again. And suddenly I knew I had to get rid of her.

I got up suddenly, quicker than I liked and came around the desk. I had her by the arm and levered her out of the chair, which was more difficult than I thought it would be in my condition and in hers. "I am sorry. I really can't take on any new clients. I'll just walk you out."

I had got her up but moving her was like trying to shift a continent. I said, "I know it's a little difficult, uh, when you have a passenger on board and you're bucking a headwind." I was not only at a loss for words but I sounded like a sailor on leave.

She just stared at me and sullenly threw my hand off her arm. I stumbled and almost fell. I might have said something harsh but suddenly she began to cry and the words stuck in my throat.

I escorted her back to the chair, trying not to look at her face and said, "Have a seat. Have two of them," as if suddenly feeling generous. She cried for some little time and I hovered above her, wanting to say something comforting but afraid any attempt at communication might cause me to cry as well. I finally said, "There, there. I'm sure it can't be that bad." Sure of course, that it was that bad indeed.

"Are you sure you're a detective?" she finally asked, wiping the last of her tears away.

"You sound demented."

"Everybody does in my line of work. It's part of my job description. Can I get you something, boiling water, a pillow, pickles, ice cream?" Everything else had failed so now I aspired to humor. It too failed.

She stared up at me and seemed annoyed.

"I have no personal experience with pregnant women," I began, hoping I'd think of something brilliant so she would go away.

"And obviously don't want any," she finished for me.

"Ok, ok. It's just thatwell....most of my clients are either criminals or lawyers though it's almost impossible to tell them apart. Legitimate people usually don't hire me. I'm an alcoholic, a serious, work-at-it-every-day sort. That's why I work cheap because nobody will hire me to do anything important. Whatever you want me for, almost anybody could do it better. Are you sure you want to hire somebody like me?"

"I'm not sure about anything. Except that I'm in trouble.

She half turned in her chair to look at me. "I met your secretary in a Lamaze class. She told me about you. When you have work, you don't drink. Oh, maybe you drink some, but you aren't drunk. She told me why you drink and I thought, considering my situation and yours.....

I cut her off abruptly with a look of hurt and loss on my face. "So it's pity then that brought you to me. Well, if it's any consolation, I don't drink because I dwell on my loss or sorrow. I drink so I don't feel it, so I don't feel anything."

"Do you want to hear my story or not?" What ever impulse or feeling of connection that had brought her to me now seemed uncertain.

I sighed, "My clients, at least the ones who aren't dead, call me Jack. But I don't see us getting that far."

"If I was in real trouble, would you seriously not help me?"

There was an earnestness about her voice that pierced my heart like a knife. I had to look away and I pretended as if it was a matter that needed the deepest concentration.

I glanced briefly at the shaving mirror hanging on the filing cabinet beside my desk, put there for the days when I was so drunk I slept over in the office. My image wavered in the mirror. My nose, which a grateful client broke once, was still crooked but more or less still in the center of my face. It even looked like I had stood close enough to the razor for once. I didn't remember shaving but I must have somewhere or had slept in the morgue last night and somebody had done it for me.

It was my eyes that made me want to call it quits. They looked like two black olives swimming in tomato juice.

"What exactly is it that you think I can do for you, even if I was so inclined?"

"My name is Lynne Michelle Gordon. I want you to come outside Jack and look at my car."

I nodded. "I don't get a lot of calls for that kind of thing. Maybe you mistook me for a fender and body shop?" It was too easy to be edgy and sarcastic. It did not hide the pain, for it was evident, but it made me feel somehow in control of it, as if humor was a grand denial.

Now she was angry or maybe she had always been angry or maybe she was just the way she was because she was densely populated.

Tight-lipped, she said, "I have a job for you but first I want you to look at my car."

"Is it the latest model Miss Gordon and will I want to run right out and buy one? Frankly, I was holding off buying a new car this year in the hope that tailfins would make a comeback." Because I didn't like myself much, it was easy to ask others not to like me too.

"Are you trying to be funny?"

I blinked. "Well if you can't guess, I'm not going to tell you."

She got up in stages. I didn't know how pregnant somebody is when they are ready to cross the finish line but she looked like an advanced case of pregnant.

"Are you gonna come out and look at my car?" she said, "or am I gonna find another detective? And you can drop the Miss Gordon. My friends call me Lynne Michelle." She was already making for the door in an awkward waddle.

I remembered thinking as she walked away from me that people said pregnant women were supposed to be beautiful. From the back she almost looked it. Only the fact that she moved like Donald Duck spoiled the effect.

I followed her out the door, pulling on my coat because it was one of the five days a decade that it rains in Los Angeles.

My one-man detective agency shared a parking lot with ten other businesses in the building. There were about a dozen cars in the parking lot. The rain was coming down so hard it bounced when it hit the pavement. She ignored the rain and I pretended to. Before we were half way across the lot, we were both soaked to the skin.

"Listen Lynne Michelle is the job maybe finding your car in the parking lot?"

She didn't seem to think that one was worth answering. She stepped in front of what had to be easily the most expensive car in the lot.

She pointed at something and said, "What do you think?"

I focused bloodshot eyes and said, "Roomy. A smooth quiet ride. Good in stop-and-go traffic. Big engine that will eat up the miles. But no tailfins. Ah, I was just about to buy it too."

She looked like she might actually bite my head off. She tapped the windshield. "I mean this, look at this."

I looked and got the implications. "Ah! A very stylish bullet hole. It looks trendy and recent."

She unlocked the car door and invited me to look inside. I did.

It was obvious that somebody had taken a shot at her and came awful damn close. The bullet went in the front on the driver's side at a slight angle, just enough that it had missed her. There was another hole in the backseat where the bullet had buried itself.

"Do you want to tell me about this?" Despite myself, I was curious.

"And I thought you weren't going to get it. Could we go back to your office so I can sit down?"

We went back inside and I waited until she was settled in a chair again before I spoke. "So why didn't you just tell me somebody is trying to kill you, if that's what this is all about?"

"If a pregnant woman walked into your office and said somebody was trying to kill her, would you believe her?"

"If she was bleeding profusely from a couple of bullet holes, even I could have figured it out."

"Smart isn't your thing. I guess you get by on dogged determination," she said, looking annoyed. "Frankly, I only came to see you because Loris your secretary struck me as a very warm and caring human being. She thought taking my case would be good for both of us."

"My secretary thinks too much and types too little." I was about to make a somewhat bitter comment on people who meddle in things that are none of their business when she cut me off with the thought unspoken. "But also, somebody at our family's law firm recommended you too when I inquired about you."

That one stunned me. As far as I knew, my standing with the legal profession was limited to serving subpoenas and trying to catch insurance fraud claimants for insurance sharks. That somebody would say something nice about me in that part of the forest was a bit of a stunner. Or maybe it was that somebody hated me so much, they were trying to

push her off on me. Put it that way, it might make sense.

"Mark Geston was my father's lawyer. He also said you were tough and knew how to handle yourself. To be fair, also said you are about as stupid as you are honest."

I had forgotten that I had once had a life before my tragedy and the sudden recall of the attorney who had always been my friend put me at a loss, as if I were an amnesiac suddenly recalling a family I had completely forgotten.

I tried to smile but my face didn't seem to work. Unbidden, memories from days passed stalked me. I tried to focus on her words, as if deflecting them were a charm against memory. "Insults don't faze me. I could be a whole lot more stupid than I am honest and not give a damn."

It was plain, I wanted to hear no more about myself, to be either praised or described or remembered in any context. To shift it away from who I was or what I might have been, I took a sudden interest in her story while in the back of my mind I wondered how I would get rid of her.

"Have you been to the police?"

"Yes."

"Then you don't need me." Already I was looking for an exit.

"I think I do. It's two things really."

"Two what?"

"Jobs. I've got two jobs I want to hire you for."

Lynne Michelle opened a big black purse and came out with a handful of items. The first one was a photograph. She was in half of it and a dark haired man with too many teeth filled the rest of it. "The photograph is about the second half, the other job I want you for."

I took the photograph reluctantly. I was trying not to work up any curiosity about it. I went back to her first problem, hoping to deflect her. I tried to insist, "If you've had the

police on this, really I would just duplicate their efforts."

"I'm not stupid," she said. "When somebody is threatening to kill someone, the police can't do anything about it until he actually does something."

"A hole in your windshield is a something," I was quick to point out.

"But the police aren't going to assign somebody to me night and day to see that something doesn't happen to me. They have a patrol officer check in with me two times a day but that isn't much protection."

Before I could think up an argument about that one, she went on.

"It just means they'll be quick to find my body." Lynne Michelle was smart.

"Ok, but anybody could have put that bullet in your windshield. This is LA. The home of the gun and run, shoot and scoot. I mean you can get shot because somebody doesn't like the color of your car, because you're in the left lane when somebody wishes you were in the right. When the Santa Anas come up out of the desert, LA is the place where everybody has a gun and is mean enough to use it."

"If I hired you for a body guard, it would be better than anything the police could or will do," Lynne Michelle insisted.

"You'd be wasting your money, most likely," I said, wanting no part of this one.

"You wanna know what the cops told me?"

I shrugged. I had been there before and could just about guess.

"Get a gun. If he comes after you outside your house, shoot him. Make sure he's dead and drag him inside!" Her eyes flashed angrily and her arms seemed to encircle the very pregnant part of her. "I can do it."

Lynne Michelle said the last line so simply, without heat or caution, that it made me blink. That's what I hated, when somebody suddenly showed you the secret parts that hurt, and then suddenly they stop just being faces. She'd said it and I believed her.

Now I really wanted her to be gone and my hands and throat began to ache for the

motions that would bring a drink.

Her arms seemed to embrace the child she carried and I had to look away. I wanted to be out of the room but I knew instinctively that she wasn't going away and that she was going to say a whole lot more.

"Jack, I could really use your help," she said and then she tried to reach out and take my hand.

I backed away like a scalded cat. My eyes were on the drawer with the bottle. That old ache for oblivion was there and rising like a river.

"I don't want my baby to die. You've got to help me." She said it in a dignified way, not begging, not insisting. "I'll pay you what you're worth. But I will need your help, as much as you can give me."

I lowered my hands below the rim of the desk because I knew they were beginning to shake a little. My chest felt hollow and my mouth was as dry as the LA river in June.

I had a hard time with people who began to unfold, to show you what lives behind their eyes. I wanted to handle problems but not the messy lives that go along with them. My hand was on the drawer handle and I began to slide it toward me.

"I don't think I'm the man for the job," I said, not looking at her, eyeing the bottle in the half opened drawer. "I mean if you had more concrete proof," I finished, trying to mollify her. It's strange how hard it was for me just to say a simple no.

"There's more than the bullet hole or I wouldn't be here."

"There's more and there is too much," I said half heartedly but I didn't think she got it. But then she wasn't meant to.

"My husband disappeared. He's the man in the photograph."

"Ah," It was all I could think to say.

"And that's the other job. I want you to help me find my husband."

"Missing persons. You file a report. They find him or they don't. If I went after him,

maybe I might stand a better chance, look a little harder. But Lynne Michelle, pregnant or not pregnant, the answer won't be something you want. If he left, you have to figure he wanted to. And finding him won't change anything."

"I am not grieving for the lost father of my child. It's easy to mistake passion for love. I did it. There was a hundred things wrong and I jumped in anyway. That kind of fire only lasts a little while and then it's not just over, it's dead and buried. I'm sure he felt the same way too, probably sooner than I did."

"So why find him? He's where he is because he wants to be. I mean this isn't a child support thing is it? Cause I gotta tell you, those things are...messy....way out of my line. I never touch that kind of thing."

"I want you to find him because I think that's who's trying to kill me."

Now I really had to look at this woman who wanted to be called by two names, this very pregnant Lynne Michelle. I stopped looking at the whiskey bottle drawer and let my eyes run over her to see what they could see.

I guess I paid her a compliment then, probably a conceited one but a compliment all the same. I tried to imagine her when she wasn't pregnant.

She had this long cascade of hair, a kind of tawny color that was half sun and half summer. She was neither tall nor short but had walked in on a pair of legs most women would have been proud to have. Her face was slightly heart shaped, but perfectly formed but her eyes were the best part of her.

They were dark as night and as full of the promise of life as any I had ever seen. Coffee eyes, that a man with an unexploded heart could wake up to for the rest of the days of his life. My heart was long since dead so there was no risk to me, but she was a most wantable woman. And probably would be again when she wasn't so heavily with child.

I looked longingly at the door and wished she might soon go through it and never

come back. My head was full of memories, eyes that stared up at me, hands that had fallen away. I felt a profound need to be drunk. Very drunk.

The need was there because I knew she wasn't going to go through that door alone. I thought to myself, well now, I can tell myself that I can close my eyes, that I can reach for that bottle that turns out all the lights but the telling and the doing are two separate things. Try as I might, I could not completely shut the door to my heart. But I did not go gladly on.

"I guess you better tell me the rest of the story," I said "But there's something you ought to know. I am, as I said, an alcoholic. A steady drinker, not abusive when on a job but I don't NOT drink. You should know that and know what that means."

"Not the kind of thing you'd tell someone if you were eager to get yourself hired," she said with a smile. She seemed unconcerned about my problem. Maybe her lawyer and my former friend Mark Geston had already told her.

"I'd already guessed you were going to be a most reluctant white knight," she said. "But it's not my problem unless it makes you unable to do what I hired you for."

"I control it. I just can't stop it," I said. "And so far, I've never blown a job because of it and that's the truth."

My hands were trembling, not so much because I needed a drink as it was because I had just told a lie. A fairly major one. I had drowned a hundred hundred things in whiskey's sacrificial lake but always meant for it never to happen and told myself always it never would happen again. So the lie was one I stayed with. The worst lies are always the ones you believe about yourself.

"Tell me why you think your husband is trying to kill you. Who is he, how did you meet, everything you know or suspect about him," I said.

"His name is Hobart Charles Gordon. But let me do it my way. First let me tell you about the day he disappeared. The other stuff you can get later. He left for work one

morning. Nothing much unusual the night before. He slept in his bedroom and I slept in mine. We were at that level." She blushed and for a second there was a trace of the very young woman she once had been.

"Where did he work?"

"I don't know but I thought I did," she said, looking impatient. "Just let me tell it my way, ok?"

I leaned back in his chair and pushed the desk drawer shut with one knee. The urgency was there but it was muted. Whiskey soon, I promised myself.

"Maybe four in the morning, I had to go to the bathroom. I heard him on the phone downstairs. He was really wound up."

"Anything specific."

"No. Other than him yelling that somebody was a son of a bitch and was going to get it. Then he heard me, looked up and saw me at the top of the stairs and smiled up at me. It was the strangest look he gave me. Then he hung up the phone without saying goodbye and went into his room and slammed the door shut after him." Her voice was somber and tense.

"Could be anything. Maybe not even related."

Lynne Michelle shook her head, "The next morning I got the Spanish Inquisition with breakfast. How long have you been standing there? What did you hear? Did you understand what I was talking about? Did you hear me mention any names? One angry question after another."

"And when you said you heard nothing?"

"He called me a bitch liar. And smiled at me again in a very strange way and I realized he not only felt nothing for me, I think he actually hated my guts," she said and her voice got husky like it does when you're about to cry.

"So inattentive husband rudely gulps down his morning coffee, grabs his briefcase,

doesn't kiss you goodbye, and drives off to work," I said, trying to sum it up.

"Oh no. He did kiss me goodbye. He kissed me so long and hard he made my lips bleed. He wiped the blood off his mouth with his handkerchief and then laughed at me. I tried to resist, but he's incredibly strong."

"Sounds like a winner."

She went on, "And then he went out, got in his car and roared out of the driveway like an Indy 500 racer. I mean the tires were squealing and he left burnt rubber on the driveway."

"Sounds like a peach of an exit."

"And he left something else in the driveway. His briefcase."

"He was not having his best morning. Probably too much coffee," I suggested. Then I said, since her next move seemed obvious, "So you called him at work to tell him he forgot his briefcase,"

She nodded, "Hubbard and Sloan, where he worked in accounting."

I was not at my best. I did not see this one coming.

"They never had heard of a Hobart Charles Gordon!" Lynne Michelle shook her head. "Imagine that?"

"I may be dense, but something sounds very much wrong with that part of the story," I said.

She smiled at me. "It gets worse."

"It always does."

"I opened his briefcase. It contained no paperwork from Hubbard and Sloan, which was no surprise since he never worked there. But it did have all his personal identity papers and even his wallet and all his credit cards."

She held up four fingers. "There were four copies of birth certificates and four complete sets of credit cards. I found four driver's licenses, two from California and two

from Nevada, current and up to date and each of them had a different name that matched the credit cards and birth certificates. Different names, different states but his picture was on each of those driver's licenses. So what do you think of that?"

"And I bet not a single one of those pictures was a good likeness. You ever notice how the only time anybody ever actually looks like their driver license picture is when they lay you out in a coffin?"

"Shut up!" she said. "You're beginning to annoy me."

I shut up. My body had begun the gradual shift from slightly drunk to mostly hung over and my mental state wasn't getting any better. And the story was getting worse.

"They found his car abandoned on the San Bernadino freeway. Engine running, blocking the far right lane, all the windows down, air conditioner running on the highest setting, and emergency blinkers flashing."

"Police call you?"

"Yes, after they towed it. Said they wanted to cite him for obstructing traffic and abandoning a vehicle."

"And this was when?"

"A week ago and his car is still at the police impound lot," she said.

"And then what?"

Lynne Michelle shrugged, "Then nothing. No phone calls, no sight or sound of him."

"Did you notify missing persons?"

"After about four days. I wasn't exactly burning to see him," she said with a weary look on her face. "But still, he is your husband or pretended to be, so you want to know what happened so I did turn in a report. They drew a blank. That was a week ago. They found nothing and from him, there's still no word."

"If he left the way you said, something tells me he isn't going to be somebody who's easy to find."

She nodded. "That's why I'm here. And for this," she snapped open her bulky purse once again and took out a small box of foil wrapped chocolates.

"Four days after my husband disappeared, he sent me a box of chocolates. There was a note that said simply, 'for my dear wife Lynne Michelle'."

"A thoughtful goodbye and you thought he didn't care? Why the man was positively mush where you were concerned."

"God, you're really not funny at this moment." Her eyes flashed with anger.

"I'm sorry." And in a way I was too. I used humor to keep people at a distance, to minimize their pain. It was a poor substitute for the blankness of alcohol but I used every trick I know.

"My husband was a loveless bastard at heart. He was not a giver of things He was a taker. The fact that he seemed to have sent me a box of chocolates sounded very very wrong to me. It just wasn't something he would do even though he knows I can't resist chocolate. Chocolate is my downfall. It's what I crave most now that I am pregnant. So I opened the box and the chocolates didn't look right."

"Somebody had tampered with them?"

"Oh yes."

"And you didn't I suppose bother to go to the police with this information, did you?"

"No. I didn't want to waste my time but I found out they were poisoned."

"How?"

"I went to a pet store. They always have feeder mice that people buy for their pet snakes. I bought one and gave him a chocolate."

This Lynne Michelle was a resourceful woman, someone to be reckoned with.

"What happened?"

"I'm afraid my mouse just nibbled on the chocolate a little bit and then he managed to convince me that he was very dead."

"Did you keep the mouse?"

"I gave him a decent flush and a few well chosen words when I yanked on the handle," she said.

"And the bullet hole? When was that, not that I need any more convincing." Lynne Michelle was a woman with big trouble.

"Last night, coming home from a meeting of my natural childbirth class. I had just pulled out of the parking lot when the baby kicked and I leaned forward a little. The bullet plowed through the windshield right where my head was just a second ago."

Of course, it had gone long past the time or need for a decision. The thing was already decided, already out of my hands and loose in the night.

"I am your bodyguard, Lynne Michelle," I said, not looking at her.

"And also the finder of my missing husband, if that is possible?" she asked.

I nodded yes, not trusting myself with words on that one.

I opened the drawer suddenly and got the bottle out.

"Excuse me," I said. "But I rather badly need a drink."

My hands were shaking. I got the cap off, didn't bother with the glass in the other drawer, took a slug from the bottle. It burned and helped and hurt all in one moment.

I turned and looked up at Lynne Michelle.

The line from the marriage vow, for better or worse, seemed to spring into my head. There would have to be more drinks. I could see that.

"Just be there for me," she said. "That's all I ask for me and for my baby's sake."

I tried to look tough and nodded but inside I was on fire. I couldn't be there for anyone. Not really. Not ever. Not after what happened.

But I couldn't tell her that, couldn't tell it to anybody. Least of all, to myself.

CHAPTER TWO.

When Lynne Michelle went home, I went with her.

But first I sent my secretary home for the week. She's temporary like most things in my life. I split her services with a real estate agency. I guarantee her a minimum of 15 hours a week and she's worth every penny I spend on her even with the constant load of scorn for my sad condition. My secretary took a check for the retainer, a thousand to start. Large enough to make it seem like a job and not something personal.

I splashed outside into the parking lot. Nodded at Lynne Michelle already behind the wheel of her car. I pulled out onto the rain swept streets behind her and let the soft parade begin.

I had a few drinks in me, alright more than a few but I could drive, and I kept her car in sight as she wended her way down through the surface streets of LA back to her house. The day was just beginning to skid toward twilight and there was a threat of Spring with a capital S in the air. The city maintenance crews were probably out gathering up the brown plastic grass and replacing it with the green plastic grass so us Los Angelenos would actually know it was indeed spring.

We took Victory Boulevard until we hit Laurel Canyon and turned right and went climbing down the steep turns as if in some automotive mating dance. She drove too fast for a pregnant woman and I drove too close for an alcoholic working on his disease.

I probably would want to start both jobs at once, finding the husband even if he wasn't the one trying to kill her and then a more basic bodyguard role against whoever it was that was out there.

I wanted to see her missing husband's briefcase first and I wanted to assess just how defensible her house was. If it was not very, she and I would have to move someplace that was. I did not relish spending a large amount of time with her. But then I do not relish spending much time with anyone.

The identities in the briefcase might be dead ends but if he had lived under any of those names, somebody might know something about him, something that was not in the fake sets of ID, something that would point me in the right direction. I wasn't too hopeful about the chances on that but you can't find anything until you're willing to look everywhere.

Tossing their house for some indication of where he might have gone or who he could possibly be, was also on my list.

I had a bottle under the seat and a flask of not so fine whiskey in the inner pocket of my suit coat. I had a Police Special .38 in a holster under my jacket too. I glanced at myself in the rear view mirror when we stopped for a traffic light at Mount Olympus. I didn't like the face, didn't like what I saw in it, but then I never do.

She turned her right turn signal on and I flipped mine on too. This was a very expensive neighborhood. I knew it very well. I had lived here once myself in a different life, when I was somebody else. I felt no special thrill at being back.

It was a big house. An old rock star's house, his name was on the tip of my tongue, and I had actually been in the house a long time ago, on a night probably just about as bleak as this one.

She pulled up in the driveway and got out of the car like a sardine being levered out of a tin. She leaned against the side of her car, looking fragile. To me, all pregnant women look like they are in imminent danger of falling on their faces.

"Welcome to Sunny Brook Farm," she said and put one finger into her cheek and made a fake Shirley Temple dimple. She curtsied like an overstuffed Panda and it almost made me laugh. I settled on a smile which pleased her.

She went up the sidewalk. I got a hand on her shoulder and stopped her before she could get her key in the front door.

"Is there another way into the house?" I asked.

"There's a side door and a back door. Why?"

"If I wanted you dead, I would assume you'd walk through that front door. And I might be waiting in there for you to do just that."

"Oh," she said. "So much for Sunny Brook Farm."

We went around to the side door. I took the keys from her and opened the door cautiously, gun in my hand. She moved in behind me, not walking too close.

I didn't turn any lights on, just moved carefully and as silently as possible through the house. She started crowding up next to me, almost stepping on my heels.

It was nicely furnished but the rooms seemed cold as if the people there had never really quite moved in. It seemed like a house built for a dream that died before it began.

I opened every door, all the closets, went into every room. She never said a word, her eyes trained on my gun most of the time. It seemed to make her nervous.

"You live here," I said, keeping the gun in my hand. "I don't see anything out of place. But how do you feel? You have a gut notion that somebody has been in here, tell me now."

Instincts work at times like this better than a professional eye. If an intruder has been in your personal space, you can often sense it. Its just something that rides you under the skin.

"I think it's ok," she said thoughtfully. "I feels pretty much the way it was when I left it."

"Ok," I continued my circuit. Checking all the doors and windows, bolting and locking everything that wasn't already buttoned up. It was a big house and there were dozens of ways to get inside. It was not defensible. Anybody who wanted to get to her, with just a little determination, could.

"I want the briefcase," I said and she nodded and went and got it for me. I told her to wait for me and ran down and put it in my car. Everything that was in it would be

subjects for later research. When I got back, she was standing in almost the same place as when I had left. She seemed tense.

"I have to use the bathroom," she said and I nodded.

She started up the stairs. "No. Use the one downstairs. I don't want you going too far away from me if trouble starts. Do your business in there as quick as you can but don't turn on any lights. And what ever you do, stay away from the windows."

"I think you overplay this bodyguard business. If I need to turn on a light, by god, I'll turn on a light!" she said.

"If I come in and turn it off for you, I won't be the one who is embarrassed."

"You wouldn't dare!" I couldn't tell if she was offended or amused. She had an interesting sense about who she was, about how she carried herself.

I felt we were safe enough for the time being so I drifted up toward the bedrooms. Her bedroom was too female, a little too frilly and light hearted for my taste. She was big on yellow, and it dripped off drapes, bled off bedspreads, and was wasted on a number of very expensive wall hangings. A few dead lemons seemed to leer at me from some art deco paintings on one wall that would have been alright if I was into fruited landscapes which mostly I am not.

But she had bookshelves, crammed with books. I thumbed through some of them, curious about who she was. The books were dog-eared, she was a page folder and it was obvious the books weren't there just for display. She had Stout, Twain, Hemingway, and a little bit of everybody in between.

Hobart Charles Gordon's bedroom looked like a motel on Sunset Strip.

Her missing half was a minimalist. Bed, dresser. Closets. Two hard wooden chairs.

Nothing on top of the dresser and almost nothing in it except underwear and socks. A big walk in closet was a jumble of suits, not sorted by color or any other system.

There was an empty space on a shelf in the closet about the size of a briefcase. There

were a lot of clothes, most of it expensive. Labels made it seem like they were from a little bit of everywhere. I sensed where he got his clothes was not going to lead to anything. There was too much expensive off the rack stuff. Half of it looked like it had never been worn.

I emptied all the drawers, pulled everything off the closet shelves. I pulled all the suits off the hangers, and tossed the pockets. I found no personal papers, no scraps of papers, no coins, no matches, no restaurant receipts. He could have been a man without hands for all I knew judging by his pockets. I began to suspect he had been there before me, removing all of the things I now sought.

Four suits had the labels cut off. I pondered that. It did say something. They obviously came from somewhere that he wanted hidden. There was some place where he had run to ground or had come from or meant to go to. The missing labels were the key but the door was gone.

I looked into shoe boxes. Ran my fingers through all of his shoes. I found nothing. Not even lint. It was like some huge vacuum cleaner had sucked up everything he had ever touched.

The closet and dressers were full. There was no indication that he had packed anything or had taken anything. He seemed to have made a perfect goodbye.

I moved on to his bathroom. His shaving things were there. He used disposable razors. But there were no old ones. His toothbrush holder had a large one and a small one, hanging there, both new in the box, unwrapped. There were no other items, no medicine bottles, or Band-Aids, or shaving cream. Two bottles of aftershave and a can of first aid spray were in the wastebasket.

I shook them. They were full, had never been used or opened.

This wasn't going to be easy. This was a man who knew how to say goodbye.

I began to have some shaky ideas about just what kind of work old Hobart Charles

Gordon was actually involved in.

I heard a noise and came out with my gun, but it was only Lynne Michelle. She had a plastic bag with bagels in one hand. "I'm hungry. How about you?"

"Later maybe. I'm done up here," I said, reholstering the gun.

"What next?"

"Did he have personal letters, correspondence, magazine subscriptions? Where did he keep that kind of stuff?"

"He never got mail here. Not one single piece of mail. Not even junk mail," she said. "Funny I never even thought about it. I mean, this is my house and he moved in. He didn't read magazines or books."

"He a sports fan? Like Jazz? Heavy TV watcher, or weight lifter? Did he jog?"

"He ran six miles every night before he went to sleep. He had a weight set in the garage. He pumped weight about 30 minutes a day, seven days a week. He was in great shape physically. It was the most tense and maybe private part of his day, and anything that I might do that would interrupt that regimen used to make him fairly angry."

"He isn't making an appearance yet, is he? I mean, where is he in this story?" I was beginning to think rather unwell of the missing Hobart Charles Gordon. A man with that much to hide must have a world of bad behind what he was up to.

"He watched the local news. Whatever I watched. Didn't seem to care about sports one way or the other. I think he watched the Super bowl once but left in the middle to mow the lawn. I'd guess he didn't care much about sports," She was trying to think about him now, trying to place just how he was and how he had been. "If you want to know what I really think," Now something was really troubling her.

Her face was tight. "I think he hid everything that he was interested in from me. He did everything I did. Watched what I wanted to watch, listened to my music, did things that I wanted to do. I don't think he ever suggested or initiated anything on his own. He

bought clothes. But nothing for the house, never groceries or furniture."

"Was he smart?"

"God yes. I used to do the LA Times crossword. Every time I got stuck, all I had to do was ask him. I think maybe only twice there were two words he didn't know."

"He say where he went to college?"

"Harvard. MBA in business but..."

"You called and they never heard of a..." Her nod made it unnecessary to finish the sentence.

"Do you think he had an MBA?"

She shrugged. "He was educated. Probably had an advanced degree from somewhere. His command of language was better than mine."

"I saved the best for last. His family? Father, brother, sister, mother, aunts, uncles? Everybody you can remember or half remember from your wedding?"

I wasn't hoping for much on this one. If there had been anything there, she would have already brought it up. She didn't disappoint me.

"Eloped. Married in Reno, one of those married in haste moments. One of my own monuments to personal stupidity!" She sounded a touch bitter.

"And if you ask me about his family, what he told me about them, I'm afraid there's nothing there either. His story was that his parents died when he was ten, and he grew up with a bachelor uncle who died while he was at Harvard."

"No friends, male or female?"

"All of our friends, were my friends. I introduced them to him," she said. "Jesus! How could I have missed all this!" She seemed dazed by the picture that was emerging. "I married an absolute stranger. I guess that doesn't leave us anything to go on, does it?"

"Nothing is ever that hopeless, unless you count me. Ok, bring me all your phone records. And I mean all of them, from as far back as you can find."

"OK." She took a bite out of a bagel and went out of the room.

I was glad to have her out of the room. I used my flask and went a ways quick towards emptying it. I would be glad to be out of her house. I could sense her presence fairly strongly here and I liked places that were a little less personal and intimate. Something like a dimly lit Laundromat. Now there's a room I know how to work.

There were a few more places I could look, the garage for instance but I knew when I was outfoxed and there was no trail to be found here.

It was time to get out of this house, get us someplace where I would be better able to defend her against whatever it was that was coming from her.

Now that I was getting a very clear picture of a man I could not see at all, a very missing person, I suspected the trouble was a lot bigger than any I wanted or might be able to handle.

I used the flask again to make me calm. I emptied it.

Courage I can swallow.

I got restless waiting for her to come back with the phone records. I started downstairs. It was silent in the house. I went from room to room. She didn't seem to be in any of them. The silence was becoming oppressive. There were no lights on anywhere downstairs and the gun came out and my heart began to race.

Something was wrong, very wrong.

I wanted to call out to her, but was afraid to give away my position. I released the safety on the gun. I reached the last room. I heard the faint echo of a sound, from a door at the back of the room. A tiny glimmer of light came from under the doorway, as if a pencil flashlight was on in there.

I moved fast, gun up. I reared back, thrust out with one leg and slammed the door off its hinges. She screamed as the door tilted out of the frame and I burst through, hand on the trigger.

She was sitting on the toilet, her dress was around her ankles and she held a large grocery sack of phone records on her lap. A tiny candle on top of the sink gave off a cheerless glow.

She stared at me, over the sudden fright that had made her scream. She made no move to cover herself. She cocked her head and stared at the gun in her face, looking past it to look at me.

"You know when you're pregnant and you have to pee, let me tell you Jack, you really have to pee!" She grabbed the gun barrel and thrust it away from her face. "But in the future, if I am just simply not doing it fast enough for you Jack, maybe you could be a little bit more calmer about telling me about it, ok?"

"I thought something happened to you," I said, lamely aware I had made a store mannequin look smart by comparison.

"Hey. When you hear the toilet flush, that's how you can tell it did, ok?"

I turned around and got out of there.

"I guess you have some kind of weird thing about bathroom behavior. Is that it?" She said and she laughed.

I felt my face flush. I wasn't winning this round and wasn't going to.

I started out of the room but then I heard something that was no echo. It was the sharp tinkle of broken glass. Suddenly, I knew we were no longer alone.

I backed into the room, moving back to the shattered bathroom door. "Get dressed. Somebody's here."

"When I'm ready Jack," she said. "I haven't even..."

I reached in and grabbed her and yanked her out. My other arm, the one with the gun smashed down and obliterated the candle, snuffing it out against my coat sleeve.

Her arm came up and I guess she took a swing at me but I had her off balance and her dress tripped her up and she never connected.

My voice was tight. "Get dressed. Somebody we don't want to meet is in the house," I whispered.

I heard noises in the house, doors opening, the heavy thud of feet going up the stairs. Whoever it was, they didn't care if we heard them. And it sounded like more than one person.

She got her clothes back in place, leaned against me and I felt her tremble.

"What do we do?"

"What's the fastest way out of here, either door or window?" I whispered urgently.

She put her lips next to my ears and I could smell her breath against my face. "There's a window in this bathroom."

"Ok. As quick as you can, let's climb out,"

"Forget it!" She stiffened and tried to pull away from me.

"Goddamn you, stop fighting me on every goddamn thing," I hissed. "Let me do my goddamn job!"

Her whisper was angry and frantic. "The window's too small. I'm too pregnant!"

I moved to the outside wall, traced the outline of the window. It was small, she was right and she was large, but there was no other way and we had no more time.

I powered the window up. The sounds were getting closer, moving in our direction.

I put my legs over the window sill, and let myself slide out. The grass was damp against my shoes. Heavy bushes on each side of the window hid me from view and it was dark out there, as dark as night ever gets.

I reached back in for her, my hands gripped her arms and I began to pull her through the window. She cursed me softly under her breath.

"Stop! Stop!" she whispered frantically. I yanked on her.

She was stuck, wedged tightly in the window frame. Son of a bitch!

I had my gun in my teeth, the grip tearing against my lip. I had both hands on her and

there was no other way. I yanked with everything I had, putting my shoulders and back into it and she came unstuck suddenly, violently and came rocketing out at me. I fell over backwards and she made a three point landing on my chest and stomach with such force she knocked the wind out of me. I rolled, tossing her off me, gasping for air, trying to sit up. We were making too much noise. We were blowing it. Even winded, my hand went toward the ground, searching frantically for the gun I dropped when I fell. My hand found it and clutched it like a lost friend.

She let me know how happy she was to be rescued.

“Keep your god dam paws off of me! Nobody plays grabass with me!” She was mad as hell.

Her fist came up and smashed hard against the bridge of my nose. My head turned and I fell over in the grass, off balance. I felt something loosen and then the night exploded in a red roar and a flash. Somebody put a bullet at the spot where the blow had been struck, shooting at the noise of her slap.

I could feel the wind of the bullet going over my downed shoulders.

I had the gun up and put two bullets as fast as I could pull them right into the center of the window frame. My hand shook and I knew I'd had too much to drink.

Something bulky and heavy fell with a meaty thud back into the room and there was a sharp exhalation of pain and surprise.

My eyes were fuzzy with the weapon flashes. I was up somehow, dizzy with drink and had her by the arm and began to run. Blood was dripping from my nose and everything was hazy like the end of a long afternoon's drinking.

I stumbled and I think I would have fallen after the first step, but she held on and seemed to lift me up. She got us both running together, matched my steps with her own. We were across the yard as quick as we could go and passed into the yard of her next door neighbor.

After that, it all seemed a fuzzy drunken shambles. The drink was affecting me, and the punch to the nose, making everything shrouded, lacking in clarity. That we were being pursued I was aware of. Close behind were shouts, heavy feet drumming on the sidewalk, hard leather soles slapping against the cement. For us it was just a mindless headlong rush without much sense or purpose other than to move. And move we did.

Several cars cruised by, headlights on, while we crouched like animals in bushes and doorways, somehow just a few steps ahead of them. Sometimes behind them.

At one point, I tried to get her to crawl under a parked car but she pushed me away. If I had been completely sober, I would have known she couldn't have fit under there in her condition.

But I was far from sober. I clung to her, like a blind man trusting his journey to the eyes and senses of his guide dog.

I don't think I remember the exact moment when we knew we were safe. My arms and legs seemed made of lead and she was panting like a racehorse that had run the best race of its life. We were in somebody's back yard, our backs against the rear wall of a picket fence, spent, leaning against each other like exhausted swimmers who had reached a distant shore.

I was light headed. She put her arms around my head and tilted it back. I heard something swish and then she was pressing a piece of cloth against my nose. She seemed more like my bodyguard now.

"Jesus! I'm sorry. I was scared and didn't mean to do it." She said.

I had no clear idea what she was talking about. I was the one who should be sorry. Shouldn't have got so drunk. I really handled this very badly.

"S'all right, shafe, safe now," I said. Had a hard time with the words, getting them to come out right. Blood dripped into my mouth.

"Don't talk," she said "and keep your head back. You've got to get that bleeding

stopped."

We sat there for a while. I don't know how long. My nose ached. It felt like a needle was jabbing at it but eventually that sensation subsided into a dull ache.

When I had enough strength, I pushed her hand away, getting the cloth away from my nose. I was tired of breathing through my mouth.

In the glow of a distant street light, I could see her clearly.

She was shivering and her blouse was torn where I had pulled her through the window. I could see the outline of her bra, black and lacy above the child she carried. The cloth against my nose was from her ripped blouse. I moved my arms, shrugged myself out of my coat, and wrapped it around her. She huddled in it, cold and scared.

I stared at her with a kind of bruised wonder. She was tough, had a resiliency, an inner strength that went beyond my own. Her unwelcome tenderness and concern for me was the worst moment of that night.

She put her hand on my shoulder. I think I would rather have had a bullet in it instead.

I drink so I don't have to feel things and she was full of things.

If I could have found the words, if I had the strength, I would have pushed her away, begged her please to let me stay empty.

But I was as trapped in her trouble as she was.

CHAPTER THREE

She wanted to go back and get some of her things.

"Look, I'm pregnant. I need things."

"We'll buy new things."

"I want MY things!" she insisted.

I had tried to flag down a cab but this was LA and we weren't at the airport which is

just about the only place you can find one. Luckily, I found a phone and called for one. We were leaning against the booth, just waiting for the cab.

My nose was better but still hurt. At least it had stopped bleeding or maybe I had just run out of blood.

"You can't go back. There's all kinds of trouble back there. Going back there would be like, like if somebody throws a punch at you, you lean into it."

"I want my things!"

She didn't say exactly what her things were and I didn't really want to know. She was beginning to sound like a juke box with only one song.

"You do remember the surprise invitation to an autopsy that went bang bang in the night? I mean, the guns and the guys using them?"

"They wouldn't still be there," she said. "They wouldn't think we are stupid enough to come back."

"Oh we are pretty stupid. At least I am."

"I say the house will be empty and I could get my things. I demand that you take me back there! Nobody is going to be there."

"I think the one I shot might be. Or the cops and the meat wagon and god knows what else. In any case, nobody back there is somebody we want to meet."

She seemed to think about what I said. She still didn't like it and I was sure I hadn't heard the last word on this subject. She was the kind of woman who doesn't let go of things easily. She came back at me with yet another verbal knife. This time gratitude.

"You saved my life. I should be grateful," she said with the kind of voice that made me positive that I didn't want to look at her eyes.

"It's what the paycheck gets signed for. Just doing my job," I tried to sound like that was the end of the discussion.

"Look you can try to act like it isn't anything if you want to but it means something to

me!" Her voice went softer, and I knew she was trying to get me to look at her. "You're pretty heroic. I'm not going to forget what you did for me," she said.

"I shot somebody. Maybe killed somebody," I said. "That doesn't make it heroic. It just means we are alive."

"Do you feel bad about it?"

There are questions you want not to hear, not to ask and never to answer and this was one of them. You get through the nights sometimes by not thinking about the questions.

"Let's not talk about it."

"But if you feel bad, I can understand how..."

"Let's not even talk."

"But I have to talk. I'm scared and shaky," she said.

Welcome to the club. I had my hands in my pockets because I was afraid they might shake right off the ends of my wrists. I needed a drink like a camel needs its hump.

"Where are we going?"

"Someplace safe."

"A motel?"

I shook my head no. "It's the first place they'll start looking."

"Do you know who those men were?" She could talk you to death.

"I know who they aren't. They aren't professionals. They made too much noise. The one who got shot by me was playing it very stupid, standing dead center in a window and firing point blank. No pro would have exposed himself like that."

"I guess you believe me now when I said that somebody was trying to kill me," she said with a wan smile.

"I remain more convinced."

Suddenly, impulsively, she leaned toward me. "Can I give you a hug to thank you for saving my life?"

I reared back as if struck. I tried to keep calm, to not let her get to me. "Stay away from me. Don't make this personal. This is just a job. I don't feel anything."

She seemed offended, slowly putting her arms down.

A yellow cab pulled up to the curb and I leaned away from the glass wall of the phone booth. "Our ride is here," I said, glad that it came now to break this moment. She was a woman dangerously fraught with moments.

"What about my car? What about your car with the briefcase in it?" she asked as I opened the cab door for her.

"That's the bad news." I said, sliding in next to her. "If they find my car, they can find me. They'll know who you're with and that's gonna make it harder for me to hide you. They'll have you and me linked up and its easier to find two people than one."

"Where to?" asked the cabbie.

"Take us to the airport," I said.

"Hey that's a long ride and this late, can't hardly be no planes leaving," observed the cab driver.

"Hey. If you don't know how to get to the airport," I said. "Get out and let me drive."

"Don't get shirty!" snapped the driver, snarling back at us over the stub of a well chewed cigar. He put the car in drive and pulled away from the curb, the meter ticking. "I was just making conversation."

"Well don't."

"Lady, you don't mind me saying so, your husband has got a mouth on him, you know?" opined the cabbie.

"He's not my husband," said Lynne Michelle. "I wouldn't be caught dead married to him."

"Good for you girlie."

It wasn't my night. I was bone tired, feeling the beginning of a hangover and my legs

were sore from running. And my nose felt like someone tried to hit a homerun with it. And we had a long way to go before we would be safe, if we were ever going to be.

"Are we catching a plane?"

"No."

"Why are we going to the airport?"

"Because its there."

"I have to pee."

"Think about something else."

"Nothing else is as big a thought as how bad I have to pee. We've got to pull over somewhere," She was tugging on my arm like a dog straining at the end of its leash.

"You can hold out till we get to the airport."

"I swear I'll pee on your leg!"

"You want I should pull over lady, there's an all night gas station on Olympia?" That was the cab driver again, sticking his oar in again.

"No she doesn't want to pull over! Stop encouraging her! Just get us to the airport!" I snarled. "And be quick about it."

"I'm beginning to hate you!" she said in a voice that was just short of emitting sparks.

"Good. I wouldn't want it any other way."

And I think I wanted that to be true. At least I hoped I wanted it to be true.

She went silent and angry on me which was a relief. The cab driver kept looking back at us in his rear view mirror but didn't offer any further conversation which was ok by me. I was talked out.

The airport was foggy, the ocean air damp and chilly.

I paid the cabbie with what little I had in my pocket and he sped away.

We were standing in a passenger loading zone and she was hunched over, holding her stomach and giving me the kind of looks that would have broke ribs if they had been

punches.

"I know, you got to pee," I said. "Soon I promise."

"Bastard!" she muttered under her breath.

A Hilton Hotel shuttle bus pulled up to the curb and I waved at the driver and he nodded his head and slowed to a stop. He pushed the lever and the double bus doors opened.

"You're lucky folks. This is the last shuttle to the Hilton. Welcome to LA."

I helped her waddle up the steps and got her seated in one of the seats.

"Appreciate it if you'd hurry," I said. "She's not feeling all that well."

"Do my best," sang out the driver with forced cheerfulness. He eyed her warily. "She's not in labor is she?"

Apparently a yes answer to that would have ruined his night.

So I didn't say anything.

She was too mad to talk to anyone. I decided I liked her that way.

I had a lie prepared about the airline losing our luggage but the driver hadn't asked so I hadn't offered.

It was about a ten minute ride. She practically ran to get off the bus, pushing past me in her rush to get to the door.

"She's uh, very athletic," observed the shuttle driver having watched her push through the double bus doors almost before he got them fully open. She hit the ground running and made a beeline for the Hilton Lobby.

"She's in training for the pregnant Olympics," I said, walking stiffly off the bus. My body felt like it had been dragging under the bus the whole way.

"Wow! Really?" said the driver stupidly "What event?"

"She's a javelin catcher. You can always tell by the oversized lips."

He looked at his nose for a second with both eyes. Apparently it was a little more

information than he could handle.

CHAPTER FOUR

Its amazing how long a woman can be gone when she goes to the bathroom. I waited in the Hilton lobby long enough to feel the continental plates shifting under me.

She finally emerged, looking frazzled and bedraggled but with new makeup applied. How she managed to hang onto a purse was remarkable in it self. Her face looked tired but pretty. My coat buttoned up as a substitute for her bloody blouse looked odd but then you were supposed to look odd if you lived in Los Angeles so she was fine. It at least covered what needed to be covered. But even so she had a look about of her of somebody who was pretty ticked off at the world in general.

But in spite of that, I was glad somehow to see her. I had actually gotten a bit anxious, waiting for her, as if she belonged to me and I was supposed to worry about her.

Thoughts like that made me sad the Hilton bar wasn't open. I could have used two or three hundred drinks. Its a classy place to guzzle and I like getting plastered in posh places. Even when you stagger at the end of the night like a beheaded penguin, you still seem somehow more elegant.

"So do we check in?"

"No."

"Why did I know you were going to say that?"

"You stay here. I've got to go somewhere?"

"Here where?"

"In the lobby. Just sit in the lobby, read a magazine. Count the potted palms if you get bored. I'll be back as quick as I can."

"Look. I'm pregnant. I need a new blouse. I need a bed. I need my things. I can't just

sit out here in the lobby. My back aches. My feet are killing me. I need a hot bath."

"You'll have to wait. If you check in, you begin leaving a trail. This is temporary."

"How do you say Drop Dead in English?"

"I don't want you to try to check in! Damn it, I'm serious about this! Don't screw around on this! Just wait here. You'll be safe enough till I get back. The next place we go to, should be safe. Then you can have all the stuff you say you need and I'll buy you whatever uh, feminine, items you need."

"Do the words 'Get stuffed' convey anything to you?"

"We can talk about upholstery when I get back," I said.

"You are really beginning to annoy me!" She folded her arms across her chest, like a baseball umpire confronting an angry ballplayer. I had the dizzy feeling that she was about to call me out and was only an angry word away from throwing me out of the game altogether. Probably I couldn't get that lucky.

I got up from my chair and started to leave. I liked her better when she hated my guts.

She got up. I heard her moving behind me.

I turned around and looked back at her. She stopped and stared at me.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Whither thou goest brave sir knight, so go I."

"Sit down. Park your pregnant self. I'm going to do something dangerous. I don't want you along with me."

"Everything I do these days is dangerous. People shoot at me when I go to my natural childbirth class! They knock doors down on me when I am trying to pee! So what's one more dangerous moment?"

"If I have to, I'll handcuff you to a chair."

"It better be a really tasteful chair and not too heavy because its going to look ungainly as hell when I am walking after you, dragging some of this less than wonderful Hilton

lobby decor. I don't want people to think I have poor taste in furniture."

"Will you for crissakes let me do my job?"

"Your job is bodyguarding me."

"I'm trying to do that!" I was beginning to get strong urges and my drinking arm was twitching. Where's a bartender when you need one?

"Not without me you aren't. I don't want to be alone."

"You're perfectly safe here until I get back!" I was trying to be reasonable but it was like arguing with a buzzsaw.

"Being perfectly safe bores me. I want to be with you."

"No way!" I was just going to have to be firm with her.

"I could scream. I could make a scene."

"I could hit you with a potted plant. Or I could paint a big bullseye on your ass and say "There she is everyone, the screaming pregnant one!"

"You can't hit a pregnant woman."

"I would like to think I could. Since you have been pretty good at taking shots at me," I felt a sudden stab of pain or memory or both in my nose. She had a right hook a truck driver would be proud of.

"I dare you!" She didn't actually make a fist but I bet she still knew how.

Actually she was right. I don't hit women, pregnant or otherwise. But she had the kind of temperament that made you almost want to.

"Maybe I'll just shoot you in the leg a little. Most people find that has a discouraging effect." The bullet that hits her better be a very hard one.

"You can't solve everything with a gun."

That seemed to be the point of no return argument wise. She sure was letting all the air out of my night.

I turned my back on her and headed for the door again. She was right behind me. I

knew I could outrun her and maybe that was the best plan. How fast can a pregnant woman run anyway? Time to think with my legs.

I pushed through the door and let it close and it hit her in the stomach. I didn't actually mean to do that.

She got mad.

She slammed the door open and came up behind me. I was turning around, ready to say something apologetic. She grabbed me by the hair and almost pulled me over backwards.

"You should be nice to me. I'm pregnant!" she said and she kicked me in the backside.

She could have been a punter for the LA Rams.

My knees lurched and folded on me. My backside slammed into the tile entranceway floor. I felt my tailbone make like a cheap accordion. The pain brought tears to my eyes. Maybe I would never be able to sit comfortably on a bar stool again! Oh the horror!

She stood over me triumphantly and I looked up at her.

"I'm not going to be ignored. And I'm not going to be bullied," she said with pride. And then her face changed and she looked sad. "Hey! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to kick you so-hard. Kinda got a temper these days," There were tears in her eyes and then she bent over awkwardly to try and help me up.

I wished she wasn't so goddamned pregnant because I had a mad desire to kiss her and hopefully make her ill. It was the feeblest revenge anyone ever thought of.

And I felt bad because it was all I could come up with.

CHAPTER FIVE

You can't even limp right when it's your tailbone that hurts. You end up limping bowlegged and you feel like your legs aren't quite long enough to reach the ground. I

needed a bodyguard to protect me from the body I was bodyguarding. I was beginning to feel badly dented.

Of course, I took her with me. There was a cab parked out in front of the Hilton which I hailed. I helped her into the cab and she thanked me by not stepping on my hand or trying to slam the car door on it. One lives for these small concessions.

"Where to?" said the cab driver as he clicked on the meter.

"A cemetery probably but then that would be negative thinking," I sighed and then I gave the cabdriver her home address.

"You lied to me!" she said. "You ARE going back to the house!"

"Oh god! Don't start with me! I'm going back to get my car and the briefcase. If its safe, we're gonna need the car. But its too dangerous for you to be there. If you coulda just listened to me and if you could act like a normal human being for five seconds..."

"I'm not normal. I'm pregnant!" She interrupted.

That was the most truthful thing she ever said or ever would say. She probably blurted it out without thinking.

"We could get my stuff too," she said stubbornly, holding herself tightly against the seat back. She was back to the same old song.

I was too tired to argue and I didn't want to risk any more body parts.

Besides my car had whiskey in the glove compartment. I held to that golden image, that liquid delight that awaited me there. I just sat back, unenjoyed the ride and thought about that first glorious drink.

I told the driver to go slow when we got near to her house. There were no cop cars in the street. No cars parked where they shouldn't be, with bad guys lurking around in them, that I could see.

I made him stop about two blocks from her house. I could see my car from there. Her car was there too. Maybe the bad guys need to get away after shots had been fired, or

their need to get their wounded or dead guy out of harm's way was why they left the cars intact. I scanned the neighborhood carefully. Nothing seemed out of place but they could be out there waiting. It made me sweaty just thinking about it.

I reached into my pants for the cab fare but I came up almost all of the fare short.

"My purse is in my house. If you don't have any money, then you're just going to have to let me go inside the house and get some," She smiled wickedly because my financial situation had opened the door I was trying desperately to keep closed. "And then of course, while I'm already in there, I could get my..."

"I keep a spare hundred for emergencies in my glove compartment," I said, cutting her off.

It was my emergency booze money but she didn't have to know that.

"You stay in the cab!" I opened the door and got out.

"Regard her as a security deposit," I told the cabdriver. "If I don't get back with the money, she's yours."

The cab driver chewed gum and seemed to be thinking about it. He nodded.

"Wouldn't be the strangest thing anybody ever left in my cab," said the driver. "I mean, this is LA after all."

He was right about that. You have to really go some to be strange in LA.

I got about half way to my car. Nobody jumped out from behind a bush with an automatic weapon. No one seemed interested in me at all. If homicide was a weather front, all appeared calm.

And then I heard the clack clack of guess who's heels on the pavement. I didn't have to turn around and look. I'd recognize that pregnant pace almost anywhere.

"I had some money on me. I paid the cab driver," she said by way of explanation.

I looked off in the distance and saw the cabdriver pull away. I sighed.

I just kept on walking until I reached my car. I bent over and looked through the car

window on the passenger side. The briefcase was there, right where I left it on the passenger side seat. No one had forced the car locks.

The car was locked up just the way I left it. I was thankful they had been so unobservant but hated to trust the idea all the way.

I got my keys out and opened the passenger door. She came up behind me.

I didn't look at her. "Get in."

I didn't wait for her to do it. I went around the car, unlocked the other door and got in. I looked all around, out the front, back and side windows but there was nobody moving except a pregnant person and she was just barely moving at that. She was half in and half out of the car, as if she couldn't decide if she could make me go into the house with her for her stuff or not.

I started the engine and she lowered herself into the seat and turned and stared at me. Her legs were still hanging outside the door frame, her feet were both still on the ground.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" I said.

"Are they gone?"

"It would seem so."

"And they wouldn't be in my house waiting for us would they?"

"Probably not but it's not worth risking it," I was waiting for her to pull her feet in before I put the car in gear.

"Well then the hell with it!" she said suddenly and began to lever herself back out of the seat.

I popped the driver's side door open, left the engine running and tried to head her off before she could get out but she was too fast for me, even as pregnant as she was.

She was up and duck walking toward her house.

I grabbed her shoulders from behind and tried to drag her back. She tried to step on my toes but I kept dancing them out of her way. I had an advantage over her. She

couldn't see her own feet, let alone mine.

We frogwalked around for a while, me holding her from behind, her trying to turn around and mangle some other body part. I had her where she couldn't get at me and where I pretty much could have it all my way. When I pulled her arms back behind her shoulders, the part of her that was very pregnant kept her overbalanced and she couldn't keep her feet quite under her. The more she tried to struggle, the closer she came to falling. This unequal struggle was more to my liking. For once I seemed to be winning one of the battles. I was slowly wearing her down. Her struggles were getting feeble and I knew I had her.

I got her turned around and started to buck her back to the car.

That was when something very large and angry and extremely noisy happened.

A blast of heat and fire and flying metal went screaming toward us.

Suddenly a very large pregnant woman slammed into me and I went over backwards and she rode me down to the pavement like a Kamikaze pilot giving her last measure of devotion to the Emperor.

I somehow found the presence of mind to roll out from under her and quickly crawled on top of her, protecting her body with my own.

A large section of my car's front bumper went up in the air above me and came down with a painful jolt. It slammed across my outstretched legs, making me jerk with pain. A small piece of flying metal grazed my forehead and something slapped against one leg, stinging like an angry metal bee. A searing blast of heat and flame rolled over us, hot enough to take our breath away. I could feel the back of my shirt beginning to burn.

A huge ball of flame gushed up at the night on the spot where my car used to stand. It was still there, or rather a mostly recognizable chunk of the car frame but it was not a drivable remnant. Very much not so.

I heard the clatter of falling metal and debris falling around us like rain. My ears

seemed not to be working. They were ringing but I was unable to answer them. I crouched over her, trying not to put my weight on her, struggling to breathe.

When the air stopped being full of flying things, I slid off her. I tried to shift her, turn her face to me to see how she was but she tumbled lifelessly to one side like a boneless thing. Her eyes were closed, her arms folded awkwardly under her.

I sat up slowly, aware that a piece of metal had pierced my arm and that I was bleeding.

My hands were too shaky to take her pulse but I knew she was dead.

An even bigger thing was piercing my heart and it too was bleeding. There was no drink big enough or deep enough to drown out this.

Waves of heat kept roiling off the burning hulk of my car and I felt suddenly sick. Everything around me glowed in a weird reddish light. I thought I heard a siren in the distance and I figured the rest of the world was about to catch up to us. Too late to be of any use for her or for me.

Probably her car was wired too. They sure had had done an aces up job on mine. They had used enough explosive and then some.

I stood up. I wanted to bend over her, lift up her head, cradle it in my arms. But that was what they do in movies and this was not a movie I wanted to be in. I couldn't even bring myself to look at her.

I walked toward the flames and felt an urge to run into them, to embrace the fiery heart of the fire and burn myself out once and for all in the raging Detroit born corpse.

I turned around and for once I did not think about the whiskey that went up with the car or my next drink. I was grieving for someone I had lost that I never had even found. And I grieved because I really didn't care enough and couldn't. I see too much and feel too little.

I went back to her and knelt down beside her. I put my hands on her gently, trying to

find where she was hurt, looking for the thing that had killed her. It wasn't clear what she had met that had been fatal.

I rolled her over ever so gently, so that her arms were not tucked under her, so that she rested on her side. The little one was probably dead too.

I had failed her.

For once it had not been the drink.

But I had failed her. That was what pierced my heart.

I put my hand on her neck, trying to find a pulse but my hands were still so shaky I had to give it up. I put my still ringing ears to her chest, listening once more for her heartbeat. I heard nothing. Life had left this body.

There didn't seem to be any life left in the world now.

"You can't believe how sorry I am, for you and your little one," I said and I found myself touching her face. I wondered as I said it if I really meant it. I wanted to. Sometimes I don't trust myself to have the finer feelings. Maybe I've drunk them all away.

Then suddenly, unashamedly, I began to weep.

For me, for her, for the failure and the want. For the harsh words and the unkindness she had gotten from me, for the ugly little death that had taken her out of this night.

The sirens came closer. I closed my eyes and waited for nothing, hoped for nothing.

Mostly I hated myself.

But that was how I always am. Now it was just deeper and darker and the pile of blame was one failure higher.

CHAPTER SIX

I was vaguely aware that a homicide detective was talking to me but I thought I was

dizzy from the heat and his voice had a lost underwater quality. A doctor was yanking on my arm with all the gentleness of a lumberjack and a wave of pain kept shooting up that arm until it exploded in my brain.

The fire department was there in force, hoses drenching the immediate world in an attempt to put the burning hulk of my car out. The bomb squad was here and there sifting the rubble, homicide cops were circulating through the crowds of onlookers in the vain hope someone would step up and confess and the usual jackals from the press were there doing live coverage from the scene of the confusion.

It was all a dimly heard, dimly sensed thing to me. A doctor gave me a shot and I found myself sitting up on a stretcher, awaiting an ambulance ride. They had moved her, taken her around to the other side of the ambulance. I couldn't see her and that was just as well with me even though it was a futile thing. All I had to do was close my eyes and I would see her.

The detective was shouting at me now. I realized that I could just barely make out what he was saying.

The doctor shook his head at him, pointing at my ears. I turned and watched his lips, making out the words. Apparently I had been deafened by the explosion. I shook my head, trying to clear my ears. They weren't getting any better.

I started to say something. I don't know what it was I meant to say because suddenly I seemed to be leaning over into blackness and I was gone.

I woke up in the ambulance being jounced by the potholes that make driving in LA an adventure. I was strapped in but still bounced from side to side as the ambulance roared along, siren screaming. I was hurting in significant ways.

My ears were back. I could hear. The ambulance guy was talking on a portable phone, explaining what he was bringing in.

"And the second one is a male Caucasian, about 37. Multiple lacerations, possible

concussion, several penetrating wounds from the blast. Probably metal fragments. He's stable," His voice droned on, getting technical about blood pressure, and other medical details.

Apparently I was going to live. But I probably wasn't going to want to.

I rolled over slowly. She was in the other stretcher. Eyes closed, looking very peaceful, as so often the newly dead do.

Maybe I would have preferred it if they had zipped her up in a body bag but I looked at her face and my heart seemed to go silent and still.

The strap fasteners were in reach of my hands and I unsteadily worked on them with numb fingers till I got them undone. The ambulance guy wasn't paying any attention to me. I slowly eased up until I was half sitting. I bent forward toward her.

My hands were shaking so bad I could barely control them. I put them up against her face, my fingers caressing her cheeks. I had so many things bursting inside me, guilt and anguish, my own dark past which was a history of exploded moments and ruined chances, that I began to talk to her.

It was crazy but then I probably was crazy now. Drunk on a profound lack of alcohol and bereft out of sheer unbearable sobriety.

"I am so sorry, so very sorry, that this happened to you. I would rather it was me there, dead, not you, not your little one. Oh God!" I sobbed. I wanted to say a hundred things but it was all I could say. I was sorry, so very sorry.

I am not sure what made me want to do it, but I bent down and kissed her softly on the lips. In life they were lips that should have had that happen to them.

"You must be pretty desperate. If the best you can do is make love to an unconscious pregnant woman," she said, opening her eyes and staring at me." You must have a social life that would scare a dwarf.

I jumped back and my head slammed into the side of the ambulance. I hurt myself all

over again in new places but it didn't matter.

"MY GOD! YOU'RE ALIVE!"

"You noticed. And I thought you weren't bright."

She moved one arm, lifted one hand and beckoned me closer with one upraised finger.

"C'mere you big goof."

"What?"

"Bend over close to me."

I leaned over.

"Closer."

My head was next to hers. She threw one arm out and encircled my neck, dragging my face down to hers. She kissed me on the lips, like a woman who meant it and my heart slammed around inside my body like a hooked fish. She knew how and it lit a little fire.

"There," she said, letting go of me, licking her lips enticingly. "If that doesn't get to you, you aren't alive either."

My face felt red and hot. "Oh, I am definitely alive."

"Well, don't get carried away. I mean, I am pregnant after all."

She seemed to think I needed to be constantly reminded.

I smiled like an idiot.

"Stop that!" she snapped.

"Stop what?"

"Looking so damn smug. A kiss isn't a lifetime commitment."

"I'm just happy you're alive. I thought you were dead."

"Good thing you aren't a doctor."

"I listened for your heartbeat. I couldn't hear a thing." As soon as I said it, I realized how dumb I had been. Of course I couldn't hear her heartbeat, my ears went south in the explosion.

"Why did you kiss me in the first place?"

"I don't know." But I did know. But there was no way I would ever tell her.

"Well, let's not have any more of that," she said, trying to turn over on the stretcher, but not able to because of the straps. "Help me get out of these damn straps. There's nothing wrong with me."

The attendant put down his phone and glared at us.

"What do you mean there's nothing wrong with you?" I asked.

"I fainted. Pregnant women are sometimes prone to it. I apparently was prone to it all over the place. They described it to me. I should thank you for breaking my fall. I bet your bruised ribs remember my backside."

"You mean I almost get a heart attack, thinking you were dead and you just fainted?" I felt like an idiot. But then I pretty much feel like an idiot around Lynne Michelle all the time anyway. Some women have the talent to do that to you. The trouble is men just can't run fast enough to get away from women like that. Mostly you stumble and run toward them.

"I guess we're going to the hospital," said Lynne Michelle. "You keep taking me places I don't want to go."

"That's because somebody wants you seriously dead."

"I keep noticing that you are noticing that. It's almost a pattern."

"Now the police will take this very seriously. Probably take you into protective custody until they can sort this out. This is all to the good." And it was. When they came on board, I would get off the train. I owed it to my body parts, many of which would never be the same again and to my heart which was no longer to be trusted. Considering that she was badly advanced in this pregnancy thing, my heart needed some serious rear end alignment.

"I'm sorry about your car."

"I'm not. I wasn't in it. Besides, the finance company can have it back now. I was ten payments late anyway."

I yawned. Something dark was tugging at my face. She looked at me with evident concern.

"Are you alright?"

If unconscious was an answer, that was my reply.

And the dark in there was very dark and I must have answered with everything I had because I was there almost forever.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Almost forever turned out to be Thursday. Which was a few days after the Monday when my car had tripped the light fantastic with a little too much high explosive.

I woke up when somebody stuck a needle in me. I opened my eyes and she was in the room, I mean, Lynne Michelle. Pain and her presence seem synonymous.

I groaned.

"Welcome back to sunny California," she said.

I groaned.

"I have kept faithful vigil by your side."

I groaned.

"Stop groaning. It's monotonous. Besides, you're going to be just fine."

"No, I'm not." How could I be with her in the room?

"Your doctor will probably send you home in a couple days or so. You've just slept a lot."

I moved one arm. It told me not to do that by sending a pain up to my brain sharp enough to take my scalp.

"That's the bad arm," she said. "I wouldn't try moving that a lot if I were you."

Now that was a flair for the obvious which was unmatched.

"Are there any other parts, I should not use?"

"Hey. They're your parts. Who am I tell you what to use or not use?"

The nurse who had given me the shot smiled at me insincerely and said, "Good.

You're awake. I'll get the doctor. He wants to talk to you."

"Peachy. And maybe he'll let me play with his stethoscope too."

"You seem pretty surly this morning. You should be glad you're alive," said Lynne Michelle.

I groaned.

"Are we back to that again," she said. "The police are here. I mean they have been talking to me for days. The hospital kept me here for observation, making sure my baby is ok. They want to talk to you too. Prepare yourself. I think they are a little bit angry at you."

"I'm sure it wasn't because of something you said, right?" But of course it was.

"I think they are a little bit ticked off that you shot somebody and didn't tell them, actually. In fact, I think ticked off does not begin to describe it."

I was going to groan but it would have been no satisfying substitute for what I'd really like to do. Not that I would have been allowed to go through with what I wanted to do anyway. Probably there are laws in California about kicking pregnant women in the butt.

The door opened and a doctor came in. He looked like his surfboard was still hanging on a rack on top of his car in the parking lot. He had a tan that was terminal, about four inches deep under skin the color of old shoes.

"Well, well!"

He was not gonna be a guy long on conversation.

"How you feeling man. Bit dinged up, huh?"

"Why no, I positively thrive on adversity."

His eyes unfocused. There were either too many words in that sentence or they were just too long.

"Yeah, whatever."

He held up a clipboard, turned back a couple of pages and looked at it almost like a man who could read. He nodded with apparent satisfaction, as if he had just caught a good wave.

"Soon have you right as rain," he said. "There's a ton of forms for you to sign. And I'll be in later to explain what you got to do, home care wise, ok cause now that you are awake, I think you can pretty much count on going home soon, ok."

"How soon will I be able to go surfing again?"

"Bitching. You too, huh. I'd stay out of the waves, like a week, maybe ten days. That arm is gonna be a bitch paddling the board. But you'll have full use of that arm, real soon. You're lucky. Couple inches one way or the other, and your surfing days would be over, man."

He was like a conversational fun ride.

The thought that he may have actually stitched me up in some of the places where I was obviously stitched, gave me no end of joy. I just hope he hadn't sewn something to something that wasn't supposed to be there in nature. I was afraid to cross my legs for fear it might seem tight in the wrong place.

He tootled off with one final comment. "I'll have to let the cops know you are awake, man. They got it in for you."

Be still my heart.

"I guess the cops will be taking care of you now Lynne Michelle. I am obviously out of the picture." Might as well get to the goodbye before the cops bulled their way in and had me for lunch.

"You aren't getting away that easily," she said. "I still could use you for a .."

I didn't find out what she still could use me for because the door slammed open and a cop the size of Mount Rushmore and with a face twice as weathered, staggered into the room and said, "You son of a bitch!"

"That's me. I'm glad you recognized me right off."

"You're in big trouble, you dumb bastard. Gonna yank your P.I. license over this!"

"And I didn't think there was any more fun left in the world."

We certainly hadn't started this conversation off on the right foot. The man didn't seem to like me all that much. Imagine that and me such a snappy dresser.

"I got blown up by my car before I could call the cops. That's my defense. And I got bandages on my evidence."

"You were supposed to call way before you got blowed up. We know the damn time element there."

"I didn't know I was gonna get blowed up."

"Don't matter. You didn't do right by us." His eyes were as malevolent as two boiled frogs.

"Look champ. I'm not having a good day. I'm in pain. Lighten up!" I said, too weary for this.

Lynne Michelle lit into him.

"This man is grievously injured. I believe there is good cause for legal action. My law firm will certainly be notified at once. When I tell his doctor how you verbally assaulted a patient who is virtually on death's door, he's going to..."

"Whoa! Hold up here!" The cop looked suddenly nervous. I didn't blame him. He was getting a sudden dose of Lynne Michelle. "Now, we, uh, the thing is, there are certain, uh, procedures...of course, uh."

It was an amazing transformation, Mount Rushmore suddenly sounds stoned.

Jesus, she had him absolutely gassed. He had my sympathy. I had hours and hours of it from Lynne Michelle and he was just getting his feet wet.

The door slammed open and a guy who looked like a pinched weasel trapped in a dirty raincoat came through the door.

"You son of a bitch!" he snarled.

"It's so great to be so recognizable," I said. "Next thing you know I'll have my own star on Hollywood Boulevard."

"You kinda bitched it up again Jack, didn't you? Another drunken spree, is that what this is all about, Jack?"

It was Captain Heywood, Hardwood Heywood to his detractors, but just plain Bill to his friends of which I count myself one. We go a long way back.

Heywood turned and barked at the first cop, "I'll take it from here, Riley. You go out in the parking lot and see if it's still there."

"Huh?" grunted Riley who was not a fast thinker.

"And check back, if the parking lot is missing, ok. Otherwise, you are done here, ok?"

Riley nodded, looked slightly aggrieved and moved the mountain outside to become a molehill in the parking lot.

"Good to see you, Jack."

"Liar."

He motioned to Lynne Michelle. "So this is the babe and babe in the babe, huh?"

It was not a word I would have used on someone like Lynne Michelle. But she didn't gouge his eyes out immediately. Perhaps she was on her best behavior.

"Captain Bill Heywood, LAPD, meet Lynne Michelle Gordon and unborn as yet unnamed passenger."

"Pleased to meet you. Little lady, you are causing us quite a lot of excitement here."

"I'm not doing anything. It's the people trying to kill me that are causing all the

excitement. All I'm doing is ducking stuff."

"Yeah. Well, your ducking days are over. We'll wrap you up tight and keep you out of harm's way." said Heywood reassuringly.

"He did a pretty good job of protecting me up to now."

"And he's got the bandages to prove it," said Captain Heywood. "Why don't you step outside for a little bit. I want a little private chat here with Jack."

She got up from the chair beside my bed, obviously not pleased at being dismissed. She leaned over me, "You need anything, you be sure and let me know. I'm just a couple doors down in a private room. Can I get you anything right now, food or something to drink?" She quickly amended that. "I mean, like juice, for instance."

"No. I'm fine."

Heywood watched her leave the room.

"She's kinda attractive ain't she?" he said.

"She's pregnant is what she is. All over the place."

"Still..."he said, thinking about it and then he reached under his coat and got out a pint bottle of whiskey.

He opened it, took a sip and handed it over to me.

I seized on the bottle like a drowning man reaching for the last lifeboat on the Titanic.

I made gurgling sounds and the bottle went from full to half empty.

I gasped. I was on fire but it was such sweet fire.

"There's one great thing about being an alcoholic," said Heywood, referring to himself, as he snatched the bottle away from me. "It's easy to find other sufferers from the disease. You hardly ever have to drink alone."

I was reveling in the after burn. I could feel the whiskey and the painkillers, oh most definitely. I was getting ripped for fair and without even half trying.

"Heywood, you are a life saver."

Heywood emptied a good bit of what was left of the bottle. He saved the last little bit for me and handed it over. I did not hesitate. I killed the bottle in one last savage grateful gulp. Another pint would have been a blessing but I was glowing and almost content.

"So tell me the whole bit from start to finish," said Heywood, sitting down in a chair. We both had a mutual glow from the shared whiskey.

I told him, leaving nothing out, except maybe the injuries I suffered at the hands of Lynne Michelle.

"Sounds weird," said Heywood. "Something definitely nasty about this so called Hobart Charles Gordon guy. And it's a shame it's the kind of world that someone should want to knock off a pregnant lady."

"I'll drink to that," I said, hinting as loud as I could but he seemed out of liquid refreshment. What kind of alcoholic only carries one pint?

"So fill me in, on what the police know."

Heywood snorted, "One hell of a lot more than you do. A snow-blind mouse waltzing on a pancake griddle would have learned more than you did."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"First off. We went to her house and lifted fingerprints. He may have lived like a ghost but he had fingerprints all over his house and we ran them.

"What did you turn up?"

"Jason Archibald Ridley Hawes the III."

"Sounds like the name of a country club golf course. Prison record?"

"No. But matched a military ID. He's ex-CIA. Also Army Security Agency."

"The thick begins to plotten."

"Wait. It gets worse." Heywood tugged at his chin.

"How could it get worse?"

"He's dead. That's how. Been dead for four years according to the military records.

Killed on a combat training mission in Saudi Arabia."

"Whoops."

"Definitely woops."

"And there's more."

"Oh goody."

"He's rich. I mean really rich. Heir to one of the biggest personal fortunes in the U.S. of A. There's oil, steel, shipping, you name it, his family owned it or leased it or controlled it. Ridley-Hawes is the family fortune of family fortunes."

"So his wife, Lynne Michelle, is..."

"Without a pre-nuptial agreement and she swears she didn't sign one, one of the richest women in the world, potentially if the part about him not being dead can be proved. We checked the marriage certificate, a case like this, and it seems legit. The fact that he used a fake name doesn't disqualify it, according to our own legal eagles. You can't inherit if you are married to an officially dead man of course but he sounds pretty lively to me. A couple good lawyers sensing money could probably overturn this in her favor."

"I guess I'll stop worrying about my bill. Is that the whole crop, the whole enchilada?"

"Oh, there's a wee bit more," said Heywood with a chilly hint of menace in his voice that hadn't been there before.

I felt suddenly uncomfortable.

"There's the dead guy," said Heywood, staring at his knuckles.

So they hadn't carted him off after all. And apparently when I shoot someone, they stay shot. This was bad news.

"Ah, him." I nodded, waiting for him to say more and he made me wait. His knuckles seemed to fascinate him.

"If you weren't already out of action, I might punch your lights out myself!" There

was anger and tension along the planes of his face.

"It's good of you to be so concerned," I said. "Not many cops would have enough of the finer feelings in a case like this to restrain themselves. Believe me, your delicacy will not go unnoticed."

"You shoot somebody bucko, you should call it in. We take a dim view of unreported dead guys."

"Yeah. I could see where that might be impolite, but trust me on this, I didn't even..." But he didn't let me finish.

"And especially when the dead guy is a cop!" He spit those words out like bullets.

My heart sank to the Marinas Trench. This was trouble all right, probably more than I could handle. You just don't kill a cop, and not get hated within an inch of your life, not in LA, hell, not anywhere for that matter.

"They want your blood, Jack," he said and he unclenched his fists and looked up at me. His eyes flashed with real anger. "And the crappy part of it is, maybe they should get it. Maybe I should just let them eat you alive."

"But..." I said, hoping there was a but.

"But we didn't find out the shooter you shot was a cop until we'd already tagged him as a hitter, attempting to kill a pregnant woman. I mean, by the time the ID rolled in, most of the heat was off this. Seemed pretty undeniable here when we put the thing together, that LAPD Sergeant Jacob Tillotson was not on duty, was not answering a burglary call, was not using his police issue weapon and from the lack of ID and clothing labels, personal papers and so on, seemed very much to be doing a big bad guy act in this instance."

"Listen. There was no police challenge. The guy was shooting at us and shooting to kill," I said.

He held up one hand. "Oh I believe you Jack. I knew Tillotson. He was not a bad cop,

not a particularly good cop. But there was something definitely not right about him. There were rumors. In fact, Internal Affairs had a little file running on him and he would eventually have had them rammed so far up his backside that he couldn't see straight. That's not official and you didn't hear it from me, but that's the skinny."

"I didn't know he was a cop. It was dark. I mostly shot at his muzzle flash and his outline in the window frame."

"I know. He was also wearing a ski mask, which isn't standard with LAPD. So you can rest a little bit easy on that one. Everyone assigned to this knows it may have been a justifiable hit. But until it's official, there's a lot of cops downtown who would like to tap-dance on your windpipe. But from me, you get some reassurance. You are eventually going to get cleared on this. As for the dead cop, you hit him twice, either of your shots could have been fatal. Medical examiner said both hit him in the heart. You're either really good or..."

"I'm the or part."

"Any idea why Jacob Tillotson would want to kill this woman you're bodyguarding?"

"Not unless you know who he was working for, and who the other people were who were in the house that night too?"

"No hint of that," said Heywood. "We're going over Tillotson's apartment, his police locker, the usual routine. Probably won't find anything but that's the crop of what we got at the moment."

"So where does that leave me?"

"Until the word gets out, about half the cops in town got you pegged as a cop killer. Tillotson will get reamed when we do an inquest but until the coroner and Internal Affairs gets it nailed down, not every cop in town is going to be singing your name with joy in his heart. Nobody takes a dead cop lightly in LA, nobody."

"What else do you know about Tillotson?"

"Ex-Green Beret. Two tours of duty in Vietnam. The usual cop stuff. Second time divorced," said Heywood. "But I wouldn't be thinking about this stuff now if I were you. You are very much out of the picture on this. You are not in this case. You are unemployed."

"No argument from me. This ain't a football game. I don't have to play injured. I'm benched."

"I just don't want you sticking your nose into this. This is official police business now. With a dead cop, the car bombing, the CIA link, the whole thing has been kicked upstairs and everybody is taking this one very very seriously. So enjoy your hospital time. As a shooting victim and material witness, you are getting this more or less as a free lunch, so eat, pinch the nurses and forget about it."

"Glad to. But why the big warning. I mean do I look like I'm gonna run right out and do something?"

"The warning is because they yanked your Private Investigators license until the investigation of Tillotson's death is concluded."

"Touchy, ain't they."

"Prickly as a porcupine in heat."

"What did the bomb squad have to say?" I was curious about the bomb. It must have been a real pro device.

"I've seen a preliminary report. It don't look good. They know exactly what kind of outfit it was, cause her car was rigged too. From fragments of the first one, they think identical devices and explosives on both cars, both done by the same guy."

"Was it dynamite?"

"Nothing so crude. C-4. Plastique. Military issue. Real high grade stuff and the way it was wired, they say a real pro put it together. Maybe somebody with a military background because the wiring was by the book. A very large charge. About ten times

more than was needed to do the job. You got lucky in a big way. Nobody would have survived that one."

"Can they trace it from the bomb they took from her car?"

"Doubtful. The device was generic. Stuff you could get in any hardware store. The only signature was the way some of the wire leads were tied. Other than that, there is nothing about the bomb except the use of military explosive to tag it."

"Is anybody hazarding a guess as to who is behind this? I mean, is somebody getting ready to brace the C.I.A. to ask if..."

Heywood shook his head and made a throat cutting gesture. "I wouldn't want to be a guy making guesses on this, would you? I mean, they called Langley and gave them the word. But bracing is not part of our vocabulary on this one. Unofficially, word has already come down from Mount Olympus. The police commissioner himself was on the phone to the rank and file so you can figure this one has heat that makes a volcano look like a snow cone. This is the kind of case where long term memory loss may be the only guaranteed way to save your pension."

"Like that huh? What did they tell the C.I.A.? I mean, I'm just curious." I was getting more glad that this case was over for me.

"Probably tactfully, that somebody is trying to kill the wife of one of your officially dead but allegedly by fingerprint evidence still alive agents. Nobody would be accusing them of anything, just sharing data, so to speak. I didn't make the call myself. My boss did. And I think his hands are still shaking."

"So you've got Lynne Michelle in protective custody?"

"Doctor is letting her go tonight and we'll spirit here away to somewhere safe."

"Glad to hear it. And I appreciate you're stepping in for me and for the whiskey too. Especially the whiskey."

"We got a guy outside your room tonight and tomorrow. Probably waste of time. We

figure we move her, the heat will move away from you. They don't really want you, they want her, still we'll go through the motions for a little while."

"I appreciate it but listen, do you think maybe you could..."

He nodded and cut in. "I'll send the night guy in with a bottle. You pay me back and buy me a couple bottles of Jim Beam when you're up and running again. Any preference?"

"It has to be labeled alcohol," I said. "With me its effect, not style."

"Yeah. I know the feeling. I could use a drink right now myself."

I licked my lips as he got up to go. I knew he was heading for a drink and the thought made me ache. "Have one for me. Have a whole lotta ones for me."

"Yeah." He got up and walked to the door. Before he passed on through he turned and looked back at me. "You got lucky Jack. You both ought to be dead. Take it as a sign from God or something Jack. You can't do this kind of crap anymore. Do what I do Jack. It's how I get by these days. Stick with the simple stuff, don't get too complicated. You can't be a tough guy and a drunk at the same time. Trust me on this, you just end up dead that way."

"Thanks for the advice." I waved a bandaged limb at him and maybe it was my attempt to agree with him. I sure hadn't covered myself with glory on this one. Part of me was glad taking care of her was no longer my responsibility. Maybe I was convinced that given more time, I would have blown it anyway. Got her killed or me.

He slammed the door going out but the door hit the frame too hard and hung ajar. So I heard him exchange gruff words with the guard outside the door. His voice came through pretty clearly. Heywood made a comment about the prisoner not leaving my room except in a body bag. Heywood sort of left off the part that his idea of protective custody was I was under arrest but then details were never his forte. Heywood left.

CHAPTER EIGHT

With Heywood gone, I had time to think. Lynne Michelle was in a lot of trouble. For the brief time I had been with her, I had shared the trouble and it made me care a lot more than I ever wanted to.

I drink so I don't have to care about anybody. As I laid there I tried to comfort myself with the thought that soon as I could get out of here, the drinking would be there for me. And I'd need it more now because the ache was big and hadn't got any smaller.

I was still feeling a glow from Heywood's whiskey. It was a glow that I wished could last forever but nothing lasts forever. There was a disturbance outside my hospital room.

I heard the guard say something angry and then the door spun open and Lynne Michelle waltzed back into the room almost carrying the cop. He had tried to encircle her neck with one arm, in a futile attempt to keep her from going in. But she had bulled through, sunk her teeth into his arm and he let out a bellow a water buffalo would have been proud to call its own. The arm went back and she was by him and I doubt if he lost more than a pound of flesh in the exchange.

She had a pitcher of orange juice in her hands. "I thought you might be thirsty."

I was but not for something that fell out of a fruit.

"They left this in my room for me but I'm not really very big on orange juice. Since I been pregnant, it makes me kind of gassy. So I stick to apple juice."

"Thanks for sharing that with me. You made my day."

She came over beside the bed and pulled out a chair and sat down. She took a small cup from the bedside table and poured me a glass of juice.

I took it to be polite. Nodded my thanks at her and wished she would just go anyway.

"I guess you are sort of under arrest? I mean that stupid guard didn't even want to let me in the room. Are you ok?"

I shrugged. How could anyone be ok in my situation. I felt just too tired to explain anything.

"Drink some juice. You'll feel better."

I lifted my glass, put it to my lips and tried to imagine it was full of vodka and orange juice.

"What's wrong?" she said, noticing the expression on my face.

I sat up in the bed slowly, hurting myself in the process.

"Where did you get this?"

"What's wrong?" She looked scared.

It smelled of bitter almonds, that unmistakable tang of cyanide. I had a sudden image of the man I'd shot. Sergeant Jack Tillotson. A cop. And now she was under the protection of cops. The other people in the house that night could just as well have been cops too. I got scared. And it was a fear that froze my bones.

"Do you see my clothes?"

"What's going on? What are you doing? What's wrong?" She was close to panic.

"They told you about the guy I killed?"

"A cop. They asked me if I knew him but I never heard of him, I'm positive."

"Did you see anybody bring in the orange juice?"

She surprised me. She nodded.

"Nurse?"

She shook her head no. "A cop. He was very charming. Very helpful. Said a nurse was bringing it for me and he was just saving her a trip."

That was the very wrong answer.

"Look. You've got to tell me what's going on?" She insisted.

"I think this orange juice is poisoned. It smells wrong."

"But..."

"Do you see my clothes?"

She bit off a question, frightened by what I said and searched the room for my clothes.

I was easing myself up, swinging my legs down off the bed, preparing myself for the painful moment of actually standing up with a lot of doubt about my actual ability to do it.

"Your clothes aren't here. I don't see anything. I think they cut them off you. They were pretty torn up by the explosion."

I had a hospital gown kind of thing on and my underwear, which somebody had laundered and put back on me because it was crisp and starched. I was not dressed for travel. I would have to do something about that.

"Doesn't matter." I held out my hand to her. "You've got to help me get up."

"Are you nuts?"

"Completely. But why act surprised. Help me up."

She took my hand and helped me ease out to the edge of the bed so my feet were firmly on the floor. But then she held me and wouldn't let me move.

"I'm not going to help you hurt yourself, unless you tell me what you're doing and why?"

Her stubborn streak had returned.

"Maybe there was more than one cop trying to kill you that night. The guy I shot may not be alone. The cop who brought you orange juice, for instance."

"Oh," she said.

I started to move then and she moved with me, bracing me, helping me stand up. I almost passed out from the pain and a sudden rush of dizziness. She managed to keep me upright but just barely.

"What are you going to do?"

"We're going to get out of here."

"How? You're under arrest."

"I know how to make bail."

I leaned over a little and got hold of the heavy porcelain base of a table lamp. It was awkward and heavy but should do the trick. I used my good arm to coil up the cord and yanked when it got tight. The effort made me grunt but the cord snapped out of the wall plug and the lamp was all mine.

"Get me to the door."

"Then what?"

I whispered in her ear.

The journey across the room was a nightmare. I kept wanting to pitch over on my face. I ached everywhere. But the more I moved, the easier it got. By the time she leaned against the wall and I got into position by the door, I was feeling a touch better, as if I could actually pull this one off. I just hoped I had the strength to be my own bail bondsman.

She went to the door. She said softly so only I could hear, "Are you ready?"

I nodded, lifting the heavy lamp over my shoulder. I hoped I was ready.

She slammed the door open, stuck her head through it and called out, "Officer! Come quick! He's having convulsions!"

The cop rushed in as she backed away and I swung and almost missed him. But the lamp connected with the back of his head, a glancing blow, not hard enough I thought at the time, but apparently I got lucky. He went down like a machine gunned penguin and stayed down.

"Jesus! Did you have to hit him so hard?"

I was leaning against the wall, trying not to fall over.

I gasped, "He'll be ok. Can you do it?"

She grabbed him by the arms and drug him into the center of the room. He was heavy

and it was an effort for her.

She started to strip his uniform off him. I needed clothes and he was the best choice.

"Weird trying to undress a guy like this. It usually isn't like this," she said, undoing his shirt buttons.

I didn't want to think about here undressing guys right now. I hobbled over to her and thought about bending down and trying to help her but was afraid my knees would imitate folding chairs and contented myself with standing and watching her undress the cop.

She got the shirt off after quite a struggle. The shoes were next and she began a heroic battle to get the pants off. The cop's beer belly made his belt buckle difficult to unsnap. The weight of the gun hanging from the holster seemed also not to help much either. Not just clothes but weapons too. Lucky me.

"Can you speed it up? This is taking too long. Somebody is going to come in here."

"Listen. I'm pregnant. I'm going as fast as I can. Give me a break will you!" She was angry. Maybe she needed to be angry because it took her mind off how scared she really was. But she did speed up some.

"Well snap it up."

She jerked his pants off and got to her feet. She flung them in my face.

"Here's your damn pants!"

My face stung from the harnessed gun on the belt. Probably left a nice little black and blue welt under my eye. I guess she forgot the gun went with the pants. She had done it to me again.

"You're gonna have to help me put them on." I limped over to the bed and leaned against the edge of it. I felt like tipping over backwards and slipping into a coma but I resisted the impulse.

I bent over with the pants in one hand and tried to stretch them out. I tried to put one

foot through the top of the pants but it seemed to jump away every time I tried to connect. One handed it was awkward as hell.

She came over and got hold of them, yanking the pants out of my hand.

She lifted one leg, shoved it none too gently into one pant leg. I wiggled and twisted until my foot went all the way through and found the floor. She snatched up the other leg and stuffed it in. When my feet were both on the floor, she grabbed the top of the pants and jerked them up so hard, the V of the pants arrowed up into my personal parts.

Apparently I needed a little more pain in my life. I didn't try to thank her for it but I didn't breathe much when she was zipping up the pants and doing the belt buckle. I had religious thoughts about something not getting caught somewhere in the zipping part of the experience.

But I needn't have worried about that part. Because it turned out there was enough room left over in the pants for maybe an accordion and the guy who played it. She went past the last hole in the belt by about eight inches and sort of looped the loose end of the belt back through the belt loop to hold it.

The shirt fit me like a tent but was long enough to cover up the improbable bulges made by the overbig pants. I had died a couple of times while she drew the shirt up over my bad arm but once I had the shirt and pants on, I felt like I might actually pull this one off.

The shoes didn't however work. He might have been a big fat hunk of a human being on top but the unconscious cop had the feet of an anemic midget. I couldn't even get my toes in them. The pants went down past my bare feet and that was as good as it was gonna get.

"If they look at my feet, we're dead," I said.

"Let's not use the word dead in a sentence," she said.

"Sorry," I said and meant it.

We went to the door. I opened it slowly, stuck my head out and looked to see if the coast was clear. The hospital corridor was full of people but nobody seemed to be paying much attention to our little part of the world. I stepped out cautiously.

She slid in behind me and we turned to the left and began to walk down the corridor. Nobody tried to stop us.

We went round the corner and got lucky. An elevator door opened just as we walked up to it and we moved inside before the people inside could even exit. We shoved our way through the people in the elevator. I suppose they thought we were rude but because I was in a cop uniform nobody said anything.

Most of the people got off. I leaned against the back wall of the elevator. She leaned against me.

"When is this ever going to be over?" she said, worn out from fear.

"Relax kid. I'm sticking with you." I put my good arm around her. I didn't think about it but I guess I hugged her.

She wanted to say something about that but she leaned against me instead, moving into my hug, and her arms went around me.

I don't know how she felt but watching the elevator numbers go from 6 to the Lobby, I felt a little tide of feeling. I liked the warmth of her touch.

The door opened and we stepped out into the lobby. Nobody seemed to be chasing us. That was good. I was not up to running.

Because of the bunched up pants, the holstered gun on the belt was digging into my side. I reached down, got hold of the gun handle and tried to twist the holster around to a more comfortable position. The belt sagged and the gun came out of the holster into my hand.

She screamed and turned me around. A cop at the end of the corridor was aiming his gun at me.

"It's him! The one with the juice!" she cried.

His gun went off and something hot and metallic whined by my head. Somebody behind us screamed and a body fell to the floor and the next shot came so quickly on the heels of the first one that there was almost one sound.

I didn't know where the second shot went because I had the gun up awkwardly and shot once myself. The bullet spanged off the hospital wall and ricocheted down the corridor.

People were screaming, dropping to the floor. Some turned and tried to run. I tried to aim, to get my gun up but I was too fuzzy, too confused.

He smiled because he was going to win. He was squeezing the trigger and we weren't going to make it. I tried to move in front of her but knew it was too late.

A heavy metal door burst open in front of the cop. His next bullet spanged into it and ricocheted. The door closed as whoever was inside decided to stay inside.

I snapped off a shot but there was no one there.

He was flat on his back, hands holding his face, body writhing on the floor. The ricochet off the metal door got him. Fortune sometimes favors the walking wounded.

I didn't linger on our luck. I put my good arm around her and tried to hurry her along. We thumped down the corridor, passed the thrashing body of the cop, stepped over the spreading pool of blood and ran straight on toward the hospital exit doors.

I staggered and almost fell. Lynne Michelle seized on a wheelchair which hid a cowering candy striper. She spun it around in front of me and forced me into it. She jumped behind it and began pushing me down the hall as fast as she could make it move. I didn't argue. I was just about gone.

We burst through the automatic doors and out onto the sidewalk. She kept right on going. She ran for all she was worth and the wheelchair spun like a dynamo as she put as much distance between us and the hospital as she could get.

I sat back and let her do it.

I suppose it looked strange. A badly suited cop with a gun in his hand being pushed by a vastly pregnant woman doing her best attempt at the four minute mile. Probably looked like some mutant float that escaped from the Rose Bowl Parade.

But I didn't care how it looked. As long as we got away, nothing else mattered.

And we did.

CHAPTER NINE

There's a limit to how far you can go in a wheel chair. Especially if it is powered by a vastly pregnant pusher and completely pooped pushee, namely me.

We ditched the chair about three blocks from the hospital and we ducked down a side street until I saw a neon beer sign winking through a dirty window. I did not need any other invitation. I felt like one of the knights of the Round Table who had just glimpsed the Holy Grail.

We staggered into the dim interior of a dive called Frank's Place. Frank apparently thought his place should resemble a bus station, or he simply had a badly misplaced sense of place. It was furnished in Early American uncomfortable.

I collapsed into a naugahyde booth. She struggled to scoot in on the other side but there wasn't enough room between the booth chair back and the edge of the table. I was too tired to offer to help. I got one hand up and waved in the direction of the surly looking individual behind the bar.

He scowled sourly and came our way.

Lynne Michelle was still struggling with the booth and getting nowhere.

The bartender stood behind her, staring at her. "Get you a chair?" he finally asked when it became obvious her belly and the booth were not a matched set.

"Yes please," she said with obvious relief.

He trotted obediently to one of the heavy wooden tables, lifted up a scarred badly painted chair and brought it over and shoved it up against the outside end of the booth table.

She slid awkwardly into the chair and nodded her thanks at him.

"What'll you folks have?"

"Whiskey. Bring me a bottle." There was only one answer to that question as far as I was concerned.

"Bring him a beer and I'd like a diet coke." she said without hesitation.

"Whiskey. Bourbon, Scotch. Whatever's cheap," I said giving her a look.

She ignored my look.

"Just bring him a beer. A glass of draft will do."

The bartender folded his arms and looked aggrieved. "Which is it, beer or whiskey?"

"Whiskey!" I insisted.

"He's sick. He's not himself. Give him a beer."

"Goddamn it, I want whiskey!"

The bartender curled his lip in a sneer. "He's a cop lady. He ought to know what he wants. But....." He started to say and then let it hang.

"Don't tell me you're out of whiskey?" I asked.

"Look, I got a business here. I'm Frank."

Not much of one by the looks of it.

"So what I'm saying is, I comp a few cops, guys on this beat, but there's a limit, you know. Sides I don't know you."

"We'll pay for our drinks. Just bring me some whiskey for chrissakes!" I practically yelled.

"You bring him whiskey and I'll dump it over your head," said Lynne Michelle. She

wasn't kidding. She wasn't budging on this one.

"Must be your wife." said the bartender. "So I'll bring you a beer."

"Bitch!" I muttered under my breath. She heard me.

"Bastard!" she said. "I'm not your mother. If you want to get drunk that's ok by me, we aren't supposed to be much of anything to each other, are we? This isn't about your drinking problem."

"Oh yeah. Then what the hell is this about?" I said belligerently.

"You got any money?" she asked.

I hadn't thought of that.

"I got enough to buy you a beer and me a coke. Maybe two beers but then I'm out of money."

"Oh."

The bartender brought over a can of diet coke and a tall dirty glass of draft beer. He set it down on the table and went back to the bar. He seemed wary of us and rightly so.

I picked up the beer and opened my mouth and disappeared it in one gulp. It tasted like heaven and soap suds.

She took a delicate pull on her diet coke.

"I guess you saved my life again."

"Yeah."

"Does your arm hurt?"

"Everything hurts!"

"I want you to know that words can not convey..."

"Oh save it, will you. I don't want to start crying in my beer."

"Why is it every time I try to be nice to you, you jump down my throat? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Ignore me. I'm broken up. I ain't myself."

"Yeah, but you were like that before you got wounded."

"I was always wounded. You just didn't see it."

"Can you tell me about it?"

"Not sober."

"You mean if I got you drunk, you'll tell me why you drink?"

"No. Because I would be drinking to forget why I am drinking. And I'd keep my mouth shut until it worked."

"Nice life if you can get it to work out."

"It's a lousy life and it never works out. Let's drop it."

She didn't seem inclined to drop it. "What was it? Unhappy love affair, somebody done you wrong?"

"Just let it alone, or I'll take back that last time I saved your life."

"I don't seem to be safe anywhere except with you. I guess I can't go back to the cops."

"It might not be a good idea," I admitted. "There are some definite snakes in the police garden. We'll have to think of something else. But what makes you think you're safe with me?"

"You're the only person in the room not shooting at me."

"Don't think I haven't had the urge." I signaled the bartender with one finger and he brought me another beer in a glass even dirtier than the first one. This beer glass had lipstick around the rim.

I like drinking in class joints. This one was in a class below class.

"Do we have an idea what we are going to do next?"

"I was thinking this beer was my idea."

"I was hoping for a little more."

I thought about the whiskey I didn't get and had to agree with her. I too had hoped for more.

I drained the second beer and it took the edge off some of the pain. The exertion had made my wounds ache. I was not sure but from the seeping sensation and the wet feeling on the inner side of my bad arm, something must have torn loose. I needed a doctor.

"I'm hungry." She was staring at the kitchen side of the bar. A greasy man in a spattered apron was cooking something vile for a couple of people sitting at some of the tables. This was the kind of place where you ordered only what was on the menu and that would run heavy on grease. It smelled like food but that was probably the only resemblance.

I shifted uncomfortably on the hard naugahyde bench. There was a lump under one thigh and I couldn't seem to get comfortable. I scooted around and realized belatedly that the lump was a wallet in one of my back pockets. I tried to move my arm down but it was on the side with the bad arm and I couldn't reach it.

I grimaced and almost fainted from the pain caused by trying to move my bad arm. She put her arm on my shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"You got to help me."

She looked so concerned I wanted to toss my cookies. Now was not the time to go all mushy on me. This might be a whiskey moment and I needed her help.

"Wallet. In my back pocket. See if you can get it out. Could be money in there."

She got out of her chair and came around and put her arm around me and reached back. The booth was narrow and I was too weak to shift around much to help her and her being overpopulated didn't help. Her hand grabbed futilely at my backside and we did a little awkward dance.

She tried to thrust her hand into the pocket but I was basically sitting on it and the pants were too big and the more she pushed the more the pants seemed to slide off my rear end. I don't know what it looked like to passerbys or innocent bystanders, not that anybody innocent was within a mile of us, but it must have looked strange.

She was leaning so heavily over me, I was practically wearing her like a hood ornament. I became aware that our little dance had not passed unnoticed.

Just as Lynne Michelle got her hand finally inside the pocket and seemed to get a grip on the wallet, the bartender was in my face with his face.

"Hey! Hey!" he said, with a look of sudden alarm on his face. "We don't have a license for that kind of thing!"

"I didn't know you could get a license for that kind of thing," I said, wondering exactly what kind of thing we were talking about."

"I'm just getting his wallet," said Lynne Michelle.

"You can call it whatever you want, but I run a family place in here so if you want to grab his gazebo, lady, and you pregnant and everything, why you just take it outside, you hear me! I got family trade in here!"

"Imagine that," I said. "People who reproduce actually come in here."

She yanked and the wallet came out of my pants with a sudden jerk and she fell over backwards into the arms of the greasy bartender, who staggered under the double weight and almost pitched forward on his face before he got her back into her chair. It was a neat catch on his part and I reminded myself to give him at least a nickel tip, maybe even a dime.

The wallet slipped out of her hands and dropped on my face, the hard leather corner poking me in one eye.

It was a fat wallet.

It fell open on the table with a thick green wad of bills plainly showing from the top. Looked like a couple hundred bucks, maybe more. Lot of traffic tickets that never got written up is what it looked like. Sometimes corruption can be your best friend.

"Lunch!" said Lynne Michelle happily.

"Whiskey!" I said.

"Lunch first," she insisted.

"No. Bring me a bottle of whiskey." My tongue was dancing with the thought of that joyous juice.

"Don't you dare. He's going to eat something first. Bring us menus."

"Bring me whiskey!" I roared.

The bartender looked tired. "Which is it, lunch or whiskey?"

"Scotch!"

"You bring him a bottle and I'll break it over your head," she threatened and she sounded like she meant business.

"Hey. You said this wasn't about the drinking problem. You said it was about the money. So now that we got money..."

Lynne Michelle smiled, "Well now that we got money, NOW it's about the drinking problem. I changed my mind."

"Bitch!" I said but not under my breath.

"You dumb bastard! Somebody has to take care of you. It might as well be me."

I had that old urge to shoot her. I was swimming in it. But I was just too tired to aim.

CHAPTER TEN

So I ate a steak that tasted like a steel belted radial tire but was not as well cooked and had fries that seemed to be deep fried in axle grease. I must have been hungry because I ate everything on my plate. And I even ate fries from her plate. I thought she might relent and there would be whiskey at the end for dessert but she didn't seem to get the hint. She did buy me two beers during the festive main course and they took the edge off just a touch.

I felt almost human with food in me and a couple of beers. The urge to shoot her had

passed. In fact, I was feeling somewhat kindly to her. Maybe it was that she made me eat something and I needed it more than I knew, or maybe it was just because she was becoming a habit I wasn't able to shake. I was aware that there were moments when I regarded her with genuine affection. I would have to watch out for those moments. Perhaps there were shots for preventing that kind of thing.

I was tired, though now that I had eaten. And the wetness along the inner side of my bad arm was increasing. I glanced down at my elbow and saw blood slowly dripping.

This struck me as something that needed attention.

After she paid for the meal, we had a little more than two hundred bucks and a couple of credit cards that might come in handy if we used them quick and not too often. Better still was a driver's license which had a picture which would have looked like me only during a total eclipse but was a start in the right direction.

Considering all the people who didn't care for us in a preoccupiedly violent way, becoming somebody else, almost anybody else, was a good idea.

"Have you given much thought to where we go from here?"

"I need some new clothes," I said, fingering the ill-fitting uniform. "I mean, unless I want to give out parking tickets, this isn't going to help us much."

"I don't know. You look sort of handsome in uniform." She put her hand on my hair and brushed it back off my forehead. "Were you ever a cop? I mean, you look like you were born to it."

"Oh, I thought about a life of crime, but I never was a cop. The graft just wasn't big enough to ever get me to climb on board."

"I would have thought a cop uniform right now was a good disguise."

"It would be, if probably half the world with guns wasn't looking for a pregnant woman and a cop together. I mean, back at the hospital, guess what they are probably thinking about me?"

"But you saved my life. They ought to know that by now."

"Oh, they may figure it all out eventually. But until they do, it sure ain't gonna look that way. The way it probably looks to them is that I'm a guy under arrest for maybe already killing a cop, who then slugged the cop guarding him, stole his uniform and gun, and shot what appears to be another cop in the hospital hallway before escaping."

"Woops!" she said. "That doesn't sound good."

"Half the cops in the city are probably out there looking to shoot me on sight."

"Oh, I see what you mean." She lapsed into silence. "How come only half the cops want to shoot you on sight?"

"You have to make allowances for the ones who want to beat you to death with nightsticks, or the strangle-you-and-run-you-down-with-their-squad-cars crowd. A lot of cops like the personal touch."

"This sounds extremely ungood. I seem to have got you in trouble, as much trouble as I'm in, maybe more. I'm sorry about that, really I am."

I was touched by her evident concern for me. After all, she was the one everyone was trying to kill. It was only the cops that wanted me dead. That was probably small time up against the ones who wanted her dead, but I didn't tell her that.

"I think I am going to need some outside help."

"Calling in the Marines?" She seemed to cheer up at the prospect.

"Well, not exactly." I was a little short of Marines.

"Another detective?"

"Er, no." To many of them were like me and that was not a comforting thought.

"A couple of hard guys with guns. Get a gangster to stop a gangster, something like that?" That prospect really made her smile.

"Well, she's a waitress."

"Ah," she seemed to think about that for a moment, and she didn't seem to like it. She

ventured, "But she's probably muscle bound, right?"

I decided not to go into muscles on this one. She had them but only in certain places but they wouldn't frighten anyone in his right mind.

I held my hand out for a coin for the phone, and I levered myself up out of the booth and limped back to the toilet and the battered pay phone on the wall.

I dialed Laura Jo's number from memory. She was thrilled to hear from me for about thirty seconds. It took that long to get to where I was and who I was with and what I wanted her to do. She left off being thrilled. She went beyond thrilled to something that resembled annoyance and then got down right ugly near the end, which was stupid on my part. If I had mentioned that Lynne Michelle was wondrously wide with one in the oven, Laura Jo might have been more amenable. Before I could tell Laura Jo it wasn't what she thought even though it was probably was what she thought except only in theory, the phone slammed down big time and my ear ached.

I wasn't even sure she would come. Why is it that old girl friends never quite get along with new ones, even when the new one isn't one?

I limped back to the booth. I was dizzy and my cop uniform was beginning to sag in new places. I felt like an elephant whose skin had got all wrinkly after going through a car wash.

"So a waitress is coming to help us," said Lynne Michelle.

"A friend. Hopefully she can give us a place to stay for a while."

"Goody!" She seemed not to like the idea.

"And she can get me a change of clothes. And maybe get you some new clothes as well. We aren't going to get very far with two hundred bucks."

"Can you trust this person?"

"As much as I can trust anyone."

"That's probably not very reassuring, considering what your life seems to be like."

She had me pegged on that one.

"Do you think she can find you clothes, I mean, ones your size?" I sensed this is what is known as a leading question.

"Uh," I shrugged. I mean she'd get stuff from the hall closet. The odd shirt, spare jacket, pants and so on, the things you leave around from frequent nights spent staying over.

"Does she...is she..." She seemed to be thinking of some tactful way to put this.

I started to get up. Those beers were beginning to change into something else, and I needed to get rid of them. And this was also a conversation I didn't want to have.

"Is this person your girlfriend?"

I grunted and pretended like I didn't hear her.

"There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood," I said, pausing for dramatic effect, "leads to the bathroom."

"Shakespeare no less," she said. "I can hardly wait to meet her. I bet she's quite refined."

I escaped to the bathroom. Me, I could wait. I could wait forever. Why had I called Laura Jo? The urge to lay down on the filthy bathroom floor and pass out began to seem like an attractive alternative.

Fussing with Lynne Michelle on a hourly basis was a lot of grief but throwing my loud-mouthed, hot-tempered, every-Friday-but-thank-god-only-one-night-a-week, girlfriend into the mix must be some kind of death wish. Perhaps I was just weak from a loss of blood.

The toilet was not the kind of place that anybody would want to hide out in for any length of time. If Frank did a lot of family business, you couldn't tell it by the john.

I did my business and went back into the bar.

Perhaps I had entertained the faint hope that Lynne Michelle would be gone, but she

was still there, and still pregnant.

The door opened to the bar and a woman with orange hair the color of a dead lampshade and with eyes mortared open with makeup came rolling into the bar. She looked even worse than I remembered her. Maybe it was seeing her almost sober that was ruining the scenic aspect of it.

"Well, where is this little...." she began, and the sparks arcing from the end of her tongue fizzled out and the heat went out of her eyes.

She stared goggle-eyed at Lynne Michelle who was equally goggled-eyed. It was a matched set of goggle eyes.

Laura Jo had on green fluorescent stretch pants that left very little to the imagination and a tight fuzzy orange sweater top that was tight enough to display her big set of not inconsiderable charms. The effect was spoiled by a face hovering over the body that looked like a utility van had backed up to her door in the middle of the night and tossed out facial features at random.

Her eyes were too large, her lips were too big and her nose was impossibly small. Her upper lip had the barest suggestion of a mustache. She had a mole on her chin which wasn't a beauty mark. Her hair, of which there was way too much and all of it fuzzy, had been dyed to an uncertain death. I used to have an oil pan on my old Chevy that was the same color as her hair.

"Is it yours?" Laura Jo turned and looked at me as if I were a sudden stain that had appeared in her toilet bowl.

I didn't get it. But Lynne Michelle did.

"Certainly not. What kind of person do you I think I am? You couldn't possibly think he and I..." she began with raised eyebrows and a snooty look. It was probably the right tack.

Of course I got it then and I felt a little miffed. I fancied that anybody would have

been a better candidate than her husband but that I would be beneath consideration, stung a little. I mean I may have low self esteem but I'm a step above a caddie at a miniature golf course.

Laura Jo had listened to Lynne Michelle's protests with a stony face. I thought it had sailed right past her but suddenly the makeup on her face cratered and she guffawed.

It was a booming boisterous sort of outburst, loud and raunchy enough to break windows. It even frightened the bartender who weaved behind the bar, flinching.

"This is really something!" said Laura Jo. "You mind if I sit down?"

She sat down before anybody could express a preference.

"So tell me what this is all about. I mean I've seen you with your tits in the wringer before Jack but this is way beyond any other screw up. This is world class! I mean, I can see you already on the cover of the National Enquirer. This is a pip, this is!" said Laura Jo, who seemed to be enjoying herself.

She leaned over the table and put her chin on one hand and stared at first Lynne Michelle and then back at me. "I wouldn't have missed this one for the world!"

Lynne Michelle stuck out her hand. "I'm Lynne Michelle Gordon."

Laura Jo ignored the hand, purposely not looking at Lynne Michelle. She stared at me and batted her eyes. "Believe me, I already know toots. I heard it on the car radio on the way over. You're both hotter than pistols." She jerked a thumb in my direction. "He's wanted for everything, including maybe arson at sea. I think the official razzmatazz of how they want you is, dead on delivery or dead on sight. I don't know what the actual words were, but there was a lot of dead in the description. Apparently you killed half of one precinct or something. You are a serial cop killer, is how one news guy put it and they are gonna shoot you down like the dog you are. That's cause they tend to frown on that sort of thing. I mean, Jesus, how many cops did you kill?"

"Dozens. But it was an accident. I was just cleaning my machine gun and I didn't

know it was loaded."

Lynne Michelle was getting angry. I could see that. Maybe it was because she offered to shake hands and got ignored. Maybe it was because Laura Jo is not a woman other women like.

"Who is this person and why do we need her help?" said Lynne Michelle huffily.

"I'm his girlfriend!" Laura Jo batted that one across the table like a hard tennis serve.

I winced. "No. You aren't." I felt my face flush with embarrassment. Obviously I had not thought this whole thing through.

"Then what the hell am I?" She reared back in anger.

"An acquaintance," I suggested diplomatically.

"That sleeps with you," she rasped, steely-eyed. "Is that what you rate an acquaintance?"

"I never sleep with you," I said, being honest.

"That's because you always pass out on the floor, and I'll be damned if I'm going to break my back trying to get you hauled up into the bed. I mean, if you didn't get so damn drunk and pass out every time, then you could say you slept with me."

"If I didn't get so damn drunk, I wouldn't...." I started to say and then realized that it was something I probably shouldn't say.

"You wouldn't what?" Laura Jo was mad. Her face flamed red enough to be seen under the heavy forest of makeup.

"Do we have to go into all this? I mean, its fascinating, in a kind of weirdly repulsive way, but aren't there a lot more important things for us to be doing, right now?" said Lynne Michelle. She tucked her arms around her stomach and I think she was getting ready to reannounce that she was pregnant after all, which was a reminder nobody needed.

She was right but Laura Jo wasn't done with the subject yet. "You started it girlie,

asking who I am. So I'm not his girlfriend, ok, let me tell you who I am. Every Friday night, like clockwork, he gets drunk. Maybe around 1 in the morning but usually closer to 2, there is a knock on my door. Every Friday night! Guess who and stewed to the gills. Every Friday for eight months. So he rolls in, makes love to me on the kitchen table, on the what not shelf, usually he's in a bit of a rush, and then he passes out on the floor. Does he call me any other time, see me any other time. No. I'm his Friday night. I don't know where he is the rest of the week and I don't ask. How's that for a love affair? I mean, do we ever talk before the every Friday main event? The answer is no. Its more like hello and then we go horizontal and that's the size of it. Saturday morning and him hung over like somebody who drank a river and has a tugboat stuck in his craw, sometimes we talk then but we never fool around when he's sober. Is this a relationship? I mean, why do I put up with it? Do I love him?"

"Well, do you?"

She actually gasped. She pursed her lips, concentrating and then turned and stared at Lynne Michelle. "You know, I never really thought about it much. I mean, I liked the regularity of it. Every Friday. I used to tell myself, it was just you know, the body thing, but you know, kid, now that I think about it. He's one hurt wounded human being. He's always nice to me. I think he loves women, not me maybe, but the idea of women. You can kinda feel that, you know. He's a guy who likes to be in love and can't let himself be because of something that happened that he won't talk about. So, in answer to your question, I want to wash my mouth out with soap for saying it, but I kinda love the dumb son of a bitch! I mean he deserves somebody better than me. But while I got him, I don't want to lose him. I don't want to do without him."

My mouth was open. Lynne Michelle was staring at me. Laura Jo turned and stared at me. I felt like a butterfly stuck on a pin. I desperately needed four bottles of whiskey, three to drink immediately and the other one to hit myself over the head with.

"Is there something else we can talk about?" I suggested. "I mean, maybe the life threatening stuff is something we can chat about, OK? I mean, we are pretty much in danger here. Until we get somewhere safe, I wouldn't give a..."

But they weren't interested in what I wouldn't give.

They ignored me.

"He ever talk about the past to you?" asked Lynne Michelle. "About why he drinks?"

"Interested in him?"

"How could I be, I'm pregnant."

Laura Jo nodded. "Yeah, you are that. OK, no, he never talks about the past. But he's not as dumb as a guy in his business is supposed to be, so he must have been something smarter than who he is and what he does now. And sometimes he uses big words like he got maybe farther than high school. I ain't saying he's a high class guy, but he's not a sloppy embarrassing drunk. I mean, he's a mess but he isn't a slob, you know what I mean?"

Lynne Michelle nodded. "He's tough, not bragging tough and beat your chest macho kind of tough, but he saved my life, I mean, really, and he got pretty banged up and I don't think he thought all that much about himself. He did a pretty damn good job taking care of me and," she patted her stomach. "and my little one. He's a jerk, of course, like most men are but he's kind of a heroic jerk."

I might as well have been mounted and stuffed on a wall of the bar for all the attention they paid to me. I wanted to put my head in a whiskey bottle in the worst way. By now, I was convinced it would fit.

I tried to get their attention, but they were busy discussing my social life or lack of one, so I could have been off in a corner gargling with cheap gin for all they cared.

I tried to signal the waiter while all this girl talk was going on, but the waiter kept pretending he couldn't see me. Maybe by now he rated serving our table a health risk.

The door opened and a cop came in. Another one stood just outside the doorway, and he had a drawn gun.

I did the only thing I could think of to do. I fell out of my chair and crawled under the table.

Laura Jo eyed me sourly and snapped, "Ain't even Friday and the pissant is bagged already. Get up from there, you're a disgrace."

I tried to shush her by putting my finger to my lips but Laura Jo is unshushable.

She reached down and grabbed me by my good arm and tried to drag me back into the chair. "Get off the floor, you big dummy."

I glimpsed Lynne Michelle. Her eyes were on the bar door and she gasped. At least, Lynne Michelle knew the trouble was coming. But before she could move to stop Laura Jo, my once every Friday waitress threw her back and shoulders into it and yanked me up. My head banged into the bottom of the table.

This seemed to have an effect on me. Maybe I had just reached some kind of limit, pain wise. My eyes closed, or maybe they were open and I was just blind.

I couldn't hear anything, see anything, or feel anything. Considering the company I was keeping, this had obvious advantages.

I was unconscious and it couldn't have happened at a better time. When they shoot you down like a dog and you are already unconscious, it probably isn't going to hurt all that much.

Lucky me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I wasn't dead, and I didn't seem to have any bullet holes that I could feel. I kept probing with my fingers for big leaky holes but I seemed to be more or less intact, bullet-

wise.

My head hurt. But that seems so much like a condition of my life anyway, that I hardly noticed it.

I stopped examining my own not quite corpse and looked around. There was no light where I was so I didn't see much. I seemed to be in a dark noisy place that vibrated. I was uncomfortable. And I was thirsty. Every part of me ached for a drink. That was a clue that I was not dead but where the hell exactly was I? I thought for a second there I might be in one of those drawers at the morgue but usually those things aren't cramped for space. This was just too uncomfortable to be something like that.

My legs were bent up under me and my head was pushing against something hard and metallic. I heard the sound of something motorized and I kept bouncing up and down and hurting my back against something.

"Tell me I'm not in the trunk of somebody's car," I said.

Nobody told me anything but that's pretty much where I was.

I smelled exhaust fumes. Lucky me. At least it was a clue I wasn't dead.

How I wished I was dead or drunk or a little of both, dead drunk.

I considered banging on the trunk to see if I could get somebody to let me out but considering how my life has been going lately, a car trunk is a pretty good place to be.

It wasn't like going by limo. I had had days when I traveled that way and I could tell this wasn't anything like that experience.

Still, it wasn't all bad. Nobody was shooting at me. That was a plus.

I was not trapped in a verbal crossfire between Laura Jo and Lynne Michelle. That was a definite plus.

The only thing I didn't have was enough whiskey to float a small boat, and that was something I desperately needed, but you can't get everything in life so that was the minus.

The car was in motion so we must be on the way to somewhere. I figured eventually

somebody would let me out of the trunk.

I did not know if that was a plus or a minus.

I hurt in a lot of places, now that I was awake and I was tired. So tired that I must have drifted off to sleep.

When I woke up, it felt like somebody was poking me in the face with a garden trowel.

"Hey. Cut it out!" I said.

I opened my eyes. Laura Jo was nudging me with her elbow. Another face peered in at me from the opened door of the trunk. It was Lynne Michelle and she was smiling. They both were. They seemed pretty pleased with themselves about something.

"You think maybe you could get me out of this goddamn trunk?"

"He doesn't sound grateful! Especially since we did all the hard work!" said Laura Jo. "I mean, we saved his butt big time, and he don't even appreciate it!"

They reached in and grabbed me and helped me crawl out of the trunk. And crawling was the right word because I was weak as a kitten with a truck parked on it. I got my legs out finally which were achy and crampy. I tentatively managed to stand up under my own power.

I had to grab my pants to keep them from falling off. I had lost the belt somewhere along the way.

I wobbled around, barely able to stand.

I couldn't seem to get my back to straighten all the way up.

"He's still bleeding," said Lynne Michelle, and she put her arms around me and helped me stand up. There was a look of worry and concern on her face. "I'm glad we decided to bring him here."

I looked around. Here where? We seemed to be in a part of LA I didn't recognize. It looked rustic. It wasn't any place I had ever seen before or had asked to see.

"Where the hell are we?"

"Topanga Canyon," said Laura Jo and she jerked a thumb in the direction of a low lying building that looked like a badly made ranch house. "We brought you here because you're in lousy shape. You need medical attention."

"Are you nuts? You take me to a doctor and you might as well paint a bulls eye on my ass! Every cop in the world will come down on us!"

"Relax," said Laura Jo. "This guy is a friend of mine. He's not going to make any trouble, believe me."

"You really need to have someone look at that arm," said Lynne Michelle.

She tugged on me, making me walk toward the building.

"How did we get away from the bar, I mean I saw the cops just before the lights went out?"

"I went into labor," said Lynne Michelle. "And while everybody in the bar, including the cops were busy with me, Laura Jo got you by the legs and drug you back into the kitchen and out the back door. She hid you behind some garbage cans until my act ended, and we could bring the car around and load you up."

"The act, how did you end it? Did you give birth?" I wondered how the cops could have been fooled.

"I just got up, apologized to everybody and said it was a false alarm."

Laura Jo hooted. "She had to explain the pain away as gas pains!"

Lynne Michelle's face went red with embarrassment. "You didn't have to mention that part."

We hobbled toward the building.

There was sign on the door.

J.P. KOOPMAN, SMALL ANIMAL VET.

PETS ARE OUR SPECIALTY.

"Oh no. Not this," I tried to turn and get away but Laura Jo came up and grabbed me from the other side. She ratcheted my bad arm and I almost fainted from the pain. They frog marched me ahead of them.

"Look, it's the best we could do. It'll work out, trust me," said Laura Jo.

"I'm not going in there. Forget it!" I tried to break free, tried to turn and run but they were all over me. They had me firmly under the arms and half carried, half pushed me toward the door. I was just too surrounded to put up much of a fight.

"I don't bark! I don't meow!" I roared. "In case you haven't noticed. I'm a human being!"

"Well, not much of one. But you're dumb enough to be somebody's pet," snapped Laura Jo. "So just quit complaining, will you! He knows how to patch up wounds. He's just like a doctor so quit bitching. A stitch is a stitch."

They rang the bell. I was too weak to resist. When the buzzer sounded they opened the door and pushed me into the waiting room. A man with a sick miniature collie on his lap stared at us balefully. He was sitting in a chair beside a picture of two pigs rubbing their snouts together under a caption that said. SWINE LOVE IS GREAT.

They dragged me in and shoved me into a chair. My arm felt like it was on fire and I realized somewhat belatedly that my whole left side was red with blood. Ok, I conceded that point. I seemed to be bleeding to death. So I did need some help. But a vet?

However you looked at it, I wasn't having a good day.

"Say what's a guy got to do to get a drink around here?" I said, figuring there has got to be compensations somewhere for something.

The receptionist came in from the back, saw me bleeding like some grisly loser at the Roman Arena, and her eyes went wide as satellite dishes.

"Jesus! Bring him in!" she said. She looked scared and angry as hell. "You were supposed to come in the back door."

"Oh, sorry," said Laura Jo. "We were kinda in a hurry."

The woman sniffed. She was an exceptionally ugly woman, with big acne scars on her face that made it look like a Hollywood map of the homes of the stars. She was short and dumpy and seemed to have no visible neck. The white lab coat she wore made her look like someone who escaped from a low budget Frankenstein movie. She kept an icy eye on us. Obviously she did not like Laura Jo.

They took me through a wooden door past a row of cages full of various kinds of animals. I was weak, feeling dizzy. I needed to sit down somewhere. I needed a Band-Aid. I needed a drink. I needed a whole new life.

They dragged me into a waiting room and heaved me up on a long metal table. There was a bald headed guy in the room with eyeglasses thick as phone books and he peered owlshly at me.

Laura Jo and Lynne Michelle began undressing me. My uniform was a blood soaked mess so I suppose objecting didn't make sense but I don't remember anybody asking them to do it. They seemed to think it was required.

They skinned me down to my shorts in stopwatch time.

"If I had known I was going to have this kind of day, I would have worn better underwear," I said.

"You don't have better underwear," said Laura Jo.

I was probably grateful to her for sharing that.

"Well, well. I'm Doctor Koopman," he said as he approached the table. "Are you ladies the owners?"

"It's me, Doc. It's Laura Jo."

The vet nodded his head and stared fuzzily at me draped over the cold metal table.

"OK. Now hold his legs and his head and just let me take a look at him."

Lynne Michelle began to giggle.

"Has he had his shots?" asked the vet as he bent closer over the table and bobbed his head vaguely in my direction. He appeared to have the eyesight of an earth blind mole.

Laura Jo grabbed the bald headed guy by his white coat and spun him around. "This is the guy I was telling you about? I'm Laura Jo!"

He seemed permanently confused. "Laura Jo?"

"I'm your Wednesdays," said Laura Jo.

"Oh dear!" His face went red as a Russian beet and he looked over his shoulder to see if his receptionist had overheard. She had and she was not thrilled. If she and the Doc had something going, it was an encounter of the third kind.

She waved a clipboard at us. "One of you want to fill this out? Pet's name, medical history." She smiled like somebody sucking on a lemon. "We got to keep some kind of record here." She was making fun of me, I could tell.

Lynne Michelle spoke up, perhaps attempting to defend me.

"He isn't a pet. At least, he isn't mine." She gave Laura Jo a nasty leer.

Was it my feeble imagination or did she sound a touch jealous?

"I know that," snapped the half blind vet. "It's just a nervous habit, you know, bedside patter to keep the little shitters from biting."

"Actually, I'm a guy. I've always been a guy," I said, hoping to clarify the situation.

"What do you take me for, some kind of idiot!" snarled Dr. Koopman.

Well if he was Laura Jo's Wednesday, what else could I take him for.

"I just thought I should make it clear that I am not a dog," I said.

This guy was really making me nervous. And I didn't want to be nervous because I think I was close to passing out from a loss of blood. I was woozy.

"Well, what's wrong with him? I mean, aside from all the blood?" said the vet.

"That's the problem," Lynne Michelle gingerly lifted up my bad arm. "He's got a fairly bad wound in this arm and it's broken open again. You've got to do something to stop the

bleeding."

Koopman got hold of my arm and slowly unwrapped the bloody bandages. I wavered right on the edge of passing out and falling forward off the metal table.

"This is a real mess," said Dr. Koopman cheerfully. He turned to his receptionist.

"Maggie, get my kit. I may have to operate." He seemed pretty pleased at the prospect.

Dr. Koopman beamed at Laura Jo affectionately. "Don't you worry your pretty little..." He had a panic attack mid-sentence and glanced back at his obviously hot tempered receptionist and decided not to name the pretty little anything. "I'll take good care of him. Nothing but the best for my Wednesday...." He decided not to finish that sentence either. He eyed his receptionist with alarm. She was fingering some of the his surgical instruments and looked like she was about to go for his throat. This was looking more and more like the set to a bad horror movie. Dr. Koopman shuddered and turned his attention back to me. "He doesn't bite does he?" he said, staring at my mouth.

I didn't bite but if I could have got my hands on a gun, I could think of two or three people I'd very much like to shoot.

Lynne Michelle put her arms around me and gave me a hug. Laura Jo watched that little display of affection with alarm. I leaned against Lynne Michelle because I was in danger of falling over.

She smelled good. I buried my face in her hair. Everything ached and it felt good to be held.

Koopman stretched my arm out to full length and the last remnant of the soaked bandage fell away. "I can fix this leg. Gonna take a lot of stitches but I think I can get the bleeding stopped."

Lynne Michelle whispered to me. "Don't worry. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I'm here for you if you need me."

Laura Jo had her hands balled into fists and she was staring at Lynne Michelle with

evident hostility. She regarded Koopman with little affection.

Laura Jo said, "I'm glad you're doing this for us, Doc. I really appreciate it. I mean, we didn't know where else to go."

"No problem," said Doc Koopman. "I'll have him up and chasing rabbits before you know it. He'll have an ugly scar, but if he takes it easy, I think we can have him up and walking on that leg again in no time."

And I bet I would be wagging my tail by then too.

I whispered in Lynne Michelle's ear, "If you really want to help me, get me the hell out of here before this old half blind quack kills me!"

"OK. We're ready to begin," said Doc Koopman.

I had had enough. I started to open my mouth. I was probably going to scream bloody murder. I might even have screamed for my mommy. I'll never really know.

As soon as I opened my mouth, Doc Koopman popped a dog biscuit into it. I gasped and choked and mercifully passed out.

CHAPTER TWELVE.

I was in bed. It was not one I recognized. Same with the room. At least I wasn't in a cage at the animal hospital.

I was dressed in a white lab coat and white surgical pants, that was none to clean and smelled heavily of dogs and cats. My arms stuck out a foot beyond the end of the sleeves and my legs were at least ten inches longer than the pants.

I tried to figure out where I was. My bad arm ached but it was wrapped with a heavy gauze bandage and was no longer bleeding. I was both hungry and thirsty, with thirsty the larger of the two.

I tried to figure out where I was.

The room was orange and pink and purple. There were pillows and stuffed animals everywhere. Fluffy things made of lace had died on the wall and there were burgeoning shelves of whatnots and notwhats and feminine stuff that made the room look like a badly run yard sale. Every item of questionable taste that could be crammed into it, was crammed into it. The room smelled like a bad Danielle Steele novel.

I was in Laura Jo's bedroom. Even worse I was in her bed.

I got out of bed like it was on fire.

I hobbled over to the door, flung it open and ran.

Not that I got all that far.

Lynne Michelle and Laura Jo were sitting on the couch in the living room. They looked like they had been there for some time.

I got about half way into the room.

"We were just discussing you," said Lynne Michelle.

"Oh," Now that didn't sound good. Why did I feel like a frog in biology dissecting class?

"How are you feeling? Think you are up to chasing some rabbits?" asked Lynne Michelle.

They both thought that was funny and roared with laughter.

Laura Jo held out a small sack for me. "Here," she said, still convulsed.

I took the sack suspiciously. "What is it?"

"Dog Biscuits. It's your reward for being such a good patient and not biting Dr. Koopman."

That set them off again. They laughed harder this time.

I tossed the bag away. There were two too many women in the room and in my life. I had to do something about that.

I went across the living room and went to the liquor cabinet. At least that was part of

the room I was familiar with. I got my hands on a half empty bottle of Scotch and I upended it. I didn't mean to stop until I saw the horizon coming up from the bottom of the bottle.

A hand grabbed the bottle and jerked it out of my hands. I turned and faced a livid Lynne Michelle. "In your condition, you shouldn't be drinking."

I wiped some spilled whiskey from my chin and reached into the cabinet and got a full bottle of bourbon. She tried to reach for that but I turned my back on her and limped across the room. She made as if to come after me but I shot her a warning look and she stayed where she was.

"I've had just about all the grief I can stand. You try to stop me from drinking now, I swear I'll. I'll....bite." The whiskey helped but I needed a lot more help.

"He's all bark and no bite," said Laura Jo. "But you can't stop him from being a drunk. It doesn't even pay to try." She looked sad when she said it.

"It's your life. Do what you like," said Lynne Michelle with a shrug.

"It's time we did something about our situation," I said. A hard pull on the bourbon made me feel warm. The pain in my arm seemed less bothersome and the whiskey made me calm enough to think about what we were up against.

"Well, for one thing. You can stay with me. I mean this isn't the biggest place but this couch," Laura Jo tugged at the cushion under her backside. "folds out into a bed. The springs are a little bit shot but with some extra pillows I think she could be comfortable out here."

Lynne Michelle stiffened as if she had just been swallowed something she didn't like.

"Uh, er, that is. I was more thinking of our battle plan. As to the actual, uh, er," My face felt hot.

"And where would he sleep?" asked Lynne Michelle.

She wasn't shy, you could say that and then some.

"Why with me, of course," said Laura Jo with just a hint of frost in her voice. "You don't mind, do you?"

I could feel the claws coming out. Not that there was anything that was anything between me and Lynne Michelle. I mean she was pregnant and I was me and that was two strikes nobody could get past, so what was this all about?

I looked at Laura Jo. Sober, in the light of day, with everything that had been implied, I knew it wasn't Friday, wasn't ever going to be Friday again if I had any say in the matter.

I did what I do best. I had some more bourbon. I wondered if this one bottle was going to be enough. Why couldn't I be rich and own a liquor store?

"Well, uh, the thing is, while its, uh, that is..." I had another drink of bourbon. It was helping but I was still able to hear them and see them so it hadn't helped enough yet to matter.

"Is there some problem here?" said Laura Jo. "I mean, you did call me when you're butt needed saving, right?"

She got up from the couch. Her stretch pants were really stretched and she was in front of me and in my face. It was not a face I wanted in my face.

"Is there something wrong with the arrangements here?" she asked.

I smiled. It didn't buy me anything. I took another burst of bourbon but nothing seemed to work. Laura Jo stood in front of me, waiting for an answer.

"While I, uh, do concede that....the fact is....uh....."

"I hate you!" she said and she turned and walked away. She plopped down on the couch and began to bawl. Lynne Michelle put her arms around her and said, "There, there, it's alright." And she shot me a look that could have peeled the skin off my face. Nobody seemed to like me. Lucky me.

"Listen, we really couldn't stay here," I said. "I mean, not more than one night. I mean,

I was in a panic. That's why I called Laura Jo. But staying here would just put Laura Jo in danger too. But I thought we could use a one day refuge to get me back to being functional and for me to figure out where to go next and what to do next." I finished lamely. I was really floundering here.

"He doesn't want me," said Laura Jo. "The bastard never did."

Lynne Michelle hugged her and shot another poisonous look at me. She spoke at me, "Say something damn it!"

What the hell was I supposed to say. "Uh, I'm sorry. I'm not....I'm not..." But I had to give it up because I was too much not.

"Are we staying here tonight?" asked Lynne Michelle. "I mean, you're getting drunk and you need to sleep if you want to heal."

"We don't have any place else to go for tonight," I admitted and just managed to stop myself from saying but.

"In case, you've forgotten, I'm pregnant and except for a couple hours on this couch while you were out cold, I haven't had much sleep."

"Well, uh," I took another drink. I felt embarrassed. Obviously, getting drunk was the answer to something.

"Naturally, we'll stay the night," I said and I couldn't imagine anything more unnatural.

Laura Jo's sobs had subsided. She looked at me and then blew her nose in a Kleenex.

"I suppose you'd rather sleep out here on the couch with her?" said Laura Jo.

"Now wait a minute. This is getting out of hand!" I protested.

Lynne Michelle actually blushed. She moved away from Laura Jo and avoided looking in my direction.

"Now I never said..." I started to say.

Lynne Michelle turned and looked at me. Her eyes did me in. I don't know what was

in them or what the light in them seemed to mean but I stopped talking.

I tried to take another drink but my heart wasn't in it and I was trying not to feel what I was feeling and there wasn't enough whiskey in the bottle to drown it out. I think I need to see a psychiatrist, maybe two of them.

Nobody said anything for a little while and that was worse than talking.

Laura Jo blew her nose loudly again on the same crumpled piece of Kleenex and Lynne Michelle just kept staring at me.

Whatever I said, it would cause trouble.

"I don't want you to think there is anything between him and me," said Lynne Michelle. "He's just my bodyguard. I mean he's saved my life. Not once but several times. Naturally I feel, well, I feel close to him, I mean I owe my life to him. But he's, well, he's a damned alcoholic. And I am married after all."

For once she left off the reminder that she was pregnant too.

Laura Jo sniffed and looked up at me. "So you're staying?"

"Yes." I tried not to look at her. Another slug of bourbon entered the race to reach my bloodstream.

"I'll see to the extra sheets and pillows then. We've had something to eat, how about you? You hungry Jack?"

"I'm eating dinner out of a bottle tonight," I said and helped myself to another liquid bite.

Laura Jo was up and moving toward the bedroom. "It's getting late. We'll unfold the couch and get squared away for the night. I got to work early tomorrow so I need my beauty sleep."

Lynne Michelle stared at her hands.

"You're getting drunk."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It's what I do, what I am."

"It doesn't have to be that way."

"Yes it does. You don't know."

"I'd like to know."

I shook my head. I was in a rare confessional mood. "Some doors are closed and the keys are thrown away. That's how I live my life. I'm not about to hand anybody a key to anything."

I took a savage gulp and burned my throat and almost choked.

"I like her," she said. "But you don't treat her very well."

"She's a friend," I said. "But I'm not good for anybody beyond a certain point. She has to know that by now or she wouldn't put up with me. God knows why she did, or why anyone would."

"But she's not right for you," said Lynne Michelle with a serious look on her face. "It's none of my business, of course."

"Could we talk about something else?"

"Sorry. I shouldn't be interfering."

"You and I are in serious trouble. I mean, let's try to deal with that."

"I didn't exactly forget."

"I think we're safe here for the night." Actually I didn't think any such thing but it was me that felt threatened and not her. "And tomorrow, I promise you, I'll work on a place where you and I can hide out. Right now, we haven't been able to do much except run while they chase us. We need to get someplace where we can break that cycle. I need to find out who is after you and the cops need time to figure out that they shouldn't maybe shoot me on sight. What we really need to do here, in the next few days, is buy ourselves some time so we can throw a little bit back at everybody who's throwing stuff at us."

"Do we have a chance?" she said and she gave me a soft look that made my heart ache.

"We ain't dead yet. If we get a couple breaks, we could come out on the right side of this mess."

"Are you just saying that to make me feel better?"

I was but she didn't need to know that. "It's gonna take some time and we need some help. Fact is, first thing tomorrow, I'm going to call good old Hardwood Heywood, see if I can get him to meet me somewhere. I know we can trust him. He could help us a lot. We need to know who the players are. They know who we are and so we aren't on a level playing field."

If a bookie was giving odds on us, I'd bet on us to die but it was better to keep kidding her that we were going to make it.

"I remembered something that might help while you were in surgery."

I looked surprised.

"What?" The level in the whiskey bottle was going down fast. My arm no longer ached. Nothing hurt.

"It may not be much but I remembered a phone number." She picked up a piece of paper from the coffee table. "I wrote it down. It's a number where I called my husband a couple of times. Somebody else answered and said something like Commodore's YC. I don't know what that means but when I asked for my husband, they paged him. I could hear them in the background. I have a good memory for numbers. I think it's the only time I ever called him away from home. You think that will help?"

"Probably not. But it's better than nothing. It could just be a bar somewhere."

"It sounded pretty high class for a bar. The voice on the phone sounded terribly British and stuffy."

The whiskey was making me dizzy. I struggled to concentrate. "You sure he said

Commodore's YC?"

"Yes. Does that mean anything to you?"

"No. But tomorrow we can find out. Anything else you can remember?"

"No. Just that I am grateful for everything that you've done for me. I won't forget that, really I won't."

Laura Jo came back into the room with an armful of blankets and pillows and dropped them beside the couch.

"If you can drag yourself away from that whiskey bottle, maybe you can help us unfold this couch." said Laura Jo, giving me the eye.

"I only got one arm that works," I said, my voice getting fuzzy with the whiskey. "And I'm not all that sure about the other one."

They took the cushions off the couch and I hobbled over to help.

My legs seemed to be having a little trouble tracking. I was developing a definite list to starboard.

We all got hold of the edge of the foldout couch and heaved. It stuck for a bit and then came loose all at once and we all staggered back while the thing unfolded with a snap like a badly dropped guillotine.

I almost fell over. Mustn't do that. Might drop the whiskey bottle and break it. Feeling insecure about my whiskey supply, I upended the bottle and tried to find the bottom. I was getting close.

The edges of things were getting fuzzy.

They busied themselves making up the bed and I contented myself with clutching the whiskey bottle with my good arm and watching them tuck and fold and so on. It wasn't exciting to watch.

"There," said Laura Jo and she turned and looked expectantly at me. "Well?"

It was a question but I didn't know about what.

"She's tired and she needs to sleep," said Laura Jo and her voice seemed unnaturally loud.

"S'all right. Let er sleep," I said and I upended the whiskey bottle and the last of the whiskey went where it usually goes. I held up the bottle and stared at it suspiciously. Must be a leak in it somewhere. Could have sworn there was more in it when I started.

"I mean," said Laura Jo impatiently. "You gotta leave the room so she can get ready for bed."

"Oh abs-absolutely. Yes. Good idea." I bounced off a wall. How it had suddenly moved in front of me was a puzzler.

"Listen. I'm not really all that sleepy yet," said Lynne Michelle. "I may stay up for a little while, I mean, he could keep me company for a bit. I wouldn't mind."

"Oh yeah, I bet not!" said Laura Jo. "That's just peachy."

"Wasch the problem?" I asked but even drunk as I was, I knew damn well what the problem was. It was the black hole Laura Jo laughingly referred to as her bedroom. That and the fact that it wasn't Friday night.

"He's coming into my room now!" insisted Laura Jo. She sounded mad about something.

"He's an adult. He can go where he pleases," said Lynne Michelle.

Laura Jo stomped across the room and got me by my good arm and started to drag me across the room. Words having failed her, action apparently was required. I staggered after her.

Suddenly my doggie doctor lab attire got very tight around my neck. I turned my head a little to see what the problem was. It seemed to be Lynne Michelle with both hands gripping the back of my lab coat.

"Now just you wait a minute here," said Lynne Michelle and she yanked so hard, she pulled me out of Laura Jo's clutches.

I almost fell on my butt. I backpedaled back past Lynne Michelle like something flying out of a slingshot and she lost her grip on me and I went careening back toward the liquor cabinet. I hit it with a bang and the doors sprang open. I sighted whiskey. Well actually, a bottle of Sloe Gin, which to me always tastes like hair tonic but it was the only port in this storm. My hand closed on the bottle.

I was feeling a little bit tired by now. I thought the shelf looked very comfortable now that all the whiskey bottles were gone. I put my head down on it and closed my eyes.

A hand closed on my hair and yanked my head out of the liquor cabinet.

This tended to wake me up.

I stared wide eyed at Laura Jo. She had my hair and my undivided attention.

Lynne Michelle marched up until her pregnant parts touched Laura Jo's stomach.

"Let go of him! or I'll..."

I tried to reach up and unclench Laura Jo's hand from my hair before I went suddenly bald. I struggled to loosen her fingers.

"You'll what?" demanded Laura Jo.

"Listen you can't..."

"Oh yeah. Well, I'm his girlfriend. This is my place. I do what I want here."

"He works for me. I'm his employer," said Lynne Michelle. "If I want him to stay in this room to protect me, then by God, he'll stay in this room!"

I got loose. I had the Sloe Gin. I tried it. Definitely tasted like hair tonic. But very good hair tonic.

"Say now, les not fight. Lemme settle thiss once for all. First..." I held up two or three dozen fingers trying to count off one. I seemed to have way too many fingers on each hand.

I realized they were both staring at me. I had the feeling I was standing under a tree with two vultures in it waiting for me to die.

"First. Laura J-Jo has 'very right cause is her liquor cab-cabinet. But lemme say this...first..first...Never said girlfriend, did I?..sides, not Friday or ish it?" I was confused.

"Are you going to sleep in my bedroom or aren't you?" snapped Laura Jo.

"Uh," The room seemed awful crowded. Who let all these woman in here? "Is that....a ...question?"

"Yes, you pissant and I want an answer."

"Have uh, I ever done that, uh, I mean 'xactly?"

"You know damn well you haven't," said Laura Jo.

"There's answer..."I gulped Sloe Gin. "Must have good reashon, right, otherwise...be there inna flask, uh, be there inna flash. For now, ish ok I sleep inna liquor cab-cabinet? Lotssa room, no more whisshkey."

"You son of a bitch!" said Laura Jo and she slapped me.

I fell down or the floor just rose up and caught me in the face, one or the other.

"Don't you dare hit him!" snarled Lynne Michelle and she was standing over me like a lion defending its lunch.

I should have been angry the way I am ending up like something that goes over the net in a badminton game but I was clutching the sloe gin bottle like a life preserver and god help me, staring at Lynne Michelle's legs. I liked those legs. I did. I do.

I let go of my whiskey bottle and put my arm around one of her ankles. It was a little teddy bear of an ankle.

If I didn't know better I would have said that I was drunk.

"I suppose you want him to sleep with you. I mean that's what's really going on here, isn't it. You're in love with him!" snapped Laura Jo.

"I am not."

"You think I don't know the way you look at him!"

"Are you crazy! Look at me. My husband is probably trying to kill me. I am pregnant

past belief and you think I got some raging urge for romance with a drunken detective who is probably in worse shape emotionally than I am. Are you out of your goddamn mind! Get a life for chrissakes! What do you take me for!"

"So why are you sticking your oars in this then? Tell me that?" insisted Laura Jo. "I mean, why are you preventing him from coming into my bedroom, if you don't want him for yourself?"

"I am not preventing anything. If he wants to go in there, then let him."

I put my nose on Lynne Michelle's bare foot. It was a nice little foot with toes on it. I was wondering if now would be a good time to count them to see if they were all there. Perhaps I am very drunk.

Laura Jo looked angry enough to punch Lynne Michelle in the mouth. Lynne Michelle looked fully capable of punching back.

I was content. Where I was, nobody could hit me. Step on me maybe, but hardly punch my lights out.

"He's not right for you," said Lynne Michelle.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Just what I said. I don't know why he's with you. But there's no future in whatever it is the two of you have, you oughta know that," said Lynne Michelle. "And I'm sorry. I'm not saying this to hurt your feelings. I'm just trying to be honest."

Laura Jo stopped being angry. "You're right. I've always known it. But I kinda like the big dummy."

I was waiting for the blows to start landing. I had a ringside seat but women never do what you expect of them. Instead of duking it out, they suddenly fell upon each other and hugged like old friends. Laura Jo began to cry and Lynne Michelle consoled her.

I tried to figure out this sudden change of direction but the only thing that made sense is that I must be in the twilight zone and any minute Rod Serling was going to step out

from behind a bush.

But there was some good in this. If there was no more fighting, they would make less noise and I could concentrate on Lynne Michelle's foot. What were my intentions about that foot? I was asking myself stuff like that. Perhaps I meant to date it. I was way past drunk.

I decided to step takes in my own hand. I stepped to take my own hand. I handed to take steps.

I passed out clutching Lynne Michelle's ankle.

At least I had had something to hold onto.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I woke up with size nineteen head stuffed into a size five hat.

In short, I had a hangover. A small herd of sheep were bleating inside my skull. My tongue felt like a deflated Zeppelin. And death was what I most hoped for, because it just had to be better than how my head felt.

It got worse when I opened my eyes. I was fully dressed but then that was to be expected. It was the other part that was scary.

I was in bed. I was not alone.

My good arm was wrapped around Lynne Michelle. From the elbow down, it had gone to sleep and I couldn't feel anything in that arm at all. Lynne Michelle was asleep, and she had one arm draped across me, her face snuggled down into my neck. It was the way lovers sleep.

I didn't remember how I got there.

I turned my head and saw Laura Jo standing over me.

I was too tired to duck. I didn't see any weapons but then she was sure to have

something. If she had a gun, I hoped she would shoot me in the head. Maybe it would hurt less that way.

"Are you awake?" said Laura Jo, speaking very softly.

"If this is my voice and you hear it, then maybe I am," I said in a feeble croak but I wasn't thrilled about it.

She bent down suddenly and I flinched, anticipating a blow. But she only put a cool damp washrag on my forehead.

She knelt beside the bed and put her hand on my face, caressing my cheek.

I started to speak but she put her hand over my mouth and shook her head.

She leaned against me and said in a urgent half whisper. "I want to talk to you before she wakes up."

I tried to raise up, expecting to catch hell big time but she pushed me back down on the bed.

"Relax. You're not in trouble with me, sweetheart. I helped Lynne Michelle lift you up and put you in this bed with her." She looked incredibly sad.

"But," I mumbled but her hand covered my mouth.

"Just listen." Laura Jo looked away, licked her lips and then looked back at me tenderly. Her eyes were red and it was obvious she had been crying.

"After you passed out, she and I had a long talk. I like her. I really like her Jack. She's special. She's been through hell yet she stands up for herself. She's brave Jack, and she's in trouble and she counts on you. She'd fall apart if she didn't have you."

She put both hands on the sides of my face, and held me gently, lovingly.

"Listen to me. Pay attention because this is important. For some reason she really cares for you. She won't admit it. And the whole damn thing is impossible and you're an idiot so there's a million reasons why this is a total mess, but you dumb son of a bitch, you better not disappoint her!"

I tried to get up again but she pushed me back down.

"Sit still, will you. You and me, I mean, what the hell are we, a couple of itches we scratched every Friday night! What the hell Jack, I don't regret a minute of it! I mean that. Oh, I wish there had been more in it. I regret that but I'm glad we had the little bit that we had."

"This sounds like a goodbye," I said.

"It is Jack. After today, I don't want to ever see you again. I mean in a Friday night sort of way. I don't want you in my life anymore."

"But.." I started to say but she cut me off.

"Don't Jack. You aren't going to miss me, not really. I think, you're going to be more relieved now that we aren't whatever it was we were than anything else. Besides Jack, I want you to stay with her. You have help her through this Jack. She needs you. She needs you like practically nobody else will ever need somebody. I want you to be there for her. It's not just for her Jack, it's for you too. Maybe you can come out of whatever dark hole your goddamn life has dropped you into."

"I can't. Trust me I can't!" It was too big to explain.

"You don't have much choice. You got too much heart to leave her. You can pretend that you never feel anything, or can't commit to anything, but she's camped out where you live now, Jack, and you can't just run away from her, no matter how screwed up you are personally."

She was right. I hated her for being right. But I turned my head and looked at the sleeping face of Lynne Michelle tucked into my neck.

I felt like crying. I would have given anything not to be where I was at this moment in my life. But I was trapped, and I knew it.

"Listen, I can't handle this. I'm just not prepared for this."

"Life's a bitch, Jack. You never really get a chance to be prepared for anything that

happens in it. That's just the way it goes. I didn't know I was going to end up like this, working my ass off in a crummy dead end job with no one in my life and no real chance of ever having anyone. I wasn't prepared for that Jack but that's what happened so that's what I get. Now I don't even have my Friday nights. I gotta tell you Jack. I used to look forward to those Friday nights."

"Listen, I'm sorry. I know I haven't always treated you like..."

"Shut up Jack. Considering who you are and who I am, you treated me just fine. Maybe you gave me about as much as I am worth. Forget it Jack."

"But..." She put her hand over my mouth. "Listen I have to run or I'm going to be late for work. Be nice to her, will you. She's having a tough time. There's breakfast stuff in the kitchen. Cereal, rolls, stuff like that. See that she gets enough to eat, she's eating for two you know."

She was beginning to sound like somebody's long lost mother. She went on, "Look. I got an idea. I know one thing you're going to need. We got a lost and found at the restaurant. Somebody is always losing their wallet or their keys or what have you. I think I could snag you somebody's wallet and you could use it for a fake ID. Would that help?"

"Maybe," Thinking about what we needed was difficult at the moment. But a fake ID might come in useful.

She bent over and kissed me on the cheek. "Goodbye you beautiful son of a bitch!" I could see that her eyes were tearing up. Then she was up and moving away, her back straight.

I watched her go out the front door and I knew then why she had been my every Friday night. She had a certain grace, a warm fire that she had let me sit beside. She wasn't an attractive woman. She had no education, not that all of mine had ever done me much good. Her talk made me nervous most of the time, and embarrassed me a good bit other times. We were truly incompatible but she gave me a hundred times more in

whatever it was we had than I had ever given her.

I felt a little tug at my heart. I was actually going to miss the hell out of her. Especially on Friday nights.

I felt like a baton that had been passed in a relay race.

Lynne Michelle stirred beside me and I tried to ease my half dead arm out from under her. That was a mistake. She woke up abruptly, found me next to her and screamed. And tried to dive off the bed.

"Will you stop that!" My head was a second away from actually exploding.

She closed her mouth, lying half on and half off the bed.

"I'm sorry!" she blushed. "I was having a nightmare and for a second there, I forgot where I was..."she paused significantly..."and who I was with."

"Listen, about last night," I said and then I groaned. With every word I tried to say, my head throbbed like a bad night on the Belgian Congo which probably wasn't even a country anymore for all I knew.

I just wasn't able to discuss last night in my delicate condition. I was seeing spots in front of my eyes and even some of them lingering off to the side. My voice sank to a whisper. "Could you, would you go into the bathroom and see if you can find me a couple dozen bottles of aspirin? I seem to have me a headache."

"Serves you right," she said and she crawled back into the bed. "If you're going to drink yourself stupid, you should pay the price. I'm not your maid or your Friday nights. YOU go to the bathroom and get aspirin if you need it. I'll be there for you in a lot of ways, but I'm not aiding and abetting anything that has to do with you drinking. That's definitely out."

"Would you please not talk so loud," I said. I sat up slowly. Movement did not seem to make anything better.

"It was nice to sleep next to you. It made me feel safe," said Lynne Michelle. "That

means a lot to me right now. And it was just that, not anything else you might have thought it was. I just mention that because you probably don't remember all that much."

"Please don't start this stuff now, will you. I mean in my condition I could have been sleeping in the glove compartment of a Volvo for all I knew. I was out cold. And this is just no time for personal stuff. Not now, not the way I feel. Right now I can just barely manage not to toss my cookies as it is."

She looked hurt and scrunched down in the bed and pulled the covers up over her. She turned her back on me.

That was just fine with me. I eased out of bed gingerly. I had to get to the bathroom and not just for my head.

Shaking the dew off my lily helped but five aspirin made no dent in the headache that I could notice. It would either get better or the head would fall off altogether.

When I came out of the bathroom, she was already up and had the blankets and sheets and pillows stripped from the bed. She had both hands on the edge of the bed and was trying to push it closed. She just didn't have the muscle to manage it.

I came up beside her, grabbed the bed with my good arm and shoved along with her. The bed gave a metallic shriek, scissored back into itself and became a couch again.

"You need a shower," she said. "You smell bad."

"A simple thank you would have been enough."

"I'll fix breakfast while you shower."

I was going to make a hot retort but I couldn't think of one. Food didn't sound good. A shower didn't sound much better. The idea of anything hitting my head, even warm water, sounded unwise. But I staggered into the shower and stayed there until I was about half drowned and as clean as I could be.

I wrapped a towel around me and went down to the hall closet and found a pair of my own pants, a shirt, underwear and a jacket which didn't seem to be mine but fit so what

the hell. Maybe it was from one of Laura Jo's other days of the week.

There was an old pair of canvas deck shoes that were mine. I slid them on without socks and they felt just fine. Good to have shoes again.

I felt almost like a human being by the time I got to the kitchen. My head was still on fire, but the rest of me was doing ok. I sat down at the kitchen table.

"Well, you certainly look better," she said and she put a plate in front of me. I was wearing a smile that showed I was going to try to be as pleasant as possible.

I looked down at the plate. It was black in places, solid in spots and runny around the edges and whatever it was, the smell of it went up my nose and my eyes crossed.

"It's an omelet," she said, trying to take the guesswork out of it for me.

To my credit, I got almost half way to bathroom before I heaved on my shoes. So much for breakfast.

The day got better after that.

I called my friend at LAPD, Captain Bill Heywood. I played phone tag with him for twenty minutes before I got him. Old Hardwood Heywood was thrilled to hear from me, even more thrilled when I said I wanted to meet him. He acted like he really wanted to see me. Heywood even insisted that I bring Lynne Michelle with me. I picked a small Mexican restaurant a couple blocks from where we were. We agreed to meet at one for lunch.

I never went back into the kitchen so I assumed she didn't eat any of the omelet herself either. I didn't ask but the fact that she was still breathing was my clue that she didn't eat anything she cooked herself.

She seemed pleased at the idea of going out for lunch.

I washed my shoes out in the bathtub. They smelled a little bit like tossed cookies so I doused them with perfume to take the smell out of them. It put a new smell on them that wasn't going to do much for my image but I figured anybody smelling my feet wasn't

somebody I had to impress anyway.

Around noon, my head began to resemble a head, at least, from the inside. I had swallowed enough aspirin to put me in the Guinness Book of Records. Lynne Michelle spent most of the morning in the bathroom doing feminine things or pregnancy things or maybe a little of both. I didn't ask and didn't want to know. I laid on the couch and closed my eyes and just rested. It helped even though I did get restless for a drink the longer I laid there.

Lynne Michelle had gone through Laura Jo's wardrobe and came up with a couple of things that fit her. When she finally emerged from the bathroom, she had on a green sweater and green blouse that didn't match but looked OK on her. It probably looked better on her than it had ever looked on Laura Jo.

I called Laura Jo at work. She had good news. She had a wallet. It had only a few bucks of cash in it, but it had ID aplenty, including a fistful of credit cards. She said if I made a little effort, I could even be made to look like the picture on the driver's license in the wallet. So we had a little luck going for us already and that cheered me up a little bit.

What we needed was wiggle room and becoming somebody else for a while would certainly give us that.

At ten to one, we set out on foot for the Mexican restaurant and our rendezvous with my old drinking buddy, Captain Heywood.

With the fake ID from the wallet and with a little bit of help from my friend Heywood, maybe I might just change my bet with the bookie on our chances of making it. I might upgrade our chances to 1 in a 1000.

She walked along side of me. Its funny. I kept forgetting she was pregnant. I mean, I'd look at her face, and she was just this woman I knew and liked a little too much. I don't know if she took my hand or I took hers.

However it happened, we seemed to be holding hands like lovers and walking down the

street together. It had the air of a first date.

I would have objected but her hand felt good in mine. And she was smiling.

I guess I didn't want to mess up the moment even though I hated moments.

Not that it was going to matter.

Other people weren't going to let us hold on to that moment anyway.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They overdid it or they would have had us for lunch.

Lynne Michelle stopped to look at some dresses in a store window. I'm not much for window shopping or any other kind of shopping. So I ambled on ahead a bit, my mind worrying our collective problems and what I meant to ask of my friend Heywood. Maybe that's what saved us.

They were looking for a guy and a pregnant woman.

Once I saw the first one, it didn't take much smarts to spot the others. Cops pretending to make deliveries from vans, cops in telephone repair uniforms fooling around the base of telephone poles, cops bending over opened car hoods pretending to fix engines with nothing wrong with them. Almost everywhere I looked, the street was full of people who were not the people they were dressed up to be.

I looked up and saw rifle barrels sticking out over the edges of the roofs. They were taking no chances.

It told me something I didn't know. The other cop I shot or rather who shot himself with a ricochet, was a real cop too. And even my friend, my drinking compadre Wild Bill Heywood couldn't square this one.

I turned around and walked back the way I came. I went past Lynne Michelle and whispered loudly, not turning my head. "It's a trap. They got snipers on the rooftops and

enough cops all around us on foot to fill a Boy Scout Jamboree."

"What do I do?"

"Go into the store with the dresses. I'll go around back. If there's a back way out of there, I'll get you out. If not, be prepared for a long afternoon of trying on every dress in the shop."

"But..." I sensed she was about to give me an argument so I cut her off.

"Just do it, god dam it!" I said and I walked on down the street and turned the corner. I walked about half a block before I began to run.

Nobody fired a warning shot into the back of my head so I guess we got lucky. They didn't see me. But how safe Lynne Michelle was was still up for grabs.

I thundered down the block, cut through an alley and took a second alley where it intersected. This one led me along the back of the shops where hopefully Lynne Michelle was trying on dresses. I hoped she had made it.

There was a back door. It wasn't marked but it seemed to be in just about the right location to belong to the dress shop. But it was a solid metal door and it was bolted from the inside. I started banging on the door. Nothing happened. I kept on banging.

A door opened down the way and a Chinese man in an spattered apron stuck his head out the door. "What you want?"

"Is this the back door to the dress shop?"

"Yes. But you gotta ring bell otherwise they don't hear,"

I looked. Yep. A buzzer was beside the door. "Thanks."

"Pah. You stupid cops. Lousy stakeout in front my restaurant. Is lousy timing. Is lunch hour rush. I got no time for this foolishness," said the Chinese man and ducked back inside.

I leaned on the buzzer. The door opened slowly with a hideous shriek of rusted hinges and a fat woman in a thin woman's dress, stared at me.

She was about to say something but I didn't wait for it. I ran past her and into the back room of the shop.

"Hey..." I heard her say as I darted past her. I passed through the cluttered back room at a full run. I was frantic to see if Lynne Michelle had made it inside safely. I had been only a little scared for my sake but suddenly, for her, I was more scared than I wanted to admit.

I slammed open a connecting door and burst out into a narrow cubicle. A blonde woman who was not a natural blonde was half in and half out of an item of black filmy lingerie. I could see lots of tan lines and beyond. She regarded me calmly. She had a watch on, a black bra and an amused expression. Everything else was around her ankles.

"Excuse me. I got the wrong door!" I tried to go back out the door I had come in, but it was locked or stuck or something. There also was no handle on this side.

"Well, it could be the wrong door," said the woman and she nodded her head in an exaggerated manner. "It depends on what you had in mind." She hiccupped and smiled at me. I noticed something else about her. She smelled like a whiskey distillery. I'm not saying she was over served but she probably had a cocktail napkin stuck to her bottom.

I circled around her and got my back against the front door of the changing booth. I didn't feel too comfortable turning my back on her. But I did put my hand up over my eyes. Not that I hadn't already seen more than I wanted to see, but it was embarrassing to keep seeing it. With my other hand I was feeling around for the door latch. This was no place for me to be.

"S 'mazing how things work out. I mean, here I am and sonofagun, there you am too," She smiled as wide as a bar is long. "Let's me and you get friendly and try out my new underwear, wadja say?" She stared down at the undergarments around her ankles. "Tell me truth, tell me if is seductive or not?"

Other than a somewhat fascinating tan line, there was not much else attractive about

her. She looked like she had fallen off a long line of bar stools and had been caught by too many things while falling.

She frowned. "Oh piss, I ain't gotta it all the way up yet!" She bent down and grabbed her underclothes and started jerking them up over her legs. She got them half way up and then got half way up herself and that's when it happened.

She stumbled forward into me.

The changing room door was flimsy, open at the bottom and with a space at the top and only held closed by a flimsy hook. It was not meant to hold what hit it.

What hit it was me falling backwards with a mostly naked woman on my stomach.

We tore the door off the hinges, I back pedaled a few steps and crashed through a display of bathing suits. I went through the swimsuit rack like a horde of Mongols doing Asia in one weekend and ended up covered in a veritable cascade of multi-colored bikini bottoms and tops. The woman was not so lucky. Her head rammed into the pole that held up the swimsuit rack and she dropped across my legs and seemed to be out for the count.

I found Lynne Michelle. She hovered over me with a face that could have launched a Cruise missile. She did not look amused.

"Uh," I said. She was looking at me. She was shaking her head.

"I can explain," I started to say.

"No you can't," she said.

"I swear I never laid a hand on her! I mean, when would I have had time!"

"Get up," said Lynne Michelle.

I got up. I started pulling swimwear off of me. Lynne Michelle pulled a bikini top off my head and tossed it aside. It was hard to tell what she was thinking. But it didn't seem like she was all that pleased to see me. I didn't wonder why.

"If you are through cavorting," said Lynne Michelle, "Perhaps we can get the hell out of here."

"I was never cavorting. She was cavorting." I pulled a red bikini out from under my shirt. "I swear it was an accident!"

"It is hard to take you seriously. I mean really. At a time like this."

The manager to the store, which was the fat woman I had left by the back door was in the room and she was not a happy. She had the phone in her hand and she had already dialed 911. "Help police! I've got a mad rapist in my store!"

"Ha!" said Lynne Michelle. "Now you're REALLY in trouble."

I took her by the hand and ran through the right connecting door this time and we scooted toward the back door together.

I threw the bolt aside and opened the door cautiously. The alley appeared empty. "Let's go."

She pulled away from me.

"No wait. I have to pee,"

"Jesus Christ! Are you out of your mind. We don't have time for that. Why didn't you go already."

"Listen. I can't help it." She looked stressed and harried. "You've just got to let me pee. I can't go on unless I pee."

I couldn't believe I was going to give in to her. I must be getting soft in the head. "Ok goddamnit, but pee fast."

She turned and went back into the shop.

I had time to smoke a cigarette. I had time to smoke two cigarettes and make instant coffee. Finally she showed up.

"Thanks for waiting," she said, looking grateful.

"No problem," I said nonchalantly. "I mean, its not like we're in a hurry or anything."

We passed through the heavy back door and started running down the alley.

We got about ten steps down it when a patrol car, siren blaring, roared into the end of

the alley and came right straight for us.

We came to a dead stop. She grabbed my arm, looking terrified. "Now what?"

"Now nothing," I said glumly. "They got us by the golden apples."

I tugged her to the left, making room for the patrol car in the narrow alley. She held on to me. I put her arms around her and hugged her for all I was worth. "I'm sorry," I said.

"You did your best. I'm not sorry about anything," she said. "I'm glad I found you."

The patrol squealed to a stop beside us and a cop jumped out with a drawn gun. He was in a hurry. He left the engine running and the car door standing wide open. They wanted us bad. I knew it was over.

He moved toward us menacingly. I knew I should put my hands up but it felt good to hold her and I knew I'd probably never hold her again so I just stayed like I was.

He didn't say anything until he was in front of us.

"This is it. Move slow or he'll shoot us both." We moved apart and both raised our hands over our heads. The cop didn't even glance at us. He moved right by us and said, tight-lipped, "You folks better clear out of here. We got a rape suspect in the dress shop here. There could be trouble. Best move along now."

He crouched down and went past us, gun raised and tiptoed, actually tiptoed to the back door of the dress shop.

We stood there witless as two store window mannequins.

"Can I put my hands down now?" she said with the beginning of a somewhat dazed grin.

She giggled. She chortled. Then she let go altogether and just laughed so hard her pregnancy seemed at risk. Her whole body shook. She had to put her hands down to hold her belly.

I realized I looked stupid so I put my hands down. I even felt stupid.

I felt an irresistible desire to giggle too. Then I lost it. I laughed so hard tears started in

the corners of my eyes. She joined in. We staggered around the alley like two convulsed lunatics.

"He...he...tiptoed!" whispered Lynne Michelle between outbursts of laughter and that set us both off again. I had to lean against the side of the patrol car, I was so weak from laughing.

"Now, gasp, now...." She was out of breath from laughing. "Now what?"

I was leaning against the patrol car. The cop was spread eagled against the back wall of the dress shop, drawn gun fixed in a bead on the heavy metal back door. He wasn't paying the least bit of attention to us.

"I guess, gasp, we take a gift from the gods," I said.

I staggered over to the open patrol car door and peered inside. Almost as good as a limo and a lot more affordable. I only hoped it had a full tank.

My bad arm presented the only problem.

"C'mere." I motioned her toward me. She stepped up next to me and I turned her around and shoved her into the driver's seat.

"Can you drive?"

I ran round the other side and got in.

"Are you nuts?" she screamed at me.

The lights on top were still flashing but the siren was off.

"C'mon. What are you waiting for?"

"But this is stealing? We could go to jail for this!" protested Lynne Michelle, hunkered down uncomfortably behind the steering wheel.

"Maybe you're right. I sure would hate for us to get into trouble." I said sarcastically. "I mean, you're probably right, killing cops is not as serious a crime as stealing one of their cars."

She shrugged, squared her shoulders, threw the car into gear and slammed her foot on

the gas pedal. The cop car took off with a gut wrenching jerk and we were flying down the alley.

I looked back through the rear window and saw the ballerina of a cop prancing out into the middle of the alley after us, brandishing his gun like a cocktail shaker and yelling at us. He seemed mad at us for some reason.

"Slow down!" I cried and I turned and looked back out the front window. We must have been doing fifty when we hit the street. The car left the ground for a second or two and my stomach almost went with it.

She cut the wheel hard to the right and the car swung around like a drunken sailor, almost went up on two wheels, before she got it straightened out, just missing a parked car. But she got it back under control and we roared away. I swear she hit eighty before we got to the next intersection. I heard horns blaring.

"Slow down!" I seemed to be screaming. It seemed to be justified.

She eased off the gas pedal. We dropped below fifty. I bent forward and switched off the flashing cop lights.

"Slow down. Watch out!" A car trying to go through the intersection braked frantically as we powered through a red light. "SLOW DOWN!"

A car hit another car, trying to avoid hitting us.

She took her foot off the accelerator. She looked miffed.

"You don't have to scream. I mean I'm not deaf. Look, I'm sorry. I never drove a stolen car before." She looked almost ready to cry.

"Well, this ain't the Indy 500. The trick is, to drive normally when you are driving a stolen car. You don't want to speed or do corners on two wheels. The idea is, its a stolen car and you don't want to attract undue attention. So drive a little below the speed limit and don't break any traffic laws."

"But this is a cop car. It's not like we aren't going to be noticed anyway, right?"

She had a point there.

"Where am I going?"

"I don't know. Let me think,"

She followed the traffic. Driving sensibly and sanely. She kept wiping her eyes. Her shoulders shook. Then suddenly she was bawling her eyes out.

"Now what's wrong?"

"I'm pregnant and you yelled at me," she said with a sob. "Why can't you be nice to me. I'm...having a bad..."She dissolved into tears and let go of the wheel.

Jesus! I grabbed the wheel.

"I'm sorry." I said, struggling with the wheel. "Please believe me. I'm sorry."

"Look at me and you can see just how sorry I am."

She looked at me and took her foot off the accelerator. She stared up into my eyes.

I looked at her, looked back at the road, looked back at her. "Listen. I swear, I won't yell at you again."

"Do you promise?"

She was breaking my heart and my back at the same time. Pregnant people are so moody. It can take all the fun out of car theft and other kinds of class one felonies.

"I promise. I swear from now on I am gonna try to be a lot nicer to you."

She leaned against me. "I just want you to like me. I hate it when we fight. Right now, you're all I got."

"I know that. I'll try to be more thoughtful."

She had to push it. "And the drinking....do you think..."

I tried to look at the road, look at her, hug her, look back at the traffic, steer the car, pat her reassuringly on the back, watch for cars and that's when it happened.

I rear ended a Volvo.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

We had almost slowed to a stop and the Volvo was already at a stop so it wasn't much of a collision. But when you're traveling in a stolen cop car and half the cops in the world want to shoot you on sight, any accident is a bad accident.

"Are you ok?" I asked her.

She'd bounced off the steering wheel but not hard enough to hurt her. I'd jammed a thumb against the dashboard and my bad arm got a jolt but otherwise I was fine.

The guy in the Volvo jumped out of his car and started back toward us. He was angry as hell for about the first five steps but then he became aware it was a police car so his attitude took a sudden adjustment.

"Excuse me," he said bending over and tapping on the window. He was portly and red-faced. He wore a shirt and tie as grey as the smog and a blue plaid jacket an undertaker wouldn't wear.

"What do I do?" said Lynne Michelle, whispering to me in a panic.

"Tell him you'll give him a ticket unless he gets that piece of junk out of our road." Perhaps an attitude would help.

"What?"

He tapped on the window again, almost hesitantly this time. He was staring at the very pregnant woman in the driver's seat and it seemed to confuse him.

"Excuse me."

Lynne Michelle rolled down the window.

"Is there any damage?" asked Lynne Michelle.

"Why yes." said the man self righteously. "There certainly is. I've got a broken taillight and the chrome is scraped and the rear trunk has a nasty dent and the back bumper is pushed sideways. I'd say that was damage, wouldn't you?"

"Tell him the city will pay for it," I whispered. "Just tell him anything, just so he moves his damn car so we can get the hell out of here before a real cop shows up."

"Somebody is going to have to pay for this. I mean just because this is a police car, doesn't mean...well, really, its very obviously your fault. Don't think my insurance company is going to pay for this. I assure you the city will pay for this and pay dearly. I happen to be an insurance salesman. So I know my coverage and let me tell you, running into me was a serious mistake. Can I see some ID and a driver's license?"

Lynne Michelle looked at me. I shrugged and whispered. "I suppose I'll have to get out and hit him with something."

"You are with the police aren't you. Perhaps undercover or something?" asked the man. He glanced over at me and didn't find my presence any more reassuring.

"No," said Lynne Michelle brightly. "My friend and I are more escaping them than we are with them. That's really why we stole this car. You see there was this cop who was on his way to arrest him for rape. But he's not really a rapist. He's more a cop shooter. But anyway, we saw a chance to steal this nifty cop car so we took it. But don't let this thing about rape throw you. In fact, I'd say you can pretty much forget the rape and car theft. What the cops mostly care about is he's been killing all these cops. I forget just how many. But it seems like a lot."

The man's eyes glazed over.

Lynne Michelle turned to me and said. "Honey. I forgot to ask, do you shoot only cops or do you make exceptions and shoot other people too?"

"Anybody, really. I don't play favorites. Pretty much anybody in my face I don't like, I'd guess that would be my choice for someone to shoot."

"What about this guy?" she said, pointing at the Volvo driver.

"I'd shoot him, no question!" I said. "Anybody drives a Volvo deserves to die."

"Show him your gun." She turned to the man again, leaning out of the window and

confiding, "You know some people are in favor of small guns. We like the big ones. Oh they make more noise and that's annoying but the holes are just ten times better. I mean, if you want to shoot somebody, a big gun is best."

The man took a step back. I reached under the seat for the gun that wasn't there.

He fainted.

"Now what?" she said. "He's no fun. He fell right over."

"Back up and go around his car," I said.

She backed up until her back bumper hit the car behind her. That guy started to get out of his car. She was extending the zone of destruction in a most remarkable way. She slammed it into gear, went so far to the right she actually went up on the curb but even that wasn't quite far enough. She went around the stalled Volvo, but was still too close and took out the rear fender panel as she went by and then roared into the intersection in time to run another red light. We sped through to the accompaniment of blaring horns, squealing brakes and the tinny sound of newly crumpled fenders. We were back in business.

"I like the way you handled yourself back there, kid," I said.

"You weren't so bad yourself. We'd make a pretty good team," she said. "If you didn't drink like a fish and jump everything in underwear that moves or looks like it might move."

"Bitch!"

"Bastard!"

I pointed to a 24 hour donut shop. "Pull in to the parking lot over there."

"Good idea. I could go for some chocolate donuts."

She pulled in and parked. She went inside for donuts and I availed myself of the police radio. I read the car number off the dashboard. I told the radio dispatcher I wanted to be patched into Anna Torreon's, which was the restaurant where I was supposed to meet

Heywood. I said I had vital information on the whereabouts of, myself, whom I named, and the pregnant woman, whose name I wished I could forget, but I insisted that I would only speak to Captain Bill Heywood."

The radio dispatcher almost swallowed her gum. "Hey! That's a stolen unit! Are you calling from the stolen unit?"

"Sure. You get better reception from the stolen ones."

"Boy, that's something. I'll patch you in," She sounded thrilled.

Heywood's voice was nervous, edgy. "Yeah."

"It's Jack. I'm hiding in the bathroom with a portable phone."

I could almost hear his neck turn.

"Is that you, Jack?"

"I think it's me. I'm almost positive."

"Where are you?"

"I'm somewhere else."

"I know that, you big dummy! Cause I am here and you're not. You're late."

"If you say so. Personally, I think I was right on time."

"Is there some problem Jack? Why aren't you here?"

"Hardwood, my friend, I got nothing but problems."

"Don't call me that. I hate that. Call me Bill. How can I help?"

"I think I have already had enough help, Hardwood," I didn't say anything for a while, trying to think up what to say next.

"Jack. You still there? Where are you, Jack. Talk to me!" He sounded half frantic.

"Well, if I'm not where you are, then I must still be where I am."

"You got to come in. You have to meet me here or I can't help you. C'mon, Jack. I got a bottle of Jim Beam. Sitting right here on the table in front of me. I figured you and I could work on it while we talk this out. C'mon in, Jack."

The idea of the Jim Beam made my mouth water.

The fact that he had sold me out made my skin crawl.

"I thought you were my friend."

"I am Jack. I swear." He was struggling to sound sincere and not making it.

"Friends don't arrange for snipers," I said. "I am pretty sure that isn't what friends are supposed to do."

"Ah...well.." Heywood said something profane to somebody else in the room.

"I knew they'd blow it. Overkill, right. They scrambled a million guys and they were tripping all over each other. Bunch of damn pissants!" said Heywood. "I just knew they'd blow it."

"You sold me out."

"You keep killing cops. What did you expect, the frigging red carpet? My mistake was, I should have taken you myself. I didn't need those swat team clowns. That was my mistake, Jack, cause I would have had your ass."

"You're probably right Hardwood. I trusted you. I damn near walked into it as it was."

His voice sounded almost wistful. "If I could convince you that I could guarantee your safety, would you come in?"

"No. Not even with the enticement that I had a free shot at punching out your lights."

"So now what?"

"Yeah. That's what I'm asking myself."

"Is she with you?"

"Yeah."

"Why did you do it? Why did you go crazy on us? I mean the first hit was going to go away but now you screwed it but good."

"I don't expect you to believe me, but the cop I shot, was the same cop that brought a pitcher of poisoned orange juice to Lynne Michelle's room. She doesn't drink OJ so she

brought it into my room and it was laced with cyanide. That's why we bolted."

Heywood suddenly sounded very tense. "Ah, Jack. This isn't exactly a secured line."

"Do you understand what I'm saying here?"

Heywood was probably squirming in his chair. "Maybe you shouldn't go into this Jack."

"If they haven't cleaned up my hospital room, they could find the orange juice. I'm not making this up Heywood. That same cop opened fire on us in the hallway. Was he authorized to do that? C'mon, Heywood. Why do you think I slugged the cop guarding me and escaped? I'm not nuts."

"Sure you are Jack." said Heywood. "Maybe you should hang up now."

"Can you help me?"

"I can't....can't do you any personal favors, right now Jack. You know that." Heywood was really tense now.

"Can you tell them to look for the poisoned orange juice?"

"I shouldn't tell you this. They already know about that."

"Great."

"One of the nurse's aides. She was cleaning up. She helped herself to some of the orange juice. At least, that's how we figured it."

"She's not able to say..." I began.

"She was dead probably before she hit the floor. But we didn't know the orange juice came from her room. That's something new."

"I'm telling you the cop who bought it in the hallway, brought it in. Lynne Michelle saw him bring it in. She even spoke to him."

"It's a story anyway," said Heywood and he sounded a little sympathetic. "But you got to come in Jack. I'm on your side. If its like you say, I know we could work this out. Knowing all this helps a lot, it explains a lot."

"Bullshit!" The patrol car door opened and Lynne Michelle got in with what looked like ten pounds of donuts.

"I'm telling you. It's your only chance. You've got to come in."

"Who's that on the radio? Who are you talking to?" said Lynne Michelle. Her face was smeared with chocolate donut.

"Miss Gordon? Is that you? Can you hear me? Listen, if you can hear me, I think it would be wise if you could talk him into surrendering because...."

I thumbed the radio off to mute. I helped myself to a donut. She had ten different kinds but they all were chocolate.

"That's my friend on LAPD. You know the one with the snipers."

"We don't like him anymore do we? I mean, he's off our Christmas list."

I thumbed the radio back on. "He'll be crushed."

"Jack? Jack? Are you there?"

"I'm here. I'm afraid I have bad news for you."

"What? What's wrong?" Heywood sounded really worried.

"Lynne Michelle says you're off our Christmas list. Once she makes up her mind, she hardly ever changes it."

Heywood's voice dripped ice. "They tell me you're calling me from a stolen police unit. Is that right?"

"I'm on a crime spree Hardwood. What can I say."

"Will you stop calling me that."

"You'd rather I called you Deadwood?"

There was a silence. I thumbed the radio back to mute.

"Is there some reason you're talking to him Jack? I mean, is there some point to this whole conversation?"

"Wipe the chocolate off your face. A mustache doesn't suit you."

"If we can't rely on your friends, who can we rely on?"

"Us." I said with a sigh. "Just us."

"That's scary." said Lynne Michelle. "I better have more donuts."

I flipped the radio back on. "Captain Bill, you still there?"

"Hello. I'm here Jack. I ain't going anywhere. You changing your mind about coming in?" He was saying it more for effect, for whoever was listening in than out of any real conviction.

"I remembered something about you. Remember the Gates Trail murder, Bill?"

"Yes." Heywood's voice became suddenly wary.

"I was your friend on that one."

"I know what you mean." And he certainly did know.

"But I won't talk about that now." I took a bite of donut. I hate donuts. "I'll never bring it up because once I am somebody's friend, I am always his friend. I'm loyal."

I bet Heywood was sweating bullets.

"Nice to know that about you Jack. Too bad we can't talk over old times. If you were here, we could reminisce."

"I'm trying to find my way home, Heywood. Does that make sense to you?"

"Home is best!" said Heywood and his voice had a peculiar urgency. "That's what I.. would.. doyes...if I were you. That would work."

His voice dropped an octave and he went back to the usual rap. "Now I still got that bottle of Jim Beam. It's still here waiting for you and let me tell you what I'm going to do. If you give me five minutes, I'll pull everybody out of here. I promise you, you come in and see me, nobody will be here but me. My word of honor on that. Jack, are you listening? The new information you told me, about the poisoned juice, and the cop who got killed being responsible, all that is gonna make a big difference. From where I'm sitting, this could be made to come out right, is what I'm saying. Now you could give me

the facts a little more clearly. Then I could be pretty sure, what you'd tell me would be enough to make them back off of you. I mean, maybe some protective custody, material witness, that sort of thing, but I mean backed off. How's that sound Jack? It's better than being out on the street. You aren't going to make it out there all by yourself. I mean, give me five minutes to convey that information and I guarantee you, I can set up a private meeting. Then you can go if I can't convince you this is going to work out. I won't try to stop you. MY PROMISE JACK!"

"Will he really do that? I don't trust him Jack."

"Ok Heywood. I'm gonna trust you. But I'll give you about thirty minutes to square it. I want to be sure you have enough time to call everybody off and we are pretty far away. We'll need time to get there. When we come in, I want the streets empty. No snipers on the rooftops, nobody around who shouldn't be around. Is that understood?"

"You're making the right choice Jack. This place will be freaking Siberia by the time you get here. It'll just be me. You have my personal word on that. You won't regret this Jack. See you in thirty minutes."

I cut the radio and hung it back up.

"I don't believe you're doing this!" Lynne Michelle was staring at me like I had lost my mind. Her face looked like Picasso had smeared her with chocolate.

"Relax."

"You're going to get us killed. I don't believe him. How can you dare go back there?" She was really upset. It was hard to tell under the layer of chocolate but she wasn't taking this well.

"Do you trust me?"

"With my life. With my baby's life," she said without even thinking about it. It was just a fact.

"Then start your engine."

She started the car and put it in gear. "I just hope you know what you're doing." She backed out of the parking lot, got the car turned around and pulled up to the street.

"Which way do I go to get to the restaurant?"

"Turn left. We're not going there."

"But I thought..." she said as she pulled out into traffic.

"Just for show. Heywood knows I'm not coming. We'll drive back to Laura Jo's. We'll ditch the car before we get there, walk the rest of the way. But we won't have to worry too much about cops out looking for us. Everybody will be concentrated around Anna Torreon's, thinking we are going there to meet Heywood."

"That guy is not your friend."

"Actually, you're wrong. He's helping me."

Lynne Michelle shook her head. "That doesn't make any sense."

I wondered if we should put the siren and the lights on. It might make it more fun and we could go faster to what I so desperately was beginning to need. No the more I thought about it, probably not a good idea. Besides when we made our absolutely necessary stop at a liquor store and pulled up with a siren wailing and lights flashing, it would leave the wrong impression. I always want liquor store clerks to think well of me.

I used my good arm. I wiped some chocolate off her face so she looked a little less like a sideshow bearded lady.

"He read my code. He stressed home. That's where I'll call him tonight. At his home. He knows damn well, I have no intention of showing up at that restaurant. But by staging that charade about pulling everybody off and me agreeing to come in, he bought us some time. He's giving us some wiggle room."

"Why would he do that?"

"Cause I know too much about things he'd rather leave buried. And he probably believes my story to boot. But he's too much of a cop, not to play the game the way they

want it played. I don't even blame him for selling me out. He's just doing his job. He's got a pension to think of. If I were in his position, I probably would've done the same thing. But the good news is he's going to help us off the record. He can't help as much as I would have liked but there's still plenty he could do for us on the quiet. We'll probably need whatever he can give us."

"What a world! When you have to blackmail your friends just to keep them on your side."

We drove in silence for a while. Lynne Michelle had eaten probably five pounds of chocolate donuts. The steering wheel was a sticky mess and so was Lynne Michelle. I kept my eye peeled for possible pursuers but the streets were relatively clear. I made her turn off the main drag and we kept to the smaller side streets where we were unlikely to run into another patrol car. The sight of Lynne Michelle behind the wheel, would blow it for us if we were spotted. But I was reasonably calm about our chances of getting back to Laura Jo's.

I spotted my heart's desire.

"Pull over into that parking lot."

She pulled over obediently. "What are we doing?"

"Give me some money. I got to get some things?"

She eyed me suspiciously. "What things?"

"I need a razor. Some basic supplies. And maybe you'd like some milk to wash down the million pounds of donuts? Is that good for your baby, to eat all that junk?" I was trying to distract her.

"God! I can't believe I ate all those donuts. I feel sick as a dog. Let me tell you, under normal circumstances, I am really good about my diet. I mean I read books about prenatal nutrition. I don't drink or smoke and I try to stay balanced with my proteins and my carbohydrates but this is one of those lose it kind of days. When we get settled

somewhere, we've got to start eating some decent food. You're not buying whiskey are you?" She didn't stay distracted long enough.

"Trust me. Just some stuff we need. Anything you want?" I hated lying to her but my need for whiskey was undeniable.

"Maybe I should come in with you? There's stuff I need," she said, shutting off the engine.

"No!" I said a little too forcefully. "I mean, its not safe. You stay with the car, I'll only be a second. Laura Jo can go out and get you whatever you need when we get to her place."

I jumped out of the car before she could give me an argument and went inside the liquor store. I bought two cheap bottles of whiskey, the cheapest I could find, a carton of milk, a razor and a newspaper.

I asked for a big paper bag when I paid for the stuff. I put the whiskey on the bottom, unfolded the newspaper and used it to stuff the top of the bag so she couldn't see what was in the bag.

I hurried out and dumped the bag in the back seat. The whiskey bottles clanked into each other and she heard it.

"That sounds like bottles. I hope that bag doesn't have any whiskey in it," she said, her voice menacing.

"Apple juice. I bought you a bottle of apple juice and a bottle of hair shampoo."

She pulled out of the lot and continued driving along the route I had picked out. She avoided looking at me and it was plain she did not quite believe me. I hated having to disappoint her but I couldn't stop drinking any more than I could stop breathing. It was just how I am.

About ten blocks from Laura Jo's, we ran into trouble.

"Jack!" Her voice was suddenly tense, her eyes were fixed on the rear view mirror.

I turned around and didn't have to ask what was wrong.

A patrol car was behind us with two cops in it. The man in the passenger seat was using the radio. The driver had unsnapped the shotgun from the center rack in the car and was holding it one-handed, stock on the seat.

I didn't need three guesses to figure out what the cop was talking about on the radio.

We had run out of luck.

"What do we do?" asked Lynne Michelle.

"I don't know. Let me think."

If I had been driving, if my arm would allow that, maybe I would have tried to outrun them. But I had seen her driving. She wasn't that good. In fact, she was a fairly lousy driver and we didn't have a chance in hell of getting away from them. Any high speed chase was bound to end bad.

"Jack. They've turned on their lights."

"Yeah." I turned and smiled back at them. The one guy had put down the radio and now he had the shotgun. He didn't seem impressed by my smile.

"Jack? What do I do?"

The siren whirred on behind us and they began to speed up.

"We can't outrun them. You aren't that good a driver."

"Tell me what to do Jack!" her voice pleaded with me.

I would have liked to figure a way out but I had no ideas.

"Pull over," I finally said. "There's nothing else we can do."

"Jack!" Her voice was shaky. She was almost crying.

"Just do it. Maybe you'll be safe. Not every cop in the world is out to get you. They got to believe some of my story. You may be alright."

She pulled over to the side and the cop car eased in behind us. She braked abruptly and the grocery bag fell off the back seat. The bag split open and the whiskey bottles

tumbled out. Behind us, the cops stayed in their car, as if not quite believing their eyes.

"Jack, I just want to say something." She turned and saw the whiskey bottles. She frowned.

I tried not to look at her.

Slowly, with drawn guns, the cops began to get out of their car.

"Jack. I think I could almost love you. But you lied about the whiskey."

"Now you don't want to say that. Not now," I said. This was no time for a moment. "I'm afraid you're timing is lousy. This is more a time for goodbye than it is for a hello."

Lynne Michelle asked, "Do you like me even a little bit, Jack? If you don't now, do you think you could maybe someday perhaps even love me?"

"I can't....I...Jesus, I need a drink."

"You and your damn whiskey!" She was suddenly furious. Her face was dark as a stormy night and her eyes flashed with lightning. I was almost glad the cops were going to make me miss the weather front she was building up to. "This isn't over until I say its over. I'm not finished with you Jack."

Actually she was. The cops would see to that. There was even a good chance I might get shot while they were arresting me. Cop killers usually don't fare all that well. They have accidents on the way in.

"Look, I'm giving it up for your sake. I just don't want you to get hurt," I said, trying to make her not hate me so much for being who I am, what I am.

"Well the hell with that!"

She slammed the car into reverse, tramped the gas pedal to the floor. The car jerked back and my head hit the dashboard.

The tires squealed, the car roared backwards and slammed into the cop car. We came to a dead stop and my head hit the dashboard again.

I'd turned my head in time to have a fleeting glimpse of two terrified cops diving for

their lives. Our car trunk went right through their radiator. Water gushed out like spilled blood.

She slammed the car into drive and shot ahead. My head bounced off the seat and then hit the dashboard again. This was getting monotonous.

She roared ahead about thirty yards and then slammed on the brakes. Behind us the cops were slowly getting to their feet. They looked stunned and both of them had lost their weapons. I sympathized with them. They had gotten their first dose of Lynne Michelle.

She yanked it into reverse and hit the accelerator. She floored it.

"Hey wait..." I tried to say but I wasn't ready for it and my head banged into the dashboard yet again and my bad arm thumped the window. I got turned around in the seat while we were zooming backwards. I stuck my head up and closed my eyes and waited for the impact. I put my good arm around the seat back, trying to brace myself.

We were really traveling when our trunk slammed into the front of the patrol car. The impact threw me into the back seat and it really shook up Lynne Michelle. I was sure we would both have whiplash.

"You're crazy!" I shouted at her when I could get right side up in the backseat. "You're nuts!"

I lunged forward, dragging myself over the top of the seat, trying to get back in the front. I was half way back into the front seat when she slammed the gear lever back into drive.

"Stop! Don't!" I tried to say.

"RELAX! I saw this stunt at a demolition derby. I know what I'm doing."

She was all shook up.

"Don't do it anymore!" I said. "Their car is no longer a car."

"Are you sure? I could hit it again. I'd like to hit it again."

"You've had too many donuts. The chocolate is affecting your brain!" I said as I got myself upright in the front seat again. "Let's get out of here!"

I looked through the back window. Our trunk would never be a trunk but their engine would never be an engine. It had been rolled up to about half its length.

The last impact was so violent, one of my whiskey bottles broke. The heavenly smell of cheap bourbon spread through the car.

Lynne Michelle seemed dazed. With one hand holding her neck, she put the car in drive and put her foot on the accelerator. She floored it again and we shot forward. She twirled the wheel, taking us back toward the center of the street.

We roared down the street at about eighty miles an hour.

"Slow down!" I screamed at her.

"Why? Are you afraid another one of your precious whiskey bottles will break?"

"SLOW DOWN! We're safe. They can't possible follow us. You did it. I can't believe you did it but you did it. Now slow down!"

When the speedometer hit a 100, I turned and dived into the backseat. My hand found the unbroken whiskey bottle. We hurtled toward an intersection like a space ship in hyper drive.

We had speed, we had momentum. What we didn't have was the right of way. What we had was a red light that was a brief blur before she ran it.

She lightly kissed the side of a car that was attempting to make a left hand turn. It lost a fender.

Our front end caught the last couple inches of a blue Ford station wagon trying to go through the intersection and sent it spinning like a weird Detroit top before it sideswiped a parked car and turned over on its side. Two other cars crashed into each other trying to avoid the hot black and white streak that was us as we raced by. That seemed to sober her

up because she eased off the gas and we began to slow down. I was no longer sitting beside her.

"I did it! I really did it!" She was happy. She was ecstatic. She definitely had too many donuts.

"Slow down!" I said, not that I cared. I was approaching personal oblivion. I had my eyes closed and I was in the back seat.

I don't know if it was cowardice that put me in the backseat when we hit the intersection or whether it was the whiskey.

I would like to think it was the whiskey. I had the bottle open in a flash and I was already drinking when we hit the intersection.

I was trying to drink as fast as she was driving.

I saw nothing to convince me to stop when we passed out of it. Even when the car slowed down to the speed limit. Drinking whiskey still seemed like a good idea. Half of the bottle was gone before I thought I might be able to ease off.

Besides, I needed to breathe air too. At the speed I had been gulping, I hadn't been able to.

"Where are you?" Lynne Michelle noticed that I was no longer sitting beside her.

"What are you doing back there?"

"I...hiccup...am...hiccup...fortuning our good toast." I always get hiccoughs when I drink too fast.

"You're drinking!" she said with absolute disgust.

"The way you been....driving...hiccup...ish is...hiccup...only way.. can handle it."

I meant it too. She scared the piss out of me.

I looked down at my lap.

In fact, she had scared the piss all over me.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

We ditched the car four blocks from Laura Jo's place. I would have ditched it farther away but it was uncomfortable walking with wet pants.

It turned out, I was wet not from wetting myself but from sitting in spilled whiskey but I was a little too tense to be cheerful about my renewed faith in my bladder control.

I tried to put my arms around Lynne Michelle in a congratulatory hug. I was trying to thank her for her back-into-them-until-they're-nuked escape.

"Just got to say it...you are...a most extra-ordirical, extra-ordinical, ...though still pregnant...very courageous...a most extra-ordinary person." It was an effort but I finally got the word right. "I mean that." That's what I said when I got out of the car.

You'd think my words would have meant something to her. I am not one given to overabundant praise.

I was giddy with drunken admiration. She was somebody worth traveling with. Oh sure, maybe she was a little too nuts about chocolate donuts but I was definitely feeling warm thoughts about her.

She kicked me in the kneecap.

She damn near broke my knee. I preferred the good old days when women disapproved of you quietly with a sneer.

"What the hell was that for?" I asked, as I began to limp.

For an answer, she grabbed the whiskey bottle out of my hand. She raised it over her head threateningly

I put my hands over my face and hoped it wouldn't leave a scar. But she didn't hit me with it. She just turned and pitched it. Nice throw for a vastly pregnant person.

Unfortunately, it went through the front window of a Mexican take out. The doors opened and angry people stormed out like fire ants leaving a burning anthill. I think they

took it personal.

"Uh-oh," said Lynne Michelle. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

There were too many that wasn't supposed to happens around her.

The hostile glances of the Mexican take out customers suggested that this was not a place where we should linger. Off we staggered, me limping with fortunately no one in hot pursuit because we couldn't outrun a dead paperboy.

If I don't succumb to the injuries she's inflicting on me first, I am convinced Lynne Michelle is going to get me killed.

She had to half carry me. The aching knee and the ache I had filled with whiskey put me among the walking wounded.

"I'm sorry I kicked you."

"Oh, was that what that was? I thought you were just trying to put a crease in my pants."

"I get angry. I've got an Italian temper."

"Are you Italian?"

"Just my temper. I'm actually something else."

No kidding. She was definitely something else.

"I don't usually hit people. I mean, I'm over-emotional at the moment. I NEVER hit people. I think its just the situation. I'm really sorry, ok?"

"Me too. I'm sure you're a.. perfectly..." I wasn't sure what she was perfectly. Maybe she was the Hunchfront of Notre Dame but I couldn't win anything by suggesting that.

My knee felt better the farther we went and the whiskey was losing a little of its steam. My head seemed to be clearing.

"Listen, back there in the patrol car. It was the heat of the moment. I mean, what I said. You know, the I love you stuff. Well forget it. I was just letting my emotions get the best of me. Its not like that. I'm pregnant after all. I mean, this is confusing. I just got

overexcited," she said with a sigh.

"Sure. You lost your head. I understand."

"Besides you have Laura Jo in our life."

"Not any more." Why was I even admitting it?

"What do you mean?"

"She dumped me."

"Why?"

I couldn't tell her the truth. I couldn't mention that it was so she and I could have a chance. It was a stupid idea anyway. Trust Laura Jo to want the impossible.

"She said she had a new guy for Friday night." It sounded like something Laura Jo might say.

"So she could just open up another day of the week for you right?"

"No. Laura Jo says it is over. So it's over."

"Do you feel bad about that? Do you miss her?"

"Sort of. But it had to happen. I mean we weren't going anywhere." I hadn't really thought about it but it was true. We had just been a blip on the radar screen. Now we were gone.

"Well, I never thought she was right for you anyway. You can do better and so can she."

I wasn't too sure how the math on that one worked out but I nodded my head in agreement. "If she found almost anyone, it would be better for her than me. I'm no good for anybody."

"Well, you're not that bad. You have your moments," she said, sounding almost wistful but then she caught herself in time. She went on quickly, "I mean I am grateful to you. I mean I owe you my life. But I couldn't really be in love with you." She didn't sound convinced. She had a confused look on her face. Her face flashed with momentary

anger.

"Don't forget you're married too." She needed all the help in this argument I could give her. So why did I feel bad encouraging this line of thought?

"Oh, well. If I could find him, I'd divorce him. That's not a problem. Far as I am concerned, he doesn't exist. I know I don't love him. I mean he's probably the one behind everybody trying to kill me."

"And we know you don't love me. I mean, I know I'm not worth it," I said. Well that was probably all too true.

"Besides you're an alcoholic," she said with a note of finality. That seemed to be the deciding factor. I was off the hook.

"If I mentioned it as often as you mentioned you were pregnant maybe you wouldn't make mistakes like that. It would be easier for you not to get so confused."

"Bastard!" She said and I thought for a second that she was going to cry.

"Bitch!" I said but my heart wasn't in it.

After that, we made the trip back to the apartment in silence. My knee sorted itself after a while. She hadn't actually kicked me all that hard. She must be getting soft. I sobered up on the limp back to Laura Jo's. Not all the way but enough to get by on.

Lynne Michelle did not look well. Her face looked strained and she was unnaturally pale. I began to worry about her.

I rang the bell to Laura Jo's apartment. Nobody answered.

"Hey, it's open!" she said, pushing on the door with the flat of her hand. The apartment door swung open.

She started in but I got my hand on her shoulder and stopped her.

"Wait. Something must be wrong."

"Look. She said she'd leave it open because she didn't have a spare key," said Lynne Michelle. "C'mon. I've got to go to the bathroom."

She started to push past me and I had to physically pull her back. Not easy with only one arm.

"Something's wrong!" I insisted. I pushed the door all the way open and stepped to one side, in case somebody started shooting. It was quiet inside. Too quiet.

"Laura Jo? Are you in there?"

Lynne Michelle tensed beside me. "But would they know about this place? Would they know about you and Laura Jo?"

"Every Friday for eight months. Somebody was sure to know," I said. "Especially if somebody is looking real hard. And we know they are looking real hard."

"What do we do?" She was scared and she didn't look well.

I looked around. It was obvious we couldn't stay out here on the street but I had a bad feeling about what might be waiting for us inside.

"You stay here. You hear anything that doesn't sound right, you run for it, do you understand?"

"Jack, there's no place for me to run unless its with you. You're the only place I've got to go."

"Just do it. Don't argue with me."

"I'm coming with you."

I pulled her out of the doorway. I was angry. I was going to read her the riot act but she looked at me with those coffee colored eyes and I remembered she'd said what I least wanted to hear, that she loved me. Of course she had taken it back. But that was just the words. There was something else in her eyes when I looked at them. Something in that place where I used to have a heart felt like it was breaking.

I had had a few drinks, enough to be buzzed a little, but I wasn't drunk enough. I was full of too much feeling.

It was hard to look at those eyes and be angry at the same time.

"Listen...." I started to say.

But she put her hand over my mouth and shook her head.

"Let's just go in Jack. You and me, OK?"

I nodded. Maybe she was right. What choice did we have?

She took my hand and we turned around and went through the open door.

It was dark inside the entrance hall of the apartment. My hand felt for the wall switch. I flicked it a couple times but the light was out. This gave me a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

We moved slow, taking our time.

"The hall light is out," I said. This was not a good sign.

"I know. Laura Jo said she forgot to change the bulb. It was out when we came here the first time," said Lynne Michelle.

I relaxed a bit. Now it seemed less sinister. Maybe Laura Jo had left the door unlocked.

"What's that smell?" she whispered back at me.

I sniffed the air and she was right. There was a strange smell in here but I couldn't quite place it. Then it hit me. It was cordite. Somebody had fired a gun in here. I felt a chill that went right to the bone.

I moved to the left, to an end table and pulled the chain on the lamp. It worked. Everything seemed as it should be. Nothing in the apartment seemed out of place. It looked just like we left it.

"Jack? Is anybody here?"

"Don't know." I wished I wasn't half drunk. I felt stupid and slow and clumsy.

I moved on through the living room. Lynne Michelle came up beside me and took my hand. I was glad for her touch.

I angled toward the kitchen, easing the door open carefully. The fluorescent light over

the stove was on. The room looked OK.

"There's a note on the kitchen table," said Lynne Michelle.

I thought I heard a noise behind me. I grabbed her and pushed her into the kitchen.

"Go in there and get the note," I said wanting her at least out of the line of fire. "And stay in there."

I turned to face whatever was coming.

Nothing came from anywhere. It was quiet.

I sniffed the air. Maybe it was just my imagination. Maybe no gun had been fired in here. The front door hadn't been forced open. There was no sign of a struggle. Maybe the place just needed airing out.

I opened the kitchen door and looked in. Lynne Michelle held the note from the table and read it.

"It's from Laura Jo." She opened a kitchen drawer and took out a thick brown leather wallet. "Look! Here's the wallet from the lost and found just like she promised. She brought it back on her lunch break. And she put some food in the refrigerator for us. She's sweet Jack. I really like her."

I heard the sound again. It was a soft sound, repeated at intervals.

"If I asked you to stay in the kitchen, would you do it?"

"No." Her face was full of sudden alarm. "What's wrong Jack?"

"You still have to go to the bathroom?"

"Jesus, yes!" She looked physically ill. "I'm not feeling well."

"I'll take you there. Would you stay in there until I can check out the rest of the apartment? Please! Would you do that for me?" I was practically begging her.

"Yes. I need to go to the bathroom Jack." Her face had that strained look again. Something wasn't right but now wasn't the time to talk about it.

She came toward me, handed me the wallet and let me lead her across the room to the

bathroom. I opened the door cautiously, checked it out but it was empty. She went in and I heard the door lock behind her.

I was glad later that she wasn't with me.

The sound was coming from the bedroom. I moved across the room. The smell of cordite was stronger here. Maybe I knew what I was going to see when I opened the bedroom door.

They cut Laura Jo up pretty badly. Her face, arms, hands all had wicked looking knife slashes on them. The sound was blood dripping on the floor from one outstretched arm.

Poor Laura Jo. She hadn't died quick or pretty. They must have tried to make her talk, make her tell where we were. She didn't really know but that hadn't mattered to them. It would have ended up like it did even if she knew, even if she had told them what they wanted to know.

I blamed myself. I should never have come here. I should have known they'd find this place. Maybe the booze takes away that edge that makes me smart enough to stay ahead of them.

I walked over to the bed. Laura Jo's eyes were open. After they cut her up, they shot her in the head to make sure. I put my hands over her eyes and forced them closed.

I remembered things about her, how her arms felt around me when my dark was very dark. If the hours I spent with her were less than golden, less than all that is meant to be when a man and woman share a night, it was me that gave so little and not her. In her own way, Laura Jo had been there for me and I hated how little I had given her.

I remembered the nights.

They had ripped her clothes up with the knives, exposing one breast. I pulled the bedspread up over her. Homicide would hate me for disturbing the evidence but Laura Jo needed to have some final dignity. She had earned it.

She had deserved better from me. I had brought Laura Jo nothing but grief. It's all I

ever seem to bring anyone.

I was numb. I never wanted a drink more in my life. Not just a drink but oblivion. To sleep and forget and remember no more.

I don't know how long I stood there by the bed. I was there but not there. I was lost. I don't think I loved her. I'm sure I didn't but then you do a little even when you don't. No matter how small a part they play, its just that everyone in your life who is in your life, is somehow part of your heart.

There were too many dead people in my life and now because of me, there was one more. When does the parade of grief stop? When will I ever stop failing those around me?

I don't know when Lynne Michelle came in. But suddenly her arm went round me and I turned and she was crying in my arms.

"It's my fault," she said and she wept.

"No." I tried to console her but it was my tragedy, not hers.

She started to pull away, to go toward the bed. But I knew there was nothing there she needed to see.

I took her by the hand and led her out of the room.

"But I want to..."

"You can't help her. There's nothing for you to see."

"What did they do to her?"

"They tried to make her talk. Probably wanted her to tell them where we were. They cut her up some. And then they killed her."

"Oh my god!" She looked like she was going to faint. She hugged herself like her arms ached. "What kind of world is this? How can I bring a baby into this kind of world? How, tell me how?"

"I'm sorry. It's not your fault. I brought Laura Jo into this. If anyone deserves blame,

its me. If I had been sober and competent, I'd never have come here. Never put her at risk this way."

"I'm the one they're trying to kill. I'm the one to blame."

"For what? It could have been a hotel clerk who knew which room we were staying in. This isn't personal."

"Where do we go now, Jack?"

It was good to think about what to do next. I needed desperately to be in motion. I wanted to leave this place as soon as possible.

I thumbed through the wallet, squinting at the driver's license picture. I sighed. At least it gave us a place to start.

I read, "Ricardo Munez. I am apparently Mexican, a foot shorter than I am, about a foot thicker and I have black hair and a mustache. Close enough. We'll use this ID to check into a motel. I'll call two taxis. We'll travel separately. Tell your driver you want to go to the Motel Escondido. It's on Santa Monica Boulevard. That's where I'll meet you."

"Why two taxis?"

"I'll have my taxi just follow yours. We need to know if anybody is following us. And everybody is looking for the two of us together. A single fare with a pregnant woman may not get noticed."

"I don't want to be away from you."

"It'll be alright." It even sounded like a lie to me. I had no confidence in anything.

"Listen, my feelings are confused. I'm not sure I can be away from you."

"This isn't a time for that," I said, hardening my heart. "Every second we stay here, we're in danger. These aren't professional killers. These are amateurs. If they were pros, they'd be outside waiting for us. But I don't think they stayed around. I think they assumed we weren't here and left. That's sloppy and unprofessional. Killing Laura Jo was not efficient. It tells me we are dealing with people who aren't all that good at this. And

that's the good news."

"What's good about it."

"Because for a while I've been afraid of some stuff Heywood told me about your husband. I thought maybe we were dealing with the C.I.A. or A.S.A. But this isn't a security agency we're dealing with."

"How do you know? And why would you think that was who was behind all this?" To her this all sounded like a bolt from the blue.

"You're gonna have to know this sooner or later. Heywood identified your husband from his fingerprints. His real name is Jason Archibald Ridley Hawes the Third, no less. No criminal record but he has a military ID that tagged him as ex-CIA, and Ex-ASA, that stands for Army Security Agency, but he's officially dead."

"What does that mean, he's officially dead?"

"That means, he's on covert status. They've put him off the books for some reason, listed him dead as of four years ago, probably for some very hush hush mission, the kind the big boys do without any supporting paperwork."

"This is all too confusing for me."

"Me too. Especially since the people trying to kill you, can't possibly have any connection with the spy boys."

"Why not?"

"If the CIA or ASA was trying to kill you, trust me, you'd be dead. It wouldn't be badly placed shots through your windshield or poisoned orange juice. If they had the kind of agenda that included killing you, you wouldn't be anything but dead. But this doesn't have a professional edge to it. It's somebody else, a private army. They're using crooked cops, rogues. And maybe, with Laura Jo, a couple of gangster types. The knife suggests they've brought in a couple of psychotic ones too. Maybe other people who are not cops. Maybe there's even some drug people in this deal now. Whatever it is, its big enough and

nasty enough to bring in some real bad people. I don't know how many people they have on this. But there's money behind it, big money."

"Are you sure about this?"

"Very. Trust me. Somebody is spending a lot of money to buy the heat that's aimed at us. But they aren't getting their money's worth. Two of the other team are dead. That doesn't say much for the other side does it? I mean I'm a drunk has been detective and you're a very pregnant but let me say, pretty damn brave woman. We aren't any serious opposition for anybody. The fact that we made it this far, isn't because we're all that good. Its that the other side is pretty bad. And it isn't very well organized."

"Who are they?"

"When we get to the motel, we'll talk. I am beginning to have some suspicions. It's more stuff you don't know about yet. But its the oldest game in town. Heywood put me onto it. I think it's all about your husband, who he is and where he comes from. Its the heart of most of these kinds of deals. But we need Heywood now, more than ever."

"What's the oldest game?"

"Follow the money," I said and reached for the phone to dial up two taxis.

It was probably about her husband's personal fortune. About which she knew nothing and I had everything yet to learn.

It was the only reason that made sense. That and the fact, that she carried just possibly a potential heir to one of the largest fortunes in the world.

Maybe it was the child they were trying to kill as much as her.

It seems to be that kind of world.

I would have felt bad about it but I remembered I drink so I don't have to feel bad about it. I was a little bit drunk even now so I should have felt nothing. Even the whiskey and the promise of more it, failed me. Because I felt too bad to even want to drink myself into oblivion. I missed Laura Jo. I wanted to make somebody pay for what they did to

her. Maybe I wouldn't drink now. Maybe I had a reason to stay sober for a while. Revenge. That was it. I would renounce drinking until I had killed the killers. I was going to go all noble and heroic. I almost liked myself for a moment or two there.

I left the lights on at Laura Jo's. I didn't like the idea of her laying there all alone in the dark. I called 911 after I called for two taxis.

I wanted her to be found as soon as possible. I only reported a dead body and gave her address. Then I left the phone off the hook. I didn't give them any details. I'd give them to Heywood later if there was a later.

The taxis came and we went.

Nobody followed us that I could see.

By the time we were half way there, I was aching for a drink and my heroic notion of staying sober to avenge the dead was over. I was just a guy who badly needed a drink.

It was why I wasn't even worth a Friday night.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

By the time we got to Santa Monica Boulevard, I knew we were in the clear. Nobody was following us.

I knew I should keep Lynne Michelle's taxi in sight. That's what a smart detective would do if he had his wits about him. My wits mostly came from a bottle so I was having trouble being smart.

I talked myself into believing that being temporarily out of danger I could justify a fall from grace. I knew that no matter how safe it seemed I was failing her, and breaking a promise I had barely even made. Alcoholics just can't keep promises. The idea of whiskey was bigger than any promise.

I wavered, almost didn't give the cab driver new instructions. I tried to hold firm. I

think I wanted to keep the idea of staying sober in play until I revenged Laura Jo, but I'm so obviously not made of stone, how could I stop myself? Every drunk I know wants not to be one. It's the doing something about it that is the hard part.

I had my taxi driver stop at a small convenience market that sold liquor and beer. I had money from the wallet and since it was packed full of bills, I'd guess most of it came from Laura Jo. A final gesture. Maybe it was all the money she had on hand. It was like her. She had been a generous human being, maybe a little too generous. Slobs like me always took advantage of her.

In addition to my bourbon ration, I put milk and bananas and apples in my shopping cart. I hadn't a clue what a pregnant woman is supposed to eat. I wondered if I should get pickles and ice cream. I asked the clerk. She was a dyed blonde with stretch marks. The dye job was obvious by the roots. It was the stretch marks that I had to imagine.

"What do you think a pregnant woman would like to eat?"

"Well, I'd take the two bottles of bourbon out of your cart for starters. That's not good for a pregnant anything."

"That's for me." I counted off a hundred bucks in twenties and pulled out a ten. "If I handed you a hundred and you went through the store picking out stuff you think a pregnant woman might like to eat, I'd give you ten bucks. You'd be doing me a big favor."

She looked at me and at the two guys waiting in line behind me. "What do you think this is...." she started to say. I added another ten to the first one and held it out.

"Oh the hell with it! They don't pay me enough." She came around the end of the counter and snatched the twenty bucks and shoved it into her blue jeans.

"You guys are going to have to wait," she said to the people behind me in line as she took my cart and began wheeling down the aisles with it.

I opened a can of beer from the six pack in my hand and drank one. I finished two of

them before she was done. Not that she took all that long, I just was damn thirsty.

"There. That ought to do it," she said. "You want to look at what I got before I ring it up?" I looked behind me. Now there were at least six people in line behind me.

"No. I'm sure you got the right stuff."

I paid for everything and carried it out to my taxi.

"Hey. No open beer in the taxi. You want me to lose my license?" complained the cab driver. He had a politically correct pony tail and was dressed like a Sears and Roebuck parking lot sale shopper. His polyester shirt and pants looked like a dog puked plaid all over it.

I chugged the last half can of beer and tossed the empty can in the parking lot.

"Litterbug!" moaned the taxi driver. "I mean, like wow man, some people just can't help messing up the planet!" He was too obviously from, like, you know, man, LA.

I was trying to think of some witty remark but I actually felt bad for a minute or two until I considered my other failures in life. I mean what with the shooting people, and stealing cars, and being an alcoholic has been detective who got his friends killed, littering was pretty small time even for me.

So I opened another beer when we got rolling. The cab driver shot me an evil glare but short of throwing me out, what could he do.

"Some people just can't seem to be in tune with the planet. You are full of bad vibes," said the cabdriver. "This is a no smoking cab. At least you're not smoking. I mean, maybe I should be grateful for that."

He made me wish I smoked. I don't because cigarettes make my teeth hurt but just to spite him, I would have gladly lit up.

When I finished that beer, I tossed the can out of the window.

The cabdriver was having a fit. I could see him preparing himself for a huge lecture. I calmed him down with one sentence.

"I hate it when people just won't let me be me. If I have to reach for my gun and blow your freaking nose off, I will. I killed some cops already this week so what's one cab driver more or less."

"Are you nuts?" said the cabdriver.

"No. Just cheap. A bullet probably costs less than paying the fare."

"Are you serious?"

"There's only one way to find out. You should ask yourself if this is a question you want to know the answer to."

I stuck my hand in my coat. "I sure hope I didn't leave my gun in my other suit."

The cabdriver got very small behind the wheel. "Like no offense fellow. OK. You do whatever you want back there. Like forget I said anything. Have another beer." He was sweating.

I was grateful for the suggestion. I had another beer. Now he was speaking my language.

It's amazing how cooperative people can get when you have a little bit of attitude. Seeming to be psychotic saves lots of arguments.

I didn't tip him when we got to the motel but he didn't seem to mind.

"I was just kidding about the gun," I said because I would hate it if he didn't remember me with all my charm intact.

"Like Ha. Ha." said the cabdriver, taking the money I handed him and not looking amused. His face was still white with fright. He barely stopped long enough to take the money before he shot out of the parking lot. Some people are so sensitive.

I had unloaded the groceries and realized it was more stuff than I could carry by myself. I looked around. No Lynne Michelle. I peeked over a low hedge and looked into the courtyard where the postage sized swimming pool was. There were two bikini clad women poolside with tans deep enough to be painful but neither of them were pregnant.

I heard a hissing noise and turned and looked behind me. I didn't see anybody.

"Over here."

It was Lynne Michelle. She was crouched down behind a garbage dumpster.

"Is it safe? What happened to you? I thought you were right behind me."

"I got groceries. I thought you might be hungry."

I started picking up the bags which was awkward one-armed. "Come and help me with this stuff."

We moved all the bags over to a shady spot. "Here. You wait here with the stuff while I go check us in."

I did. I got something called a kitchen efficiency which meant a room with two double beds, a sub-standard kitchen, complete with ratty kitchen table, thrift store pots and pans and silverware and a battered refrigerator that tended to freeze everything and a stove that needed desperately to be degreased, possibly with a blow torch.

I meant to put the stuff away but she pushed me aside. I think I hoped to hide the bourbon before she saw it but she saw it anyway and didn't seem to mind all that much. At least she just set the bottles aside and didn't say anything. Maybe she felt guilty about kicking me in the kneecap.

"Were you ever married?"

"What makes you ask that?"

"The stuff you got. I figure a single guy going to shop would buy junk food. This is pretty balanced. Like you know how to cook?"

I waved it away. "I was almost married once."

"That's the tragedy in your life. Your secretary told me a little It's that thing you won't talk about, isn't it?"

I got a bottle of bourbon and retreated to the other side of the room. It wasn't an answer and it wasn't a denial.

I needed a shave and a shower. I took the bourbon with me, locked the bathroom door. The shower didn't work so I ended up taking a bath. Which was just as well. The hot water felt good and so did the bourbon. It was also a relief to have the door shut and to be alone with myself for a while. I thought about Laura Jo. I thought about a lot of things.

But the bourbon helped and soon I didn't think too much anymore.

I must have drifted off to sleep. I heard somebody pounding on the bathroom door.

I woke up with a start. Lynne Michelle yelled through the door, "Are you alright in there?"

"Yeah." The water in the tub was like ice. I shivered and crawled out, awkwardly trying to dry myself off with a cheap towel. What with nodding off and the icy water, I was sober as a defrocked mother superior.

"Can I come in there? I mean, are you done, because I have to pee."

She must have a bladder the size of a molecule.

I got dressed, wrapped a towel around my wet hair and unlocked the door.

She almost elbowed me aside in her hurry to get into the room.

I took my bourbon into the other room and used the phone.

First I called Heywood at home and got his wife.

She wasn't thrilled to hear from me. She said he wasn't home yet. She said he was supposed to be on a stakeout waiting for me to show up. She asked did I know anything about that? I knew way too much. Well, I'm obviously not there, I told her. I asked her to take a message for Heywood. The message was a couple questions I wanted Heywood's help with. She grudgingly wrote them down and banged the phone when she hung up. I was not her favorite person.

Next, I called Fran Bricknell at the Costume shop. She was a former client of mine and an almost friend. I needed clothes and some other accessories and so did Lynne Michelle. Fran Bricknell was our best bet. I had once found Fran's boyfriend for her

when he disappeared on a four day drunk with some even drunker sailors. They were back together now and Fran always felt she owed me. Whether out of gratitude for the actual reconciliation or the fact that she had never actually paid me for the four days I worked on her case, I knew Fran would come through for me on this. The Costume shop was one of the busiest shops in town and the studios used Fran a lot for help in doing contemporary make up and costume. That was just the kind of help I needed too.

I took out the driver's license and described the man on the photo to her.

She asked me some questions about Lynne Michelle, her size, weight, and so on. I did my best but I was only guessing.

I gave her the address of the motel and she said she'd be there in a hour, possibly two.

That would give me enough time to talk with Lynne Michelle. There was some stuff she needed to know.

The room smelled strange. I saw she had set two places at the kitchen table and that there was stuff cooking on the stove. Just what I needed, her going all domestic on me.

She breezed out of the bathroom and smiled at me as she headed for the kitchen. "Are you hungry?"

I sat down at the kitchen table, pushed aside the plate meant for me and replaced it with the bourbon.

"This is all the lunch I need right now."

She bit her lip and looked hurt but before she could say anything I started in. "We need to talk. I know a lot of things you don't know. About your husband, about why things are like they are."

"Do you mind if I keep cooking while you talk?"

"I don't care, just as long as you listen to what I tell you."

She busied herself with one of the boiling pots on the stove. She kept her back turned to me.

"First off, you remember I told you your husband's real name, according to the fingerprint evidence, was Jason Ridley Hawes the Third?"

"Yeah. It's better than Hobart. It's a definite improvement."

"What I didn't tell you is that Jason Ridley Hawes your very missing husband is also the heir to one of the largest personal fortunes in America."

"Are you kidding? He was rich? He barely gave me enough money to buy groceries. I had to tap dance to get a dime out of him. I had the impression he barely made enough money to buy himself lunch every day. I paid for more stuff than he ever did."

"Being a bastard about money may be one of the ways you get rich or stay rich. He wasn't exactly taking you into his confidence about anything."

"No kidding."

"Despite the fact Jason Ridley Hawes's been written off as officially dead, and he married you under an alias, which doesn't make the marriage invalid, I'd think a half way decent lawyer could prove your marriage was legal and binding and you were therefore entitled, since California is a community property state, to one half of his estate. You didn't sign a pre-nuptial agreement, did you?"

She shook her head no.

"So I'm supposed to be wealthy. Is that what this is all about? Is that why people are trying to kill me?"

"It's possible. It makes more sense that way."

"I thought my husband was trying to kill me."

"We don't actually have any proof it was him. Or even that he is still alive. A box of chocolates in the mail doesn't prove anything. I mean, he did disappear under suspicious circumstances. If he was dead, you might present an even bigger risk to the people who may be behind this. Not just a claim to half the estate but all of it. The fact that you are about to have his child, may be a factor too. If there is a will or a trust fund or something

in place that covers legal offspring, your child just might be what this is all about."

"You think this is all about money? Just stupid money?"

"A lot of stupid money. More stupid money than I can imagine. Enough to make enemies out of angels."

"How do you know all this?"

"My sometime friend, Captain Heywood. The cops are not totally without resources."

"So who's behind it?"

"I'd make a guess."

"And that would be?"

"Your in-laws or other family members."

"My relatives are trying to kill me? They want to kill my baby!" She looked shocked.

"Big money always buys bad habits. These aren't the nicest people in the world. This is big construction money. Or steel money. Those are hard businesses with corruption built in. Big time bribes and bad cops on the pad. Hush money and bribe money and zoning permit money. Payoffs to building inspectors and so on. Steel and construction. Those are some of the toughest games in town. You don't make a fortune in that kind of business by being virtuous. You have to be a little pocket Hitler to pull off that kind of endeavor. It touches on a lot of dirty stuff and my guess is, that's the connection to the family."

"Is that why you think the people who are after us are amateurs?"

"Partly. I think they've been recruited individually. This isn't a well organized group. I think whoever it is in the family that is doing this, may have put the word out through the construction arm of the business. The family has mining interests, oil, steel and shipping but I'm guessing, the construction side is the most corrupt and the dirt is most likely to come from that."

"How would they go about getting people to kill me?"

"This is my best guess. It makes sense. They put out the word unofficially through the cops they got on the take and through whoever else is dealing with them in that way, they want somebody killed. They gather a team of players and probably they are offering big bucks. So they get a crew of enthusiastic but unprofessional amateurs. Competent enough and deadly enough, but bound to be erratic. Not like a real team of pros like the Mafia would send, or the real cold warriors a spy group would have launched. Those last two groups would have sent us somebody we couldn't have handled and you and I would have been dead already."

"Why didn't they just go to the Mafia and take out a contract on me? Wouldn't it have been better to have a professional killer?"

"Maybe not. It might open the door to the wrong people knowing too much about their business. This might not be the kind of thing they'd feel comfortable having the Mafia know about. It would give the Dons too much of an edge. No, I'd say this was something the family wanted to do as quietly as possible."

"I can't believe this. This is crazy! I mean, this is really nuts!" said Lynne Michelle. "I hate rich people. I really do."

"Yeah. The rich aren't like us, they're worse."

"So how are they keeping everybody from knowing who I am and why they want me dead?"

"Nobody who's out to kill you probably knows who you are or even why anyone wants you dead. I mean you're married under a name that isn't the Ridley Hawes name so there isn't much to connect you with the name. You're just a name and a face and a number with a lot of zeroes in it for whoever gets to you. That's how I got it figured."

"So what do we do?"

"I find out about the family, who's connected in the family to the construction end of it. I figure out who's the most likely one to be behind what's aimed at you, then I deal

with him."

"How will you deal with him?"

"I'm not sure. But it has to be done in such a way, that the troops get called off. The contract on you has to be canceled."

"Are we talking about killing somebody?"

"Yes."

"Isn't there any other way? Couldn't I just renounce the money or the inheritance or something?"

"They don't have the patience for that. And neither do I. Somebody is going to die because of this. And if it isn't you or me, it'll be them, whoever they are."

"For me and my baby, I thank you. I'm glad you are trying to be there for me." She was almost in tears.

"It's for Laura Jo too. It's for you and me and it's because somebody earned this, somebody deserves to die."

I took another slug of bourbon. It was good going down but I was feeling bad. About Laura Jo, the past, about things I didn't want to think about. Probably about us too.

"So what do we do first?"

"I've got Heywood working on a couple things for me. I left a message with his wife. There's a couple questions I asked him. He can nose around in places where I can't. If he can connect, he could open some doors for us. And then we're going to find out who your husband's family is. And we're going to find out which one of those rich bastards is the one who's behind all this."

"And if we find him, what do we do then?"

"We'll work that out when we get there."

"Would you really kill him?"

I took another long hard pull on the bourbon bottle and looked away. "Maybe you just

shouldn't ask."

She tried to get me to eat after that but I had had my meal from a bottle. I was depressed and the bourbon was making it worse. She ate in silence. She needed time to think about all the things I'd said. I must admit, she took it all rather well. No hysterics, no complaints. Just acceptance. She was tough and she was brave too.

If I'd had all that stacked up against me, I'm not sure I would have been so calm. I would have needed a drink or two just to steady my hands.

She smiled at me and put her hand over mine. "We'll win," she said with a show of confidence.

I was half drunk. I nodded wearily. Funny thing is, I was almost sure we had already lost. But no use telling her that.

It was probably just the bottle talking.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I wanted to get so drunk the hotel room would spin around like a roulette wheel and my brain would feel like the white ball dropping for a number nobody had bet on.

But Lynne Michelle got between me and my bourbon ration.

I started to raise the bottle to my lips but I couldn't get the bottle past her head. She moved inside the circle of my arms, turning me in my chair. Her lips found mine and she was kissing me.

I don't know what brought it on. I had just been sitting there, deep in the blues, drinking it a deeper blue and then she had her arms around me.

And I didn't want her to stop. It was so sweet to kiss her.

And when the kiss stopped, my heart completely broke.

She put her head on my shoulder and I felt her breath against my cheek and my

shoulders shook and the ache in me spread and filled every part. I wept for the dead, for Laura Jo, for the ruin drinking made of me, for the one I can never talk about.

She held me tight, and her arms around me were soft asylum. I cried my heart out. It wasn't the crocodile tears of an alcoholic, the insincere regrets the bottle too often brings. It seemed as if she had touched a part of what used to be my lost heart.

"It's ok," she said and she held me tighter. "I'm here for you. Let it all out."

"Oh my god," was all I could say. And for a time there, someone I had lost long ago was there in the room with me, like she has too often been in my dreams and sleepless nights.

She rocked me and I just let her hold me.

We were like that I don't know how long. I cried until I had no more tears, until my eyes were red and swollen and the ache was burned away.

She never let go although her arms must have hurt with the effort.

Finally, I moved back a little and she let me go.

"Do you feel better?"

"I'm not sure. It was nice to be held."

"Do you cry much? Most men never let themselves cry."

"It's hard for me," I admitted. "There was a time in my life when I cared enough to cry. But it hasn't been like that for a long time."

"I know you feel bad about Laura Jo," she said. "And something in your past too that always seems to be there, just under the surface. Maybe some day you'll tell me about what it is you don't talk about."

"I can't ever talk about that."

"If you could talk about it, it would get better."

"It can't get better."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It was a long time ago. When I was somebody else. It isn't something I'm trying to fix, not something I hope will get better." The ache was back and my heart went back into hiding.

"I won't pry, I won't ask about it again, but you must have loved somebody once and" She stopped speaking because of the expression that must have been on my face. I guess she sensed that any thing else she might have said would have pushed me past endurance.

"I need a drink. I would very much like to get drunk."

"Can't you stop yourself? I need you sober. The idea of you being drunk scares me."

"It scares me to be sober."

"Why?"

"I feel too much. I remember too much."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"I'm better when I don't feel things."

"Nobody is better when they're like that." She put her hand on my hand. It was the one that held the bottle. She slowly uncurled my fingers and the bottle slipped out of my grasp and fell on the rickety kitchen table.

"I told you this is how I am. I never said I could be different."

She picked up the bourbon bottle. "I could drink this up. I could drink the whole damn bottle. Should I do that?"

"It wouldn't be good for your baby. Pregnant women shouldn't drink."

"Then you shouldn't drink either. If you get drunk, my baby may not be safe. My child might need you and drunk, you might not be able to..."

"I'm not sure I can..."

"I'm giving you a reason, a damn good reason not to drink!" she interrupted angrily.

"I've got two lives depending on you. God damn it!"

"I'm sorry. I'll try to...to drink less. I can't just not drink altogether."

"I suppose you think just because I kissed you, I'm in love with you or something," she said changing the subject.

"No. I wouldn't dare think that." I said. "I'm not worth it."

"You sure aren't." She slammed the bottle down in front of me. "Go on. Drink if you have to drink. I won't stop you."

That seemed to be the end of the conversation. She looked desperately unhappy and I'm sure I looked worse than that.

So I started the conversation up again.

I picked up the bourbon bottle. "Take it. Pour it out in the sink."

I held it out to her.

"You don't have to make a gesture for my sake."

"Just pour it out."

She went over to the sink and held the bottle tilted but didn't pour. "If I do this I want to know why I'm doing it. What does it mean?"

"That I am acting like a sloppy drunk. That I cried and it makes me feel like a goddamn fool. And if it's the whiskey that's doing that, I got to back off a bit. I got to stop till I get my head clear. It's ok to be down but you can't let yourself get so far down, you can't function. I must be that far down."

"I don't know if I like that reason. I wish you had a better one," she said, biting her lip.

"Look, it's a reason that makes sense to me. It's when I get like this, when I think I am losing it completely, that I have a spell of sober time. I go dry for a few days. This seems to be a time for that."

"Men should never be ashamed to cry."

"I feel like a little boy's idea of a tough guy. Just pour the goddamn stuff out will you."

Watching the bottle of whiskey hover over the sink was making my throat ache. I

could taste the bourbon even across the room.

She dumped the whiskey down the sink and my tongue wanted to follow it down the drain. I had to close my eyes. Wasting whiskey is just too painful to look at.

"I'm glad you cried. I think more of you, not less because you cried." She dumped the empty bourbon bottle into the trash basket and started across the kitchen. She got the other bottle of bourbon from the top of the stove and unscrewed the cap.

"Now wait a minute," I started to say and she shot me a look that would have iced the testicles of a polar bear.

"You wanted to empty out this one too, right?"

"Right." That was a word that did not leap out willingly. I meant not to drink for a time, and I wouldn't, but I had liked the idea of another bottle of whiskey around while I was being forbearing. Its easier to toss your ass on the wagon when you can cling to the idea that the bar is never really closed.

She poured that one out too. It was unnerving.

"I'm glad you're doing this."

"Me too." I said but my eyes were closed and if lies were water, I would have drowned myself in that one.

"I guess I should have got some coffee. I'm going to need some."

"You got a jar of instant coffee. Don't you remember?"

"Oh sure. Of course."

"I'll make some." She came over and put her hand on my shoulder. I tried not to look at her. "Listen if I wasn't pregnant," she started to say. "if I thought there was half a chance that...."

"I take my coffee black," I said with real urgency and my voice cracked.

"What I'm trying to say is," she said and I wished she would go away before she made the attempt. "I am a little confused. I know that. But I do feel something for you."

"It's probably gas," I said which is what you say when your wits have just been poured down a crummy motel sink.

"Bastard!" She started for me.

"Bitch!" I said it just to complete the cycle. Then I realized she still had an empty whiskey bottle in her hands. "No! You're not a bitch! I take it back!"

She moved quick for someone so densely populated. She was in motion and I'm not sure she even heard me try to take back what I said.

I didn't even try to defend myself. I just closed my eyes and waited for the blow to fall.

She really hurt me good this time.

She put her arms around my neck and kissed me.

A real kiss. Full of endless summer and smoke. It had everything that a kiss could have. It was scorching.

"Oh my god!" I said. "What was that for?"

She pulled back and she was smiling.

"Can't you guess?"

I didn't want to. She didn't let me anyway.

"You're with me," she said with a strange smile. Then she tried to finish me off. "And it's Friday night."

She was almost right and that was what was so scary.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Now I had an even better reason to stay sober. I just didn't trust myself around Lynne Michelle after that last kiss.

"What are you thinking?"

I was working on my fifth cup of coffee and my stomach felt like 200 hundred miles of Arizona highway but I was alert and sober. My arm was hurting a little which meant the booze was working it's weary way out of my system.

"Are you thinking about me?" she said with a smile.

It wasn't safe to answer that one so I didn't. I just shrugged. Actually I was thinking that I was really glad I wasn't drunk. I was afraid I could get so drunk she wouldn't look pregnant. Or I would forget that she was pregnant. Or that I would wake up handcuffed to a sheep.

"I didn't mean anything by that last kiss," she said. "I was just reminding you that I am a woman."

"Huh?"

"I mean. Just because I'm pregnant, it doesn't mean I'm not a woman. I have feelings too."

"You talk too much." I held up my coffee cup with something very much like desperation. "How about another cup?"

I needed another cup like I needed a wooden leg but it was the only thing I could think of to distract her, to stop this train of thought.

"What the hell does that mean?" She practically screamed at me.

"I mean..." But I hesitated because the truth was obviously not the way to go with this one.

"I'm just speculating. I'm just imagining stuff. Nothing is really happening here! I wouldn't let it happen, you big dumb ape! Don't flatter yourself!"

Good. She was angry at me which was better than the opposite, I think.

Being sober and alert was confusing me. Being able to think clearly was a definite handicap. I liked me better fuzzy and listless.

"I know you were just...uh...talking...uh...thinking out loud. And I am very aware

you're a woman." That was all too true. "I mean, you're certainly attractive and you kiss well and if our circumstances had been different, who knows?" I was hoping for peace and silence.

What I got was conflict and explanation.

"Sometimes you're almost human. But mostly you're not. I wish I didn't need you so much. I wish you could be a much more reliable guy," she said with some anger in her voice. "Sometimes and its only because I have no choice, and people are trying to kill me, I feel like I'm married to you, more than I was to my husband. My child and I have a bigger stake in you. I just hope you don't let us both down. Sometimes I worry if you care enough about me to save me."

She had too much riding on me, had too much faith in me, had made me into something I constantly knew I never could be. It was a burden that threatened to crush me.

I was also stressed by our verbally impossible tilt at love's improbable windmill. It was almost as if she felt the need for some kind of emotional commitment from me. As if I had to love her to save her or she had to love me to be sure I'd really try. It wasn't a rational sequence. But then she must have felt like an emotional hostage and I was her unwilling captor. I'd read about that kind of thing. I think it's called transference.

We had to stop this before we either strangled each other or burst into flames and the fire department had to be called in to hose us off.

There was a knock on our motel room door.

It was Fran from the costume shop and not a minute too soon.

If don't think I could have stood to spend another second alone with Lynne Michelle.

She was confused.

She loved me. Well it sounded like that.

I was even more confused.

I probably loved her back.

Which left me feeling like the greyhound who had caught the mechanical rabbit and found he couldn't eat it after all.

She was pregnant.

I was crazy.

And Fran had costumes for both our conditions.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Fran was built like a tree stump. Her face was broad and flat and plain. She had the half stunned stupid look of somebody who had been hit in the face with a fish. She was cheerfully stupid about everything except her work which she seemed to actually be brilliant at.

I had always failed to see what her boyfriend who was an even bigger drunk than me saw in her, but I had seen him sober, hanging onto her like she was the last lifeboat from the Titanic.

Despite the fact her expertise was in choosing fashionable costumes for some of the biggest movie and TV stars in LA, she dressed like a guy who worked in a car wash, with a wardrobe that ran heavily to orange coveralls and huge black boots. She also tended to favor baseball caps like the one on her head now which she wore turned around backwards.

She had two huge garbage bags full of stuff, one in each hand, which she promptly dropped so she could thrust one gnarled hand out to Lynne Michelle to shake.

"Boy, are you ever pregnant!" she said when she saw Lynne Michelle.

"This is Fran Bricknell," I said by way of introduction. "And this is Lynne Michelle Gordon."

Fran seized Lynne Michelle's hand and shook it up and down vigorously enough to loosen teeth. Fran was a little over-muscled.

"Congratulations, Jack. You finally got one in the oven!" she said with idiotic enthusiasm. Fran had the social graces of a penguin.

Lynne Michelle withdrew her hand like it was burning. She was not thrilled by Fran.

Fran bored on. "You must be proud, Jack. And she isn't even all that ugly either. I mean, who knew you even liked women at all."

"What's that supposed to mean?" snapped Lynne Michelle who was working herself up to a real fit. Fran was not winning a friend here.

Fran smiled. "Jack never made a pass at me. For all I knew he could have been gay."

Fran traveled under the assumption that every man wanted to make a pass at her except gay guys. Her world must have seemed peopled with nothing but gay guys.

Fran had a style of perspiration that invited criticism and suggested distance. Apparently her bath night was March.

"Let me see that driver's license Jack. I'll get you both squared away. Have I ever got some stuff for you."

I handed her the stiff plastic card and she studied the picture. "This is gonna be a snap. You're gonna be Mexican, no sweat, OLE!."

She studied Lynne Michelle with some show of concern. "Hey! You didn't tell me she was this big. She looks bigger than a motor home!"

Lynne Michelle was looking for things to throw. I hastily stepped between them. All out combat had to be avoided at all costs.

"She means well," I said to Lynne Michelle in a stage whisper and, with my back turned to Fran, I made the circling hand signal beside the head to Lynne Michelle to indicate quite plainly that Fran was chock full of nuts.

Lynne Michelle relaxed enough not to use a blunt instrument.

"I'm not that big," said Lynne Michelle. "And this...this person. Jack IS NOT THE FATHER OF MY CHILD!" She was most emphatic.

She was right about that but she was wrong about being big. For all I knew, Lynne Michelle was giving birth to a teenager.

Fran began taking clothes out of the bags. It was the worst assortment of clothes I ever saw in my life. The shirts she had for me were either red or white and looked like she had stolen them from a busboy in a bad Mexican restaurant.

The pants were baggy and black and had cuffs, no less.

"What the hell is all this?" I said as Fran pawed through the garbage bags and drug out all sorts of paraphernalia.

"It's authentic Pacoima street wear," she said, naming a poor predominantly Mexican section of LA. "I mean, if you want to pass yourself off as a Mexican guy like the picture on the license, you gotta look the part."

She even had black shoes in my size and white socks. She grabbed something and put it under my nose. It smelled like a dead mouse.

"What the hell is that?"

"It's a mustache. Just like the guy in the picture. It'll look great on you Jack, trust me."

"First things first," she said taking me by the bad arm which hurt like hell and beginning to drag me toward the bathroom. "We gotta dye your hair black."

I worked my arm free and protested, "My hair is black."

"It's white guy black. It isn't Mexican black. What we want is blue black, not brown black."

"What about me?" said Lynne Michelle. "Who am I supposed to be?" Her stuff was in the other garbage bag and Fran hadn't taken any of it out yet.

"You're gonna be his pregnant and boy you really are pregnant, Mexican wife."

"Oh no," said Lynne Michelle and her hands went to her long blonde hair.

"Don't worry. I got a wig for you. A pregnant woman shouldn't dye her hair. It ain't maybe so good for the baby. Relax. I thought of everything."

And actually she had.

An hour later, I looked at a mirror and saw a face that only a bullfighter's mother could love. My blue black hair gleamed and the dead rodent under my nose which Fran claimed was a mustache made me look like somebody who had been badly embalmed in taco sauce.

Lynne Michelle looked like a woman stupid enough to be with somebody like me.

Lynne Michelle's wardrobe ran heavily towards the draped and not shaped look, with embroidery on every available inch of everything and little flounces and ruffles. She studied herself in the mirror and said, "I looked like a bad sewing circle explosion."

"Yeah, well, I look like something that hangs from the mirror of a '57 Chevy."

"We are a matched set," Lynne Michele said and she giggled..

I hated the way I looked. But nobody would recognize me. Even I didn't recognize me.

I offered Fran money for this truly amazing transformation.

She waved it away. "Hey Jack, I owe you. Don't sweat it. Everything is borrowed.

You just give it back to me when you're done, ok?"

Lynne Michelle had lowered her frost level to sub-arctic. She had five pounds of black wig hugging her scalp like a tire patch. She actually smiled at Fran. "Thank you for helping us. I actually think I look Mexican."

"Of course you do dear." said Fran happily. "Boy, it must be some really exciting case you're working on. I sure am glad I could help you out with your disguises."

Fran didn't know what we were up against and that was probably best. Any explanation would probably have included words too big for her. I was just grateful as hell she had done the job I asked her to do.

Fran made a cheerful exit, and we sat there for a while and soaked up the sudden joy

of being ethnic.

We were just shot through and through with local color.

"I look Mexican but I don't feel Mexican," said Lynne Michelle.

"Then what do you feel?"

"Mostly pregnant."

I had to ask. Why was I not surprised.

"Now what?" she said.

"We take it easy for the rest of the day. I work on trying to stay sober. I got to get this bandage off my arm sometime this afternoon. I need some mobility with this arm, and I think the stitches will hold it together now. And then we sleep. Tomorrow, we tackle Heywood and see if he's found out anything and we get some guns. Or rather I do."

"I meant to ask you about that."

"About what?"

"There's only one bed in this room."

"Uh," I stared at the double bed. Apparently I hadn't thought this all the way through.

"I mean, shouldn't we have had two rooms."

"Uh, we're on a budget. And...." Just saying it made my stomach ache, "we're supposed to be a married Mexican couple...I mean that's our cover."

"So I guess we're going to sleep together," said Lynne Michelle.

"Now wait a minute!" I said with look of panic on my face.

"Oh relax, will you. Nothing is going to happen. You sleep on your side of the bed and I'll sleep on my side. I mean, I'm far enough along that sex isn't a possibility."

"You are? That's great!" I felt and looked relieved.

"Well, you don't have to be so damn happy about it!" She was furious for some reason. She seemed to think about it angrily for a little while and then she put a wicked smile on her face. "Of course, in theory, that doesn't rule out intimacy! At least that's

what the baby books say. Just so you know."

"Was this something I wanted to know?"

"You really are a bastard, aren't you?"

"And you're a..."

But for once, I just couldn't say it.

"You're a ..B-better person than almost anyone I ever met," I said intending it as a kind of flattering lie but realized it was the truth as I spoke it. She was actually one hell of a brave human being. She looked so pleased that I said it that I was afraid she'd start weeping.

I spent the rest of the afternoon not drinking. That was harder than it sounded. Lynne Michelle napped and snacked and went to the bathroom about thirty-seven times by my actual count. One of the curses of being pregnant and having a bladder a microscope could barely see. She cooked food again and I ate this time.

We were both exhausted.

She used a small pair of nail scissors to cut the bandage off my arm. It looked worse than it felt. It was still an angry looking wound but it was healing. It didn't bleed and if I didn't use it for a doorstep or an oar, it might actually be of some use to me. I could move it now without feeling like I had to faint.

I was going to have a peach of a scar.

Night finally came. We stalled around about the business of actually getting into bed. I intended to sleep with everything but my shoes on. And maybe the mustache. The shoes were too tight and the mustache itched like poison ivy.

Lynne Michelle stood beside the bed. She took her earrings off and put them on the night table. She sat down on her side of the bed and seemed pretty well hidden in the embroidered tent that was her Mexican maternity dress. I guessed the earrings were the only thing she was going to take off.

That was not exactly undressed.

"You know what?" she said and her voice sounded sad and kind of far away.

I didn't want to know what.

"I'm not going to be comfortable sleeping in all these clothes. It's just too confining. I'm going to take off all my clothes."

"Uh." I was embarrassed.

"Listen, if you feel anything for me at all, if you care about me even a little bit..." She didn't finish the sentence and seemed ready to cry. "Oh God, I never felt more alone in my whole life."

"I'm here. You're not alone. I'm not going anywhere either."

"You mean, this isn't just a job to you?" She looked at me intently as if the whole world hung on my answer. Her eyes flashed and there was a solemnity and a longing in her voice.

"It stopped being that a long time ago. Now, this is about you and me and it's about them."

"I really hope you mean that."

"You can't pay me and you can't fire me. It's about just surviving and hanging tough," I said, suddenly realizing that I was out of a job. The way I felt, I'd have to give back the thousand she'd hired me with. It had all got too personal for anything else.

"Do we have a chance?"

"I hope so. I want us to make it. We made it this far, maybe we can go all the way. They're not that good and we're going to get better."

"How is it about you and me?"

She always asks the questions I don't want to answer.

"I don't know." I looked away. "It just is."

"It's strange," she said and that could have covered almost anything and there was a

genuine sorrow in her voice. She began to unbutton her blouse. Her fingers trembled.

I wondered what she meant by that. I turned away, not watching her undress.

"Can I ask you for something?" She finally said, and I knew it was something big enough to ride the wind.

I thought about it for a little bit. She and I had been through a lot. Maybe it would be wrong, because I am so wrong for everything and everyone, but anything she wanted to take from me, I wished somehow I could give it to her.

"Ask me anything," I found myself saying. I even meant it.

"If I promise you nothing will happen, will you take your clothes off and lay down beside me?"

I knew the answer to that, but couldn't quite say it aloud.

"I'm just so damn lonely. I just want to feel a warm human body next to me. I want you to put your arms around me and just hold me. Please don't hate me for asking you for this."

"I don't think I could ever hate you."

She was just about to cry. I suddenly realized that bravery had its limits. That she had stood alone against more than most human beings ever have to face. She had been terrified, and most of the ugliness that can be this world had been aimed at her. And all she had had was me. That must have been cold comfort considering how little I have to offer anyone.

I took my clothes off and got into bed. It was just easier somehow than having to say yes. It took her longer to get undressed and she was shy.

She struggled to get comfortable then finally settled in, her face nestled in the crook of my arm. I was nervous. I kept my eyes closed until she was under the sheets. I wasn't sure why I felt I had to do that. The touch of her, the feel of her warm body against mine, brought back old memories, old feelings I thought long dead. I couldn't remember how

many years it had been since I had slept in a bed with a woman.

I imagined that I would lie awake all night, yearning to be elsewhere, longing to be dead drunk and feeling nothing.

But it wasn't like that at all.

I slept with the comfort of a warm baby in his mother's arms. I slept with the sweet tiredness of a lover who has found his love. I rode a wind that burned down the angry night of my life.

I could remember a thousand thousand nights where whiskey bought me kind oblivion but never one as peaceful as this.

No nightmares chased me. The dead ones in my life no longer held their arms out to me.

It was impossible but I fell asleep in the arms of someone I loved.

It was a lie. It was a fairy tale.

I was glad to have such sweet untruth even, for a night.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

There was no tenderness left. The morning was the end of the night.

I got up stiffly, arm aching from holding her. I felt half sick.

She woke up when I moved away from her. She was scared, almost in a panic, until she was fully conscious, and realized where she was. She tried to smile at me but it wasn't much of a smile.

I got up and dressed quickly, pulling my pants on to cover my nakedness.

Nothing but awkwardness seemed to be in the room.

She got up, wrapped the sheet around her and went into the bathroom, locking the door after her.

The fairy tale of last night had been retold in the morning paper. The news wasn't good.

Nothing had happened. Nothing could have happened.

We were like two complete strangers when she came out of the bathroom. She didn't speak, didn't look at me. She busied herself fixing breakfast. I took my turn in the bathroom. I shaved and showered and felt somewhat better but not much. I had the morning ache that comes from wanting whiskey and not getting any.

I got dressed in one of the least offensive of the Mexican costumes. I put the glue on my upper lip and pasted the lousy mustache on. It was a part of the disguise I could gladly have done without.

She slapped the dishes on the crummy kitchen table. She forked eggs and toast onto each plate. She had made an omelet. She had cut up some apples and bananas and made a fruit salad.

I wasn't hungry.

I sat down at the table. My scalp seemed sore from the hair dye. I stared at the food on my plate.

"Aren't you hungry?"

I shrugged. I was thirsty. That was the problem.

"You should try to eat."

I forced myself to take a few bites.

"About last night.." she said looking embarrassed.

I cut her off. "Nothing happened. We don't need to talk about it. We got a long day ahead of us. I need to get guns and I need Heywood."

"Is it going to be a bad day?"

"It could be." It could be fatal. Every one of our days might be that.

"I'm not ashamed about last night," she said suddenly.

"I don't really want to talk about it," I said. It was true. Nothing had happened and everything had happened. It was an experience I hoped never to have again. Love isn't for me, not with her, not with anyone. Especially not with her.

She grew sullen and withdrawn. She ate her food listlessly.

"Get dressed as quickly as you can. I want you to go with me. We'll do all the stuff we can do together. We'll do this so you don't feel all alone but then when things heat up, when I get to that part of it, I want you out of it," I said.

"I'm in for the whole thing."

"People are going to die. You don't need to be in that part of it."

"I am already in that part of it."

I let it go. This was not an argument we had to have.

I ate as much as I could. I felt sober and mean. I looked at myself one final time in the bathroom mirror to see how my costume was holding up. I looked like a knife fight waiting to happen.

She got dressed with more speed than I thought a woman could ever possibly muster. She seemed angry with every movement she made. She slapped her black wig on so hard it must have been painful. I had to help her button up the back of the blouse she chose to wear. She kept her back stiff as if any contact with me was unpleasant. I called for a cab. We were busy not talking to each other until the taxi came.

"Where are we going?" she finally asked when I gave the cab driver an address.

"Guns and Heywood," I said.

"Which one first?"

"Both at the same time. Heywood is a certified gun nut. This is Saturday, his day off. He'll be barbecuing in his backyard."

"Does he know we're coming?"

"It's better if it is an unwelcome surprise."

"Why?"

"So he doesn't feel obligated to shoot me for duty's sakes."

"Would he really do that?"

"Let's not find out."

I honestly didn't know what he might do. He was a drunk like me. He was also a man of uncertain temperament. It all depended on whether he still believed my story. He was long on suspicion like most cops and a little too short on the benefit of the doubt. I sensed I could trust him but only if I had the drop on him. And he wasn't going to be happy when I showed up on his doorstep.

No man likes trouble coming into his house, appearing in the same place that shelters his wife and children. I meant him no harm but just being there, just showing up was already a kind of attack.

He answered the front door himself. He had a steak sauce smeared barbecue apron on and was holding a long handled meat fork. He was half drunk and that was our salvation. He peered at us like a sun-blinded half drunken owl. He stared at our Mexican regalia and ethnic accessories without any sign of recognition.

Fran really had wrought wonders.

But no disguise would take us past what I had to say.

"Hello, Heywood. Say hello to two of the most endangered members of a species you're ever gonna meet. I guess you're real surprised to see us."

I moved closer, edging through the door, saw the sudden alarm on his face as he recognized my voice. Drink made him slow and clumsy. He tried to slam the door in our face.

I had no choice.

I hit him in the face with everything I had. He went over backwards like a sledge hammered ballerina. He was down but not out. I didn't have a whole lot of everything in

everything I had. My knuckles ached.

He raised his head up slowly, rage and shock in his face. I put my foot on his chest and kept him from getting up. He still had the long-handled fork in one hand. I put my other foot on that. I had him effectively pinned.

"You son of a bitch," he said thickly. "You sucker punched me."

His wife called out from another room deep in the house.

"Who is it, Bill?"

He stared at me and I shook my head.

"S'ok, its....its just a ...lawn fertilizer salesman. I'll be right back." he said.

I motioned her inside and Lynne Michelle came in behind me. She looked distressed.

"Jesus! Did you really have to hit him? I thought he was your friend."

"It was the only way to keep him my friend. I think the next time he opened the door, he would have had a gun. If he shot me, it would have ruined our friendship forever. This way is better."

"You big goddamn dummy! I got my kids here!" said Heywood with a mixture of fear and rage in his voice. "I don't want any trouble here."

"That's good. We don't have any trouble with us."

I bent down and took the long-handled fork out of his hand. It was a wicked looking thing.

I took my foot off of him, and he slowly started to rise up. I put the tines of the fork against his neck and helped him stand up. He was not comfortable with the sharp prongs digging into this neck, but I was very comfortable.

"You're out of your frigging mind! Let's go to my study!" said Heywood, looking wildly back over his shoulder to see if anybody was around. "Before somebody sees you! I got cop friends here, fa chrissakes! I got half the department in my back yard!"

"You think it would be hard on the furniture if all your friends recognized us and

started a shooting spree?" I asked.

"Let's get the hell out of the hallway! Please! I don't want nobody to get killed here!"

Heywood looked scared.

"My thoughts exactly. Especially since I am the one everyone wants to kill."

We marched down the hallway and went through a heavy oak door into a paneled room that was Heywood's den. It was a room long on knotty pine and short on taste. It had all the charm of a changing room at the bowling alley. It even smelled like old bowling shoes. And gin. Heywood was a gin drinker, and he had a stack of full and half empty whiskey bottles arranged artistically on a bar that ran the length of one wall. I eyed the bar with longing. It was well stocked and I was temporarily unstocked.

But the really crucial part of the room was a locked cabinet of guns. Heywood had enough weapons to arm a safari but only if nobody shot anything bigger than squirrels. He was strictly a hand gun guy. His taste generally ran to nothing bigger than .38s.

I walked Heywood into the room and didn't take the fork away from his throat until I opened the desk drawer and got his service revolver. It was a snub nose .38, and having it in my hand made me feel more welcome in Heywood's house.

"What's the gag? I mean, with the Halloween costumes?" said Heywood, rubbing his sore jaw.

"It's no joke. We just went native," I said. "Kind of protective coloration. One Mex among many. I mean, it's right out of 'The Purloined Letter.'"

"Huh?"

Heywood didn't get the literary allusion and I was too tired to explain.

Heywood stared at Lynne Michelle. "You guys are nuts, you know that. She still looks pregnant. I mean, you didn't disguise that."

"We couldn't," I said. "It would be like trying to hide Mount Rushmore by spray painting it."

"There's guys here that would shoot you as soon as look at you Jack. I mean the whole damn police force is out looking for you. They want you dead or alive and mostly they want the dead part."

"I'm charmed by your friends."

"You had to be drunk on your ass to come here! Jesus, I need a drink!"

"Actually, and I wish you hadn't reminded me, I am stone cold sober. So how about you help us poor endangered species out. Did you check around on the stuff I asked you about?"

"I have to pee, Jack." said Lynne Michelle. I looked at her.

"Not now."

"But now is when I have to pee." She said urgently.

"Later."

"I feel like it is already later."

"The woman's got to pee, Jack, I mean if she's got to go, then she can..." said Heywood.

"Stay out of this! She can pee later, goddamn it!"

I turned to her and said angrily. "I wish just for once you could manage not to get in my face with this stuff! Why do you always have to pee when our tails are in the wringer and I got something I'm trying to do. Don't you have any self control! Could you for once just get a goddamn grip on your urine retention."

"Listen, you're not pregnant!" She yelled.

"Medical science is relieved I'm sure." I snapped back.

"You don't know what its like! You don't care how I feel!" She was furious.

"This is not the time for this!" I was almost screaming.

"You only think of yourself. You don't care how I feel. You don't care if I'm comfortable or not. You don't..."

I turned the gun around and handed it to Heywood. "I think I'll just give you back the gun, Heywood," I said, interrupting her. "But only if you promise to shoot me in the head. I mean, you got to promise to do it and I don't want a scalp wound, I want one right between the eyes."

Heywood raised the gun.

"I can't believe you did that!" said Lynne Michelle. "You're nuts!"

"If I have to be sober and listen to this too, I'd rather be carried out feet first. So go ahead, shoot me."

"Don't think I'm not tempted," said Heywood, sighting down the barrel of the gun. "But I hate like hell getting blood all over the knotty pine paneling."

Lynne Michelle turned around and marched across the room. She opened the door and started to go through it, glaring defiantly at me, as if she expected me to object.

"Which way?" she asked.

"Take a left. The second door," said Heywood. "Boy, I remember my wife when she had one in the oven. When they gotta go, they gotta go."

Lynne Michelle slammed the door behind her. She really drives me right up the wall. I turned back to look at my good buddy, Heywood. Now I was beginning to regret acting in haste with the gun but she really got on my nerves.

Heywood cocked the gun. "Actually I don't give a shit about the paneling. I just didn't want to blow your brains out in front of her. It ain't polite."

"Now wait a minute!" I said.

"Two or three shots in the head ought to do you a world of good."

"Think of the paperwork," I said.

"Yeah. There's that," he said sourly. "And the bastards would want to know how you got inside my house and why. They'd climb my butt with a forklift over this one. It ain't worth it." He lowered the gun and headed for the bar.

I sighed with relief.

"How about a drink? How about a lotta drinks?" said Heywood. He was already a long way ahead of me. I wished I could play catch up. My throat began to ache to accept his offer.

"You drink some for me. I'm on the wagon for a while. In case I have to shoot something that might shoot back."

"Good thinking." said Heywood, and he poured himself a stiff drink. "You almost look Mexican. You almost had me fooled there for a while."

"What do you mean, almost. This is a perfect disguise."

"I hope you're right. Or you may not get out of this house alive. I mean we can't stay in here forever. I'm supposed to be barbecuing something right now as a matter of fact."

"Did you find out anything?"

"Why would I bother?"

"Because you're my friend. And because you probably were curious as hell yourself."

"More the last part than the first part. I'm not sure I like you anymore.

You are kind of a big disappointment lately. You keep making me look bad at stakeouts.

That hurts my feelings."

"So give already."

Heywood downed a huge slug of whiskey before he spoke. "First off, I got it narrowed down to two guys. I mean, one is the most likely one, but it could be either one of them or both of them working together. But I could be totally wrong on either one. This is guess work. More like gut instinct."

"Who? Name names."

"First, there's a guy named Brentwood. Brentwood Pierce Ridley Hawes."

"Sounds like a ballet instructor."

"Don't let the name fool you. He's a West Point grad. Did some combat duty in

Vietnam. Had a reputation as a real go getter. High body counts, both his own men and the enemy. A career climber who really stacked up the bodies for his own personal advancement. Not a real likable guy."

"Is he the likely one?"

"No. He sounds too smart. Could be him. He's got interests in steel and shipping and runs a shipyard construction venture. He's mean as a snake, some people have said off the record. But he isn't my favorite for this one."

"So if not him, who?"

"Julian Bains Hawes."

"And why him?"

"He's a lawyer."

"Ah." He was my favorite now too.

"Harvard Law, middle bottom of his class. Smart but wild. Criminal law in the early days. Represented some real scumbags. Had a reputation as a real fixer, a Go-Along-Johnnie." said Heywood. He took a hefty drink. "Am I ringing any bells here?"

"It's playing some kind of tune. Tell me more, you fascinate me."

"It's my boogie woogie beat. Here's more. There's a jury tampering scandal."

"Ah."

"Our boys walks because money talks, but it's the end of his criminal law career. He goes into the family business, only he specializes. Heavy construction. Tandor Corp to be more exact."

"That name, that don't ring any bells. What's Tandor?"

"Chicago's biggest and I mean biggest and roughest underground construction company. If there's a sewer in Chicago anywhere, chances are Tandor built it. Same goes with most of the airports and about every subdivision from Oak Park to Bensonhurst. He runs it. There's no part of that business he doesn't have a hand in. Julian IS Tandor Corp."

I knew exactly what that meant. You don't do business in Cook County, Illinois, without paying daily wages of graft and corruption. It was the lifeblood, the dirty heart that made Chicago beat.

"So is this all Chicago based?"

"It's the core of his holdings. He has outfits in every city. He's building subdivisions in California, mostly down in Orange County, and he's in on a redevelopment deal here in LA. You know, where they condemn perfectly good buildings on Lankershim Boulevard so they can tear them down and put up high rise office buildings."

"Crooked?"

"As a queer snake."

"He sounds like an outstanding candidate."

"And he's feuding with some of the other members of the family." said Heywood.

"That just adds fuel to the hunch."

"Over what?"

"Control of other businesses. More power, more money. Julian seems to want what everybody else in the family has. The man is hungry."

"He's the one." I was convinced.

"He's got my vote. But he may not be acting alone."

"But that's the limit of what I could find out. I talked to some pissant at their law firm. A guy named Sturdevant who handles all the estate and inheritance matters but candy wouldn't melt in his mouth. He wouldn't tell me a single goddamn thing. He left me with the impression you'd need a court order to get his shirt size. Nobody is going to tell anybody anything about who stands to inherit, who's in line of succession and so on. So if this pregnant Lynne Michelle is carrying a potential heir, or is in line for money herself, you won't hear it from them. Apparently that information is privileged information and is liable to stay that way."

"So how do I get to him?"

Heywood went over to his desk and tore off the top sheet of a notebook pad. "Here's his home address. And the two places below that are also his houses. You'll have to look for him. He moves around a lot, shuttles back and forth."

"One place in New York. One place in Chicago and a house in LA. I'd bet he was in LA."

"Could be. Some of the people after you are from here. At least the two cops you claim were gunning for you were. Stands to reason, he's here and whatever program he's running, is based here too. His powerbase in Chicago may be a little too far away to be of any real use to him here. My feeling is he's running locals, trying to keep this a low profile operation. If this was Chicago, you'd be dead. LA is maybe a little harder for Julian to get a grip on. I mean, otherwise, you not being so damn bright, and her being pregnant and the size of Iowa, I gotta ask myself why the two of you ain't already dead. Got to be a small time operation going against you, cause you are lame, Jack."

He brandished the gun. "I mean, you can't even keep the drop on anyone. How you guys made it this far is a mystery."

"It's a mystery why you'd think it's a mystery," said Lynne Michelle coming back into the room. "Cause Jack is really on top of everything. I mean, look how good he does on potty patrol."

"Is she funny like this all time?" asked Heywood, staring at her. He put the gun down on the bar and opened another bottle of gin.

"I am convulsed practically 24 hours a day."

"So what did you find out?" demanded Lynne Michelle.

"That's it's probably all in the family. Just like we thought." I told her everything Heywood had told me. She took it in all very calmly.

"A lawyer? You mean just a lawyer."

"Not just a lawyer, a Harvard-trained lawyer."

"What difference does that make?"

"He can spell bigger words. If he's crooked, he's going to be smart about it. That makes him much worse."

"I am confident you can out-stupid him, Jack. I got faith in you."

"She's funny," said Heywood splashing down a liberal dose of booze. "I like her."

"You can have her then. She's kind of like a stupid pet trick. If you let her breathe near water, she has to pee."

"Bastard!"

"Bitch!"

"You guys ought to get married. Then you could have this kind of fun every night."

Lynne Michele asked, "What about my husband?"

Heywood shrugged. "Still very much among the missing."

I asked, "Any chance he's behind this. I mean, Lynne Michelle came to me first with the idea that it was her husband that was trying to kill her. Do we know anything that would prove it or disprove it?"

"Look the guy was supposed to be dead. And living like a phantom. You ask me, I think somebody wanted him dead, and he was hiding out himself. I got the feeling he had enemies that would make the ones after you guys look like Kmart shoppers."

"That's all you got on him?"

"We're not dragging the rivers, but it's a good bet he's not around because he is in no shape to be around."

"Are you saying he's dead?" said Lynne Michelle.

Heywood shrugged and drank some whiskey. "Sorry, lady, but if you want my gut reaction, I think he's been dead and is gonna stay dead."

I thought of something. "If the guy is heir to a fortune and that's why somebody took

him out, wouldn't that cause a seven year legal glitch if there's no body."

"If that was the motivation, then maybe we'll get him back in the mail, maybe piece by identifiable piece. You never can tell how these things are going to go," Heywood blushed. "Excuse me for being indelicate. I forgot this is your husband we're talking about."

"I don't think I much cared for him alive, so if he's dead, my feelings aren't going to improve all that much. I just wish he had meant more to me."

Heywood's wife screamed. "Bill! Get your sorry ass out here and barbecue something!"

Heywood shrugged. He was half drunk and made a mock bow in acknowledgment of the shout. "My destiny awaits me."

"Before we go, we gotta have some guns." I moved up beside Heywood at the bar. I got a full bottle of bourbon and hefted it. I could hear Lynne Michelle's sudden intake of breath behind me.

"Oh no! No way, Jose! I'm not aiding and abetting anything. You wind up dead with one of my guns in your hand or shoot somebody with one of my pieces, I am the one who ends up in the shit! No way I'm going to give you some guns!"

"I didn't want you to give them to me. I was just gonna steal a couple."

Heywood went for the gun on the bar but I was faster. I smashed his hand with the bourbon bottle. I used my other hand and came up with the gun.

"AAAAAH!" groaned Heywood, holding his smarting hand. "You sucker sapped me again! This is my goddamn bottle opening hand! Man! That hurts like a son of a bitch! I coulda been ruined for life!"

"I want the key to the gun cabinet."

Heywood suggested I do some anatomical re-exploration.

"Is that a no?"

Heywood suggested a recreational adventure with a barking dog and an oil-coated pony.

I walked over to the glass gun case and used the .38 to smash the glass door. It splintered quite satisfactorily.

"I'll just not use the key then, shall I?"

I reached in and got two more handguns and stuffed them into my pockets. I got three boxes of .38 shells. That was three guns with Heywood's gun included and a box of shells for each one. If I couldn't stop trouble with that many shots, nobody could stop it.

"I hate the hell out of you, Jack!" said Heywood wearily. "You're the biggest boil on my ass! You're a continuous pissant!"

"I appreciate your hospitality. And the kind words always go a long way with me. I'll treasure them always."

"I'd sooner kill you than look at you."

"You know, I keep hearing that from almost everyone these days. I think it must be my breath. Well, give my love to the lovely wife, will you, Heywood. It's time for us to tootle off. We've got a date to go steal some hubcaps off moving cars."

"I'm glad I drink too much. If I wasn't half boiled, I'd probably be seriously pissed off. People just keep taking advantage of my generous nature. Ah the hell with it! I hope you shoot yourself and everybody you know. So what if I spend the last few years till my retirement doing paperwork. At least I don't have to look at you anymore. Well, I'll just walk you out," said Heywood, picking up a gin bottle for the long journey to the front door. "I wanna make sure you really go out and you stay out. Don't come back here, Jack. I swear I'll shoot you two times dead if you ever show up here again."

"Isn't that sweet of him. Probably wants to act as a shield in case his friends start shooting at us," I said watching enviously as Heywood tilted the gin bottle and let a lot of liquid empty down his throat.

"Are we going?" asked Lynne Michelle.

"Sure. Unless you need to pee again."

Lynne Michelle just glared at me.

Heywood opened the study door cautiously. Nobody was in the hallway.

He moved out and motioned us to follow him. We went quickly to the front door and Heywood swung it open. He slugged another hit from the gin bottle and jerked his thumb at the door.

"Go fa chrissakes!"

We started to go past him and through the door, which was no mean trick when you have someone as wide as Lynne Michelle is. I think I was going to make a snappy comment, some kind of witty exit line. But I would never know if it was as witty as I thought it was gonna be.

A bullet broke the gin bottle in Heywood's hand. Another slug took off the top of one of his ears.

We jumped back and Heywood slammed the door. We all hit the floor. Heywood was on the bottom. Lynne Michelle and I were tied somewhere beside him. I think we were both on top of each other.

The front door ceased to be a door. At least thirty automatic weapon rounds turned it into a religious icon, a veritable holy object.

Then again, better it than us.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

If you had boiled Heywood's cop friends, you couldn't have gotten them angrier than they were at the frontal assault on Heywood's house. The fact that Heywood got nicked seemed to be the final straw.

The came from everywhere. They had guns. They had so many guns they probably had hideout guns sewn in their underwear. They hit the windows and back doors. They went around the back of the house and came up alongside each side of the house. They dove out opened windows and crouched in the shrubbery. Every window in the house had a cop at it with a gun.

"What's this all about Heywood?" yelled one huge cop who looked pissed as hell.

Heywood was sitting on the floor, safely out of the line of fire, holding the bloody mess that was his ear. "How the hell should I know. I'm standing there at the door with....with a couple of the

"Neighbors, senior. From across the street," I said, being helpful.

"Yeah," said an aggrieved Heywood, looking pissed. "Yeah, neighbors and suddenly those bastards out there opened up. Another inch and they'd have killed me. They must be cop killers!"

"Sons of bitches!" roared the big cop.

The big cop yelled loud enough to be heard all through the house. "We got us a couple of cop killers out there. They tried to kill Heywood. We gonna stop em! You bet your ass!!"

I poked my head over the edge of one window. I saw the perpetrators. Two black guys with weapons hunched down behind a white Cadillac. They were only about twenty steps away from Heywood's front door. How they could have missed us all from that distance was one of the seven wonders of the world. One had what looked and sounded like a .22 target pistol and the other had an Uzi machine pistol. The one with the .22 had probably got off the first shots. That's all that saved us. If the guy with the Uzi had been first we would all have been poster art for a drive by shooting.

They didn't look like dangerous guys. They looked like pimps on a bad hair day.

They were also probably higher than kites. They kept shooting full clips harmlessly

into the front door which no longer stood in its frame. And they were actually giggling like school girls. You could even hear it over the weapon fire. They weren't crouched down behind the white Cadillac so much as they were leaning on it. I had the impression it would have been difficult for them to stand up without some assistance.

"Seymour, I think I nailed her ass!" said one florid looking specimen in a high pitched giggle.

"You shit! You hit a pedestrian. I'm the one that waxed her!" said Seymour.

The debate ended mid-giggle.

The cops opened fire all at once. Seymour's hat went one way and his head went another way. Neither hat or head looked much like they used to. I would say that in the first few seconds, they ceased to be useful items.

The other guy was luckier. None of the first thirteen wounds were in fatal spots. He went down just as fast as the other guy, but he was more in one piece.

My ears ached. Had to be more than fifty guns going off. A big cop near me was practically shooting inches from my head.

The battle was over but not the shooting.

The white Cadillac was turning into a huge metal piece of Swiss cheese. Bullet holes blossomed in the side panels, window glass shattered. And there was the continuous whap whap of metal striking metal. A round caught a front tire and it went down. Then the rear tire was pierced and the car leaned dizzily to one side. This part of the battle seemed to go on forever.

It might have gone on forever or until they ran out of bullets in North America but one round apparently found the gas tank and the Caddy went up like a torpedoed Liberty ship in one huge burst of flame. There was a second explosion, which sounded like high explosives had been stored in the trunk. The Cadillac skyrocketed up with the second blast until it stood on its tail, danced drunkenly on its back bumper and did a complete

flip.

It was so spectacular, everybody stopped shooting. The car crashed down and burned furiously about fifteen yards away from where it had been standing.

The black guy who was not headless, hatless Seymour, was laying flat on his back in the street. With the Caddie gone, he was stretched out there in full sight.

The black guy wasn't moving. He didn't look like he would ever want to move. If he noticed the death of his Cadillac, he didn't acknowledge it. He also didn't giggle anymore. I think they shot it right out of him.

Heywood was up, holding his ear and heading out the front door. "Cease fire. We got the bastards!" He yelled.

I stepped up beside him and he shot me a poisonous look. "Why don't you get the hell out of here!" he snarled under his breath. "Ain't nobody looking at you. Now's your chance to get away."

Lynne Michelle was beside me and in front of me, which happens when you are vastly pregnant. She took my arm in hers in a wifely embrace.

"Your cop friends are pumped too full of shooting jubilation and adrenaline to notice us. Besides, we look so Mexican it hurts. Don't worry, we'll just fade in the crowd."

Heywood stared at Lynne Michelle's belly. "Hey, you're a whole crowd all by yourself."

The cops began moving out onto the street and out of the shrubbery and away from the windows. With a feeling of a job well done, they marched out toward the dead bodies to see just how dead they were. One fairly drunken cop came out of a smashed shrub and paced up to the burning hulk of the Caddy. He had a marshmallow on a sharpened stick and cheerfully held it out toward the raging car blaze. The heat was so intense and the flame so fierce, it burned his eyebrows off, but he was too drunk to notice.

The first guy, the one who had lost his hat by getting his head shot out from under it,

was seriously dead.

I got far enough to see what was left of him and turned Lynne Michelle around before she could see anything.

"But I want..." she started to say.

"Trust me honey," I said, noticing that a cop was staring at us. "This is not something you want to see."

She seemed to understand. She put her hands over her eyes and turned around and looked away. She had an air of delicate female sensibility about as real as a barracuda's knowledge of table manners.

"Better get the little lady home, there Jose. This ain't something for ladies to see," said the cop, grinning like an ape. He was staring at the dead body with obvious delight. A guy could hardly get more dead than that guy was dead. He was what you might call, dead in a lot of places.

"Heywood, do you think he's dead enough?" said the big cop. "I mean, should I put one more warning round in his head just in case he's got a knife hidden on him somewhere and is playing possum."

Heywood looked at the bullet-riddled thing that once used to be a human being and shrugged. "I think we can safely assume he has passed on. Congratulations, men, on some really fine shooting!" Heywood was pleased. His ear hurt like hell but the situation was not entirely without satisfaction. The bad guys had paid heavily for the discomfort.

Another cop standing beside the other body called out. "Hey! You're not gonna believe this, but this one is still kicking."

I pushed Lynne Michelle back toward the house, and she reluctantly moved away until she stood in the front yard.

I went with Heywood and we stood over the body of the black guy. He was conscious but shot silly, or he had been silly to begin with and he was just shot.

He was actually grinning. He was obviously not himself.

"S'um bitch!" said the man. "I is shot."

Heywood glanced around at the cops around him. "Everybody stand back. Maybe I can get a deathbed statement here. Don't crowd me."

They moved back a little but not enough to be out of hearing range.

Heywood got down on his hands and knees. I crouched down too and Heywood wasn't thrilled by my presence but he didn't tell me to go away.

"Can you hear me?"

"I is shot. Ooooh!" repeated the man, eyes rolling wildly in his head.

"Who sent you?" asked Heywood, leaning over him intently. Some of the other cops were trying to edge in to catch what the black guy was saying.

"Said...Seymour...get...get yourself some big ass easy money...and now I is shot. Ooooh!"

"Can you answer my questions?"

"Kill pregnant woman...can't be too hard. Oooooooh!"

One cop in the crowd asked another. "What was that he said about a pregnant woman?" I hoped they didn't look around and see Lynne Michelle and start to get ideas. It was not a good time for ideas.

"Who hired you?" insisted Heywood.

"Fax. Ooooh!"

"Who? Fax who?"

"Fax...Ooooh! I is shot."

Suddenly the guy opened his eyes wide and stared directly into Heywood's face.

"Never saw..." His voice sank to a whisper and Heywood had to bend down to hear him.

"Never saw...pregnant woman...with so many guns..."

Blood bubbled from his lips and he passed out.

"Is he dead?" I asked.

The black guy's eyes shot open. He giggled. "Ooooh!"

Then he shuddered and was still.

"Now he's dead," said Heywood.

The dead guy made a sound.

"What the hell is that?" I asked. "A death rattle?"

Heywood swore. "The son of a bitch is snoring!"

Heywood looked up. "You guys can't shoot for shit! Call the meat wagon. We got us a survivor."

I got up. "Well Heywood, thanks for asking me to the barbecue. Never been to one more fun."

Heywood saw the cop roasting a marshmallow over the burning Caddie. "Get away from there, you dumb drunken son of a bitch!"

The cop turned around and sauntered off. His marshmallow was on fire and so was his hair. He was having way too much fun.

Heywood stared down at the black guy in the street. He shook his head in utter disbelief. "Jack, I think they're sending hairdressers after you."

"Even I am encouraged. If they're this bad, I don't have to be any good."

"That's good cause you ain't for shit. Now get the hell out of here before I lose my mind completely and tell everyone just who the hell you are and find out if they got any bullets left. Call me. If he lives long enough to put two words together that actually mean something, I'll let you know what I find out. Call but don't show up!"

I motioned to Lynne Michelle. "Time to leave, honey. We'd still got to baste your pork roast."

She looked like I had been suddenly struck stupid but came toward me. I met her on the sidewalk and we began to walk away.

"Baste my what?" she said.

"It was marital small talk. I'm probably not good at it. Skip it!"

"Gladly." She smiled at a Mexican cop who was standing on the sidewalk. He was staring at us, really staring at us and tugging at his chin as if thinking deep and probably unsettling thoughts. He was one of the cops who had heard the black guy talk about killing a pregnant woman. I hoped he wasn't adding things up. He made me nervous.

"You know what I like about living in this neighborhood," she said, aware of the cop's attention.

"No honey, what?" I said, nodding at the suspiciously wide-eyed cop staring much too intently at us as we walked past him.

"Living next to cops just makes you feel kind of safe."

I glanced back at the burning hulk of the Caddie and the bloody splotches that used to be people.

"I couldn't agree more," I said and I put my arm around her in what I hoped was a real husband-like way.

"Hey!" That was the Mexican cop.

We both turned and looked at him.

"What part of Mexico are you two from?" He asked, his hand on the butt of his gun.

"Porto-porto..." I began and finished lamely. "Porto-san."

"Oh, well, then, that explains it," said the cop and he took his hand off his gun and walked away.

"How did that explain it?" whispered Lynne Michelle.

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"Isn't a porto-san a portable toilet?"

"Yeah. I was desperate."

"Well that must have been what convinced him. You look like a guy who was born in

a toilet."

I almost said something. She watched me almost say it.

"Isn't this the part where you say 'Bitch!' and then I say 'Bastard!?'", she asked as she reached out and took my hand. Her hand felt good in mine.

"That's the part."

It was just like being married. Now we didn't even have to say the words.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

"You know what I'd like to have," said Lynne Michelle. She was getting undressed for bed. We were in for another uncomfortable night.

"What?" We had called it a day not terribly well spent and went back to the motel after the barbecue. We simply had too much fun at Heywood's barbecue to think about doing anything else with the rest of the day.

"Of all the attempts to kill us, this one was probably my favorite," said Lynne Michelle. "It was a day to pin in my scrapbook, let me tell you."

That was emotionally pretty much where we both were by the end of the day. When you're desperate enough to try to figure out which assassin was the most fun, you probably don't have much of a life.

I was chock full of guns and clues. Heywood had really come through for me. I was pretty sure who the enemy was. I had a handgun or two to convince the bad guy that life has six chances to go away in every little gun.

My arm was hurting me, and being sober for the rest of the day was becoming a real burden. Staying in the room and getting set for the next day was something I needed to do. My bad arm looked swollen and puffy around the stitches. I'd probably be better off if a doctor could take a look at it but that would have to wait.

Lynne Michelle looked tired too. She had been through a lot. I had a vague idea of sneaking off while she was asleep and trying to get a jump on the demon while he was asleep in his lair. But the thought of actually crawling out of a warm bed in the middle of the night, just so I could shoot somebody didn't have much appeal. Besides it was the early Christian who always got the hungriest coliseum lion. But it did have the added appeal that she would sleep through most of it and might even wake up and find that it was all over or I was dead or both.

It might have been easier that way. But I just wasn't ready yet. I probably wouldn't admit it, but I also would've regretted not spending the rest of the night with her too. That was a factor too. I hated to admit to myself how much I felt about her sometimes and how crazy it all was. I needed two psychiatrists, one to hold the straightjacket sleeves and one to fasten the straps.

Lynne Michelle eased into bed gingerly, her back turned modestly to me and clicked off the table lamp on her side of the bed.

"You never finished saying what you'd like to have."

"Two days in a row with nobody shooting at us."

"You have such small wants," I said.

"I've been forced into it," she said. "I'm too busy just trying to stay alive to hope for much of anything."

"I'm sorry. These are hard days. If I haven't said it before, I thought it. Considering everything you've gone through, you're a pretty damn brave woman. I mean, a lot of guys would have folded under the stuff that's been thrown at you."

"I don't have to be all that brave, Jack. I got you for that. Whenever I think I can't make it, I just imagine you with me and I feel alright."

That made us be quiet for a while.

"We kind of like each other sometimes, don't we?" she said.

"Sometimes," I admitted.

"How's your arm?"

"Hurts some but is serviceable. It works enough for what I need it for."

"What's tomorrow going to be like?"

"I hope it's a violent day. A day with a death in it. I hope it's a decisive day."

"You sound pretty intent. Does it have to happen all on one day? Can't we take our time? I mean, I feel pretty safe here. Wouldn't it be better if we just waited them out for a little while?"

"The longer we wait, the more time they have to get lucky," I realized my hands were shaking for want of a drink. I turned off the light on my side of the bed and began to get undressed. "We don't want to give them any more chances."

"Will you hold me again tonight, Jack? Would you mind?"

I didn't mind and I said so. I got undressed in the dark and got into bed.

I put my arms around her and wondered how many more nights I would have with her. It was all very sweet and innocent and I knew that I would miss this, this strange closeness and holding. I would miss not sleeping next to her because there was comfort there and soft asylum. But it also scared me, filled me with a fragile terror that was my own past and my future. It was awkward because she was pregnant and she made me feel too damn much when mostly I wanted never to feel anything.

"I wish we could wait," she said.

"We're running out of time," I said.

"Will it be over tomorrow, Jack?"

"It's possible. I hope so. I want it to be."

"Do you know what you're going to do?"

"No. It's like going into battle. You look for the enemy, and he's just where you find him. You can't plan much."

"I don't want you to get killed, Jack."

"I don't want me to be killed."

"I'd miss you."

"I..." I wanted to say I would miss her too but the words just laid there and I let them go. She sensed it I think and pulled away from me.

"You're trembling, Jack. Are you ok?"

"My body is having a hard time. It wants to be drunk. Its just a touch of the shakes. It'll go away."

"How did they know it was us at Heywood's? I mean I guess our disguises aren't any good."

"I'm not sure about that part. I think Fran did a hell of a job. I mean you can't get much more Mexican looking and neither can I. If Heywood can get anything out of the guy who survived, we might know for sure. But I can make a guess. They've got somebody staked out around everybody I knew in my life or they can connect me up with. They don't know how to find you, so they're looking for me and everybody I know, in the hopes I'll go to somebody for help. They'll know I can't make it alone. Me and Heywood go a long way back. They would have had to know about him."

"But if our disguises are as good as you say they are, shouldn't the guys who tried to kill us have thought we were both Mexican? That's why I don't know why they started shooting."

"Hey, they're looking for a guy and a pregnant woman. With the amount of money that's probably involved, I get the idea that these guys would shoot any pregnant woman who showed up, no matter what they looked like. How many pregnant women are going to show up on Heywood's door anyway? I mean the odds would be on their side that any pregnant woman is likely to be the right one."

"We should have come up with a disguise that disguised my pregnancy."

"What do you mean, like maybe you dressed up as a Rose Bowl float?"

"It's that part again," she said meaning the B words.

She moved closer to me and held me tighter. I tried to relax against her and there was something so comforting about her touch that I stopped trembling. I was tired and I felt safe and warm.

"This is not how I imagined I would spend the last days of my pregnancy, Jack."

I was drowsy. It was pleasant just to hear her voice. I tried not to think about wanting a drink and felt her warm skin next to me. She radiated warmth like a cheerful country store stove. Her arms held me gently. I had an irresistible desire to caress her, to touch her face. It was not going to happen, but I thought it.

"I've been so busy trying not to be a homicide victim, you know I've missed all my natural childbirth classes. Jesus! I'll never learn all that stuff in time now! I mean, now it's just too late. Way way too late!"

The urgency of her last words got to me. Suddenly I was wide awake, sitting up.

"You aren't... haven't...I mean...it isn't now, is it?"

"What?"

"Is it now?"

"What?"

"Are you....."

"What's wrong?"

"The baby! Are you having the baby?" I was almost shouting.

"Eventually. It's kind of unavoidable," said Lynne Michelle staring at me like I had suddenly gone rabid and would soon be leaving tooth marks on the furniture.

"But not now?"

"Relax. Its days away."

"Ah." I laid back down.

"Did you ever wonder what I might be like when I am not pregnant?"

"No," I don't know why I said it. It wasn't really true. I had a hard time not thinking about it was a lot closer to the truth. But it was hopeless to admit it.

That seemed to make her sad. I could see her in the dim light of the motel room. She shifted in the bed and seemed to have a forlorn look on her face. I knew it was unkind and not the answer she wanted. But I somehow couldn't say it any other way.

"Do you think you could ever give up drinking?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes and no."

I could feel her sitting here staring at me expectantly in the dark, waiting for me to explain.

"Yes, if I tried, but, no, because I've never had a reason to try."

"You're sober now."

"Day to day. I'll fall from grace soon. I'm counting on it."

"Then you're hopeless," she said with a note of loss in her voice.

"Always thought I was."

"You could change, damn it, Jack!" she said with sudden anger. "I could change you. I could give you a reason."

I mumbled something.

She dug her elbow into my rib. "What did you say Jack?"

I'd almost said it. Then I did say it. "If I could let myself love anybody, an anybody like you, then I'd quit. I'd try. I'm not sure I know how to do that."

"It's a start at any rate," she said. "Maybe you aren't so hopeless after all."

But I thought I was and would always be. But she seemed calmer now and she drifted off into sleep. I followed soon after.

I had a peaceful night. Through most of it, I dreamed about her when she was not pregnant.

They were the kind of dreams that make librarians blush.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

We had a better morning. Maybe because it might be our last together.

Maybe it was other things too.

I loaded my guns and redistributed them in my jacket pockets. I tucked one of them in my belt on the side where the jacket covered it. Not a comfortable place to carry a gun but quick if you needed one. I might need one quick.

I felt bad and could have gladly had a drink but ate breakfast instead. She made eggs and bacon and hash browns. I had no appetite but she made me eat and I felt better for it. My hands stopped shaking by the time I had cleaned my plate.

"Is this it, Jack?"

"Seems like it. I'll call a taxi to take me to his house and you just wait here."

"I won't be able to stand it here all by myself, Jack." She was almost crying. "How will I know you're alright? I want to go with you, Jack."

"It's out of the question," I said it with such an air of finality she didn't press me on it. Maybe she knew I would never give in on this one.

"I'll call Heywood first, and see if he learned anything from our many times shot gunman. I bet he didn't live long enough to give them his underwear size."

I dialed Homicide, gave them my name, which caused no end of excitement on their end, and asked for Captain Heywood. They put me right through.

Heywood's voice boomed over the wire. "Jack! Great to hear from you!"

"I bet." I was about as welcome as a HIV positive test result.

"No really. I mean it. Listen, there's good news, Jack."

I wondered how long I could stay on the line before they'd be able to trace the call.

"Are you there Jack?" said Heywood, voice ringing with forced cheerfulness.

Whenever Heywood sounded up beat, something was bound to be wrong.

"Yeah. I probably am."

"You're off the hook. For the cop killings. You've been cleared. The word is out, you're clean! You can come in now, Jack! This is the straight goods."

"Do you also have some oceanfront property in Iowa you want to sell me?"

"What about the little matter of the stolen cop car? Grand theft auto and how about the patrol car Lynne Michelle backed up over? I mean the one where she put the engine somewhere back in the vicinity of the trunk?"

I heard Heywood sigh. "Listen Jack, it's kind of like a Presidential pardon. Call it a blanket we forgive you for everything kind of thing. I mean they had you down for almost everything, illegal flight, kidnapping, malicious destruction of property and maybe even arson at sea from the way the DA was squawking but all that stuff has gone away. Crime wise, far as everybody is concerned, you're a virgin. The Hawley family has agreed to pay for any damages up to and including replacing our dead patrol car."

"Are you wearing boots and standing in something brown?"

"Listen, I'm not bullshitting. It's the Hawe's attorney, Sturdevant. He's leading a parade in your honor. He's representing the Hawe's family and they came in pitching for you. And I mean pitching. I mean they had the governor on the phone and the police commissioner and a senator or two. I wouldn't have been surprised if the President stuck his oar in this one."

"What are you giving me?"

"Look Jack, it doesn't make any sense, I grant you. All I know is, this lawyer Sturdevant, he's frantic to talk to you. He's also frantic to make sure that Lynne Michelle is unharmed and stays that way. Same goes for the unborn bambino."

"I don't know, Heywood. If you get this drunk in the morning, you aren't gonna be in

good enough shape to appreciate happy hour later in the day."

"Look, you don't have to believe me. Go get this morning's paper. It's splashed all over the front pages. Hawes family acknowledges unborn heir, etc etc. recognizes legally married wife etc. etc.. You made the front page of every paper in the immediate world. I'm not making this up! This is the straight goods!"

"Why?"

"Jack, I don't know why. Nobody knows why. Nobody is saying anything about anything. But before you do anything rash, I mean before you start shooting people, call Sturdevant. I mean just talk to him for Christ sakes. Please do it, as a personal favor to me. I swear you won't regret it."

"I got to hang up now before you trace this call."

"Don't bother Jack. Look out the front window of your motel. I got two of my most dependable men standing guard out in the parking lot."

I put down the phone and pulled back the front window drapes. A patrol car was parked sideways in the motel parking lot. Two uniformed cops with shotguns were leaning against the side of the cop car. They were staring at our crummy motel room. I waved at them. They smiled like idiots and waved back.

I picked up the phone.

"How did you find me?"

"You have a habit of bragging to taxi drivers about killing cops. They tend to remember you."

"I'm funny that way." Also stupid but I didn't mention that. It was probably already obvious.

"Why am I having such a hard time believing all this?"

"Cause it don't make one shitting bit of sense is why. I mean, think about it, Jack, if I was running a con on you, it would make more sense than this does. I tell you this is so

weird it's got to be true."

"Who's behind Sturdevant? I mean, he's speaking for the family but which member of the family. You got any idea?"

"Shit yeah. I talked to him myself. And that's why it makes no sense, it was Julian Hawes himself. If I'm lying, why would I make up something so stupid and so nuts. He called me this morning. Wanted to know if I knew how to find you, if I was in contact with you."

"He called you personally?"

"Yeah. Ain't it a bitch!"

"Didn't we both figure he was the bad guy. This doesn't make sense."

"It might," Heywood lowered his voice, spoke with more caution. "Hey, this ain't exactly a secured line but let me tell you what I think is behind this."

"What does Heywood say?" asked Lynne Michelle. I motioned for her to be quiet.

Heywood went on, "I think it's because he doesn't know who you are. He doesn't know what you are."

I wondered if my eyes were crossing. Apparently Heywood's brain was completely rotted with alcohol. Poor guy. They'll bury his brain in a shot glass when his number comes up.

I turned to Lynne Michelle. "Heywood is drunk. I think he wants to ask you out for a date."

I went back to the phone. "Are you alright, Heywood? Maybe you should have some coffee."

"Look Jack, I know it sounds strange but I got the feeling Julian is afraid of you. I don't know why but I got the impression his BVD's were seizing up at the prospect that you might be coming after the family or him."

"He said that?"

"Not in so many words. But look at it from his perspective. He doesn't know you're a drunk and a has been and an almost was. All he knows is, everybody he's sent out after you and Lynne Michelle is dead."

"Which means?"

"Ok, I shouldn't tell you this but I got called onto the carpet the day of the barbecue. I mean big time as in they were waving hedge trimmers at my wienie and threatening to prune me. Everybody upstairs wanted to know why I was making inquiries about Julian and the family, especially about Julian. They knew I had asked around a bit, that I was checking very specific stuff out about Julian and that seemed to make lots of waves. I had to tell them the information was for you. They really had my tail in the fire over this. It was tell them or kiss my retirement goodbye, Jack."

"What did you tell them, Heywood?"

"Everything! I mean everything right down to how many pimples are on your ass. I told them about the guns. And HOW YOU STOLE THEM AT GUNPOINT!" He paused. It was a statement very much for the benefit of whoever else was listening in. Heywood went on, "I told them I gave you Julian's address and that we figured he was the dark haired favorite."

"Something doesn't make sense. A rat as big as Julian wouldn't be afraid of somebody like me."

"I agree," said Heywood. "There's something else going on. Some hidden agenda at work here."

"What about the guy who tried to kill us? Did he talk? Is he still among the living?"

"He's still alive. Nobody knows why. If he ever does die, they'll have to embalm him in fruit juice."

"Is he talking?"

"We can't get him to shut up."

"Did he name names?"

"He gave us half of the LA phonebook. The guy knows nothing. But he did have a real clue on him."

"Like what?"

"Like a Fax. A copy of a fax with Lynne Michelle Gordon's picture on it, and a number with lots of zeroes behind it. And a one line message. To be paid when this woman dies. It's page two of a two page fax. He didn't have page one on him. I figure the first page was information about where she lived, how they could find her, maybe stuff about you, Jack, since she was with you and that's who they had to find to find her."

"Who sent the fax?"

"No name on it. But, and this is the wild part Jack, it turns out the point of origination is a fax machine at"

"Tandor corporation!" I said, taking a wild guess.

"Stupid isn't it? Almost a dumb kid trick. Or maybe somebody wanted Julian to look like the boy most likely. Any way you look at it, it's stupid. It connects the family up with the murder attempts. And the family is not thrilled, let me tell you."

"Am I under arrest?"

"Protective custody," admitted Heywood. "I mean there's the two cops you can see and about a hundred more out of sight all over the neighborhood. Nobody is going to get to you. At least not right now. We'll be bringing you downtown later today. Right now, we're gonna keep you buttoned up."

"Listen Heywood, this all sounds a bit strange, you know."

"Yeah. But that's the way the thing seems to be going. What can I say?"

"You got a lot of faith in this set-up?"

"I'm an atheist on this one. The more I know about it, the more I want a drink."

"This game seems a little bit deep for me. I mean the bad guy is helping us. The bad

guy, at least the guy we think is the bad guy, is interceding on my behalf with the cops. He's welcoming Lynne Michelle with open arms. Does this make any kind of sense to you?"

"Well, I don't know. If they were trying to find you and the stick they were trying to hit you with kept getting broken, maybe they'd put some sugar on the stick and let somebody else carry it for them, like the ever efficient LAPD, for instance. I mean they couldn't find you but we found you. That's something to think about, isn't it."

"Is it a trap, Heywood?"

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. I heard an angry voice that was not Heywood's. Apparently someone was objecting strenuously to the information Heywood was giving out.

"Why....no....what would ever make you think that?" said Heywood, coming back on the line and speaking in the most unconvincing manner possible.

"If it was a trap, you couldn't tell me, could you?"

"Oh, if there was a trap...I COULD TELL YOU....really there's nothing to worry about." I could imagine that Heywood was sweating. And probably touching his damaged ear and thinking about how much damage I was doing to his career.

I tried to think how we could break out of this. Heywood was doing me another favor. He was telling me that there was something very wrong here but he didn't know what it was or how it was wrong. I had no guesses either. It just felt bad. Heywood sensed it and so did I.

"Look, I think I understand, Heywood. But if the news is as good as you say, then it doesn't make sense that we'd just stay here. I mean we should move as quickly as possible to get Lynne Michelle back to the bosom of her new found family. Why not let the family help keep her safe."

"What you got in mind, Jack?"

"Better to go see Sturdevant than just call him. How about that, Heywood? We'll catch a ride with your boys in the patrol car. They can take us directly to the law offices and we can see this guy, Sturdevant."

I heard Heywood's muffled voice speaking to someone else in the room. There seemed to be some heated discussion.

"Hold on there, Jack. I'll see what I can arrange." I heard the click as the phone went on hold.

"What's wrong, Jack?"

I put my hand over the receiver and said, "I think we're in big trouble."

"So, what's new?"

"No. I mean, now I think we are in even worse big trouble."

"How could that be?"

"If we get only half lucky, we get to go see a lawyer."

"As bad as that? I didn't know we could sink that low. Maybe we should just shoot ourselves and save ourselves unnecessary pain."

Heywood's voice came back on the phone. "It's going to take a while. They want to get set up...for your visit. Do you understand WHAT I MEAN? About an hour and then you go out and get in the patrol car. They'll take you to see Sturdevant."

"I sure appreciate this, Heywood."

"Yeah," said Heywood. He sounded like he was not in the best of shape.

"Just leave the guns in the motel room, Jack. You won't need them any more after this meeting. HAVE I MADE MYSELF PERFECTLY CLEAR ABOUT THAT PART?" said Heywood. "I mean, you'll have your meeting. And then after that, EVERYTHING WILL BE TAKEN CARE OF." Lots of emphasis on the stuff he couldn't say. It didn't sound good. Not to him, not to me.

"I hope this hasn't hurt your career, Heywood."

"Oh hell no! I'm gonna enjoy spending my last couple years before retirement on school crossing patrol. I'm gonna find it very restful."

"It could be worse." I tried to reassure him. Hell, he could be me.

"Yeah. I could have had a chain saw vasectomy. I could be a soprano now," said Heywood glumly.

"I'll give Lynne Michelle the good news. And thanks again, Heywood. You're one hell of a good friend." I meant it. He'd gone way out on a limb for me. Maybe he was a little cranked off in his own right. After all, he had lost a front door and the top part of one ear. A man could take that kind of stuff personal.

"You're more right than you know. Take care, Jack."

I had one more thought before he rang off. "And one more thing, Heywood. Since we're gonna be leaving here, could you radio the patrol guys and ask them to come in and help us pack up our stuff. Lynne Michelle has a lot of baby items and pregnancy stuff. She'll want to take it with us and I can't really carry things. I got this bad arm, you see."

"Good idea." said Heywood with an insincere chuckle. "I'll get them on the horn. We sure want to make sure you get the best care from now on, Jack." He sounded almost cheerful.

But then, why wouldn't he be? He wasn't the one who had to steal another patrol car.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE.

"What's going to happen now?" asked Lynne Michelle after I had told her pretty much everything Heywood had and hadn't told me. We were both worried about what he didn't say.

I motioned her over to the window and pulled back the drape for her. One of the cops was leaning inside the patrol car, talking on the radio and glancing back at us.

"The boys in blue have found us."

"Looks like it. I guess this means I can give up my disguise. And I was just getting ready to take Mexican cooking classes too." Lynne Michelle looked depressed. She picked up her coal black wig and flung it across the room. It whapped against the bathroom door like a dead octopus. "I don't like being found. I liked being lost better, especially lost with you. Is there much of a chance that this is a good thing?"

"Don't count on it. Right now, there's only one thing we can count on."

"What's that?"

"You and me, kid. That's it."

"Great! I'm still pregnant and you're on the waiting list for a three-day booze binge. Hurray for our side!" said Lynne Michelle. "I hope you have a clever plan. I hope you have a plan, period. I mean, have you got a clue what we're going to do?"

"I predict history will repeat itself. At least I hope it will."

"What does that mean?"

"I hope it means we are ready to successfully steal another patrol car and not get shot in the process."

She rolled her eyes in disbelief. "Jesus, Jack! When is our little crime spree ever going to end? When my kid is old enough to vote?"

"Hey. That's what I call positive thinking. Who could even imagine that we would live that long."

I explained to her what was going to happen, about the two cops coming in to help us pack up our stuff. I said it might not be easy because they had shotguns, but actually it went off like clockwork. Probably because they weren't expecting any trouble.

They knocked on the door, which we had already unlocked. Lynne Michelle called out for them to come in. I was sitting on the bed, hands in plain sight, smiling at them as they came in. Seeing me unarmed, obviously posing no threat, they just came in. They

sauntered in casually, shotguns resting on their shoulders.

They didn't look so casual when Lynne Michelle stepped out from behind the motel room door and put a pistol to the back of each of their heads. They looked the very opposite of casual.

I got up off the bed and took their shotguns and their holstered handguns as well.

"You guys must be nuts! Don't you know the heats off? You're both in the clear!" said one cop who had a naturally red face and an unnaturally large mustache.

"Funny how everybody says the heat is off, and yet I keep sweating, even when stripped down to my socks. Go figure that."

"You'll never get away with it," said the other cop who didn't look old enough to shave and must have read that in a manual one time somewhere on how to talk bad cop movie dialogue.

"You better hope I get away with it."

I emptied their shotguns and took the shells out of their handguns and then handed them back. I had a gun out now myself. I kept it in one hand and stacked a pile of my psuedo-Mexican attire on top of it. I was ready now for our trip to the patrol car.

"Just keep in mind, that this gun may make a mess of my laundry but it will do a lot worse if it hits you," I told them.

"Now what do we do?" asked the older of the two cops.

"Just what they told you to do on the radio. Help us pack up and carry our stuff to the patrol car. Then you'll get in front and we'll get in back and we'll just drive away like nothing is wrong."

"And if we don't cooperate?"

"Then that story about me killing two cops will be wrong."

"How's that?" said the cop with a mustache.

"Cause it'll be four cops and not two."

They seemed to find my speech convincing because they bustled around very energetically and gathered up all our stuff. Amazing how motivating the idea of a bullet in the head can be. Or even in the butt for that matter.

"I'm gonna hate to leave this place. It was just about the only place where I felt safe," said Lynne Michelle. We were all packed up and ready to go. We even took the leftover groceries. We let the cops carry everything except for the laundry in my arms to hide my gun.

"If a cheap motel on Santa Monica boulevard is the best that we can do, then we're really in trouble," I said. "The next place we land will be better, I promise you."

"I love that optimism. I mean the idea that we are going to land anywhere at all," she said as she held the motel room door open for our heavily burdened cop escort. "I mean, Jesus, here we are, stealing another patrol car."

It wasn't optimism. It was just something I hoped for but didn't hope for real hard. Of course, I wasn't going to tell her that. She probably needed the idea that we were gonna be safe somewhere and so did I.

The cops were grim faced and sullen. We made the trip out to the patrol car in silence. They opened the trunk and stowed our stuff inside. I noticed one looking off in the distance, and he started to raise his arm. I knew he meant to signal someone.

"If I were you," I said, keeping a tight smile on my face while I said it, "I'd ask myself if a bullet is a fair exchange for the satisfaction of making a hand signal?"

The cop's arm stiffened and he went pale. He nodded and came back around and opened the rear doors for Lynne Michelle and I. I was glad he was being cooperative. I wouldn't have actually shot them, but they didn't know that.

We got in the car, us in back and them in front.

The radio began crackling. "That's for us. Should we pick it up?"

I set aside the laundry so I could aim the gun better. "Hand it to me."

He handed back the speaker unit. I yanked and the cord tore out of the base. "Gee I'm real sorry. Guess I don't know my own strength."

"Hey!" said one cop, starting to protest but I nudged him with the gun barrel and he swallowed it.

"Where to?" said the red-faced cop, starting the engine.

"Just drive. I'll figure out where later."

Lynne Michelle stared at me. "That's a plan! Just drive!"

"Relax! Something is sure to occur to me."

"You know the radio not working and us not checking in is gonna make them suspicious. Also, if we don't go in the direction we're supposed to be going, they're gonna know something is up." said the driver, who was the one with the overlarge mustache. He pulled out onto Santa Monica Boulevard and speeded up until we matched the flow of traffic.

His partner looked at him like he was an idiot.

"Are you helping them or us? Why would you tell him that stuff?"

"You want to be in the middle of a shoot out? I don't. There's a swat team on call for these two. You want those bozos, the worst shots in LA, trying to pick and choose with automatic weapons? I mean, these clowns are going to get killed. I mean they're just asking for it. I mean look at them for chrissakes!" They both turned and looked back at us. We still were half Mexican, at least clothes wise, although my mustache and her wig were no longer items in our repertoire. Both cops shook their heads and the one who had been speaking, went on. "See what I mean. I just don't want to be dead by mistake along side of them."

"I like the idea that nobody gets dead. It would mess up my afternoon," I said, trying to be encouraging. Besides, we could use all the help we could get even from the people we were kidnapping.

Lynne Michelle piped up. "Besides it's so hard to get bloodstains out of car seat upholstery."

Both cops turned in their seats and looked back at her with a kind of stunned look. She smiled brightly at them and they both looked away quickly.

"I still say it's a mistake to help them," said the one who didn't shave.

I spoke to the one with the mustache. "Take the route we were supposed to take, at least for a little while. I'm grateful you're trying to cooperate. I need some time to think."

"Just don't take too long," warned the cop. "We already got a couple cars in motion behind us. Probably scrambled because they haven't heard from us on the radio."

"Do you have a plan yet?" said Lynne Michelle.

"I am planning to have a plan."

"Well plan to have a plan faster," she said. "This is getting ridiculous."

"If you shut up, I can plan faster."

"If you already had a plan, I wouldn't have to say anything."

"If you could stop getting in my face, I would have enough time to think of a plan. I can't think with you yattering at me!"

"Maybe you're just too stupid to think up a plan. Maybe it's just too complicated for you."

Both cops were turned around again in their seats, staring at us in disbelief. Apparently, our style as kidnapers and car thieves was throwing them for a loss.

"Will you just shut the hell up!" I was almost screaming at her.

"I will when you plan something!" she said crossing her arms angrily across her pregnancy. "I just can't depend on you for anything."

"Bitch!"

"Bastard!"

"Excuse me," said the cop who was driving.

"Listen. How the hell am I supposed to think when...."

"If you didn't drink, maybe you could figure out...."

"HEY! Knock it off you two!" said the cop behind the wheel.

We turned to look at him in surprise.

"Do you mind?" said Lynne Michelle huffily. "This doesn't concern you. Quit sticking your nose in."

"It does concern me," said the cop. "Cause there's two patrol cars behind us with their lights and sirens on. I think you ran out of time to plan a plan. I think it's already a bitched-up deal!"

We both turned and looked out the back window.

Kind of hard to miss the patrol cars. One right behind the other and both behind us. The sirens were whooping and the red and blue rooftop lights were flashing to beat merry hell. The cop car in the lead speeded up and pulled alongside of us. The cop inside motioned us to pull over.

"Now what do we do?" asked the driver.

"Pull over, you gotta pull over, Jake." That was the other cop. He turned and looked back at us with a smirk. "Ha. I knew you wouldn't get away with it."

"Shall I pull over?" The driver was looking back at me in the rear view mirror, and he was sweating. "Jesus. I got a wife and two kids."

"Pull a U turn," I said. "And then floor it."

"Huh?"

"You heard me. Do a U turn."

The cop took one hand off the wheel to adjust the mirror. I could tell from the way he was holding the wheel and from the way his hands shook on the frame of the mirror, that he wasn't going to do it.

Lynne Michelle half threw herself over the back of the front seat, gripped the wheel

and jerked it a vicious hard left. No mean trick for someone as pregnant as she was. She succeeded because it was so sudden and unsuspected.

The car fishtailed, almost went up on two wheels, bounced lightly off a parked car, caught the cop car that had been coming up along side of us a really solid blow against the front right side. Our car jerked as if hit by a major thunderbolt. We bounced around inside the car like human tennis balls.

For a second there, I thought we were going to go over. Smashing into the other cop car actually helped straighten us out. It was the other cop car, the one that had tried to pull up alongside us that lost the race with gravity.

The cop car we hit flipped up and went over on its side. The siren and lights went off suddenly as something shorted out. The car engine burst into flame.

There was a horrendous crunch of metal slapping metal and the other patrol car which also raced forward to overtake us, pan caked head on into the overturned one. The overturned car flipped over on its top from the impact.

The engine of the second patrol car lost its radiator in a cloud of steam, and the lights and siren also went dead. Both cars looked like last place in a demolition derby. We hurtled on past them. Inside the cars, four cops began the laborious process of climbing out the windows of their totaled patrol cars. They were alive but probably not happy about it.

The car door on the driver's side of our patrol car had a wacking great V in the middle of it and the glass in it was shattered. My head was sore from hitting the side window and the cop who hadn't been driving had a very sore nose from hitting the glove compartment face first.

The cop who didn't need a shave was holding the damaged bridge of his nose and staring at the scene of the wreckage with his mouth open. He pointed vaguely at the wrecked cars and almost confusedly waved goodbye at them.

I had a bruised rib or two where Lynne Michelle's feet had dug into me when she flopped around during the U turn. I guessed that we hit a max of 3 G's or thereabouts at the top of the U turn. I based this estimate on how hard her feet thumped into my chest. Probably, I would need to have my ribs taped but that was fun that could wait. Why is it there is always something painful about every likable thing she does for me?

The driver had got Lynne Michelle's hands off the wheel after a fairly rough struggle, and he had the car under control and going once again in the direction we had just come from. We went past the motel on Santa Monica Boulevard where we had been hiding out. Lynne Michelle was half in the front and half in the back and was trying not to be like that. The other cop helped her by putting his hand on her face and shoving. She didn't like it but she had been stuck on the backseat by her overbig belly like a beached whale and she probably needed the boost. I remember wistfully wishing I could have been the one who shoved her face. Just once.

Lynne Michelle flopped back into the back seat. She had a look of triumph on her face.

The car shimmied like a drunken moose on a skate board. The frame had taken a nasty jolt and the wheels were now badly unaligned. Our car was still drivable but it wobbled with arthritic abandon.

"I guess we did so get away with it!" said Lynne Michelle, leering triumphantly at the cop who had smirked at our chances. He was staring out the back window at the carnage. He seemed almost to be in mourning.

"It's superior planning. That's why it worked," I said, not wanting her to get all the credit.

"Planning hell! I'm the one that did it!" said Lynne Michelle.

"Well I thought of it," I said defensively.

"Big deal! What kind of plan is a four-word plan, make a U turn! Some big plan!"

"I didn't see you coming up with any..."

"I swear if you two jaybirds start another argument, I am gonna jump out of this car while its moving and take my chances," said the cop behind the wheel. He was still sweating. "You guys are making me nervous here."

"Sorry." I said. And I meant it. That damn woman drove me crazy at the worst times. Still, she sure swung a mean U turn, and I was proud of her.

"Now it's time for phase two of my plan."

"I'm holding my breath," muttered Lynne Michelle.

Actually, I did have a phase two. It hit me just like that. At first, I had a momentary thought about robbing a liquor store but decided that would help only me. To help us both, I advanced the full brilliance of my weighty and well considered plan.

"Turn the car around," I told the driver. "Take us where you were supposed to take us in the first place. I want you to drive us to see Sturdevant the lawyer."

The driver stared at me in the rear view mirror. The other cop turned in his seat and had the same kind of stunned look on his face when he saw the patrol cars meet their doom.

Lynne Michelle was the one who was really staring. Her mouth dropped open. Apparently, she was so stunned by the sheer genius of my plan that she was temporarily speechless.

"So now we get to see the guy who wants to see us, only they don't know we're coming. It's the last thing they'd expect us to do. I mean we ran away from this meeting, so this will be a very big surprise when we actually show up. I know it sounds strange but it kind of makes sense. If they had an unwelcoming committee waiting for us, it'll be elsewhere.

"This is your plan?" said Lynne Michelle. "Are you hiding a bottle I don't know about?"

I ignored her.

The cop who was driving shook his head and said to his partner. "It's got me beat. Just when you think they can't get any stupider, they come back with something even dumber!"

He turned into the parking lot of a fast food chain and turned the car around. He looked in the rear view mirror back at them and spoke. "Are you sure this is what you want me to do? It sounds nuts if you ask me, but then you both sound nuts so I suppose to you, this must make sense. Boy, do I need to get another job!" That last thought was delivered with heartfelt emotion. Our driver was not having the best time of his life. But then, who was these days?

"Explain it to me one more time," said Lynne Michelle. "We escaped a trap so we can go right back into it. Is that what I'm hearing?"

"Something like that," I agreed as the driver pulled back out into traffic and we began heading back the way we had come. "Sometimes you have to look stupid to be smart." Even that didn't sound right when I said it, but it must have been right or I wouldn't have said it. On the other hand, maybe I just badly needed a drink, and this was the result.

"If you don't mind," said the driver. "I'd rather turn at the next intersection and maybe go around, uh, the place where the patrols cars are wrecked. You know, in case there might be somebody there, and they might be pissed at you and if they see us, you know, maybe they'd want to shoot the hell out of us or something, that ok with you?"

"I love it when people show initiative. Good idea. I hadn't thought about that, but its probably the thing to do."

His partner muttered. "There you go again Jake. You're helping them."

"Christ! Somebody has to," said the cop. "They couldn't bust their way out of a paper bag."

"I appreciate all the help you've been with this kidnapping," I told the driver.

"Don't mention it. I certainly won't. I'm not putting any of this in a report," said the guy behind the wheel. "They'd never believe us for one thing, and they'd suspend our asses for another."

"Getting shot in the line of duty might be easier than trying to explain what happened," I said but this did not cheer up either one of them.

"It's worse when he talks, isn't it?" said the driver glumly.

"I think I have to pee," said Lynne Michelle. "Let's add that to the plan and I'll agree to it."

His younger partner was considering what the cop who was driving had said. He was too tired to do much else but nod yes in agreement but after Lynne Michelle spoke he added, "But not as bad as when they both talk."

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

The rest of the ride was uneventful. Unless we counted the number of places and times Lynne Michelle wanted to pull over and pee, which was under a hundred but just barely.

When we got to the point where one of the cops said to either shoot me or let her pee, we pulled over and Lynne Michelle ducked into a fast food joint. Forty-three incredible minutes later, she reemerged.

"If I had known she was gonna take this long...I'd have never...." said the cop sourly. Waiting for her had made us all nervous.

She opened the rear door and crawled in beside me. "I hurried," she said. "Boy, do I hate being rushed."

The cops stared at each other like two half drowned guys clinging to a very small piece of driftwood. "You know," said the one with the mustache. "I can't ever in my whole life remember a day as long as this."

"Or as stupid," said his partner.

"I have a theory," I said. "She pees one drop at a time and counts them all."

The cops stared at me.

"Shut up, Jack!" said Lynne Michelle.

We traveled in silence for a ways. The cop who was driving said, "What's going to happen to us, to my partner and me, when you get where you want to go?"

"Good question," said his partner. "Maybe we should time him on his answer."

"Uh, actually....I frankly hadn't thought that far ahead yet."

Lynne Michelle sighed. I could tell that she was thinking nasty thoughts. And she would have lots of them.

"You could just leave us in the car," said the cop who didn't shave. "We'd promise not to tell anyone where you are."

"Sure," said the driver. "That would work for me." His eyes studied me in the rear view mirror. "Maybe they want to handcuff us to something," he finally suggested. "I mean it would be better than," He gulped uncomfortably at the thought,. "let's say, knocking us out, or something like that." He was trying to be helpful.

"Quit helping them, damn it!" His partner was sore.

"Well, what ARE we going to do with them Jack?" asked Lynne Michelle.

"Quiet. I'm thinking."

"Ok, I got it," I said suddenly, not wanting to make this a long production.

I was aware that everybody was staring at me with not much confidence.

"Tell me how to get the rest of the way to where we're going?"

The driver pulled a clipboard off the dash and handed it back to me. "It's all written out there. Even the office number for Sturdevant."

I watched out the front window until I saw a dingy looking convenience market. "Pull over in that lot. Take the alley behind the store. This is where you guys get out."

"You mean you are actually going to let us go?" said the driver.

"Sure."

"Jack. This is crazy! You can't let them go!" Lynne Michelle was livid.

"Sure, he can lady," said the younger cop. "It's the smartest thing he ever thought of."

He was almost laughing. Apparently he thought my IQ was a few degrees below room temperature in Alaska.

The driver gave me no argument. He swung the patrol car off the street and aimed it for the alley. He was smiling like a cat with a key to the fish cannery. Even his non-shaving partner was looking more cheerful.

"Alright, everybody out," I said when the car came to a stop. We all got out and then I brought Lynne Michelle to stand beside me. The cops turned and faced us uncertainly.

I opened the front driver's door for Lynne Michelle. "You drive."

She got in and shook her head. She was convinced I had lost my mind. So was I.

The cops stood there awkwardly in the alley. They knew I was being stupid, and I could see it on their faces. They were just afraid I would smarten up enough to change my mind. There was a high wall behind the alley, and we were fairly well out of sight of the street.

I held the gun on the cops and motioned them to move back against the wall.

"Ok, you guys have been a lot of help. Move back a little more, that's it, stand next to that drain pipe," They stood warily beside the heavy iron pipe. I went on, "And because you've been so good about this whole thing, instead of knocking you out or something painful like that, I just want you to take off all your clothes."

"Huh?"

"C'mon you heard me. Quit stalling! Take off all your clothes, underwear too."

"You're nuts!" said the old cop with wild-eyed dismay. His partner's mouth was open like a two-car garage.

"Of course I am!" I waved the gun at them. "So are you gonna do it or are you gonna try and argue with someone who's certifiably crazy and has a gun?"

The older cop put his hand on the buttons of his shirt but still didn't do anything. He seemed to be thinking about it and was not happy with the thought. "He's got a point there," he finally admitted.

"You're not really going to do this, are you? I mean, he can't make us!" said the younger cop staring at his older partner as if looking for some kind of clue how to proceed. The younger cop looked like a cardiac arrest wasn't too far off.

"Do you really want to find out how crazy I am?"

Both cops stared at me and at my gun.

I jerked my thumb back at Lynne Michelle.

"I mean, look who I'm with."

They stared at her and suddenly both of their eyes crossed. It was like they were simultaneously hit in the head with a small hammer. Lynne Michelle was the clincher. Their hands began to fumble with their shirt buttons.

I called back to Lynne Michelle. "Ok, turn you head, this isn't going to be pretty." Their shirts were off and they started on their pants.

Lynne Michelle piped up, "I don't know about that. The short one might have a cute butt."

The younger cop went about sixteen shades of red, none of them particularly fetching. They were down to the underwear stage. Suddenly, with that just between them and naked, they got coy.

I went through their uniforms and got out their handcuffs. I tossed them a set. "Hear. Loop it through the drainpipe and then fasten one side on each of your wrists."

"And you had to help him!" said the young cop contemptuously. He slipped out of his underwear and stood there with his hands in front of his central goodie.

"It's better than being dead," said the old cop philosophically.

"Not by much. You're not going to think so when somebody finds us, and we got to explain how we got like this," said his partner bitterly.

"I don't suppose there is any other way, is there?" said the cop who was now dressed only in his mustache.

"I could shoot you," I said trying to be reasonable.

"It's tempting," said the older cop. "But then I got a family. I suppose I may want to see them again. The question is, will they want to see me?"

"Let's just hope whoever discovers you isn't the Channel 2 news team. There are times when it doesn't pay to advertise. This is probably one of them," I said.

They dutifully fastened themselves to the drainpipe with the handcuff. I gathered up their clothes and stuffed them into the patrol car.

"Why are we doing this, Jack?" asked Lynne Michelle.

"By the time two naked men explain who they are and what they are and why they are where they are, it will be too late for anybody to catch up with us. Trust me on this. It takes a long time for a naked guy, correction, two handcuffed naked guys, to get people to take their story seriously."

Lynne Michelle waved at them. "Take care, you two. I'll remember our time together always."

They hunched over, their one free hand strategically placed. Neither of them seemed in a mood to wave back.

I got in the patrol car. Lynne Michelle handed me the clipboard with the street directions and we drove away. I didn't look back at them. I had already seen enough of them.

"You know, Jack. You and I have some pretty strange times together."

"What do you mean by that?" I gave her a direction and she turned at the next

intersection to the right.

"I mean, look what we do on our first date together. Handcuffing naked cops to drainpipes is a personal world record for the strangest thing I ever did on a first date!"

"Who said this was a first date? Who said it was any kind of date? Are you out of your mind? Just drive!"

"Call it what you like. It sure feels like a first date," said Lynne Michelle.

I thought about that for a while.

Considering how crazy we both were, it probably was our first date.

It seems fitting that our second one would be with a lawyer.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Sturdevant's office wasn't hard to find. It was the entire fifth floor of a seven-story building. It was an overblown, tastelessly expensive architectural monstrosity. It was the kind of place God would have if he was a Fortune 500 company. It had all sorts of pseudo-art-deco flourishes and needless inlaid marble accoutrements that made it seem like the green room of the Roman Coliseum where the Christians waited to go on with the lion act. They even had elevator operators which consisted in our case of a dim blonde in a short skirt with most of her brains in her fingers.

I had scouted the lobby but there was nobody dangerous looking lurking around and I felt reassured. I didn't think anybody by now actually expected us to show up.

Lynne Michelle and I took the elevator. On the ride up, she held my hand. I smiled at her. She was nervous.

"Jesus, Jack, I'm jumping out of my skin. I hope this goes well."

"Relax. How bad can it be?" I had a suit full of guns but had no confidence in the outcome of this meeting unless I actually got to use them and even then I had no

confidence.

"He's a lawyer, isn't he?" she said. "I mean after we see him, am I gonna feel that life is just one big argument. I mean I've had it. I'm feeling a little, well, it's the stress. I'm wrapped too tight right now."

"Yeah. I see what you mean. Never mind relaxing. Besides I like you better tense."

"Have you ever seen me any other way?" She had a point there.

She did look more stressed than usual. Maybe it was because we were getting close to putting a face to the implacable enemy that had been chasing us. Maybe it was because we had been prey too long, pushed too hard with little chance to get much of our own back. Maybe it was just because she was pregnant and she was Lynne Michelle. Whatever it was, she was an explosion waiting to detonate.

We went through two double doors that were heavy enough to have come from a castle dungeon. It put us in a hallway that led to a second set of doors. We went through them and came upon yet another door.

"Maybe it's a maze," I said.

"Maybe we're rats trapped in it," agreed Lynne Michelle "But where is the cheese?"

We went through the last door and found out. The big cheese had a receptionist that even made me stagger. I was petrified on the spot and happy to be that way. She was way beyond pretty. She was sort of an expensively tailored beauty landslide. Call it a triumph of surgery or too much of the California dream, but the woman had parts that were designed to make every man want to apply a wrench to her and try to assemble her.

Lynne Michelle gave me a shot in the ribs hard enough to bring breakfast back up. It at least woke me up. I was actually almost capable of speech.

The receptionist was also smart and cool and kind of deadly, a kind of female land shark. She regarded us as something just a little less than carpet lint.

"I assume you do know you have to have an appointment?" she said in a tone that said

we better have one or else. She stared at Lynne Michelle's pregnant appearance with obvious distaste.

"We're here to see Sturdevant," said Lynne Michelle and she sounded like a cold shower. It was hate at first sight.

"Oh really," said the woman. "I rather doubt that. He's not scheduled to see any "clients". She put a sneer into the word, making it clear we couldn't possibly be classy enough to actually be clients of a guy like Sturdevant. "I'm afraid you have to come back some other time. I don't have any appointments for..."

"We do have an appointment," insisted Lynne Michelle. "My name is.."

"Oh please," said the woman, staring at her fingernails. Apparently they were perfect. She turned and looked at me with obvious sympathy, as if feeling sorry for me for being stuck with a loser like Lynne Michelle.

"Listen, I have a goddamn appointment!" Lynne Michelle was furious.

"Some people's wives...They get fat. They let themselves go and then..." She began with a rueful shake of her head. She patently ignored her and blinked her eyes seductively at me. "I'm sure she must be a real trial for you....," she began but she got interrupted.

Maybe I should have seen this coming, just because Lynne Michele was having a tough day or a long day, or maybe it was just that she was Lynne Michelle.

"Why you stuck-up little bitch! I'm not fat! I'm pregnant!" yelled Lynne Michelle and she went for her.

Lynne Michelle reached across the desk and got a handful of hair and yanked the receptionist half-way across her desk. The ultra-pretty one smacked down on the desk and beauty and dignity and haughty went right out the window.

Lynne Michelle banged her face twice against the desk.

"I...(bang)...have ...(bang)...an appointment!"

She used her hair like a handle and dragged her the rest of the way across her desk

until she somersaulted all the way over and landed flat on her back at our feet. Lynne Michelle still had a healthy grip on her hairstyle, but it no longer had any style.

Lynne Michelle yanked, and our disheveled receptionist was up on her feet. She might still have been beautiful but with one hand covering her aching nose and her hair doing a dance step on top of her head, it no longer seemed important.

"Let's pretend I made another appointment. Now take us to your boss," said Lynne Michelle. She was definitely showing signs of stress. Lynne Michelle spun her around and then shoved her in the direction of a heavy wooden door with Sturdevant's name on it.

"Who shall I say is....." The somewhat damaged receptionist managed to get out but Lynne Michelle opened the inner office door and gave her a solid kick that ruined the rest of her looks for the afternoon. The pretty one shot through the opened door like a cannon-shot Barbie doll and went flat on her face in the center of a very expensive office.

"Oh Jesus! I broke a nail!" moaned the receptionist.

"Leslie. Who are..." But then the short bald guy with a phone in each hand knew exactly who we were. He spoke into each phone. "Call you back, I hope." He hung up.

"You're late," he said and he looked positively ill.

"Late for what?" I said and indeed that seemed to be the question of questions.

Leslie pulled her face out of a thick Persian rug and said. "They just" She was almost in tears. She wailed, "And they didn't even have an appointment!"

"She's wrong. I think we were the only names on your dance card for today," said Lynne Michelle.

"Actually," said Sturdevant. "Oh, do please come in and take a seat. Leslie is quite right. You have no appointment with me. You were never actually supposed to make it all the way up here to the fifth floor."

"Ah." I said amazed at how calm Sturdevant was, considering I now had a gun out and

was pointing it in the general direction of his bald head.

"Oh, you don't need the gun. Nothing crude like that, I assure you. Really not." He spread his hands expansively. "Do sit down. I like eyes on a level. And let me point out, the fact that you were meant to be detained elsewhere does not connote a violent situation. Far from it. There was to be a meeting of the minds, so to speak. A time of suasion and reasoning. A sizable settlement offer in exchange for Lynne Michelle's signature on a number of documents. After which she would have been both financially rather well off and immune from any further grief of a violent nature, so to speak, and, of course, free to go."

He talked a lot but then he was a lawyer.

"And if she had felt no wish to sign those documents?" I said, looking for the worm in the apple.

"Ah!" said Sturdevant. And his only answer to that was a smile. He seemed to have too many teeth in his mouth.

Sturdevant undoubtedly knew exactly where the worm was and probably felt he owned the apple as well.

Leslie was up on her feet and beginning to edge toward the door, obviously planning an escape of some kind.

"Oh no, you don't," said Lynne Michelle. "You just park your butt on that rug and stay there."

"Do I have to take orders from..." she began but Sturdevant waved a cautionary finger at her.

Sturdevant said in a reasonable tone, "They do seem to have guns, Leslie. Just sit back and let them do whatever they want. I'm sure, they mean us no harm."

"I'm not going to sit on the floor like some kind of dog!" said Leslie.

"You want me to make you sit on the floor?" asked Lynne Michelle.

Leslie sat down rather abruptly. Apparently, she had had enough of Lynne Michelle.

I didn't sit down and neither did Lynne Michelle, so Sturdevant got up and came around his desk. It was a gesture meant to be calming, to bring us closer together. He was a hat size away from being a dwarf. His suit couldn't disguise the fact that he was short but it said he was short and rich. He smelled like a carton of Menthol cigarettes.

I kept the gun on him, which he pretended was either irrelevant or just something to be negotiated.

"Let's see what sort of deal we can work out here. I'm sure we can strike some note of accord here, short of guns." He actually laughed at the prospect of violence. "We are all reasonable people. We all want peace and an end to strife. Let me be the one to facilitate that. Let me be the one who brings us to a moment of conciliation. Can I get you some coffee or tea? Some cinnamon rolls perhaps or some fruit? Leslie? Could you phone Ruth and have them"

"We didn't come here to snack," said Lynne Michelle. "I don't like him, Jack. He's even slicker than I thought he would be. He's practically the Exxon Valdez oil spill."

"I assure you. There is nothing duplicitous about me." If lies were car washes, the whole room would be wet.

"What's the purpose of this settlement offer?"

"You're the one called Jack, the detective. Let me look at my desk, I have your last name written down somewhere." He started toward his desk. I motioned with the gun.

"Just stay where you are."

He shrugged and folded his arms across his chest.

"Whatever makes you comfortable. I'm glad you're here. I believe I can explain some things that will make you see our side of this unfortunate situation. I think you'll understand that the time has come to work for some kind of civilized and perfectly legal solution to what has become a..."

I crooked my finger at him, motioning him to come closer.

He leaned forward as if expecting me to whisper something to him.

That's when I hit him. I raked the gun barrel across his face, and he went over backwards and his head hit the front edge of his desk, and it probably hurt worse than the gun did. He sat on his back on the thick Persian rug.

When he could talk, which wasn't right away, he muttered, "What the hell's wrong with you! You goddamn dumb bastard! Why the hell did you hit me!"

"Cause we don't have time for speeches or bullshit. I got questions, you got answers. I thought we would just shorten the distance between them."

"There was no need for violence." said Sturdevant. "I'm a reasonable man. I...."

I put the business end of the gun against his knee cap.

"If you even cough, I will make you limp for the rest of your life."

He stared at me with real terror on his face.

"I will ask you a question. You will give me only one answer. Do you know what that one answer is?"

He shook his head.

"You will give me the right answer. If you get it wrong, you can kiss your kneecap goodbye."

"Is Julian behind all the attempts to kill Lynne Michelle?"

I could see the lie coming on his face so I thumbed back the hammer on the gun.

Leslie screamed and covered her eyes. "They're crazy! They're going to kill us both! Help! Help!"

"Shut up, stupid!" said Lynne Michelle. "I can't hear myself think."

"Help! Help!" Leslie was hysterical.

Lynne Michelle went behind the desk and scooped up a metal waste paper basket. She came around the desk and smashed it down over the receptionist's head. The muffled

screams continued unabated.

Lynne Michelle took both hands and clapped them violently against the outside of the wastebasket. The trash can rang like a church tower bell. She did this four or five times until it sounded like a mad bell ringer was loose in the room. This seemed to have an effect on the once beautiful receptionist. She fainted or something and fell over backwards and was mercifully quiet.

"Thanks," I said.

"I bang up the women, you shoot up the men. Equal division of labor," said Lynne Michelle, looking very pleased with herself.

"You're not actually going to shoot me, are you? I mean, not actually?" I guess he was over being scared and was back to arguing a case again. Some people are hard to convince or keep convinced.

So I shot him.

It was an accident. I forgot I had the hammer thumbed back. I was going to launch into an explanation that was going to convince him that I would so shoot him.

And my thumb slipped, and I won the argument by default.

He stared at me as if suddenly hell had opened up or the years at Harvard had been all in vain or maybe a little of both. Nothing in life had prepared him for this.

He whimpered and clutched at his ruined knee and I thought for a second there, he was going to cry. Instead he used every foul word he knew in English and some I'm not sure were even English.

I understood from this that he was not very happy.

"Well I seem to have shot you," I don't think he needed to hear it verbalized. I think the evidence had already brought in a verdict and it was beginning to drip on the carpet.

Absentmindedly, I lifted the gun until it appeared to be pointed at his other kneecap. He saw it and screamed. "No! Anything you want! I'll tell you anything you want! I'll tell

you every goddamn thing there is, just don't, fa chrissakes, shoot again! Please!"

It was the first time he ever sounded sincere. I guess it's what you have to do if you want a lawyer to really level with you. Probably there is a law against that. Probably a shame too.

"Well its against my nature, but from now on I think I'm gonna trust you," I said. "Now for the bottom line. Who's behind the attempt to kill Lynne Michelle. And why? It's Julian Bains Hawes isn't it?"

"No."

"Then who?" I was surprised. I stared at him like a prize moron.

"His son. His goddamn idiot twenty-three year old putz of a son, Julian Junior. That dumb yuppie bastard did this on his own. Julian had nothing to do with it except at the end. When he stepped in to try to clean up. I mean, it's a total screw up! Oh Jesus, my leg! It's starting to hurt."

"His son?"

"Shit yeah, are you deaf? Oh my, oh my, I need a doctor! That's why Julian got scared. He's not afraid of you personally. Just because you nailed the lightweights that Julian Junior put in the field, that wouldn't phase Julian. He's tougher than nails. He'd have eaten you alive if this had been his operation. He plays plenty rough. But he was afraid you'd come after his son, that you might get lucky and actually kill the little shit. So Julian came out to protect his son. Not that he's better off with him alive. Julian Junior ain't never going to amount to shit, you ask me, but what's the old man supposed to do, it's his only child, and blood is blood."

"Keep talking."

"I'm talking! I'm talking! I'm also bleeding all over the place! You got to get me to a doctor!"

"When we know what we need to know, you'll get help, right now, just keep talking."

"Look it's a big fortune but it's also a big family. There is too much dilution. Two many offspring of offspring, all covered in the trust funds. By the time you get it all parceled out, there's not all that big a piece of pie for Julian's generation. So when he learned about Lynne Michelle and the child, which added not one but two more inheritors to the list, he went nuts."

"This is what this is all about?" said Lynne Michelle. "Dilution? What kind of stupid reason is that?"

"I'm dying! I can't talk anymore."

"It could be worse. You could be bleeding from two kneecaps." I said.

That thought spurred him on to verbal eloquence.

"Ok. So Julian Junior works in the construction side, you know, proving to his father he's worthy which he isn't. Probably he handled some bribes and payoffs and dealt with some of the dirty side of construction, and it gave him some ideas. Feeble ones, but ideas none the less. So the brain dead putz recruits people, some crooked cops, some junkies, a couple of real freako's, I mean, we don't even know who all is involved here but it's a group of losers just in it for the money. This whole hare-brained operation is financed with Julian Junior's walk-around money. I mean, he was offering peanuts to put you away. Which is why everybody after you was so lousy. I mean, I probably pay more in tips to my hairstylist than Julian Junior was putting up to do you in."

"And her husband? He isn't behind it?"

"You should know that. Aren't you the one that killed him for her?"

"Says who?"

"Educated guess. Why else would you be in this if it weren't for the money."

"And why would I know it was even about money?"

"You had to know who he was. Why else would you be teamed up with her?"

"She didn't even know who he was. It was his big secret, even from her. She just didn't

know. Neither did I until this program was already up and running."

Sturdevant looked shocked. "You didn't kill him?"

"We thought he was the one trying to kill her. A box of poisoned chocolates was mailed to her supposedly by him after he disappeared. And we didn't find out who he really was until the cops told us. My friend on the force, lifted his fingerprints. It was a military fingerprint ID that the police computer matched. Otherwise, we wouldn't have ever known who he was."

"This doesn't make sense," said Sturdevant. "We were going on the assumption that you killed him."

"I'm just a hired bodyguard, after the fact, so to speak."

"You're more than that, Jack," said Lynne Michelle.

"Julian Junior swore up and down that you guys did Jason Ridley Hawes, her husband, in for the money. I mean, when Julian Senior blew the whistle on the operation, it was that explanation Julian Junior peddled, that you guys had already killed Jason Ridley Hawes for the money, that kept Julian Senior from kicking Junior's butt so high he'd have to take off in a jet to go to the bathroom."

"If we didn't and your side didn't, where is he?" I asked. "And why was he hiding under a different name and why was he supposed to be officially dead, answer me that?"

"He had some problems with one of the Dons, more specifically with one of the Don's underage daughters. It probably wasn't rape but she said it was. It's an insult that keeps right on insulting, long after the deed was done. Dead was the only acceptable apology. The family was in no mood to apologize. Friends of the family got to highly placed people in the military, arranged a period of forgetfulness. The Don was old, and his animosity, we hoped, would not go as a legacy to the next generation. It was an accommodation."

"Sort of a family version of the Federal Witness Protection Program," I said. "I guess

you can do that when you got enough money."

"We have more than enough money. At least for now. It's keeping it all in one place that is the hard part. That's what this is all about."

"So Julian is our friend or our enemy?"

"Both."

"He'd kill you if he could get away with it, but he doesn't want to risk his son's life in case the attempt is botched."

Lynne Michelle shook her head. "It sounds like a Mexican standoff."

And I added, "With both sides forced to drink the water."

"Was this a real settlement offer or an ambush?"

"Both. If you agreed to be bought off, I think he would have actually let you live. I can't...oh Jesus... the pain... I can't guarantee it. But I think if you allowed yourself to be bought off, he would have let it all die away. He's more eager to bury his son's mistakes than he is to bury you. That's how I see it."

He went lawyer on me again. "After all, you don't actually think a lawyer of my standing and reputation would lend himself to something that was so obviously a violation of common decency, a violent and illegal undertaking which I in no way....."

I wiggled the gun against his kneecap and he stopped arguing his lost case. He shut up so quick his lips must have got chapped from the friction.

The way we played this game of cards, a six gun beat a bar exam.

"You think the Dons killed my husband?"

"Who cares? I mean, get me to a goddamn doctor! I'm bleeding to death!"

"So what do we do now, Jack? Does the crime spree go on? Do we go after Julian Junior? Do we get bought off? What's next?"

"Why is it that I have to figure everything out? This is mostly all about you. Why don't you think of something"

"It's about Laura Jo too. It's about them trying to kill me. It's about both of us now."

I sighed. I hadn't forgotten. Laura Jo's death was a debt and an obligation.

Somebody would have to pay the debt.

"Just get me to a doctor!" said Sturdevant. "I won't press charges! Jesus! The family probably wouldn't let me anyway. They don't like bad press. And one of the heirs shooting the family....oooooh....the pain....shooting the family attorney....ooooh...Holy Mother, GET ME TO A DOCTOR!" Sturdevant passed out.

I liked him better unconscious but he was a little short on information that way. But then we'd got probably all the news we could stand from him anyway.

We parked him in the emergency room of LA County General Hospital with a note pinned to his expensive suit which said 'Please open before Christmas.'

"I can't believe you actually shot him Jack! I grant you he was a lawyer. But to actually shoot him?" said Lynne Michelle as we drove away in a taxi.

"Frankly, my finger slipped on the gun hammer. It was an accident."

Lynne Michelle looked disappointed. "I'll try not to think less of you. I'll try to forget you said that. I think I liked you better when you did it on purpose."

I suppose if I thought too much about lawyers like Sturdevant, I might feel the same way.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

We drove by Julian Bains Hawes's house in the taxi. But stopping wasn't an option. The outside of the house was crawling with enough armed guards to overthrow a small Caribbean nation. They had automatic weapons. They had shot guns and attack dogs. Julian Junior was probably home. It was a sure bet the guards were on board at the behest of Julian Senior because they looked like professionals, definitely not the kind of low

lives Junior had set loose on us. Just by the numbers Julian Senior was maybe overprotecting his off-spring. However it credited, the unwelcome mat had definitely been rolled out.

"That doesn't look good," said Lynne Michelle. "That looks like nobody wants to see us."

"You're wrong about the last part," I said watching out the cab window as we slowly cruised by. "They very much want to see us. Then they want to shoot us as soon as they do."

"I would guess that would be the part that doesn't look good. What do we do, Jack? How do we get into that house?"

I told the cab driver to take me to a phone booth. He had been regarding both of us suspiciously ever since we got into the cab. I guess we had hit most of the nightly newscasts and all of the papers. We were still dressed in the remnants of our former disguises. We hadn't had time to get anything else.

"We don't. Unless we get a couple platoons of Marines to clear a path, and I don't see that happening. I'll call Heywood. Maybe he has some ideas."

"Why don't you have some ideas?" she demanded to know.

"I got lots of them," I said defensively. "The trouble is, most of them will probably get us both shot."

The cabdriver kept the meter running while I called Heywood. He was not thrilled by either one of us. I caught the cabbie staring hostilely at me while I dialed police headquarters. It took a while to get through. It dragged out so long, I even had to put in more change to buy extra time. The upshot of my phone surfing was that Heywood was on suspension and not available. I was glad I hadn't given my name out when I asked for him. I knew his home number from memory.

Finally Heywood's cautious voice answered, "That you, Jack?"

"No. It's the pope. Of course, its me."

Lynne Michelle got out of the cab to stretch her legs. Her back had started aching, and she leaned against the back door of the cab, watching me carefully, trying to overhear my end of the conversation.

"Boy, you sure are an idiot, Jack!" Heywood sounded positively cheerful but then he didn't sound completely sober either. I'd guess half a bottle of something suspiciously like whiskey was contributing to his mood.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. I don't remember asking for..."

But Heywood kept right on rolling. "Jack, who's gonna square this one? You stole yet another patrol car! That's grand theft auto and Julian ain't there to fix it. You kidnapped two cops and that's not fixable by anyone. And hoo boy! The way you left them. You're lucky they didn't get discovered by a bunch of Hollywood funny boys. They would have probably been regarded as some kind of weird freako Christmas present. You aren't making any friends with LAPD, Jack!"

"So bust me for littering. I figured, two naked cops. What the hell! They were biodegradable!"

"So what am I supposed to do about this latest stuff? I mean, you don't expect all this stuff to go away, do you? They suspended my butt, pending an investigation into my relationship with you. I think they are thinking of an aiding and abetting charge. I'll be lucky to walk with my pension intact. Thanks a million, Jack!" He belched extravagantly from somewhere deep in his soul. He went on, "You know, I can't help you anymore."

"Ah, hell Heywood, then why not add it to Julian's bill. I mean, he fixed the other stuff, why not this too?"

"The wind shifted. Everything that was fixed is still fixed. But you are now an official mad dog. That's the latest word from Julian's camp."

"What does that mean?"

"It means what it always means when you have a mad dog. You shoot the damn thing!" He sounded relentlessly cheerful, but then he had whiskey and I didn't.

"They sound pissed."

"You wouldn't negotiate. You wouldn't settle. You also shot their lawyer. I'm not sure that's a crime, so we ain't adding that one to the list," Heywood roared at the evidence of his own wit. There was a gurgling sound before he continued. "But I got the feeling you disappointed Julian and he's not used to that."

"We had doubts about the other side's willingness to settle without using a gun to sign the contract."

"I probably would have had the same thoughts, Jack. But you're still screwed."

"We've been screwed ever since this whole thing began," I said.

"So why are you calling me? Trying to give my career another boost. The only way I can get demoted any lower is if they bust me down to Cub Scout. Want to screw up another barbecue for me? Thinking about giving yourself up?"

"I was going to ask you if you had any ideas."

"Huh? Boy, you really are chock full of nuts! Sure I got ideas. Like maybe you should just shoot yourself and save everybody one fat lot of trouble. How's that for an idea?"

"It lacks poetry."

Heywood laughed. "If its poetry you're looking for, you're talking to the wrong guy."

I sketched out the situation at Julian's house, describing in four-part harmony the armed guards, the automatic weapons and the attack dogs. I even gave him a detailed rundown on Sturdevant's spiel about who the real bad guy was, yuppie putz Julian Junior.

"So, why ask me? I mean, you want to get in that house and rattle Julian's cage. You want to put his son's head in a nutcracker and squeeze the bejesus out of him, but it don't sound doable. You aren't getting into that house unless they carry you in feet first or you crash an airplane through the roof."

"Can you help me?"

"You really abuse my friendship, Jack, you know that. You really push it beyond belief."

"I'm desperate Heywood."

"I'll drink to that. You are that indeed." Heywood seemed to be thinking about it. He swallowed more whiskey. The sound effects of his drinking was beginning to parch me. I felt a terrible thirst coming on, but I tried not to think about it.

I waited him out. He was a lot of things, a drunk like me, a guy marking time until retirement, but under it all, he had a first-class brain. If anybody could figure out an angle, he could.

"Ok Jack, but after this, if this works, this is the end of it. Whatever I owe you from the old days, it's paid off. You won't call me again. You understand, this is the last time, Jack?"

"Got you."

"You need a lever. What you need is an enemy of the enemy."

I didn't get him. It didn't make sense.

"Remember the other suspect. Brentwood Pierce Ridley Hawes. The hard-nosed Vietnam vet who got where he wanted to go on the bodies of almost everyone. Brentwood and Julian are bitter enemies. Fighting for control of some of the same family businesses. There is no love lost between Brentwood and Julian. Do you read me?"

I still didn't get it.

"That makes no sense."

"Sure it does. Lynne Michelle and her unborn passenger represent something to Brentwood. Proxy votes. They are shareholders if they are legitimate. I mean, that's what this is all about, taking control of the companies. What do you think was in the papers Julian was so hot for her to sign? Control Jack. It's all about control!"

"How would this guy Brentwood help us?"

"You can't get into the house without a tank and you don't have one. If you can't get in, get them to come to you. That's where Brentwood Hawes comes in. He can rig up something. Board of Director's meeting, some bullshit. You can't get inside where they are, but Brentwood helps you get them to come outside somewhere where you can get to them. Now, does it make sense?"

"But how would we get Brentwood to help us?"

"Sell him the votes to outmuscle Julian. Keep the money, hold onto the equity but let Brentwood Ridley Hawes vote that stuff to his heart's content."

"But wait a minute...if this guy is as big a shark as Julian is?"

"No question. You got to watch your ass with Brentwood too. But the thing is, if you can hand Brentwood something he needs to hammer Julian, he'll extend everything that Julian offered you and maybe more. Brentwood can get what he wants from you and he can nuke Julian. That makes you twice as fun to have and to hold."

"Like what can he get us?"

"He could make the new items on your rap sheet go away for starters. Brentwood could facilitate all kinds of things. If you want somebody dead to revenge Laura Jo, a guy like Brentwood Ridley Hawes would probably load the gun for you and help aim it. Understand, I'm not inquiring into your homicidal tendencies. I ain't aiding or abetting any more than I can help it but I am sorry about Laura Jo. If I haven't said it before, I give you my sympathies on that. You do what you got to do. If they use dirty cops and kill women, they earned whatever you do to them. But you didn't hear me say that, Jack. How does the whole thing play with you, Jack?"

"Jesus, Heywood! I hope this works!" I was riddled with doubts but what else did I have?

"Me too, Jack. Cause I don't think you can go the rest of the way without some help. I

don't think you can stay alive all that much longer on your own," said Heywood dourly.

"We ain't done all that bad so far." I felt defensive.

"If you call handcuffing cops in their birthday suits to drainpipes examples of your best work, you guys have really lost it," said Heywood.

"I did some things right. I mean, all the dead guys are on the other side of this deal so far."

"This ain't a time to get over-confident, Jack. Dumb luck don't last forever.

Brentwood Ridley Hawes is a tough bastard., a Marine and he still acts like a Marine. He's tougher than Julian. Brentwood's got big money behind him too. I say let Brentwood carry some of the freight and the two of you might just actually survive this mess. That's the best I can do for you."

Heywood told me how to find Brentwood Ridley Hawes.

Lynne Michelle tugged on my arm. She was frantic "The cabdriver used his radio and called the cops. He was trying to whisper but I heard him. He turned us in!"

"Oh Christ! Now we've had it!" I was still on the phone to Heywood. He caught the sudden note of alarm in my voice.

"Something wrong, Jack?" Heywood laughed.

"Plenty. Our cabdriver just radioed our location to the cops."

"Nobody loves you, Jack."

"Heywood, can we borrow your car?"

"I can't believe you're asking me. Is there anything in my life you don't intend to screw up? Maybe you want to date my wife too while you're at it?"

"We can't run very far, Heywood. She's....."

"Pregnant. Yeah, I know. She's pregnant," Heywood sighed so hard it must have made his teeth ache. "Where are you, Jack?"

I turned and looked down the street. I told Heywood the cross streets nearest us.

"Ok. Walk back one block to Hart street. Go west on Hart. There's a little bar called the Dugout. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'll pick you up there. Stay in a booth and try to look inconspicuous until I get there, ok? I'll drive your ass, but I ain't letting you borrow it. There ain't enough car insurance in the world to pay for what you'd probably do with it."

"I owe you big time."

"I don't have any excuses, Jack. I'm doing this and I'm sober. Well, maybe not completely sober but sober enough to know who I am without reading the labels on my underwear. When I get there, you pay me back by buying me enough booze to float the Queen Mary."

"Ain't you never heard that you shouldn't drink and drive?"

"Gosh no, Jack, it always worked for me. I'll be there in about half a bottle of gin. Just sit tight till you see me."

I hung up and went back to the taxicab. I showed the cab driver the gun. "If I count to three and you're still here, this is what I'm going to use to pay my fare."

"One." He floored it and was half way down the block before I could get to 'Two'.

I grabbed Lynne Michelle's arm. "C'mon there's a bar down the street a ways. Trust Heywood to know where every bar in LA is. We can hide out there until Heywood picks us up. Let's hurry. We don't have much time before the boys in blue show up."

We waddled off as fast as we could go. We went West on Hart street, moving as quickly as we could go. In the distance we heard sirens which made us renew our efforts. We went a tiny bit faster. We even ran, if a very pregnant woman and a broken down alcoholic detective wobbling arm in arm, are capable of running. We probably looked more like two dancing bears trying to tap-dance on a hot plate. Finally, we made it. The heavy wooden door slapped behind us, and we heard the whine of a police siren going booming by. It had been a near thing. Exhausted, we rested with our backs to the door,

trying to adjust our sun-dazed eyes to the gloom of the bar.

"What did Heywood say? Could he help us?" asked Lynne Michelle in between pants.

"He suggested that we send in the Marines."

She didn't believe me but when does she ever?

But that's just what we did.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

I had made the necessary phone call while waiting for Heywood to put in an appearance. The man I asked to speak to, Brentwood Riddely Hawes, was surprisingly reachable. When I gave my name there was at first no response, but mentioning Lynne Michelle's name, brought him to the phone almost immediately.

He was brusque and very direct. I outlined briefly what I had in mind.

He didn't want to discuss it on the phone and that made sense.

He was very tight with his words and very intense, like a hand grenade with a loose pin.

He put me on hold for a minute and a half, which was all the longer it took for him to set up a place for us to meet. He gave me precise instructions on how to get there and when to be there, and then he hung up without saying goodbye. He was an abrupt bastard.

Our departure was not as fast as I would have liked. It took us a while to pry Heywood out of the bar. He arrived drunk and insisted on getting drunker.

Lynne Michelle drove even though Heywood swore up and down that he was the only one who was going to drive his car. Heywood sat in the backseat and worked on a six pack of beer the bartender sold him. He meant to drive but the three or four steering wheels his car seemed to have confused him.

"So I can't figure this out. Heywood is on suspension. He may lose his pension. And

he's still helping us. What's wrong with him, other than the fact that he looks like an even bigger drunk than you are?" said Lynne Michelle looking back at him in the rear view mirror. Heywood appeared to be passed out.

"Ah. But he's a cop," I said.

"Does that explain anything?"

"Explains everything. LAPD's motto is 'to protect and serve'," said Heywood, proving that he was still in the conversation which surprised everyone, probably even himself.

I looked back at Heywood. He grinned at me. "Tell her why I do what I do. If you figure it out," he belched loudly, "be s-sure to splain it to me too."

I'd show him. I knew him better than he thought I did but then I've known him since God was a child. "He gets drunk because in his secret heart, he believes in justice and most of the time what he does isn't about justice. So when he gets his teeth in something, like you and me, the injustice rankles, and despite himself, he wants to try to make it right."

Lynne Michelle looked back at him again. "I guess he's a real friend."

"Probably the only one I ever had that I could count on."

"I wish we could help him somehow. I wish we could make it up to him," said Lynne Michelle.

"If Brentwood Ridley Hawes signs us up and rehabilitates us, wipes my rap sheet, takes the heat off you, he could help him too. When Brentwood's money buys us out from under, maybe he can smooth out the ruffled feathers Heywood raised so he can at least survive until his pension."

"S'good idea, Jack," said Heywood. "And maybe Brentwood can help you shake the tail we got riding our butts."

I turned and looked at the back window. I saw lots of cars. "Which one?"

"Tan Cadillac with two hard-looking guys about three cars back. Dya see it?"

"Yeah."

"Do I try to loose them?" asked Lynne Michelle, looking all too eager to rev up the engine and run with it.

"Hell no. If they stay back and only want to know where we go, it's not a problem. It may slow them up if they know we are going to Brentwood Ridley Hawes's corporate headquarters. It'll give them something to think about."

Cooperatively, the tan Cadillac stayed a couple cars back, pacing us in traffic. The two toughs in the Caddy gave no indication that they intended to make a move on us, just keeping us in sight. The driver had a cell phone and was obviously reporting in to somebody. He kept it to his ear the whole time they were behind us. I rode with a gun in one hand and kept another gun in my lap in case I needed it.

Heading for trouble with trouble following us, I had enough to worry about.

"Jack!" There was a note of urgency in Lynne Michelle's voice.

I raised the gun, ready to shoot. I knew it had to be trouble but I had no idea how bad it was gonna be until she spoke again.

"Jack. I have to pee."

Trouble that big can't be beat. So I let her.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The Luxar-Hawes building was the corporate headquarters of the companies that Brentwood Ridley Hawes controlled. We pulled up in front of the building and pulled into a parking spot marked for visitors. In my brief phone conversation with Brentwood back in the bar, he had picked this as the best place for all of us to meet. I wasn't too thrilled by the choice because it was definitely his turf but any meeting like this was bound to be on his terms anyway, so I just had to take it.

The two guys trailing us had other ideas about the meeting. They pulled into the parking lot, jumped out the car while it was still running, and came toward us with drawn guns. I had the driver's side door open when one of them snapped off a shot. He was too far away for the handgun he carried. A real pro wouldn't even have tried it. The bullet fell short, spanging harmlessly off the pavement.

About four guys came bolting out from behind parked cars. They had guns too and for a second there, it looked like a remake of the Shoot Out at the OK Corral. They opened fire at the guys who had been tailing us. It was good and effective shooting.

Both men went down. Not killed, that had been skillfully avoided, but with multiple gun shot wounds to the legs that made standing up an impossibility.

I didn't wait to see if there was going to be more mayhem. I hustled us out of Heywood's car, no mean feat with Heywood in alcohol nirvana and Lynne Michelle tired and pregnant. We headed at a half run, half waddle for the front entrance.

Six more guys came running out of the building with drawn guns. Before I could react, they went right past us like they didn't even see us and took up a defensive position behind us, covering our backs. Brentwood was protecting his assets.

Two security guards grabbed us at the front door and quick marched us across the lobby and put us in an elevator. One of them stepped inside with us and pushed a button for us.

"What's going on?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Don't know. All I know is, somebody topside ordered all the security guys we got down to cover the front of the building. We got everybody we can muster down here, with me and Jake in the lobby and everybody else out in the parking lot. Our instructions are to get you inside safely and sent up to the fifteenth floor. That's all I know."

We leaned against the back wall of the elevator as the doors began to close.

“Who the hell are you people anyway?” asked the guard, as the elevator went up.

I didn’t answer that one. I wasn’t sure who the hell we were. But I did have some hopes about who me might become.

The elevator opened on the tenth floor and a tall guy with gimlet eyes and a back stiff as a board got on. I thought he was another security guard. He rode up with us all the way and kept eyeing us as if we were a surprise package that might be a bomb.

We reached the fifteenth floor, and the man stepped to the side so we could get out. He was staring at us intently as we moved out into the hall.

The corridor went both ways, and there was nothing to indicate which way to go.

“Which way to Brentwood’s office? How do we find him?” Lynne Michelle was speaking to the security guards.

The tall man stepped out of the elevator and spoke. “I’m Brentwood Ridley Hawes.” He marched past us and went to the right. “If you’ll just follow me, I think we have something to discuss.”

We stared at him like three prize idiots.

“I wanted to get a look at you before you arrived. I wanted to get a sense of you before we began to talk,” said Brentwood without a trace of a smile on his face. “Come along. Let’s not waste time.”

With those words, he turned his back on us and walked away. We had no choice but to follow.

He took us not to his office but to a small boardroom. It was the kind of room used for staff meetings. Three people stood almost at attention at the far wall. Brentwood motioned to them, indicating that he wanted them to leave. They left quickly, jumping to obey.

“Take a seat,” commanded Brentwood. He remained standing at the head of the heavy oak conference table.

We sat down. I started to introduce ourselves, but he shook his head.

“Please. I am not a man for the amenities.” He identified me by my full name and Captain William Heywood of LAPD and did a short capsule description of both my career, such as it was, and Heywood’s. He had been well briefed. Brentwood paused before he went on to Lynne Michelle.

“And you my dear, as my lawyers are very prepared to show, are the legal wife of Jason Archibald Ridley Hawes, the Third. Your unborn child is the legal issue of that union and as such, has full entitlement and interest in a trust fund established back in 1957 and still very much in force today.”

“But.....” Lynne Michelle started to say.

“Let me talk. I think things will go quicker. I know a lot of things you don’t know.”

“Now, wait a minute,” I began, not too thrilled with his manner.

Brentwood cut me off. He was a man used to getting his own way.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” said Brentwood. “I helped your husband disappear. I helped him restart his life with the contrivance of highly placed friends in the military. I have always been aware of you, Mrs. Ridley Hawes, or should I say Gordon, as that was his perfectly legal cover name. His apparent death was an arrangement, shall we say, an imposture to facilitate a certain effect, namely, to rid him of the unwanted attentions of certain hostile individuals. I suspect his marriage to you was a contrivance as well, but that is not for me to say. Because of the unfortunate need to prevent disclosure, it was a marriage without our customary pre-nuptial agreement, a marriage I might add that is valid in California, which is a community property state. I should say that, almost without exception, that there would be such a document with any marriage to a member of our family. There is a certain cause and effect here which made this action necessary, but I see no reason at this time to disclose to you....”

“The Don’s daughter. Yeah, we know already,” I said, unable to resist.

Brentwood looked like his face had been slapped.

“I may have underestimated your resourcefulness,” said Brentwood.

Lynne Michelle spoke up proudly. “He shot a lawyer of Julian’s named Sturdevant. It made him positively chatty.”

“Ah. I would’ve liked to have been there for that.” Brentwood stared at me intently. There seemed to be something definitely approving in his glare, as if I had done something truly admirable. Maybe I should shoot more lawyers if it makes me more likable.

“You know that I had nothing to do with the attempts on your life?” He had turned his gaze to Lynne Michelle.

“Julian Baines Junior,” She said promptly.

I explained further, “We know he’s the solo pissant at the picnic, but now his father is in it to clean up the mess. So now maybe we have both of them to deal with.”

“Quite amazing! I would guess your survival is no accident. I have underestimated you all! You people have smarts and guts! I am pleased!” He looked thoughtful before he spoke again. “Are you aware that Junior’s actions, acting alone, were an idiotic attempt to help his father, Julian. You see, Julian and I are locked in a fairly fierce power struggle for control of a number of Ridley Hawes companies.”

“So we have been told,” I admitted. “Which is why we came to you.”

“Did you know I control the shareholder votes allotted to your husband? It was part of my deal, the price he paid in exchange for the new life I arranged for him. I have complete power of attorney over all of his accounts.”

“So if he’s dead?” asked Lynne Michelle.

“I would still be able to exercise the same options, if he’s dead or just missing. Nothing changes in that regard. What I don’t control, are the shareholder votes automatically assigned to you the day he married you by the trust, nor do I control the

eventual share of votes that will accrue to your newborn child. “ He smiled without any real warmth. “Perhaps, on this matter, we have mutual interests.”

I nodded and so did Lynne Michelle. Heywood was nodding too, but I doubted if was in response to anything.

“Let me tell you where I am,” said Brentwood. “And where you are, relative to me, Mrs. Gordon. My lawyers have the means and methods to establish your legitimate claims for you and your unborn child to the estate of Jason Archibald Ridley Hawes, the Third. You don’t happen to know where he is, do you? Because I certainly don’t.”

Lynne Michelle shook her head no.

“I had hoped you would know,” I said. “The way he left had all the earmarks of another arranged disappearance. Very much like the one that gave him the Gordon last name.”

“It’s a mystery to me, Mrs. Gordon. A most unpleasant mystery since I counted on him to cede me your proxy votes to keep Julian at bay, which until now, he had done surreptitiously.”

“If you don’t know where he is, why did he disappear?” asked Lynne Michelle.

“I don’t like the alternative possibility that the Don found him and that he is now where he will never be found again except by some hungry fish exploring something with cement on one end.” admitted Brentwood.

“I would like to know what happened to him,” said Lynne Michelle.

“We all would,” said Brentwood. “I do know this much. The Don, as of yesterday, was still sending men out to look for him. He wouldn’t do that if he already knew where he was. Still, I am troubled by the fact that your husband has made no attempt to contact me. Giving the Don’s actions, his disappearance may have some other explanation.”

“I could think of one,” I said. “Possibly two.”

“I’m listening,” said Brentwood.

“Julian Junior, for one. Maybe he had him killed. That would explain why he hasn’t contacted you.”

“That’s one explanation. And the other?”

“He thinks you betrayed him. If he fled because he thinks somebody is trying to kill him, he might suspect you. Wouldn’t you be a logical candidate to do something like that?” I said.

“Not a thought beyond the realm of possibility,” admitted Brentwood. “I pride myself on a certain amount of ferocity. It’s at least, conceivable, that he might think that.”

“I would give a lot to know, either way, “ said Brentwood. “You’re smarter than you look.” I guess he meant it as a compliment.

“You mentioned votes. I have votes, uh, proxies, I think you said,” asked Lynne Michelle. “Is there any money involved? I mean, what’s it...”

“Worth?” Brentwood finished her question for her. He shrugged and then looked coldly at first me and then at her. He hesitated briefly and then said rather casually as if it were a trifling sum, “About one hundred and eighty million dollars.”

Lynne Michelle’s mouth fell open.

Brentwood went on. “And the trust will grant your newborn child another sixty million. You’ll have control of those votes too, till he or she reaches a majority.”

“I would gladly allow you to vote those shares as you saw fit,” said Lynne Michelle, making our pitch. “In exchange, for any help you could give us.”

Brentwood smiled for the first time like he meant it. He almost beamed. “I do believe we have some basis for an understanding.” It was all he could do to keep himself from rubbing his hands together in glee and cackling.

He looked at each of us in turn, wincing a little when he looked at Heywood, who was still grandly pie-eyed.

“Your enemies, Julian and his son, Junior, are my enemies. I offer you complete

protection from harm. I can tender security and wealth commensurate with your status as a legally entitled member of the Ridley Hawes family.”

“And all I do is let you have my votes?” asked Lynne Michelle. Suddenly she was suspicious. “There isn’t a catch in there somewhere is there?”

“There is an abyss of a catch, but it’s not one you’re going to fall in. Trust me on this. With my lawyers help and contrivance, your cession of the proxies will be enough to destroy the business threat that Julian and Junior represent to me.”

Lynne Michelle looked at me. “What do you think?”

“I think you’re giving him a lot and he can afford to give you a lot in return.”

“Do you trust him?”

I shrugged. “You’re doing him a hundred and eighty million favor. He’s bound to be just a little bit grateful.”

“Indeed!” said Brentwood. He looked at us expectantly. “Do we have a deal along these lines, for your sake and the sake of your unborn child?”

Nobody said anything.

“Just tell me what you want,” said Brentwood finally in exasperation when the silence went on too long.

“I think we’re hoping to set a trap for Julian and his son. We hoped you could help us with that,” I said finally. Maybe we hadn’t figured it out completely.

“To what end?”

“Their end.” It made me shaky to say it, but I think it’s what I still hoped to do. “I think we are thinking dead.”

Brentwood looked dubious. “Revenge? You actually want somebody to die?”

“We want other things, all the protection and all that. A few things fixed that got broken along the way including a few laws, but yes, I think, at least for me, I think a little bit of blood ought to be shed somewhere along the way. I hope that’s not a deal breaker

for you.” I studied his face. He wasn’t fazed by anything I had said.

“Not at all,” said Brentwood, with the same expression on his face a great white shark has, just before lunch. “It’s almost an added inducement.”

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

I started out with a gun in my pocket but during the long wait for Brentwood’s attorneys to rig up the trap and assign votes , I managed to commandeer a very respectable bottle of 12 year old Jamison whiskey from an office bar in Brentwood’s office. I was like a guy who had climbed a mountain only to find a thousand other people had already been there before me. I needed a drink just to keep myself awake.

I know I shouldn’t have, but I managed to kill quite a bit of the bottle while Lynne Michelle was off in a corner signing what seemed like thousands of documents.

I willed myself not to drink but it seldom works.

At one point, Lynne Michelle came back into the room to see if I was hungry and almost caught me drinking. I managed to shove the bottle into my jacket pocket before she saw it.

As much as I told myself I had to revenge the death of Laura Jo, I was a lot less brave than I needed to be. I hoped the whiskey would help.

I put my gun in a desk drawer. Having it on me made me uncomfortable. Nobody had talked about what I meant to do. A trap was being laid, a snare to bring Julian and his son to us but nobody had worked out exactly how it was all supposed to go, least of all me.

Maybe I just meant to shoot them on sight. Ok, maybe not the old man, but the son, maybe I would just shoot him. I don’t think anybody but his father would have objected.

The whiskey had put me on edge. If the future held something fatal, it was between Junior and me and the whiskey.

Brentwood had other plans for Julian Senior. He called it his 'divide and vanquish' scenario. They weren't violent plans, but they were calculated to put a nail in Julian Senior's coffin in other ways. Brentwood set his snare very carefully. He made a pitch for Julian Senior first.

An hour later, Julian took his first step toward the abyss that Brentwood had said was part of the deal.

"Take a seat, Julian. I'm glad you could attend this special shareholder's meeting of Luxar-Hawes. I'd guess that you are no more thrilled about this threatened hostile takeover by Brixton-Lexmark Investors than I?" said Brentwood Pierce Ridley Hawes. Brentwood had an erect military bearing, a no-nonsense hair-cut clipped lawnmower style, and steel blue eyes that looked etched in glass. His face looked purposefully angry. Brentwood lied with remarkable grace.

Julian Bains Hawes looked like a well dressed bookie. His eyes looked perpetually pinched, his face bleak and forbidding. His eyes were as cold as bagged ice and he projected the personal warmth of a sanitary landfill.

He was dressed like a guy having millions of bucks is supposed to dress. A good suit could not make him handsome. If his face was a fish, somebody would have wanted to throw it back. Whereas Julian was a cold day in Siberia, Brentwood was a hot dusty day in Death Valley with a scorpion lurking somewhere about.

"This is bullshit! Utter bullshit! Nobody could possibly be launching a hostile bid! Somebody is..." Julian stopped.

He was staring at a blanket shrouded figure in a wheel chair sitting hunched over at the far end of the boardroom conference table. It was Lynne Michelle badly disguised as an invalid. I was beside her in a borrowed suit so tight I could barely breathe. Heywood sat on the other side of Lynne Michelle. He refused to wear the suit they gave him, more from being too drunk to understand the request than personal objection. He was wearing

a golf sweater with a cigarette burn in one sleeve and a pair of blue jeans that he probably painted his kitchen in. He wore a baseball cap turned around backwards and was absolutely gassed.

It had taken Brentwood Ridley Hawes's attorneys four hours to do the paperwork with Lynne Michelle but the trap took only a few phone calls to set up.

I think we looked more like soup kitchen attendees than stockholders.

Julian seemed to think so too.

"What's going on? What are you trying to pull? Who are these people?"

Brentwood pointed to each of us in turn and introduced us.

Julian's face went grayer than the hull of a submarine.

"What's the meaning of all this?"

Brentwood opened a briefcase sitting on the table in front of him. He took out a sheaf of papers, set it down, took out another stack and handed the second pile to Julian.

"These are your copies," said Brentwood with a phony smile.

"Copies of what?"

"Long term assignment of proxy voting rights. You'll see that my attorneys have drawn up an absolutely airtight agreement. The papers on the bottom of the stack establish Lynne Michelle Gordon as the legal spouse of Jason Ridley Hawes, the Third, her unborn child, the legal heir of Jason Ridley Hawes, the Third. As such, under the conditions of the trust, her legacy has been duly distributed. In exchange for a significant consideration and, I might add, the full protection I have tendered to her and her unborn child, and please take special heed of this part, Julian, an assignment of voting rights has been made in the following twenty three companies but rather than name them all, I suggest you read the list appended to the last page of the document."

Julian went white as winter. His hands shook as he took the document from Brentwood and then sat down hard in a plush leather chair. He looked stunned. His eyes

wildly ran over the document. He flipped the page and the alarm and dismay grew. He flipped another page and the rage and fury that flashed in his eyes were enough to power a small city in Iowa.

"You son of a bitch, Brentwood! You'll never get away with this!" he rasped. He raced through the other papers in the stack. His face looked like dirty snow.

"Do you think he's going to have a heart attack?" asked Lynne Michelle, throwing off the blankets and shawl that covered her head. She smiled at him. She was enjoying this.

"He's more the kind to give them than get them," I said but I was enjoying the devastation that seemed to be landing on Julian. "But one can always hope."

"But this..this..." Julian was incapable of speech.

"Gives me majority control of seventeen of the twenty three companies. Yes, Julian. A pity, really. Oh, by the way, each of those companies had a special board meeting via one hell of a conference call and voted you off the Board of Directors. I've taken the liberty of preparing your resignations." Brentwood passed a small stack of papers over to Julian. "I've filled them out with the usual gracious thank yous. All you need do is sign them. Of course if you elect not to sign them, you'll be fired. That might look bad on your resume, Julian. I mean, should you want another job somewhere, getting fired seventeen times is probably not going to help you much." Brentwood Ridley Hawes was enjoying this.

Julian leaned across the oblivious figure of Heywood and aimed his finger like a gun at Lynne Michelle. "You murderous bitch! You did this to me. You'll never get..."

Heywood grabbed the outstretched finger and tried to remove it. Julian screamed. The finger stayed attached but it was not from a lack of trying. Heywood grinned like an ape who caught the banana.

Brentwood laughed. I laughed too. Lynne Michelle looked at me askance.

"Are you going to let this bag of wind call me a bitch?" she demanded.

"Oh yeah. I forgot. That's my job," I turned to Julian, which was not easy in that suit.

"I'm the only one allowed to call her a bitch. So lay off already."

"Thanks," said Lynne Michelle. "I think."

Julian had his finger back and was reared back in his plush boardroom chair. He looked like a bomb that wanted to explode but had come out to play without its detonator. Angry did not begin to describe him.

"The goddamn game is over and I'm screwed," said Julian finally, his lips so tight it was a wonder any words got out at all.

"I suppose if I ran this by my attorneys..." began Julian with no hope.

Brentwood Ridley Hawes sneered. "By all means. Walk it, run it, eat it, and excrete it in front of them. It's going to come out the same every time."

"I'm not dead on this. You may have my ass in a sling but let me assure you..." But he was unable to think of anything to assure anybody of anything.

Brentwood shoved the resignation papers in front of Julian.

"Sign on the dotted line in the next five minutes, or I hit the press with how the mighty Julian Bains Hawes was fired from seventeen companies. And let me tell you, I have a list of reasons why you're being fired in each case that will lift the hair off your chest, if you even have hair on your chest, that is, which I very much doubt. I've been waiting for this a long time. About time, this whole corporate entity came under the control of somebody who has a real spine, a real backbone. No more of this bloodless candyass micromanagement. We're going to run a lean mean military machine, all American, top down and spit shined." Brentwood had the tone of an evangelist.

Julian stared at the stack of resignations. Then he shoved his hand inside his coat, reaching for something. Heywood thought he was going for a gun, and so did I. I reached for the gun I didn't have and my suit busted wide open in four or five places. So much for sartorial splendor.

Heywood pulled out a gun but his whiskey was showing its age and it's abundance.

He had the gun upside down. He tried to turn it over and it fell out of his hands and went under the table. He bent down to pick it up and his head smacked into the edge of the conference room table. He pitched forward out of his chair and went face first on the floor. If he had been sober, it probably would have hurt a lot, but in his condition, he probably thought he was still sitting in his chair.

Julian didn't seem to notice Heywood's actions. He came out of his suit with an expensive fountain pen, with inlaid pearl and gold. He unscrewed the cap and picked up the first resignation on the stack. He signed it and said, "That dumb bastard, Junior, is the one that did this to me. The shit for brains, no good piss-brained..."

The door to the boardroom opened and the object of his father's discussion came in with two hoods at his back.

Julian Junior had a smile and gun. His two thugs had a menacing look and even bigger guns.

Heywood stuck his head up over the edge of the conference table. He had the gun backwards in his hand, the business end of the gun aimed in the general vicinity of his forehead. His finger was on the trigger, and he looked as deadly as a butterfly in a power dive.

"It's a trap, father!" said Junior.

"No shit!" said his father disgustedly. He signed another resignation. He glared at his son with undisguised contempt.

"Well, it looks like we finally caught up to you. We got your asses now!" said Julian Junior who was even uglier than his father. I stood up. Now I was face to face with the man who had caused the death of Laura Jo. He looked like a guy too dumb to work the French fry basket in a fast food chain. He looked like a little boy's idea of a tough guy. He did not wear his twenty-three years of life with distinction. He was all neck, above that was a face like an unhealed blister and eyes like two overcooked blueberries in a bad

buttermilk pancake.

"Now, things are going to go my way! Now, I'm calling the shots!" said Junior and I think he meant shots literally because he waved the gun around. He didn't look smart enough to know which end of the gun shot bullets. At the moment, that put him about dead equal with Heywood.

"I've been hoping to meet you Junior. I owe you something," I said and Julian Senior looked over at me with sudden alarm. "And you owe me something."

"You must be the half-assed detective she hired. You caused me a lot of grief, but you won't anymore. Now your asses are grapes!" he crowed with triumph.

"It's the colorful language I love the most," said Lynne Michelle. "I think he's going to talk us to death."

His father sighed and reached for another resignation. "If your mother wasn't already dead, I'd kill her. It can't be possible that you are blood of my blood."

"Now, father, you just let me take care of this. I know we don't see eye to eye on a lot of things, but let me tell you, I have a handle on this."

"You're too late, Junior," said Brentwood Ridley Hawes.

"How you figure that?" said Junior sarcastically, waving the gun around like a badge of office.

Brentwood told him. He quoted chapter and verse and got specific about numbers and votes and which company was going where. Junior's eyes bulged as the story went on. When Brentwood capped it off with Julian's involuntary resignations and Junior eyeballed his father finishing up the last of the resignations, it finally began to sink into his feeble brain that all was not well.

"Is it true, father? Is this scumbag telling the truth?"

"Why didn't you just shoot me?" said his father. "You'd have done less damage."

"It's bullshit!" said Junior and his hand tightened on the gun. His two goons sensing

the tension in the room, came up on each side of him, their guns were trained on us. His thugs came in two sizes this time, large and extra-large. The large one was black as a night in hell and about as friendly. He had a knife scar from one ear to the corner of his mouth, and a shotgun that looked like it had seen some use. The extra-large one looked like the entire left side line of a professional football team. He looked like he ate more people than he killed, and the .44 magnum in his right hand looked like a toy. He had hands as big as basketballs and no light in his eyes and no expression on his face. For once, Junior had a couple killers on board who really looked like trouble. "Might is going to prevail. Anything his attorney's put together, ours can take apart. Especially if there are no surviving heirs but you and me, father. That's how I see it."

Brentwood Ridley Hawes laughed. "I pity you, Julian. He's even stupider than he looks. What you gonna do, kid? Are you gonna shoot everybody in the room?"

"Sure," said Junior and his eyes were cold as ashes. He raised the gun. Heywood was slowly standing up, his gun still pointed at his own head.

Julian fired, and the slug took Heywood high in the left shoulder and he went over backwards, hit solid. Heywood bounced off the plush chair back and slid sideways to the floor. The look of pain and surprise on his face not pretty to see.

Lynne Michelle screamed and tried to get out of her wheelchair. I moved toward her instinctively. She was pulling the lap blanket off frantically, and she looked up at me with a look of pleading and alarm on her face. I could see her absolute trust in me, and I felt helpless.

"Which one you want me to shoot?" The black guy smiled and raised his shotgun and trained it on me. I could feel the icy touch of death in the room.

"Wait a minute, Junior. There's something you forgot!" I said in desperation.

Everybody stared at me. I wondered what the hell it was Junior had forgot.

Now was the time for me to be a hero, but I couldn't move. I only ached for a drink.

My body wanted to be drunk. My only thoughts were of my great thirst and my failure. I was afraid to look at my hands. I knew they would shake if I tried to do anything. Not that I thought there was anything to do but die.

Julian's father rose up from his chair. "You stupid bastard. You just shot somebody. You just shot a cop! Are you out of your mind?"

"This is none of your concern, father."

"I absolutely forbid you to..."

"Shut up, father. I don't give a rat's ass what you forbid. Just stay out of this. If you don't want to get hurt accidentally, I'd suggest you move to the other side of the goddamn room! Move and shut up! You're old and slow and you've lost your edge, father! You just can't cut it anymore. If you could, you wouldn't have knuckled under, you wouldn't have signed those resignations!"

"You're an idiot! You're a brainless prick!" said his father. He turned to Brentwood. "What can I say, Brentwood? This is none of my doing. You know that. The kid is a freaking moron!" He moved away and stood against the far wall.

"Just so you know. Killing a cop is more trouble than I can make right," said his father.

"I don't care who I kill. Just so I win," said Junior, and there was a smile on his face. Heywood was crawling out from under the conference table, his ruined shoulder was bleeding profusely. He was half drunk and half pissed off and seriously wounded.

Heywood got up on his hands and knees and it was an effort. He had lost his gun and his baseball cap. He leered at Junior with bravado. "Just a flesh wound. I'm gonna tear your face off. Gonna have to shoot me better than that if you want to stop me." He weaved uncertainly in front of Junior, in no shape to do much damage to anyone. There was a large exit wound in his back and he was bleeding heavily.

"Happy to accommodate you," said Junior and he raised the pistol again.

Heywood knew what was going on, drunk as he was and looked directly at me with a smile on his face. "You tell my wife, Jack, how I bought it, if you survive." That was the Heywood I knew. He was the kind who would throw his ashes in his enemy's face.

Brentwood Ridley Hawes was up, eyes aflame with tension. He was in a combat mode, hands poised to handle weapons he did not have. The sudden violence had brought him fully alert. Brentwood was not going to go down without a fight.

The extra-large guy made a mistake. He held the gun out toward Brentwood. The gun barrel was close to Brentwood's head, too close.

The extra-large one spoke through the only two teeth he had. "You want I should pop this one?" Doing a complete sentence was obviously an effort for him.

"Sure. Indulge yourself," said Junior, himself taking aim. He glanced in Lynne Michelle's direction. He smiled at her. "You're next, sweetheart. And I want to do you myself. For a stupid woman, you sure caused me lots of grief. You should have been dead a long time ago."

"Jack!" Her voice broke, and the unvoiced belief in me broke my heart.

I had failed her. But then hadn't I always known that was what I was going to do.

Brentwood grabbed the gun arm and the .44 magnum held on him fired harmlessly into the ceiling. Brentwood was on the extra-large one, trying to climb his frame and keep the gun arm pinned and ineffective. Even for an ex-Marine, he was in for a battle it didn't look likely he would win. The guy he was taking on was too tough to take without weapons. He was so big, he was almost a force of nature.

Lynne Michelle moved. She tossed the lap blanket up and it came down over Junior's and the black guy's head, momentarily blinding them.

I moved then, probably too late, but at least I was no longer paralyzed.

I dove headlong toward them and the black guys shot gun blasted through the blanket, digging a hole in the floor. I was aware that I screamed, that I gave vent to the rage and

frustration pent up in my life.

The suddenness of my attack and my weight threw them off balance. We all crashed to the ground in a heap, me on top.

It was Junior I wanted. I meant to choke the life out of him. The black guy would probably kill me but I hoped to take Junior to hell with me as part of the price.

My hands were around Junior's neck, and Junior was trying to get the gun up when the stock of the shot gun slammed into the back of my head. The black guy had made a quick recovery. Stunned, I was knocked off Junior. I felt myself almost losing consciousness. The black guy was up on his feet, standing over me in triumph. He moved fast. He was smart and deadly.

The black guy smiled and turned the shot gun around. He put the end of the barrel against my face. "Say goodbye!" He said with a smile. His finger stroked the trigger.

Heywood's arms went around his neck, and Heywood jerked him away. The shotgun exploded inches from my head, almost deafening me. The blast caught Junior's other goon across the back and shoulder. He was so big the stinging shotgun pellets seemed to have no effect on him. He had Brentwood in a hammerlock with one massive arm and was crushing the life out of him like a human python.

Heywood was running. He had the black guy by the neck, and he bulled forward until they slammed through the heavy conference room doors. The shotgun was ripped away when they went through the doors, and Heywood's charge pushed them out into the hallway. Before the room doors closed I saw a weakening Heywood, smashing the black guy against the stairway door beside the elevators. The door burst open with the impact and Heywood and the black fell through the open door. Heywood was too drunk to know he was almost dead but he was going down fighting. He was the bravest son of a bitch I ever knew.

I tried to get up. Julian Senior was staring at everything that had happened with sick

fascination. Lynne Michelle was up and running. She swept past Junior and went out of the room.

Julian was up, white faced and out of breath. He stood there unsteadily, the gun aimed once again at me. He seemed dazed.

"You dumb bastard! If you've gotta try killing everybody, make sure you don't let the damn woman get away!" said Julian Senior. "Can't you get anything right? You dummy, she's getting away."

Julian responded to his father's voice and started to go after her and then remembered me. He turned back and snapped off a shot at me. It grazed my side and knocked me down. It was not a good hit, but Julian thought he killed me.

"Glad you're dead, smart ass," said Julian, and he fled in pursuit of Lynne Michelle.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

I got up. My side was on fire and I was bleeding but I was functional. I was more creased than wounded. Julian Senior stared at me with hatred and contempt.

"Not dead, huh? The kid just doesn't have it!" said Julian Senior grimly to himself.

I would have liked to smash his face, but my only thought was of Lynne Michelle. I didn't waste any time on him.

Brentwood was still gamely alive, still struggling mightily against the other goon. I came up beside them and kicked the big guy in the crotch. He folded up like a cheap accordion. Brentwood got his neck out from under his crushing grip and jabbed his fingers into the guy's face, going for the eyes.

It was all the help I had time to give him.

"Go on," Brentwood rasped, flailing at the big guy's face. "Stop him. I can handle this."

I had doubts that he could handle it, but I pushed open the conference room door. Junior was watching the white lit numbers over the elevator door. "The roof. She's on the roof!" I heard him say and then he was gone through the door marked stairs. I limped after him.

I ran like a drunk chasing the last living bartender in the world. I tried to fly up the stairs, but I was losing blood, and there was a little too much booze in me, and it was hard to breathe. I ran as hard as I could. I heard Junior's steps above me. He was out of shape. I was gaining on him. Still, I heard the door to the roof bang open and I knew I'd lost the race.

It was only when I burst through the rooftop door that I realized that I had come up without a gun. Heywood's gun was still on the floor of the conference room. And so was the black guy's shot gun. A sober man would have thought of that. My heart sank. I was gonna blow it again and she was counting on me.

On the roof, I saw Junior pacing along the west side of the building. I didn't see Lynne Michelle. There were very few places to hide, especially for someone as pregnant as Lynne Michelle, but she had gone to ground somewhere up there. Junior turned and saw me.

"You're a hard guy to kill, Jack."

"I'm funny that way."

"I know she's up here somewhere. You gotta gun, Jack?"

I held up my hands. "Call me irresponsible. But I forgot to bring one."

"You're not going to get out of this alive, Jack. I got more guys outside. I got guys waiting for you out front and in back. There's no need to try and drag this out. It's going to end up the same way. So call her out, Jack. Call the bimbo out and let's get this over with. I know she's here. Maybe I'd let you go. I could buy you off. Call her, Jack. Tell her to come out and let's get this over with."

"I'd rather be dead."

Junior was cheerful about it. He began walking toward me. "You will be, Jack." He raised the gun.

Lynne Michelle screamed. "Don't shoot him!"

Junior turned and looked towards the east edge of the building. Lynne Michelle was hiding inside the curve of the B of the L-B corporate sign. The orange glow of the sign eerily backlit her against the sky.

I started moving toward Junior. "You got enough bullets, Junior? You're gonna need them all for me. Maybe you won't have enough left for her. Maybe I'll get you first."

Junior looked alarmed and raised the gun and shot. The bullet scored the top of my shoulder. I winced but kept on walking.

"How many bullets you got left?"

Junior turned and raised the gun, aiming at Lynne Michelle. She ducked back down and the bullet slammed into the harshly lit corporate logo and the bottom of the brightly lit B went dark.

She screamed as bits of broken glass showered down on her. "Jack!"

"Are you ok?" I yelled at her.

"Yes. But Jack, go back! He'll kill you!"

"Get ready to run. Even if I don't get to him, I want you to make a run for it!", I called out to her.

"Go back! He'll kill you. You're acting crazy!"

"Do what I say! If the son of bitch kills me, I deserve to die. If I wasn't a drunk, I'd have a gun and he'd be dead now!" I meant it. It wasn't heroism. It was atonement. I figured he'd kill me. But it was the only thing that might give her a chance to get away. It was the last little bit I could do for her.

I ran toward Junior. He turned in a panic and shot again. I stumbled and slid sideways.

It probably saved my life. The bullet went screaming past where my head had been. I found it difficult to get back up. My side was an ache that was becoming unbearable. I felt faint. I stood up but found it difficult to walk. I stumbled a couple steps toward him.

"You missed, Junior." I smiled at him. I felt giddy. "One more bullet! Or is it two?"

Junior fumbled with the gun, trying to open the breech to see how many shots he had left.

"Better not stop to look!" I said, and I forced myself to stumble on towards him. "I may get to you before you find out."

He raised the gun, a look of terror on his face. "Stay right there!"

"I'm coming for you. You better make this shot count!" He couldn't possibly miss now. The shot came, and this time I couldn't get out of the way. It hit me mid-thigh and I went over backwards like a man who wasn't going to ever get up again. The impact rolled me out to the edge of the roof. One leg dangled out in space and I almost went over.

"You son of a bitch!" said Junior.

I raised myself up as far as I could go and began crawling toward him. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the ground far below. I had almost gone over the edge of the roof. My right arm and leg still dangled out into space. I tried to bring them back up on the roof. It was an effort. Any way now, bullet or falling, was a good way to die. But I had meant to take him with me.

"Goddamn it!" Junior was terrified. "Why don't you die!"

He ran toward me and put the gun to my head. Lynne Michelle screamed. I remember thinking she should be so busy running away that I shouldn't be hearing her scream. I closed my eyes in abject failure and waited for the end. The last thing I saw was her face outlined against the sky. It was a good last thing to see.

The hammer clicked on an empty cylinder.

Thrilled beyond words, I got my hand on him and pulled him down on top of me. His

body crossed mine and his head was over the edge of the roof. I rolled over and the upper half of his body suddenly dangled out over the edge of the building. I got one hand on his belt and one hand on his leg and I held him there.

Junior screamed. He tried to get his hands on me, tried to break away, but I was covered in my own blood, and he couldn't get a grip. I tilted his legs up and the front of his body edged down, below the surface of the roof.

"Let me go!" Junior dropped the gun and it was a long time falling before it hit the street below.

"You better think about it, Junior. If I do that, you'll die." I was dizzy and the strain of holding him was beginning to tell on me. I tried to uncurl my fingers, free them of his belt. I meant to let him go, to send him on to hell but my fingers were caught. I was afraid we would both go there together. I felt faint.

I turned my head and looked for her. Lynne Michelle was climbing down from the sign. She reached the roof and rushed toward me but somebody else was on the roof.

I felt the barrel of a gun in my back and turned my head back the other way. Julian was standing there with the shotgun.

"Don't let him drop, you bastard."

"He deserves to die," I said. "He had someone killed in my life who had more right to be alive than he ever will."

"He's my son, goddamn it. The only one I got. Bring him up."

"Go ahead and shoot me. That shotgun will blow us both off the roof."

Julian thought about it. He was a man used to having his own way.

"I'll shoot her if you drop him," said Julian desperately.

"Then they'll hang you. Anyway you do it, you lose. I thought you were a guy who only liked winning. Shoot that gun, and you lose twice," I said, and my arms were aching and I knew I was going to lose it soon.

"Ah the hell with it!" said Julian, and he dropped the shot gun abruptly. "Dump the son of a bitch! He cost me a bundle and the bastard'll never amount to spit anyway!"

"Father! Help me!" screamed Junior.

"Tough luck, kid. Nobody wants a loser in the family!" Julian walked away.

Lynne Michelle was beside me. She kicked the shotgun and it went skittering off the roof. She bent down and her hands got hold of Junior's legs, and she pulled back on him, taking the strain off me.

"Daddy! Daddy! SAVE ME!" It was the voice of a scared little kid.

"Are you going to let him go, Jack, for Laura Jo? You got the gun away from him. He's beat, Jack. He's finished, and everybody knows it. You do it if you have to, Jack, but you don't have to do it for me."

I looked at her face and the sweet ache in her eyes and suddenly I didn't know if I could do it. I looked at Julian. The kid's father seemed unconcerned, as if what was going to happen meant absolutely nothing to him. Maybe it didn't.

Junior didn't weigh much. Still my fingers were hurting. With Lynne Michelle helping me hold him, I had a little time to figure it out.

The rooftop door opened and Brentwood Ridley Hawes staggered out, a look of triumph on his battered face. Apparently, he had prevailed over the human ape.

He had Heywood's gun and he raced up to us, intent on continuing the fight.

He held the gun on Julian Senior. "Things don't look so good for you, Julian."

Brentwood saw Junior hanging out in space.

"Looks like there is gonna be a death in the family," said Brentwood.

Julian shrugged. "It's business. He screwed up. Now he pays."

"Are you going to drop him, Jack?" she asked me, and I think she already knew the answer.

I shook my head no. She put her hand on my mine. "I'm glad, Jack."

"He's just a stupid kid." I couldn't explain it any better than that, not with words. I was tired and confused and felt like I was dying inside. Revenge seemed too hard to get, too much to ask for. It was the last drink, the one that takes you a little too far over the edge. What the hell was wrong with this kid was what was wrong with the whole world. Somebody didn't love him enough growing up. Something bad would happen to him now, but I wasn't the one who'd pull the trigger.

Lynne Michelle spoke to Brentwood. "If Jack doesn't...if he just can't kill him, is there a way to put him out of harm's way?"

"Why wouldn't you kill him?" asked Brentwood. "I mean look what the little shit has done and tried to do? Why would you let him live?"

"Why Jack? He wants to know why?" asked Lynne Michelle.

Together she and I dragged him up on the roof. "Keep him covered. I don't trust him." I looked at Brentwood. He was another version of Julian, better but not by much. "I don't know why."

Lynne Michelle spoke up for me, for both of us maybe. "I thought I wanted him dead too. I was sure of it. But I think you're doing the right thing, Jack. I don't want us reduced to their level. I want to like us both when this is all over," said Lynne Michelle. "And I just want it to be over."

She'd said it better than I could. "And when it's over, I'd like a drink." I said. "If I don't bleed to death first."

"You drink too much, you lose your killer's instincts. You gotta go for blood in this world, or you don't make it." said Brentwood Ridley Hawes self-righteously.

"There are times when you can be glad you failed. This is probably one of them," I said. I had a vague ache for a drink, and a world of pain gnawing at me. I was tired. I looked at Julian and then over at his sorry failure of a son. "If killing is a cure, I don't want the disease."

Junior sat up abruptly, scrambling back from the edge of the roof. His hand went into his pocket rapidly. Maybe he had another gun, maybe it was a knife. Brentwood didn't wait to find out. He raised the gun and whacked him squarely on top of his head. It was a hard hit, and Junior went unconscious.

"The kids a total shit," said Brentwood.

Lynne Michelle pointed at Julian. "Well, look as his role model. Imagine trying to live up to somebody like Julian."

"Can you arrange something?" I asked wearily.

"I can get him hard prison time. I can sock him away in the military in a punishment battalion. I can pitch his ass so deep in a mental institution that he'll never see the light of day. Take your pick," said Brentwood Ridley Hawes.

I spoke to Julian, "You wouldn't put up a fight if we picked one of those things. You wouldn't get in the way of something like that?"

Julian waved his hands. "As long as it doesn't cost me any more money, I don't care what you want to do with him. He's a bad debt somebody ought to cancel."

Brentwood said, "You take him home, Julian. Keep him under lock and key until we get organized for him. Let him settle his affairs, but you figure he's going to be gone five years minimum."

"Sure, I guess I could do that," Julian suddenly got cagey, having lost but still willing to negotiate the surrender. "But what's in it for me?" said Julian. "It's my kid we're sweeping under the carpet here. Why should I play along?"

"I'll give you Teneltrex Industries. My equity in that. You sell me minority interest in Gensentech-Bosc. The kid pleads insanity with my lawyers defending him. Two cats pissing on the same turf doesn't make sense. I'll get mine. You go chase yours," said Brentwood.

"But why the hell would I...." began Julian but Brentwood interrupted him.

"There's enough in this train wreck your son caused to break the trust."

Julian suddenly looked very interested. "How you figure that?"

"It's a set up. The kid is looking good for murder one. He can go up for murder plus. There's a lot of charges he could be hit with. He played it stupid and left way too many witnesses for this thing to go away. He was sloppy, and everything is bound to come out, no matter how much money you shovel on it to bury it. So maybe we let them put his feet in the fire, the trust will be broken and we can fix it so he walks because he's clinically insane. We'll medicate him, run him past Judge Binyard who owes me big time. With my attorneys doing a number, it'll be a cakewalk. We'll declare him incompetent, and we'll lock him up somewhere nice and safe and padded for five years or until he gets some frigging sense. Julian, you get his voting shares of the stock. You'll get appointed his guardian." Brentwood was smiling like a cat who owned voting shares in a dairy.

Julian didn't even have to think about it. "I like it on the face of it. His trust shares will put me back in the game, give me almost as much as I lost when the bitch signed her stuff over to you."

"Lots of companies in the group for you to take on. I got the ones I want. You give me Gensentech-Bosc. You can use Teneltrex Industries as a base for taking a run at the rest of the companies we don't control. With his trust shares and proxies, it's a good deal. The family has, owns, or controls fifty eight companies. I only have use for seventeen of them. You want to take a run at the other companies, here's your chance. I just want you out of the seventeen I've just made deals on. Think about it, Julian. It's a smart play in the short run and a brilliant one over time. It's making lemonade out of your stupid lemon of a son."

"It would work just as well if he were dead," said Julian, staring at his son without favor. Julian had the cold dead eyes of a great white shark.

"Kill him yourself," I said, disgusted with the whole goddamn world. "I'm too busy

needing a drink."

Julian shrugged. Maybe he would have done it too, if we hadn't been there as witnesses. It was easy to see that he was fully capable of it.

"Let's get the hell out of here, Jack," said Lynne Michelle. "You need a doctor."

"I need two doctors." She helped me stand up, and I needed the help.

I spoke to Julian. "How'd you get here to this meeting? Did you drive?"

He stood over the unconscious body of his son. He stared at me curiously. "I got a limo parked at the side entrance. I drove it myself because my stupid driver had a dental appointment. Why do you ask?"

I put my hand into my pants pocket and pulled out the keys to Heywood's car. "Here. This is the keys to Heywood's Buick. Your son says he has men waiting out there for us in front and in back. Junior is in no shape to call them off. You take your son home in the car we came in. They see the two of you, they aren't going to open fire. Give us your limo keys."

"Are you sure this is necessary?" said Julian with a look of distaste on his face. Perhaps it was the idea of driving a Buick. "I don't like it."

"I probably got a dead friend downstairs. I want him to ride home in style. And I ain't in much better shape. Just do it, and shut up about it."

Brentwood smiled at Julian. He bent over and gathered up the still very knocked-out body of Junior and slung him over his shoulder. "I'll carry him out and tuck him into the car for you. He's no problem for me to carry him cause he's a"

"Lightweight, yeah, I know," said Julian with bad grace, and he and Brentwood started across the roof.

Brentwood called back to us as we began to limp along after them.

"You ok, lady? Can you get him down to the limo?"

"We'll make it," I said speaking for both of us. "But first we'll find my friend,

Heywood. I don't think he made it."

"I got some guys downstairs," said Brentwood Ridley Hawes. "I'll send them up to help you. Then I'll ride with you in the limo. There's some things we have to talk about, things we need to settle before we set up Junior for the big go-away."

"Are you ok? Should I send for an ambulance?" asked Lynne Michelle solicitously as we inched along.

"Walking is hard, talking is worse. Just get me to Heywood. I want to pay my final respects to him. He's the best damn friend I ever had."

"Is he?...Do you..?" She was half carrying me and she stopped talking and concentrated on keeping me from falling down. It was obvious she didn't want to ask if I thought Heywood was dead because she thought he was dead too.

"I think I'd have killed the kid as much for Heywood as I would have for Laura Jo," I said as we went through the rooftop door and started our laborious way down the stairs. "But Heywood was a cop right down to the bone. He wouldn't have liked it if I killed him. Not even to avenge his own death. He wanted justice but always upheld the law. Always. He was one hell of a human being."

"If he's...if he's dead, he died doing what he wanted to do. Still nobody should have to die that way. That poor man!" said Lynne Michelle. "Where do you think he is?"

"I figure we keep going down the stairs, past the floor where the conference room is, we'll find him. I think he took the guy with him when he went. We'll find them together dead in a heap at one of the stair landings, something like that." My heart ached as I said it. I was going to miss him.

We went down one landing in silence and then around the corner and down another flight. I was bleeding still, and I was getting weaker as we walked. It was hard for her to carry me. I knew I couldn't go much farther.

We past one floor beyond where we'd had the meeting with Julian, and Heywood was

there. Two ambulance attendants were loading him on a stretcher. He was wild eyed and triumphant.

The ambulance guys were trying to strap Heywood in, and he wasn't cooperating. It took both of them to get Heywood up on the stretcher, and even then he seemed ready to bolt away.

The black guy he'd been fighting was sprawled on the steps below them. His neck was bent in a way human necks aren't supposed to be bent, down with a definite case of dead. Heywood was very much alive.

"It took you long enough!" he roared when he saw us. "The bars open!"

"I stopped to wash my hands and to have my afternoon nap. Otherwise I would have been here sooner."

"He's alive!" said Lynne Michelle, and she suddenly began to cry.

"Of course I'm alive." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the dead black guy. "But he's a little bit saddle sore. I rode him down two flights, and I think that last turn was a little rough on him. I haven't heard him whinny in I don't know how long."

"As badly shot as you were, I thought you were a goner," I said.

"I've had cavities in my teeth that were bigger," bragged Heywood. He was obviously wacked out from a loss of blood. His eyes didn't seem to focus.

"I'm...I'm just glad you're ok." sniffed Lynne Michelle. She tried to stop crying, but the tears just kept falling unbidden from the corners of her eyes.

"No need to cry over me," said Heywood. "I'm just a tad too far from the drink cart on this plane, but by god, I had my seatbelt on, and the other guy didn't!" Heywood nodded in the direction of the dead black guy. "Always have a belt and buckle your belt, that's my motto." He stared up as if we had suddenly moved somewhere above him.

Heywood tried to climb off the stretcher. One of the attendants slammed him back on the stretcher. "Quit moving, will you? You aren't in any shape to move."

"Make that a double, bartender, and I'll go quietly." Heywood was very cheerfully undead.

One of the ambulance attendants, already fed up with trying to manhandle Heywood and get him strapped in, snickered sarcastically. "Fat chance of him dying. You can't kill this guy. He's pickled in alcohol."

"That's a fact," said Heywood cheerily, staring intently at his own nose. "Which reminds me, anybody got anything to drink? The service in here is lousy."

"Forget it," said the other ambulance guy. "As shot up as you are, it would just spill right out on the ground. Be a waste."

"Did we win?" asked Heywood. "And if we did, who's gonna be the first to buy me a drinkie? How about two big drinkies?"

"Sort of. And more so now that we know you aren't dead," I said. "We're more alive than some of them are. But we have more ouch per square inch."

"Well, just so you know. And this could be...important. These ambulance guys say there's a couple meatballs with guns hanging around the ambulance, waiting for you and Lynne Michelle. So this round of drinks is on me. I'll just take that drinkie now. Right." He seemed to be listening to a voice, perhaps a bartender only he could hear. "Maybe I'd better go down first and deal with them."

Heywood tried to look tough, but his eyes crossed, and he passed out.

"Is he going to be alright?" I asked, worried about the huge hole in Heywood's shoulder.

"He'll get his pension," said one of the ambulance guys, looking annoyed as he strapped an oxygen mask over Heywood's unconscious face. "And a fat lip if he don't stay on the damn gurney."

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

We watched from a window on the second floor. Brentwood Ridley Hawes dumped Junior in Heywood's car. There were a couple guys with suspicious bulges under their coats loitering around in front, keeping eagle eyes on Heywood's car. The ambulance loaded Heywood and drove away. Another guy with a gun had hung around the ambulance while it was loading. Junior had too many boyfriends.

The side entrance was clear. Brentwood had come back and checked it out for us. He helped Lynne Michelle half drag, half carry me down to the limo. Walking was getting harder. But the bleeding was subsiding a bit, either because I had completely run out of the stuff, or my heart had stopped, and I had died and I was just dreaming that I was in a limo.

"Its going to take a while before we can get rid of all of Junior's junkie shooters and armed psycho's. I have a crew of dependable men I'm sending in to disarm the current crop around the building, but it's going to take some time before we can get word out to call off the dogs," said Brentwood.

"Are we gonna be safe in this limo?" asked Lynne Michelle.

Brentwood nodded. "This is a private entrance. Nobody saw you get in. And with the tint, nobody can see in. You can ride away in comfort."

"He needs a doctor."

"I'm taking him to my personal physician. I've already called ahead. The clinic is open and a surgeon, one of the best, is ready and waiting for him. Trust me, I am going to take care of you both. You've done me a world of good, business wise. I want you to walk away happy from this. And we may need you to testify to make sure Junior gets nailed before we section 8 him into oblivion. Your health, believe me, is a subject of concern. You will be taken care of. Let me assure you, you have my full protection and aid."

"We're grateful."

"Don't be. The privilege of sticking it to Julian was all the thanks I need." Brentwood was exultant.

The driver of the limo was a burly guy big enough to jump over trees. He had a gun on the seat beside him and looked like he knew how to use it. We pulled out slowly into the street.

I could see Julian getting into the car. Two guys with guns, both Hispanic, were in a heated discussion about something. They kept pointing toward Heywood's car. They were very unhappy about something.

The limo pulled up even with Julian as got in Heywood's car. He saw us pull up and rolled down the window. Maybe Julian expected us to stop. Our driver sneered in Julian's direction and speeded up. Julian stared at us with enough hate to take the paint off our fenders.

I looked out the side mirror. Julian started Heywood's car. You could tell he hated being in such a cheap car. But, then, the kind of day he was having, he probably hated almost everything.

That's when it happened.

Heywood's car went supernova.

It rose up like an arrow shot at the sun on a fiery red fireball that looked like the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle. Nobody could have survived that blast. It was so massive and so huge, it destroyed two cars that were within thirty feet of it.

At Brentwood's shouted command, our limo driver jammed on the brakes, and we skidded to a stop. "Holy Christ!" said Brentwood. He flung open the limo doors and got out and began to trot back toward the massive fireball that had once been a Buick. There was a look of astonishment on Brentwood's face.

Lynne Michelle started to get out, but the limo driver put a big hand back across the

seat and pushed her back. "Better not. It's not safe out there," cautioned the driver.

"Brentwood's orders are I should protect you. Stay put."

It was said in a tone that brooked no argument. Lynne Michelle settled back against the seat.

"You two stay here. Don't get out." said the driver. He got out with the gun in his hand and trotted after Brentwood.

"They're both dead, aren't they, Jack?"

"Nobody walked away from that one. Junior really lost it for keeps this time. And he took his father with him. I don't think I'm going to miss either one of them."

"It's over, isn't it?"

"More over this way than it would have been if Junior got sent up and away." I thought about it. I was so tired, so very tired now. "You're safe. You really are safe now. And you're rich."

"I couldn't have made it without you, Jack."

"Now you can. My job is finished."

"Up on the roof, the way you kept walking toward him without a gun, and he just kept shooting at you! That was the bravest thing I ever saw! Why did you do something so crazy?"

"It didn't seem crazy at the time. I was supposed to die and you were supposed to run away. Neither thing happened. I wasn't thinking about being brave. I was just stupid the way a guy gets who drinks too much. All action, no thought, that's me."

"I'll never forget what you did for me, Jack. Nobody ever tried to give me as much as you did. Nobody ever will again. I won't ever, ever forget this, Jack!"

I felt embarrassed and dead tired. I wished I was unconscious. The tenderness and concern for me on her face were harder to face than Junior's gun.

Brentwood stuck his head back into the limo.

"This changes the dynamics of the thing," Brentwood Ridley Hawes said soberly.

Lynne Michelle stiffened, as if expecting bad news but Brentwood went on. "This is perfect for the two of you. I'll get the press in on this. I'll crucify Julian and his son both. I'll bury his side of the family. I'll get your friend Heywood reinstated. He'll be the fair-haired boy courtesy of me and my attorneys. Julian and son will get banged for everything in the book that Heywood can throw at them. We'll break the damn family trust seven ways to breakfast! Son of a bitch, this is absolutely the best thing that could happen! They can't defend themselves against these charges now that they are dead." Brentwood was incredibly cheerful about the sudden deaths in his family.

"Heywood deserves a promotion before he retires," I said wearily, tired of life, tired of Brentwood's omnipotent greed. In his own way, he was as bad as Julian.

"I guarantee it. Suspension canceled and promotion."

"You could buy him a new car too," suggested Lynne Michelle.

"Done. Any car, any price range," said Brentwood. "And 200,000 a year as a security consultant for one of my companies, effective the date of his retirement. Is that satisfactory?"

"It's...great," I said.

"Good!" snapped Brentwood curtly. "Then if you don't mind, I'll have my driver take you to the clinic. I need to get my attorneys on this. I got new papers for Lynne Michelle to sign. There's more money, more of everything, so incredibly much more, for her and for me. It looks like I am getting my seventeen companies and a whole group of companies I didn't even think I wanted. She gets a piece of all of that too. So I got work to do for all of us, but, frankly, this is one fire I just want to watch! It's such a cheerful damn blaze. What a god damn idiot Junior was! This is more fun than a wienie roast in hell!" He wasn't kidding. All he needed was marshmallows on a stick to complete his joy.

Brentwood shut the door and the limo driver got back in, and we drove away.

"You're rich. I mean really rich." I leaned back against the plush seats of the limo. I was tired to death.

"What am I going to do with all that money?"

"Pee every five minutes." I said. "I don't think money is going to change you all that much."

"Thank you, I think." Lynne Michelle looked worried.

"You don't need me anymore," I said. "My job is done."

"You're not getting away that easily. Besides you've only done half."

"What do you mean?"

"You still haven't found my husband. He's still missing."

"He's probably dead. I know how he feels," I touched my side to see how badly I was hit. It wasn't a serious wound but it hurt like hell. I put the other hand down to touch my right hip which also had taken a bullet. A clean in and out, not life threatening but painful as hell. I decided not to touch anything anymore. I was feeling dizzy.

He put her arm around me. She put her head next to mine and said, "Then I want to see him dead. If not dead, I want to divorce him."

"Sounds like a marriage in trouble," I said. I thought vaguely about kissing her. It's amazing how pretty a pregnant woman can look after you've been shot two or three times.

"We have to stay together. Until we find my husband, you've only done half your job," she said and there were tears in her eyes.

"It could take a while."

"I hope it takes a lifetime," she said. And then she kissed me. I was a little too shot up to get the full benefit, but I was just alive enough to be stirred up by that kind of thing. "Is it a deal, Jack? Will you stay with me?"

"I don't know what to say. Right now I'm hurting a little too much and sadly, I think I

need a drink."

"Do you think you could get over both of those things?" she asked and her voice was so forlorn and filled with longing that all the ice in me, seemed to melt.

"Maybe. If I had a reason." I was scared of all the things that suddenly seemed to be in my heart.

"Could I be your reason?"

I kissed her.

"Is that your answer?" she said, holding me.

I pulled back a bit, troubled. There were so many difficulties. I guess the look on her face made her think I had said no. But I was just thinking of the unavoidable fact.

"I can't be a father to your child. I don't think I know how," I said and felt ashamed that it might be true.

"You don't have to be, just be a friend to him," she said. I held her close.

"I can do that. I'd like that." It was scary but said like that, maybe it would be all right.

"What's going to happen to us?" she asked me, and the look in her eyes was a place I think I wanted to go.

"Is there an us?" I said and my heart ached to find a yes.

"I don't know." she said.

Life seemed suddenly worth living. I said what was in my heart, what had been there for a long time.

"Lets find out."