

FREE TO DIE

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Also by Bob McElwain

Fatal Games
Those Who Betray
Blackmail
Strike Terror
Take the Shot
Lethal Wind
Slaughter on Maple Street
Blowback

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*To the reader:
I hope you enjoy reading this tale
as much as I enjoyed writing it.*

CHAPTER 1 FRIDAY NIGHT

He'd never found a pattern to it. And he had no warning now. As fog off a river delta, it quietly enshrouds, lingers, and then drifts on. He was engulfed by a damp gray loneliness, the cries of childhood close to his lips. He was cold, too cold.

There was no fog here, only the Nevada desert. Although mountains blocked his view, he was gazing to the southwest in the direction of Los Angeles. The moon doubled his height in a shadow, blurring the tension in his broad shoulders and short neck.

When he could again taste the crisp, desert air, he took control of his eyes first; he focused on the horizon. The urge was strong to walk to where the bright, brilliant stars were within reach. Instead, he turned back toward the filling station, a sprawling blemish beside the old highway. To the north, light from Las Vegas was a dome of whiteness against the dark sky.

He walked carefully, avoiding broken car fragments abandoned to the desert wind and sand. Skeletons of dead vehicles were silhouetted by the moon. With the station lights off, darkness lent respectability, hiding the flaking paint and rusting walls of the building.

He stopped abruptly. Something wasn't right, but all he could grasp was the wrongness of it. He struggled to bring himself back, as if over a great distance. The station was completely dark. It shouldn't be. Jake couldn't be more than half finished with his nightly bookkeeping chores.

Moving quickly now, he picked his way silently around the far end of the building opposite the office. The side door to the service area was still open. At the doorway, he heard the muffled sounds of voices. He heard Jake moan. He drifted swiftly through the blackness toward the office, trying not to hear the old man's cry on each additional blow. But the sounds soiled the night, each a lonesome, keening wail.

“Hold the son’bitch higher,” a man demanded.

“Fuck it. This old fart won’t tell us nothin’.”

He felt in the darkness among the tools on the wall and picked an open-end wrench. It was eighteen inches long. It had the weight he needed.

“Old man,” said a third voice. “We got what ya was fixing to bank. We only need tomorrow’s cash. It ain’t worth dying for.”

He was close enough to hear Jake’s faint reply. “Christ. You got it all.”

“Hold the bastard. He’s slippin’,” the first man demanded.

“You’ll kill him, ya keep hitting like that,” the third man commented mildly.

“Fuckin’ right I will, if he don’t tell me right soon.”

As he moved toward the entrance of the office, he was careful to keep the heavy wrench away from the metal wall. In the moonlight filtered through the dusty office windows, he could see the man holding Jake and the larger one as he buried his fist in Jake’s gut. This time, Jake made no sound, sagging deeper into the grip of the man holding him. All he could see of the third man was the .38 revolver, pointed in the general direction of the action.

He took a guess at where the knees would be below the weapon, gripped the metal doorframe, and brought the wrench from behind him, powering it low through the doorway into the unseen man.

Bone breaking has a distinctive sound. He heard it now. He was inside the room before the beginnings of the man’s cry. The .38 fell to the floor as a scream of agony burst from his mouth. He paid no attention to the man or the .38; one whose knee has just been shattered does not think of weapons.

It was the startled face of the big man who’d been beating Jake that held his attention. He threw a slow, rolling, overhand punch at the man’s broad face with his left. As expected, the blow was blocked. The heavy wrench in his right hand crashed downward into bone above the left ear. The man dropped as if dead.

Swinging upward, almost as a continuation of the blow, he broke the jaw of the man holding Jake. Teeth flew and blood exploded from his mouth as he crumpled.

He grabbed the wrench through his shirt, hastily wiped it free of prints, then dropped it to the floor. Ignoring the harsh screams from the man holding his knee, he grabbed the phone and dialed. “I’m at Jake’s Service Station. Three fellas took his money and beat hell out of him.”

“May I have your name, sir?”

“Get the police and an ambulance. If you move it, Jake might make it. Can’t say about the other three.” He hung up. It wouldn’t take long. Las Vegas police respond swiftly and effectively; money-laden tourists are not to be disturbed.

After wiping down the phone, he gently picked up the old man and carried him outside. He laid him on the front seat of a car that had been propped against the station wall. “Oh, Christ, it hurts,” Jake murmured.

“Hang on. An ambulance is coming. And cops.”

“Your name’s not Fairchild, is it?”

“No.” He crouched on his heels, holding both the old man’s hands as if comforting a small child.

“Then you better get out of here.”

“Yeah.” Flashing red lights were moving toward them down the highway, not more than four or five minutes away. “What do you say, Jake? I left at eleven?”

“ ’Bout five after, as I recall.”

“Thanks, Jake.”

“Hell. It’s the least I . . .” The old man fainted.

He glanced at the office. The three men would keep. “Sorry as hell I didn’t get inside sooner,” he murmured softly to Jake.

Gently he eased the tired, bony hands down to the car seat, rose, then moved quickly off across the highway and on into the desert. It was more a trot than a run, a pace he could maintain for hours.

* * *

The Four Aces Motel had been passed by time and a new highway. There were no lights in any cottage as he approached from the rear,

but the moonlight helped. He picked his way cautiously through years of scattered debris, moving soundlessly in his heavy, steel-toed boots. Although his breathing was heavy after the fast three miles, it had slowed considerably during his final approach. Concerned about police at the moment, there were others he didn't want to meet.

A glance at the door showed the dead leaf he'd placed that morning was still there. He entered, closed the door and walked across the room to the scarred table beside the bed. When he turned on the small lamp, cockroaches scurried for cover. He hated to take the time, but escape from a city in the middle of a desert was not easy. The airport and bus terminal were out. And he'd never make it looking like Jake's mechanic. He removed his boots, stripped and stepped into the dingy shower stall.

He lathered quickly, paying particular attention to his coal-black hair, grimy from the undersides of cars. He used the towel briskly to erase the last of the desert grit.

His hands took more time. His short nails were easy to clean with the brush and cleanser. But he had to work with care around the quicks and knuckles. He wanted no sign of grease from the station.

As he worked, he thought of the old man. Jake was desert tough, but he'd taken a hard beating. He tried not to think of the three men he'd hit, but that only heightened the images. Sure, they would have killed Jake. But did they deserve crippling blows? Or death?

He slipped into clean clothes, his best shirt and slacks and laid his sport coat on the bed. He dusted off his black dress loafers with a towel, then tightly rolled what little remained and packed it into the carry-all bag. He wrapped the boots in a towel and slipped them inside. The Colt .45 auto-load was the last item tucked inside.

His plan was simple. He was known in Vegas as a poker player who won more often than not. He'd play long enough to hitch a ride out of town with someone leaving. The police would not be looking for him in the casinos.

He stepped once again into the bathroom, reached under the toilet tank, and stripped the heavy tape loose, freeing the money belt. Tightened around his waist, the belt was hidden by the drape of his shirt. As he slipped into his coat and reached for his bag, he saw the first hint of dawn through the dirty, dusty window.

He snapped off the light, walked to the door, opened it, then stopped abruptly. His wide mouth was a grim slash across his face. His wide-set gray eyes were expressionless.

The tall woman was leaning against the trunk of the nearly dead elm, holding her purse in both hands. Dangling rhinestone earrings accented her long neck. He decided the odd bulge in her purse was a pistol.

“Amanda sent me,” she said evenly in a low-pitched contralto. “I’m Josie Botsworth.”

“Why would Tom Fairchild interest either of you?” So far as he could tell, none of his tension showed in his easy, soft bass.

She shook her head. “You’re Brad Ashton and you’re wanted for murder.”

“Bounty hunter?” he asked, watching her long fingers holding the purse. Was it open?

“Sometimes,” she replied, holding his steady gaze. “Not at the moment.”

“Then what do you want?”

“To talk.”

“If I don’t want to?”

“I’ll leave.”

“Police?”

“No.”

He could see little of her eyes, but they were large and bright. Her nose was too big for her narrow face. There was an intriguing tautness about her. He couldn’t tell whether she was ready to run or attack.

“I’ve news from Amanda you should hear,” she said quietly, but emphatically.

“Tell me more about Amanda,” he demanded, probing for identification that can’t be put down on paper.

“You cost her two hundred and fifty thousand dollars when you skipped bail. That’s more than many in the bail bond business can afford.”

“You’re here to get it back?”

“I’m here because she loves you.”

The words jarred, stated so casually in the emptiness of the desert. They startled him; he’d never tried to put Amanda’s feelings for him into words, but those he’d just heard would do nicely.

“Did you know Sgt. Hank Walters was handling your case now?”

“No.” His surprise faded into memories of night patrols and the awesome, pounding throb of choppers overhead.

She stepped away from the tree toward him, stopping three feet away. He could smell her faint perfume and whatever she’d last used on her long black hair. “We’d be more comfortable inside.”

“Yeah.”

As he turned back into the small room, she followed. He dropped the bag on the bed and turned the light back on. He motioned to the worn overstuffed chair by the lamp and settled into the wooden chair by the small table.

When she sat down, he could see her more clearly in the forty watts fighting through the dust-encrusted lampshade. She wore a pale blue vest and matching skirt. Her long-sleeve, Jersey blouse invited attention. Both her face and neck were splattered with large sprawling freckles. He could see, now, her hair was streaked with dark red.

“Satisfied?” she asked, tossing her hair back over her shoulder.

“Sorry,” he said, feeling the blush in his cheeks. He saw the hint of a smile, quickly gone. “How’d you find me?” he asked.

“Amanda knows you play poker. She’s had friends keeping an eye out for you. Someone recognized you early last week in the Golden Nugget. She asked me to come over and keep track of you.”

“You’ve been on me over a week?”

“Every move.”

He hadn’t seen her; he’d had no hint anyone was interested in him. Respect for her skill added another dimension to his image of the tall, competent woman he faced.

“I stopped by Jake’s, hoping to catch you there.” For an instant, distaste clouded her features. “Perhaps we should be talking in my car while driving south out of Nevada. If you’re responsible for what happened, the police will be looking for you.”

“How’s Jake?”

“Sitting up when I left, talking about a god-like blond stranger who saved his life. Bruised ribs seem to be the extent of his injuries.”

“And the other three?”

“Do you care?”

“Yes.”

“Sorry. The question was uncalled for,” she said. “The paramedics said they’d live, but they looked dead or dying to me.”

“You don’t approve?”

“To be fair, perhaps you had to do what you did. But I don’t care for violence, even when it seems to solve problems.”

“Why are you carrying a pistol?”

“That’s a point, isn’t it?” Abruptly she snapped the purse closed and laid it on the table beside her. She clasped her hands and leaned forward on her elbows, shrinking the gap between them. “This business in Los Angeles, wouldn’t it be better to settle it? To put it behind you?”

“Yes,” he replied decisively. Hell. That was all of it. How to arrange it was the constant question. Nothing else could matter until he was free.

“When you were arrested for the murder of your brother-in-law, you ran; you couldn’t cope. The war and that Cong prison camp had ripped you apart.” She paused, searching for a clue in his eyes. “It’s different now. Obviously you’ve regained your health. You may have a good deal of uncertainty and some unanswered questions, but you’ve basically got things together. It’s time to go back.”

He made no reply as he combed his still damp hair back with his fingers.

“Everything is arranged. Sgt. Walters and your attorney took your case back to the District Attorney’s office. It took a week and

a meeting with Judge Tofler, but they came up with a deal. I checked; there aren't any strings."

"A deal? Strings? What are you talking about?"

"Your attorney promised you'd turn yourself in Sunday. Judge Tofler agreed to a hearing Monday and to reinstate bail. The District Attorney's office agreed to drop charges for lack of evidence."

His mouth opened, but there were no words.

"You'll receive a suspended sentence for skipping out. You'll be free. Don't take my word; call Amanda."

He tugged gently on an ear lobe. "All that evidence just went away?" His eyes called her a liar, but a ray of hope had begun to glimmer, screening him from murky, black fears.

"A lot of people saw you take Gerald's .45 away from him in the bar. Your ex-wife supported your statement that you went to bring home her drunken brother as a favor. But she claimed she saw you shoot him. You were arrested, spent the night in jail and then arraigned.

"You didn't ask for help, but Amanda found out somehow, and put up bail. She also asked Jeffery Walden to take your case.

"The day after you left, Lydia changed her story. She claimed she'd been misunderstood, that all she'd meant was the killer looked like you."

"What if Lydia changes her story again?"

"Weinberg would never allow a jury to believe a story in its third version." She studied his face, then asked, "Do you still have the .45 you took from Gerald?"

He nodded.

"You've friends in Los Angeles," she said, looking away. "They believe you're innocent." She turned back to face him, tossing her hair over her shoulder. "If it's the murder weapon, bury it. If not, turn it over to Sgt. Walters. They never found the gun." She met his gaze evenly.

"No need to bury it," he said. He liked the warmth that flooded into her eyes.

"Then we should leave."

He stood and began pacing, a hard restlessness in every step. He stopped, facing her, tugging gently on his ear. “It’s not that easy, Ms. Botsworth.”

“Josie is friendlier.”

“Josie, then.” He paused, gathering his thoughts. “It’s too good to be true.” He interrupted her reply with a slight lift of a hand and continued, “I believe what you said. At least I know you believe what you said.” He moved to the window and gazed out at the desert. The moon had gone down and the sun was beginning to brighten the sky. The morning breeze tossed faint, flickering light off the desert sage. He turned to face her.

“I grew up and trotted off to war with the idea our government was the finest possible. It’s different now. I know it’s the best on this planet, but it’s a crock. We’re being used and abused by a bunch of powerful greedy bastards.” His gray eyes were flat with disgust. “And our highly touted legal system? It flat-ass terrifies me. Walden had to wake that judge up twice in twenty minutes. Hell. I don’t mean any more to him than dust on a window sill.” Abruptly he resumed pacing.

“I can see why you might feel that way,” she said, “but it’s not that bad.”

He sat back down in the hard wooden chair, leaning toward her, struggling to still his body and his racing thoughts. He was silent for several moments. “To go back your way, to let them get their hands on me, that would be hard.”

“I know.”

“Even one night in a cell.” He shuddered. “Ever been in jail?”

She shook her head.

He looked away, out the dirty window. He was gone to a place far away, to an ever-present past. “They dropped me into a hole, then covered it over. There was no light, no sound, except from an occasional drop of water seeping through the ground above me.

“I counted five hundred and twenty-three drops before I lost count the first time.” When he turned toward her, his face was pale. “I’ve never believed it was only a month. I just don’t know if I can do it. The night I spent when they arrested me seemed like years.”

“You’re stronger now.”

“Maybe.” He allowed himself to get lost in her dark blue eyes. “If it goes wrong?”

“Walden says if it goes to trial, he’ll win easily.”

But what if something went wrong and Walden didn’t win? The chill in his back translated to an uncontrollable tremor in his hands.

The silence dragged on. Josie leaned back in the chair, waiting. Finally he said, “You’re very convincing.”

“It’s not difficult in this case. You’re an intelligent man; the facts speak for themselves.”

“Yeah.” He stood, slowly. “Maybe we best get going while those facts are real clear in my head.”

“You’re sure?” she asked, searching his face.

He nodded, reaching for his bag. She picked up her purse, turned out the light and walked toward the door. As he opened it for her, he knew she couldn’t see the icy grip of fear pinching his stomach. If she noticed the tremor in his hands, she didn’t comment. He followed her out, closing the door behind him. Stomping ruthlessly on fear, he fell in step beside her.

A black Pontiac Trans Am was parked beside the cottage next to his. “I feel a little better,” he said grinning. “At least I remember the car.”

She smiled, unlocked the door for him, moved to the other side and slid behind the wheel. He tossed his bag into the back seat as the car started with an authoritative roar. She drove carefully, dodging rocks and chuckholes. Once on the highway, the car quickly gathered speed. Two miles later, she turned off in front of an all-night coffee shop.

“I’d feel better if you called Amanda.” She didn’t look at him as she spoke. She looked straight ahead through the windshield.

“No need,” was all he said. He was rewarded with a dazzling smile. The powerful car leapt back onto the highway.

But her smile was undeserved. Right now he needed to get out of Nevada. He’d check with Amanda when he got to LA. If there was anything wrong, he’d split. In a crowd of ten million people, he knew how to lose himself in minutes.

He broke the long silence. “Are you really a bounty hunter?”

“I’m a licensed private investigator. Lately I’ve been spending a lot of time tracking down missing and runaway kids.

“But Amanda’s been good to me. When she needs me, I make sure I’m available.” Although there was little traffic, she kept her eyes on the road.

“Are you good at your work?”

“One of the best.”

“What’s your fee?”

“Three hundred a day plus expenses.”

“Kinda high.”

“I’m worth it.”

He smiled. He felt better for reasons he didn’t understand. The tremor in his hands was gone. It was more than the hope she’d brought. Maybe it was only the woman. Maybe it was because he was going back to sit down once again at the game he’d abandoned three years ago.

He gave up further speculation. His smile was replaced by a hardness in his eyes. He rubbed the slashing white scar on the palm of his hand with his left thumb. “I want to hire you,” he said softly, “to find the real killer.”

“That’s unrealistic.” She looked at him briefly, then back at the highway curving gently to the left. “It’s been three years. Give ten good people a year and they’d probably still come up with nothing. It would cost a fortune with virtually no hope of success.”

“I’ll get the money.”

“But why?”

“Charges dropped can be filed again. To be free, I’ve got to find the killer.”

“You’d be wasting money,” she said emphatically.

“Maybe.”

“I’ll do what’s needed to see that charges are dropped.” She met his hard look for a moment. “But that’s it.”

“Do you ever change your mind?”

“It happens,” she admitted curtly. “But it’s quite unlikely in this case.”

He noticed the set of her chin and the tightness of her lips. He leaned his head back in the seat, wondering what it would take to make it happen.

She handled the car with an easy grace and a minimum of wasted effort. And she was easy to look at. He closed his eyes to ease the brightness of the desert sun. The rumble of the heavy tires on the concrete highway was soothing.

* * *

Brad awoke from a fitful, dream-infested sleep when Josie stopped for gas in Victorville. Her face was drawn, her eyes reddened from strain and lack of sleep. When she got out to fill the tank, he got out and stretched.

“I can manage the rest of the way, if you like,” he said.

“That would be greatly appreciated,” she replied with a tired smile.

As he settled behind the wheel, she reached for an extra coat in the back seat, then used it as a pillow to cuddle against the door. For the rest of the trip, his attention was divided between driving, the woman sleeping beside him, and thoughts of what lay ahead. Should he go through with it? But he knew there was no real choice.

Every patrol he'd ever led was routine, so they'd said as he had prepared to leave. But far too many had become grisly, deadly affairs. Josie Botsworth had not lied. But he knew the true nature of fact. He wondered what would go wrong. He shoved the accelerator down and the car charged more swiftly down the sun-bleached highway.

CHAPTER 2 SUNDAY

The cell was a few inches over six by eight feet. There was a lowered corner in the smooth concrete floor with a drain. The fluorescent light was even and bright; there were no shadows even behind the white, bright, seatless toilet. The two-foot bunk was the only other feature. There were nine steel bars in the door, with six more on either side. The three-inch bolt was electrically operated from outside the cellblock. He tried to ignore the dull gleam of the bars.

He concentrated on taking slow even breaths, as he lay full length on the bunk. He listened for the crashing splat of a drop of water on damp, gray clay, but he could hear it only in memory. He had covered his eyes with an arm, but it did not dim the brightness much. It was a constant battle to subdue fear. He tried desperately to think of Josie, to keep her image before him as a symbol, as a sufficient reason for being here.

He remembered the way her dress had inched up her thigh as she had dozed while he'd driven across the desert. The traffic of the city had awakened her. Following her directions, he had pulled up in front of the Holiday Inn on Roscoe Boulevard, just east of the San Diego Freeway in the San Fernando Valley.

Inside the hotel, he had discovered Amanda Pothmore had a great deal of confidence in Ms. Botsworth. She'd reserved the room for a week.

The door opened into a nicely appointed sitting area. The bed was beyond the furniture, tucked against the back wall beside a well-appointed roomy bath. To the left was a small kitchenette.

After the quick tour, Josie had opened a cabinet in the kitchen and pointed to a bottle of Wild Turkey. "Compliments of Amanda," she had said with a smile. "Get some rest. I'll reserve a table for us downstairs at seven. Amanda will join us; she's anxious to see you."

When Brad had nodded approval, Josie had smiled encouragingly, then left. The room had become suddenly empty.

Later he had settled in at the small table at the window with a drink and gazed out at the city. He had never been good at waiting; he wasn't doing better now. As he had often done, he had tried to focus on things he might do once he was free. But as always, he had become distracted, wondering if it would ever happen.

* * *

Dinner had been macro-managed by Amanda Pothmore. She had dominated all with her cheery confidence. Josie had smiled a lot, but she hadn't said much, other than to support Amanda. Their certainty that all was well had boosted Brad's hopes. He had been able to hold up his end of the chatter with a lightness that surprised him.

But when the door to his room had closed behind him, the confidence both had shared with him evaporated. He hadn't gotten to sleep until nearly dawn.

* * *

Sunday, promptly at eleven as agreed, Amanda had gotten another hug. Walden had said little beyond a succinct review of the case. All three had driven downtown where Brad had formally turned himself in to Sgt. Hank Walters.

It had been a homecoming of sorts. Their handshake had been firm and Hank had seemed uninterested in releasing Brad's arm. They had grinned a lot, often foolishly. They had talked as long as they could, delaying what must come. Finally Brad had stood; it was time. With a brief nod of acceptance, Hank had risen and led the way downstairs.

He had stayed with Brad throughout the booking procedure, easing the sense of degradation. He had made sure the booking officer used "Mr. Ashton" in the proper way, "Just like with any VIP." He'd even lingered a long while in the cell.

Brad refused to guess how long he'd been alone or how long he'd be alone. The strong scents of disinfectants and detergents

were as grating on his senses as the brightness of the constant lights. Even with his eyes closed, images of black steel bars interrupted scurrying thoughts. He wondered if this was as bad as it would get. What would a year of nights like this one add up to? What if it turned out to be five years? Or fifteen?

He had dozed, on and off. Each time he had come awake, he'd had to take firm control, steadying his breathing to a slow even rate. He had managed to keep the cell walls from closing in. It was progress of sorts, something he'd been unable to do before.

When the cell door clanged open, he awoke with a start to see Hank facing him, smiling. Brad couldn't remember a more welcome sight. With Hank at his side, he showered, shaved and dressed quickly.

Together they had faced countless terrors of which death was possibly the least; they had never talked of these things. Now they spoke only of girls, cards and who really owed how many smokes. This last matter was of critical importance since neither man smoked.

Side by side, in step, they walked into the courtroom.

CHAPTER 3 MONDAY

“Judge Tofler, the Vietnam war has marred this nation deeply.” Jeffery Walden was persuasive. As Brad remembered, the judge was nodding; he was making no effort to hide his boredom. Walden straightened his perfectly positioned tie, settled his coat on his shoulders with an elegant shrug and continued, “But what concerns us here is the impact of that war on the individual soldier who fought it.”

Walden was a dynamic force in the courtroom. His slight stature was lost to those listening. Alone at the defense table, Brad loosened his new tie; it felt foreign, restrictive. He wanted to walk out, despite the two armed marshals.

He looked around the room. Most were concerned about other items on the court’s agenda. A few were curious, perhaps drawn by the magic of Walden’s presentation. Sgt. Hank sat behind the rail near the prosecutor’s table. He caught Brad’s glance; whatever concern he felt was carefully hidden behind his nearly black eyes. His coarse blond hair contrasted nicely with his light green sport coat. He pointed his thumb to the ceiling as if to say, “So far, so good,” then turned his attention back to the judge.

Brad knew that Amanda and Josie, seated behind him, were listening carefully. He tried to ignore the trickles of fear, to concentrate on what Walden was saying. He wished the judge would do the same.

“You have his war record before you. The patrols he led were extremely effective. Night after night, Lt. Ashton and a few selected men, vastly outnumbered, fought a deadly guerilla war. The medals and citations he received are ample evidence of his success.”

Weinberg paused, considering his next point. The judge looked up as if suddenly remembering where he was. “As a prisoner of war, Lt. Ashton faced a different kind of war for two years. The record shows he fought these battles equally well, with great personal

courage. The record does not show the impact of violence, treachery and torture on the individual man. We must—”

“Mr. Walden,” interrupted Judge Tofler with a sleepy nod, “that will be sufficient for now. Bail is hereby reinstated.” Brad breathed deeply; it felt good. The drama was unfolding according to the script. At least Amanda would get her money back.

“As to the charge of flight to avoid prosecution,” Judge Tofler continued, his sleepy voice barely audible, “does anyone have anything to say?”

He glanced toward the prosecutor’s table and mumbled, “Ninety days. Suspended.” He rapped his gavel lightly and continued, still gazing at the prosecution’s table, “I believe, Mr. Danielson, you have something to say.”

Mr. Danielson rose, trim and neatly groomed in a gray three-piece suit. “I presume you’re referring to an earlier discussion of dropping charges?”

The judge scowled darkly, studying the man suspiciously. He spoke bluntly. “I was not speaking of a discussion, but of an agreement.”

“My office would like additional time to study the matter, your Honor. We’re not prepared to dismiss at this time. We’re not—”

“You’re not what?” interrupted Judge Tofler, totally awake now.

Brad didn’t hear what was said. He was dealing with a personal earthquake of a magnitude immeasurable on any scale. His grip on the arms of his chair turned his knuckles white. The trickles of fear had become waves, thundering and pounding at every part of his being. Everyone had told him he’d be free today. They were wrong. He turned slowly and studied their faces.

Josie was puzzled, her brow furrowed in concentration. Amanda was plainly worried. The judge became increasingly angry as the dialogue continued. Only his attorney, Jeffery Walden, seemed undisturbed. Sgt. Hank leaned well forward, arms on the railing, his dark eyes expressionless as they darted between the judge and prosecutor.

Brad’s attention was drawn to a man he hadn’t noticed earlier, sitting in the back row. It was Lt. Randolph Stratford, the man

who'd arrested him originally. His pale blue eyes showed a vitality and youth that offset the impact of rapidly thinning hair. For a moment, their eyes met. Stratford's smile faded. He rose gracefully and left the courtroom. Brad's hard look remained fixed on the door, long after the man was gone.

When he noticed Josie was watching him, he determinedly turned his attention back to the judge. Trembling slightly, he wiped fine sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. His mind overflowed with the ghosts of hopes and dreams that had died in this room. Despite all effort, images of despair crowded in. He tried to clear his mind, to listen.

"This court will be no part of your games, Mr. Danielson," the judge thundered. "I'm reducing bail to fifty thousand dollars. And," he continued angrily, "I will have a complete explanation before the end of the day. This case will be settled next Monday at 9 a.m. We are adjourned." He rapped his gavel decisively. "Next case!"

Unperturbed, Jeffery Walden gathered up his papers, slipped them into a thin, hand-tooled leather briefcase and turned to speak with Amanda over the rail. When she'd left, Brad said, "What the hell's this?" His voice showed only a trace of the icy chill in his spine, the surging turmoil in his mind, and his struggle to contain an unwanted anger.

"Try not to worry. It's one of those things." Walden took his arm firmly and together they walked out of the courtroom. Josie Botsworth fell into step behind them.

In the hall, they found a quiet corner. Josie said, "I'm truly sorry, Brad." Her deep blue eyes asked nothing.

"Even the judge was surprised," Walden pointed out. "I'll get right to work and have the matter settled in no time. I want you to go back to your hotel, relax and enjoy yourself. I'll call as soon as I have something."

Brad took the offered hand, but didn't release his grip. "What could happen?"

"If we have to, Mr. Ashton, we'll wait for a trial and blow them out of the water. Can I have my hand back?" he asked, smiling. When his hand was released, he placed it on Brad's shoulder. "Believe

me, this is the kind of case I dream about. We'll win hands down if they decide to prosecute. Do I look like a loser?"

Brad shook his head. Swayed by the man's easy confidence, he managed a slight smile.

Jeffery Walden nodded, then strode quickly away. When he moved out of sight, the confidence that had radiated from him was also gone.

"He's good, Brad," Josie said. She placed her hand on his forearm and gave it a firm, sympathetic squeeze. "He may be the best criminal lawyer I've ever known. I'd bet a lot on his opinion."

"My life?"

"Aren't you being overly dramatic?"

He was silent, staring at the marble floor. He felt her hand fall away from his arm and wished she'd left it a while longer. "Innocent people have been convicted," he said softly.

"The percentage is so small, it's not worth considering."

"If I lose, it'll be a hundred percent for me," he responded grimly.

"This will work out," Josie said firmly.

Her sincerity was a tangible thing. Despite his grim mood, she reached him with her quiet certainty. The gray wool skirt accented her hips and thighs. The long-sleeved blouse and tailored bolero jacket softened, but could not hide, the upthrust of her breasts. Part of him wanted to try, right here, to see if he couldn't span her slender waist with his hands. He wondered how far those delightful freckles extended down her back.

Further speculation was interrupted by a big man, nearly sixty, with a shaggy mop of bushy, gray hair, and thick glasses that reflected light in disconcerting fashion. As if Josie wasn't there, he shoved himself between them, facing Brad, seeking to intimidate with his greater height and bulk.

"I'm Tuckman," he said, handing Brad his card. It hung there in the slight space between them. Brad said nothing, nor did he move. He simply examined the man.

Tuckman wore an expensive tailored blue serge suit that didn't disguise the basic crudeness of the man. His carefully manicured nails failed to soften the look of his huge, heavily calloused hands.

“I got a good proposition for ya.” Tuckman backed away, belatedly trying for politeness and failing again. The card was still extended toward Brad. “Can ya drop by? Soon?”

Brad took the card and glanced at it. It read, “So-Cal Trucking. Willard Tuckman, President.” Brad looked up questioningly at the piercing brown eyes hiding under heavy, bushy eyebrows behind the thick lenses.

“Lydia’s ma was my sister. I’m your uncle sorta, ’cause you married Lydia,” he offered. “Take my word. We gotta meet, you and me. There’s good bucks in it for you.”

Finally Brad nodded acceptance.

With a look at Josie that undressed her, then toyed with her, Tuckman turned abruptly and strode off. Two men, nearly as large as he was, stepped away from the wall, gave Brad a parting look and fell in behind the big man. The trio paid little heed to others walking in the center of the hall.

“Now there’s a winner,” Josie said.

“You’re easy to look at,” Brad commented.

“Oh, I don’t mind the looking; I like it.” She flashed a dazzling smile, unashamedly revealing teeth that had never visited an orthodontist. “I can even handle mental seduction. It’s rape I can do without.”

Amanda joined them with a rush. “Bail’s been arranged, Brad. But why I bother with you I’ll never understand.”

“You love me.” He put one arm around her shoulders and hugged her gently.

“I loved your father,” she snorted, “but you were a brat.” She placed her hand on his and gave a strong squeeze. “Now unhand me. We’ll go to my office.”

Brad knew she was closer to sixty than fifty, but she looked terrific. Age had softened her plain features, added lines and fine wrinkles that reflected years of kindness and love, despite the hard career she’d elected. Her high-styled clothes added an elegance she didn’t need.

She slipped her arm in his and they started toward the stairs. For a long moment, Brad forgot where he was and why he was

here. He enjoyed being with this woman. Then he remembered and understood why he felt so cold.

Near the top of the stairs, Sgt. Walters joined them. In a strange way, his light green sport suit looked both new and slept in. His dark eyes were uncharacteristically grim. His rugged, lean features showed little concern but Brad knew otherwise. He'd seen that tight, lazy smile before.

"I talked with the office," he said. "Nothing new. I've got no idea why the fast shuffle." His easy drawl further disguised his concern. "We've been had." His dark eyes flashed angrily, but briefly.

"Not by the judge," Josie said.

Hank nodded agreement. "That .45 she gave me," he said, nodding toward Josie, "it checked out clean. It was Allison's piece and it wasn't used to kill him. That alone should have done it." He placed his slender hands on Brad's shoulders. "Givin' advice, it's not my way, but I've got some." His mellow base was pitched low.

Brad nodded.

"Three years ago you cut out. I mighta done the same. You've gotta be pissed and maybe some scared with this latest crap. But it'd be a bad move to split now."

"Are you listening to the man?" asked Josie gently. Amanda tightened her grip on his arm. Brad said nothing.

Hank broke the silence, his dark eyes searching for a sign from Brad. "Somebody in the DA's office stiffed us. I can handle it." He waited with a patience one can only be born with.

Brad nodded, then gripped the hand his friend offered.

As Hank walked away, Brad watched his receding figure. Every move spoke grandly of indifference, almost indolence, but Brad knew Sgt. Hank Walters had things to do and meant to get them done. He also knew he wouldn't want to be the one who got in the way. But the knowing didn't help. Icy fingers still tied his stomach into a grand knot. It was Amanda who turned him back toward the stairs.

"Who was that man in the back of the courtroom?" asked Josie.

"The fella that left?"

Josie nodded.

“Lt. Stratford. He arrested me. I didn’t much like the look on his face.”

“I could see that,” Josie said. “You looked as though you wanted to beat him into the ground.”

“Might be fun.”

As Brad walked down the stairs with Amanda. Josie fell in step beside them. The elegant marble steps were broad. They also seemed haunted by hopes and dreams that had died here.

* * *

Amanda Pothmore’s office reflected her heritage. It seemed more an exclusive European salon than the office of a bail bondsman. She maintained a small cubbyhole office near each of the principal jails in the city. But she handled important clients here, largely those who controlled major California money.

The highly polished oak floor was covered with oriental rugs, bold in their design and beautifully executed. Brad remembered Amanda’s desk had been hand tooled out of walnut, more than a hundred years ago. As she seated herself behind it, he settled himself in a dainty looking antique chair that was surprisingly sturdy and comfortable.

“You told Sgt. Walters you’d stay. Will you?” she asked.

“If it weren’t for your money . . .” His voice trailed off.

“Oh, posh,” she interrupted. “That didn’t stop you three years ago. And I’m two hundred thousand dollars better off today. Don’t give it a thought.”

“When I signed those papers, I thought I owned my folk’s home.”

“I know; it wouldn’t have mattered had I known otherwise. But you didn’t answer my question. Are you staying?”

“I feel as if someone’s out there again. And I don’t like steel bars.”

“That’s perfectly natural, don’t you think?”

He rose abruptly and moved to the window. He watched the flurry of cars and people four floors below on Wilshire Boulevard. The traffic sounds were hushed by the heavy windowpane. He hadn’t

realized how much he'd missed the city that had been his home until he had returned to it. Now he wondered if it would ever be home again.

The scream of the siren on a hook-and-ladder rig brought him back. Amanda was standing beside him, also watching the flow of traffic. She looked up at him.

"Nothing's easy, is it?" he asked.

"Only for fools," she answered.

He sighed and turned back to his chair, aware of Josie's close scrutiny. Amanda again sat down behind the desk.

"I've never understood why you went to get Gerald," Amanda commented.

"I'm not sure myself." He tugged on his ear. "But when Lydia asked, I went. When the jerk pulled that .45, I took it and left. That was enough for me."

He was silent for several moments. "When Lydia said she'd seen me kill him, I didn't know what to think. After a night in jail, Judge Tofler didn't impress me. I couldn't see a reason to stay, so I left. Maybe she hates me, too, just as her brother did."

"I don't think she hates you," Amanda said. "She's a user. In college, you were a football hero, a campus favorite. Your status was sufficient for her then. But now she has others to select from. The airline she inherited isn't much, but it gave her a degree of wealth and power she hadn't known before. By the time you got back from Vietnam, she didn't need you anymore. It's as simple as that."

"Maybe she did think of you," Josie said thoughtfully. "She didn't have to change her statement. You were gone. She could have let the police continue to believe she'd seen you kill Gerald."

"Brad," Amanda said, "they didn't have a good case initially and I don't see any now."

Brad nodded. "Neither do I, but the charges weren't dropped?"

"I have confidence in Jeffery Walden," Amanda said. "If he's not worried, you mustn't be."

"I can't seem to stop it, the worry, I mean."

"Are you tough enough to beat that? Or will you run again?" asked Josie.

“You’ll stop me?” He regretted it immediately. The warmth disappeared from her eyes.

“No. It saddens me to think of you running for the rest of your life. Particularly when there’s no need. I know you don’t think much of Judge Tofler, but he did listen. I think he gave a great deal because of your past. Perhaps he even understood. But if you run again, I don’t think any judge will be sympathetic.”

When the phone rang, Amanda picked it up. “Ms. Pothmore,” she said.

She listened carefully for several minutes. “Thank you so much, Mr. Walden.”

When she hung up, Brad leaned forward in his chair. “It seems Lt. Stratford asked the District Attorney’s office to reconsider before dropping charges,” Amanda said. “I gather he believes you’re guilty. But Mr. Walden assured me charges will be dropped next Monday.”

“What else?” Brad demanded.

Amanda hesitated. “Lt. Stratford did claim there would be new evidence. But that’s what he’d have to say to get them to break their agreement with Judge Tofler.”

Leaning back in her chair, Josie said, “I wonder if Brad knows something we don’t.”

“What’s that mean?” he asked with a bit of snap.

“Only that clients don’t always tell me the whole story. Perhaps you’re holding something back. If the police could come up with anything at it, it could make things more difficult for you.”

“Brad,” Amanda said, “if you’ve even an idea, let’s hear it, and give Mr. Walters an opportunity to defend against it.”

“There was trouble between us.” There was a lot that could be told about Gerald Allison. “If they’ve anything new, it’ll be more of the same.”

Amanda seemed mollified, but Josie remained skeptical. He stood up. “Guess I’ll go see Tuckman.”

“Lydia’s uncle?” Amanda asked.

“That’s what he said.”

“What does he want?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Be careful. He plays rough.”

“You sound like a mother.”

“Perhaps, but what I said is true. He is a dangerous man.”

“Ok, Mom. I’ll be good.”

“Humph,” Amanda snorted, but she was smiling.

When he turned toward the door, Josie asked, “And then what?”

“Back to the hotel, I guess.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Josie rose and faced him. “I know what’s on your mind, and I want it out in the open where everyone can see it.”

“Expect I’ll try to find a killer. Will you help?” His face was expressionless now; his arms hung loosely at his sides.

“No. This is not the time.”

“Then I’ll go it alone.”

“The gifted amateur, right? All you’ll accomplish is to muddy the water. This isn’t some game; this is the real thing. Suppose, with damn fool luck, you do stumble on a killer. He or she will be forced to kill you, too.”

“Maybe. And maybe I can only muddy the water, but the pros screwed up. At least somebody did. Maybe it was you.”

“Maybe I what?”

“Screwed up.”

Her dark blue eyes flashed dangerously for an instant, then changed. Brad couldn’t tell what it meant, and then he didn’t care. “Lt. Stratford caught us all with our pants down. Seems to me someone on our team should have seen this coming.”

In response, Josie moved to the window.

“Brad, you’re being terribly unfair,” Amanda said. “Josie is one of the very best. Jeffery Walden is tops. And Hank Walters is clearly a very competent man. None of us had a hint of this. I think an apology is in order.”

“Expect so,” he said, but the anger was too close; the words wouldn’t come. He reached across the desk and gently clasped both her hands in his. “Any point in thanking you?”

“Posh,” she replied. “But,” she added impishly, “you could say something to Josie.”

He turned and looked at the tall slender figure silhouetted against the window. “Josie,” he began dutifully. “I . . .”

“Go jump!”

He turned to the door and left.

* * *

When the door had closed behind Brad, Amanda said, “I’m surprised at you, Josie. You don’t usually allow people to upset you.”

Turning from the window, Josie replied, “I’m surprised myself.” She sat down. Long fingers sought to make curls in her hair. She grinned ruefully. “Frankly I’m angry, and I can’t tell whether with myself or with him.”

“He’s an attractive man,” Amanda commented innocently. “All that wild, tanned, weathered look. And did you notice his eyes? He’s been too long alone, I think.”

“Are you suggesting I do something about that?” Josie demanded.

“Of course not, dear. Still he is cuddlesome, don’t you think?”

“Like a grisly bear, perhaps, and many times more dangerous. His war record makes this clear. If there’s any doubt, I saw the carnage he created in that filling station in Las Vegas. He nearly killed three men in a matter of seconds.”

Amanda seemed not to have heard. “I knew his mother, you know. And his father.” She smiled, remembering. “When she died, Brad was only six. He had always been a quiet boy. After that, he seldom said a word.

“For the longest time, I hoped Big Red Ashton would marry me, but it never happened. So now I poke and pry into Brad’s life and think of all manner of things I wish had been.” When she looked out the window, there was a touch of sadness written in her eyes, but acceptance dominated.

“And that means, I suppose,” Josie said with a wry smile, “you want me to babysit this blundering beast until next Monday’s hearing.”

“He’s not any kind of a beast and you know it,” Amanda snapped, all business again. “He’s a man like any other. He’s had a difficult time and needs our help.” She opened the second drawer of the desk, extracted her checkbook, wrote a check for \$3000 and handed it to Josie. “You’ll agree, I hope, that’s a fine fee for a week of babysitting.”

“I can’t take your money. What would I do with him? Take him to the zoo? Or to Marineland?” She dropped the check to the desk.

“Brad has never asked me for help. It’s just not in him. But I’ve never failed him. I don’t intend to now. I thought we had it all arranged. I’ve the strangest feeling about all this, and it isn’t a good one.

“I want you to look after him as best you can. Brad is precious to me. He’s all I have left of his father.”

Josie sighed. “All right. I’ll do what I can.” She bit her lower lip thoughtfully. “But I don’t need the check.”

“Oh posh,” Amanda snapped. “I’m extremely grateful for what you did in Las Vegas. And I’m flattered you wouldn’t even take expenses. This, however, is something quite different.

“We were all going to be winners. Now I’m not so sure. And as much as I hate to admit it, you’re absolutely correct. Brad has a capacity for violence that worries me. It could be very dangerous for you.” A twinkle flickered in her eyes, accented with a faint smile. “Maybe there’s more here than even you can handle.”

Josie ignored the comment. “What am I to do if he decides to go hunting for a killer? You know what nonsense that is.”

“Of course you’re right, dear.” Amanda closed her eyes, thinking. When she opened them, they were clear, bright and determined. “Do as you think best. However, I’ll pay costs, if you decide to work with him.

“Brad grew up hunting with his father. They were both good at it. And it sounds as if Brad did well in Vietnam. He might surprise you.”

“Now you do sound like his mother, all pride and nonsense. There’s a difference between knocking over an enemy supply depot and finding a big city killer.”

“You’d be a better judge than I,” she replied demurely. “But if he does go hunting, and I suspect he will, it would be nice if he had professional help, don’t you think?”

“You’re impossible. Do you ever lose?”

“Never.”

“All right. I’ve a few things that must be cleared up, then I’ll get on it, but there’s a condition.” Amanda settled in for serious debate. “I won’t take the check.”

In the end, Josie left with the check. She managed a last word of sorts by tearing it into little pieces and dropping it into the ashtray by the elevator. Waiting, her thoughts strayed from the task ahead.

Sure. Any girl would like to run her fingers through that jet-black mane of hair, then down across that broad powerful chest. But there’s a price tag here and no discounts are offered.

By the time she reached her car, she knew she was disappointed; she wanted Brad’s good opinion more than she had realized. She remembered the rock hardness of his forearm when she’d squeezed it. She sighed as she opened the car door. The price was clearly marked and it was much too high. There was no way she could afford more than a professional relationship with Brad Ashton.

* * *

Sgt. Hank Walters could tell it was going to continue to be one of those days. Even his toes itched. *What in the livin’ hell is that goddamn DA doin’ now?* It had taken over two years to get his hands on Brad Ashton’s case file, two months more to set up a deal, and only a couple of seconds for Danielson to blow it out of the water. *Screw me, you shitheads, and it’ll be the ultimate fuck.* Harsh feelings were buried deep beneath his outward calm, as he walked up the steps toward the district attorney’s office.

Inside the building, he took the elevator to the fourth floor. You bastards, he thought. You deal every day. Now you mess with me and Ashton. It had been a hard lesson. Bust your ass, bleed a little or a lot, then watch them turned loose with deals. He’d tried

to learn not to care, but with little success. He did his job, handed them good cases, then tried to let go. *But this is different, fuckheads. There's no way I'm gonna lose this one.* He opened the door, stepped inside and closed it silently behind him, smiling pleasantly at the receptionist.

* * *

Willard Tuckman sat unmoving behind the large scarred desk. His bushy gray eyebrows overlapped the frames of his glasses. Light reflecting off the thick lenses gave him a sinister look. His huge hand dwarfed the yellow pencil and the paper cluttered with doodles. I handled that boy wrong, he thought. I surely did.

It was only after finessing a deal that he could be ruthlessly honest with himself. *He ain't no kinda mamma's boy like Lydia said.* But he knew it didn't matter; he'd figure a way. He always did, didn't he?

And if Ashton couldn't see the light, well, there were other ways. *But it's a bunch more fun to deal.* He smiled broadly. He knew it was not a nice smile, not one to use when dealing.

* * *

Another man, finishing his late lunch, watched the few remaining diners, but he was thinking only of Brad Ashton. He knew the man was no one special. It occurred to him no one had ever been special to him. That Ashton was back was merely inconvenient. It added to the risk, and he didn't like risk. He chuckled aloud at this thought; he knew full well he was always at risk. A little more was virtually meaningless.

Besides, he had the edge, those special abilities, those finely tuned instincts that kept him well ahead of the others. He toyed with the red ruby ring on his finger, thinking of a next move. He wondered idly, with no real concern either way, if Ashton would run again. Maybe it would be best if he stayed. It might be safer to kill him; it would minimize the risks.

CHAPTER 4 MONDAY AFTERNOON

Brad drove skillfully. He had that knack for sensing the flow of traffic around him and automatically adjusting his speed accordingly. He wished he had a few tools; he could at least smooth out the performance of the gutless rental Amanda had provided. He couldn't depend on acceleration to escape minor difficulties. Instead, he maintained a slower speed. Horns behind him testified to any slight overreaction with the brakes. He paid little attention; people who used horns, instead of brakes, did not impress him.

Mentally, he reviewed the morning's courtroom scene again. He reconsidered every word and gesture, and the beet-red face of the angry judge. "We're not prepared to dismiss at this time." The words replayed themselves repeatedly.

He had been coming back. His path from Mexico through Texas, Georgia, Illinois, Montana, and finally Las Vegas, might lack directness, yet he knew it led to LA. But he'd planned to come in quietly by the back ways to which he'd become accustomed. The money belt was full. With the right moves and a little luck, he'd have found who killed Gerald Allison.

Now he was spotlighted for all to see. The tiny hairs on his lower neck told him someone was out there, adjusting the scope. Another click, maybe, and he'd be centered in the crosshairs. He could sense the closeness of it. The quiet ways of stealth he'd planned to use must be set aside.

Finally came the small mental shrug that set aside the last hand and turned attention to the cards being dealt. It's not much, he thought. But maybe Tuckman's good for openers.

He traveled east on Wilshire and was soon skirting the central part of the city. He got lost for a minute, near Chinatown, but held a general course toward the railroad yards. He found Tuckman's warehouse, pulled up among the rigs and parked. As he moved through the scurrying bustle, he noted the tight efficiency of the

operation. In response to his question, a man with a clipboard pointed to a stairway. At the top of it, “Willard Tuckman” was painted in bold red letters on the door. He knocked.

“Hold your pants.” A moment later, Tuckman opened the door.

“Hey, Ashton,” he said. “Real glad ya could make it.” The smile on his face was not reflected in his eyes. “Come on in,” he urged.

The office was a place of work. The furniture was substantial, comfortable and functional, without frills. Everything in the room was nicked and scarred from hard use, including one of the two men who studied him intently, seated in one corner.

“The boys,” said Tuckman, with an expansive wave in their direction. “Sometimes they answer the door. Know what I mean?”

Brad turned to face them. He remembered the size of them flanking Tuckman in the courthouse. The man on the left was wearing a light gray suit; it clashed with marks of past bruising encounters on the pock-marked face. The second man had a smooth, pale complexion. The pistol he was carrying under his left arm spoiled the drape of his jacket.

Tuckman laughed, breaking the mood. “They’re good boys. Not to worry. They do like I say.”

The latent menace brought Brad’s attention back to Tuckman; he met the hard look squarely. As if satisfied of a point made, Tuckman moved around the big desk and seated himself in the oak swivel chair. Without waiting to be asked, Brad chose a seat facing Tuckman from which he had a good view of “the boys.”

“So, can ya beat the rap?” asked Tuckman in a way that made it plain he didn’t care either way.

“So they tell me.”

With his coat off, Tuckman’s well-muscled chest and brawny arms were revealed. The pencil with which he was doodling seemed lost and out of place in his huge, hairy hand. “Walden’s good,” he said casually. “I used him once in a smuggling beef with one of my boys. He blew them clowns away.” He grinned, remembering. “Fact is, they got burned so good they ain’t bothered me in over two years.”

“You must haul interesting cargo,” Brad commented, watching the big man’s reaction.

“This is a tough business,” Tuckman said defensively. The thick lenses of his glasses enlarged his piercing brown eyes. “I got over three hundred loads on the bricks any time ya wanna pick. I didn’t get where I’m at, worrying what was in them crates I hauled. Besides, if ya do it right, there ain’t nothing to it,” he said slyly. “Ya just gotta cover all the angles.”

“It figures,” Brad said, “that I’m one of those angles. Right?”

Tuckman nodded. “I got a good proposition.” His broad smile contrasted with the calculating expression in his eyes. “I want ya should listen good.”

Brad nodded.

“This goes back to Art Allison, Lydia’s papa, my sister’s old man. When he started that air cargo racket, Overnite Air, he ran right quick into the shorts. He needed money bad. On account of my sis, I listened. It didn’t sound bad, but Christ, a million bucks.” His eyes showed a slyness now.

“So I hocked myself, raised the dough and give it to him. I got twenty-five percent of Overnite Air and a note. The note’s in writing and I got the stock. There’s still a few bucks owed, but it’s coming in regular. Got it so far?”

Brad nodded again, waiting for the kink. With an operator like Tuckman, there had to be a kink.

“Art also drew a will. I was to get the airline if he died sudden-like, with a flat cash settlement to his brats.

“So I’m real surprised when Art and my sis drive off Topanga Canyon. Damn near a hundred feet straight down, it was. The bastard screwed me; he had drawn a new will that left the airline to his brats. And worse yet, Lydia, she jumps right in and the business is losing money so fast my stocks ain’t worth shit.”

A pleased expression replaced his earlier slyness. “So I got me a top-type shyster and dragged the deal into court. An old will and a verbal agreement ain’t much, but you should see what that lawyer type’s doing with it. He’s good. He tells me it’s gonna cost a chunk, but I’m gonna own an airline real soon.” He leaned back, contented and pleased.

“So?” Brad asked.

“That shyster, he says maybe you got some claim to that airline.”

“Crap,” Brad snorted. “Lydia and Gerald got it while I was in Nam. When she divorced me, she took everything. She even grabbed my folk’s place.”

“She did. She did! But it was a Vegas divorce, uncontested. Ya could maybe go back and jab her for fraud even, taking your parents’ place and all. Then with me, ya wouldn’t win nothing, but ya could file a nuisance suit and cost me to beat it.

“I built So-Cal Trucking by not leaving no loose ends. What I’m offering is twenty-five thou for a release of any interests ya may have, now or later.”

“A waste,” Brad said, surprised at the amount.

“Maybe,” responded Tuckman confidently. “But the offer stands. Ya gotta cover your butt from all angles. If you don’t, somebody’s gonna kick it hard.”

In response to the puzzlement on Brad’s face, Tuckman continued, “Look, I got this nailed. I’ll win in court in a matter of months. I just don’t want no complications. Ya could easy cost me twenty-five thou, just being a pest.”

Brad studied him carefully, looking for more. “Did you kill Gerald?” he asked softly.

“That’s crazy,” thundered Tuckman, rising and pacing behind his desk. The two men in the corner straightened in their chairs. Tuckman calmed a bit, faced Brad and fixed him with a sharp, hard look. “Matter of fact, I thought you bumped him.”

Brad shook his head.

“I’ll be damned. Wonder who did?” A speculative gleam livened his eyes, as if he was wondering how a dollar could be made off this new information.

He leaned on the desk, his head and shoulders well forward. “I didn’t have no reason. The little shit was gonna sell me his half. I have it in writing. Now he’s dead and Lydia’s got his half too, on account of Art’s second will. Besides, I mostly don’t kill people to get what I want.” He underlined “mostly” with a sly grin. “There’s lots of ways, and I know ’em all. Where’d ya get that idea?”

Brad shrugged, watching the big man closely. “Ever try a deal with Lydia?”

“Oh, Christ. Don’t remind me.” He leaned back out over the desk. “I made a really good offer, maybe a mil more than she’ll get when I wipe her ass in court. She told me to go play with myself.

“Me, I decide I’ll try one more time, maybe raise the ante some. So I go back. Before I can open my mouth even, she hauls out a nickel plated .38 and starts blasting. She damn near killed me.” He shook his head, as if he still didn’t believe it had happened.

“Sounds like her,” Brad said with a faint chuckle. “But if she’d wanted you dead, she wouldn’t have missed.” He stood up. The man with the pock-marked face also stood and moved to the door.

“Where ya going?” Tuckman demanded. “We ain’t made a deal.”

“Sounds good,” Brad responded. “Maybe later.”

“Now don’t go getting cute with me. I been snacking on guys like you for years. I ain’t slowed down so’s ya’d notice.”

“Sounds like a threat.”

“Take it any way ya like. I want a deal. Now. For five years I been working this out. Maybe tomorrow you’re gone again. I say we deal now.”

“No.” Brad turned toward the big man who was blocking the exit. The pock-marked face showed the eager anticipation of a puppy for a fresh bone. “Maybe later is all you get just now.” Brad spoke without turning around. He could feel the tension build. He noticed the other man had a hand close to his pistol.

“Yeah,” Tuckman grunted. The big man grudgingly moved aside.

Brad opened the door and left. He would remember the disappointment he’d seen on the broad, pock-marked face.

* * *

Brad drove west and north through town, then onto the Golden State Freeway, letting his thoughts drift. Tuckman seemed capable of anything and didn’t care much about people in his way.

As for the offer, he’d wait. He smiled, remembering what his dad had often said. “Don’t be greedy. But don’t be too excited about

that first offer.” Right now, Tuckman’s offer didn’t matter much. Money wasn’t what he needed.

“Sure. I’m going to find a killer,” he said aloud. How? That he alone could find a killer among twenty million people was purely a dream of the night. In the bright light of day the task was clearly impossible. He didn’t have even a hint of where to begin.

Tuckman said Gerald had agreed to sell his share of Overnite Air, and Lydia got it when he was killed. Could Tuckman have killed him because he backed out of the deal? Could Lydia have killed him to get his share? The thought startled him. Lydia a killer? He knew there was more hope than substance in his thoughts, but still it may be a place to start.

He passed a car parked on the shoulder of the freeway as a lovely pair of legs settled to the ground. He only glimpsed the girl. The image was immediately shattered by a much stronger one of Josie.

He watched her move and liked it. He saw her sitting in a chair, legs crossed, confident and poised. He saw her toss her gleaming, black hair back over her shoulder. Then he thought of her long, strong legs, and the way they would feel . . .

The big tractor-trailer locked eighteen wheels and veered into his path. He headed quickly for the shoulder, his own brakes locked. It was then he noticed the pale green Ford in the rearview mirror, also sliding toward the side of the freeway, struggling for control. He looked again. Was it the same car he’d seen parked by the fire hydrant in front of Tuckman’s place?

Moving again, Brad studied the Ford in the mirror. It dropped back, leaving three cars between it and Brad’s. He took a firmer grip on the wheel.

He took the 118 west and was soon on the San Diego Freeway southbound. He got off at the Burbank exit and drove east. The Ford lagged behind, but traveled the same route. Even with the cool breeze through the open window, his palms were sweaty, slippery on the wheel.

He stopped at a delicatessen and picked up a salami, some German cheese, two quarts of milk, and a roll of French bread. In the

car again, he drove north on Sepulveda to the hotel. The Ford was still behind him. What the hell did it mean?

He parked his car, entered the hotel and took the elevator to the fourth floor. From the window in his room, he could see the Ford, parked four spaces from his rental, two rows further back.

Two men approached the car, apparently from the hotel lobby. Both men were well dressed in light brown suits and ties. Both wore dark glasses. They got into the car and drove off, the blond behind the wheel. Brad munched on a piece of cheese, thoughts of Judge Tofler and the morning courtroom scene, now overridden with questions.

Who were they? Who would want to follow him? Why? He tried the office number Hank had given him, but had to settle for leaving a message. He broke off another piece of cheese and turned back to the window, his questions unanswered.

* * *

An hour later as Brad was pouring another cup of coffee, there was a firm knock on the door. He opened it with coffee in hand. It was the two who'd followed him from Tuckman's place. Each held an identification wallet open.

"We're with the CIA," the older man said, as if reciting from the ID wallet. "I'm Agent Cogswell. This is Agent Feldersen." He nodded toward the younger man with the well-groomed blond hair.

Brad felt intimidated in some way and was bothered by the feeling. Their eyes reflected hard indifference and nothing of their slight smiles. But that wasn't it. What was bugging him?

"May we come in?" Cogswell asked.

"Why?"

"We'd like to ask a few questions, Mr. Ashton."

"Why me?"

Feldersen tipped his head slightly forward as if to accent his reply. "We're not here to answer questions." His quiet voice contrasted sharply with his hard, piercing look. "But you'll know more after we've talked."

Brad shrugged, then turned, walked to the couch, and sat down. He heard the door close behind him. He took a sip of coffee; it eased the dryness in his throat.

Cogswell sat down facing Brad at the far end of the couch. Feldersen sat in the chair opposite him and asked, “What’s your relationship to Willard Tuckman?”

“He’s my uncle by marriage.”

“We know that, Mr. Ashton. Let me put it this way. How are you involved with him?”

“I’m not.”

Feldersen raised a blond eyebrow skeptically. Brad met his hardness with a look of calm he did not feel. Feldersen spoke sharply. “What did you discuss with him today?”

“Business.”

“What business?”

“Not yours.” Brad guessed Feldersen was accustomed to having his way; he saw the flash of anger in his eyes and a firming of the jaw. He couldn’t remember seeing a federal officer display petty emotions.

“As I asked at the door,” Brad said, “why me? Why did you two follow me from Tuckman’s place?” He noticed the hint of chagrin pass fleetingly across Cogswell’s face, a touch of wounded pride at having been caught. Feldersen gave no indication he’d even heard the question.

“We understand you like Mexico.” The hardness in the blond’s eyes was present in his voice.

“Yes.”

“Do you spend a lot of time there?”

“Some.”

“And some of it in jail?”

Brad was surprised. So far as he knew, only Lydia knew about that night. “You’ve been talking to my ex-wife, haven’t you?”

Cogswell replied with his own question, “What makes you think that?”

Brad turned to face the man. “One night in Acapulco, Lydia gave a couple fellas the wrong idea. I had to get her clear and spent

a night in jail for my troubles. I was never that proud of it to tell anybody.”

Cogswell nodded; there was no indication whether he believed Brad or not. “I’m curious, Mr. Ashton.”

Brad waited, watching.

“Why can’t you be as frank in answering our other questions?”

Brad made no reply. It was becoming more difficult to stifle anger.

“Where’d you learn Spanish?” Cogswell asked politely.

“Here and there.”

Cogswell sighed, as if being sorely tried, but his eyes didn’t change expression. “What’s your relationship with your ex-wife?”

“There isn’t any.”

“You’ve been away about three years. Were you in touch with her?”

“No.”

“Where were you during that time?”

“Places.”

“Tell us about Mexico.”

“I spent five months on a drilling platform.”

“You’d need papers for that.”

Brad made no reply. He’d had papers, but they’d been in the name of Tom Fairchild. He mentally stepped on surging anger.

“Answer the man,” Feldersen snapped, leaning toward Brad, “unless you want to come downtown for a formal interrogation. I’m sure we can think of a charge.”

“Anytime.” The anger was in his eyes now, despite his best effort. “First get a warrant.”

“We don’t need a warrant.”

“Blondie, that tough, dangerous look of yours needs lots of practice. Right now you just look silly.” He braced himself as Feldersen moved his feet for better leverage, his face mottled with rage, his jaws clenched tightly.

“Mr. Ashton,” said Cogswell calmly, without a hint of impatience. He leaned out over the corner of the coffee table toward Brad, drumming his fingers slowly on the polished surface. His

other hand rested on his thigh. “We need answers.” His voice was mild, almost disinterested. “While we’re not in a position to discuss our investigation, I can say our interests are unrelated to the local charges against you. Let’s just say your name came up. We need to check it out. It is important or we wouldn’t be taking our time or yours. We’d sincerely appreciate your help.”

“What sincerity?” Brad snapped. “You shove your way in like you own the place and everything in it, including me. You’ve suggested a sneaky deal with Tuckman, something shady with my ex-wife and black deeds in Mexico. You scare me, but not in the way you think. If you’re America’s finest, I’m real scared.”

“Just a little help,” said Cogswell patiently. Feldersen was ominously quiet. Brad ignored him.

“One time,” Brad snapped, “Tuckman offered me a business deal. I haven’t talked with my ex in over three years. My mom died when I was six. The lady who took care of me spoke Spanish, so I picked up enough to get by in the streets. Now get your butts back to my ex and get some real facts.”

Cogswell, scribbling in a small notebook, asked, “How about a fast rundown on the last three years?”

In rapid order, Brad gave his movements. He didn’t mention Tom Fairchild; let them figure it out. Feldersen hardly listened. To Brad, he looked like a pale blond fox watching a hen house. Cogswell scribbled hastily. When Brad finished, he stood, setting his coffee cup on the table. “Now get out of here.”

Cogswell snapped his notebook closed and stepped in front of Feldersen who was also standing. Gently he nudged a shoulder of the younger man. Both turned toward the door. Feldersen gave Brad an angry look of righteous indignation, before following his partner out.

At the window, Brad watched the two men exit the building. The younger man’s anger overflowed into his jouncing stride and an occasional arrogant toss of blond hair. Even without hearing, Brad could understand the gist of his gestures and bobbing head. They bode no good for him. They got into the green Ford. Feldersen

drove, leaving smoking, scorched rubber on the asphalt in the parking lot. Brad watched the car until it passed from sight.

Feldersen had lost control; he'd be dangerous if they met again. But of the two, Cogswell was the most dangerous. If the man decided it was necessary, Brad knew he'd be swatted like a fly in the name of God and country. He'd seen the type in Nam and had been frightened of them then. Why was the CIA interested in him? Had they been following him before he arrived at Tuckman's? Or had they picked him up there?

He walked across the room, glanced at Tuckman's card and dialed. He explained the visit briefly, then asked, "What would the CIA want with you?"

"Nothing. Now if ya'd asked about narcs or border types, they're always on my case. How about our deal?"

Brad hung up; a shudder rippled down his spine.

CHAPTER 5 MONDAY EVENING

A knock at the door awoke Brad with a start. He slipped on his pants and padded across the carpet barefooted. He paused to slip on his shirt and button it, then opened the door.

It was Josie, stunning in a sarong-styled dress, slit at the sides to mid-thigh. “May I come in?” she asked.

He nodded. She glanced around the room, then perched on the side of the bed, watching as he slipped on his socks and shoes. “I called before coming up, but didn’t get an answer,” she said almost as if asking a question.

“Sorry,” he said. “I unplugged the phone.” He fished around for the cord and plugged it back into the wall.

“Right now, that’s not a good idea. People need to be able to find you. At least until next Monday.”

“Right.” He felt the muscles across his stomach tighten. He wondered if she’d noticed the sudden tremor in his hands.

“It’ll work out. I’m sure of it,” she said.

“There aren’t many things I can’t deal with, but that judge.” He paused, shaking his head. “About that crap in Amanda’s office?”

“Yes?”

“That’s not my style.”

That’s good to hear,” she said with a smile. “Want dinner?”

“Is it that late?”

“It’s after six.”

“I slept nearly four hours?”

“Do you have a decent coat?”

“No.”

“Then you’ll be a cheap date. We’ll eat in the hotel.”

“Who said you were taking me?” They argued as he grabbed his jacket and followed her out the door.

Brad couldn't remember a more enjoyable meal. The hamburger steak was the best ever and the baked potato was better. He knew it was the company, not the food. The only business they'd discussed was the two CIA agents. Josie had been puzzled; she'd asked pointed questions. With the dishes removed, he asked, "Was this Amanda's idea?"

Josie nodded. "She worries about you."

"She always has. Did you know about her and my dad?"

"Only that she wanted to marry him."

Brad nodded. "Dad was a hard working, hard drinking type who laughed a lot. He loved driving a Cat, the bigger the better. Amanda is such a lady, a class act in every way. Despite the contrast, they were a hell of a team for a long time."

"I wonder why they never married."

"Can't say. Maybe Dad thought I might forget my mom."

"Do you remember her?"

"Not much. She smiled a lot. And she gave great hugs. Mostly I remember her cookies; there was always a jar full of them in the kitchen."

"It must have been hard on you when she died."

"Harder on Dad, I think. He was gone a lot, because the big construction jobs were usually out of town. He always seemed kind of lost and confused when he got back. After she died, I mean."

"But we did all the good father and son things and sometimes school didn't matter for several days at a time. What I remember most was hunting with him. Then, later, I worked with him summers."

"How did he die?"

Brad poured more wine and combed his hair out of his eyes with his fingers. "Oil rig. Somebody dropped a drill casing on him. It happened while I was in Nam. I still miss him."

"When I finish a tough job or do something I'm not sure about, I catch myself asking, 'Hey, Dad, what do you think?'" He took another sip of wine. "He was some kind of man for sure. But he was wrong about Amanda. He should have grabbed her and held on real tight."

“Why people marry remains a puzzle to me,” Josie said. “It sounds as if Amanda and your father should have married. But I’ve known couples who should never have said ‘Hello.’”

“My parents fought every minute they were together. I never could see why they married or why they stayed that way. The day I graduated from high school, I left. I’ve never been back.”

“Don’t you miss them?”

“Only what could have been.”

“Why did you choose this kind of work?”

“What’s a nice girl, etc.?” There was a sudden hardness in her eyes.

Brad lifted both hands, palms upward. “A little sensitive?”

She sighed, then visibly relaxed. “I’m tired of the question. People either don’t take me seriously or wonder if I’m some frustrated macho type.”

“I was only curious. It seems like a tough life for a guy or a girl.”

“It can be. For me, it started that way, working vice with LAPD. It was ugly. When I saw there was no future for a woman, I quit and went to work for a large agency. But it wasn’t any better. What they really wanted was me flat on my back as appropriate.

“I was about to give up on the whole idea, when I met Amanda. She put me on to some good people and good cases, so I’ve been on my own ever since.

“Most of it is simple and uncomplicated. I have a knack for finding people. Thanks to Amanda, I’ve a good reputation now, so I don’t have to take every case. I’m having good success finding missing and runaway kids; it’s very rewarding.” She smiled. “But that’s enough of me. Let’s hear more about you.”

“Like?”

“Tell me about your ex-wife.”

He grinned. “How come women want to know about ex-wives and girlfriends?”

“It’s a good solid defensive technique.” She leaned out across the table expectantly.

“She was beautiful and I loved her madly. Afraid I got sex and love mixed up. I can’t see why she married me.”

“What made you leave her?”

“The usual. Except it was a woman she was in bed with. They were pretty energetic about it. She invited me to join in. I packed instead.”

“Any regrets?”

“I just wish it could have been different.”

“How do you feel about Vietnam, now that it’s behind you?”

A bit off center at the sudden change of subject, he hesitated. “It was a lousy war.” His voice sounded far away.

“All war is absurd.”

“Expect so.”

“How did you meet Hank Walters?”

“In a poker game in Nam. I was doing well; he was doing better. Some of the players took exception so we had to scramble some. My war changed after that.” He paused, remembering.

“He’s the best friend I have, yet we’re not much alike. War does that, I guess. It was all such a royal fuckup. The patrols were simpler. Our team went after the enemy his way. It changes a fella some.”

“Killing will do that.”

“You’ve never killed?”

“No. And I’d rather not.”

“You’re lucky.” There was no sarcasm. After a moment he continued, “You carry a pistol,” he pointed out. “You’ll have to use it one day.”

“Perhaps, but I don’t believe it’s that simple. Situations, people, the world, they’re all complex multifaceted systems. There are always options.”

“I’ve been in some tight spots these last years,” Brad said. “For me, it’s been easier than for most. I’ve enough size that guys usually take a look at me and move on. And if somebody misses that, I’m quick enough to end it fast. But things can go wrong; it can come down to some dying.”

“This gives me the creeps,” Josie said with a gentle shudder.

“A nightcap?”

She nodded, picked up the check and walked toward the cashier.

* * *

“To better times?” Brad lifted his glass.

Josie smiled and lifted hers in return, then leaned back in the chair. Brad settled his legs onto the couch. He stretched and eased down further until his head rested on the arm of the couch. His eyes on the ceiling, he said, “Can’t remember being this comfortable.” His left hand stroked the fabric of the couch.

“Do I hear a touch of self-pity?”

He thought for a moment, his brow furrowed in concentration. “Don’t think so. Had some bad breaks is all.” He turned his head to face her, seeking her opinion.

“To better luck, then.” Her smile broadened.

The phone rang. Remembering the benefits of not having one, he reluctantly eased off the couch.

“Ashton?” a muffled voice asked.

“Yeah.”

“Thought you’d like to know.” Brad could hardly distinguish the words. “Your ex-wife’s been murdered. They’re gonna nail ya for it. You still have time to get clear.” The connection was broken.

Brad’s knuckles whitened as he gripped the receiver. He straightened slowly, took two halting steps, then leaned against the wall.

When he realized Josie was trying to take the receiver from him, he let go and looked around, willing himself to deepen his breathing. He focused on the city lights through the window, seeking to slow whirling, unwanted images.

Determinedly he moved to the table by the window. As he dropped into a chair, Josie knelt beside him and began lightly stroking his hand. Her touch brought his attention to her face.

He could find no break in the even line of her pale lipstick. Her nose was shiny; should he tell her? He could see traces of past smiles and laughter.

“Lydia’s dead. Murdered.” He felt her grip on his hand tighten.

“Who was that?”

“Used a handkerchief or something.” He took a deep breath. “He said I’d be tagged for it.”

She gave his hand a strong squeeze, picked up the glass he'd unknowingly dropped and moved quickly to the kitchenette. He heard the water run as she rinsed the glass. She returned it to him with Wild Turkey and very little ice.

He took two long swallows. "Less than ten hours ago, I find out charges won't be dropped. I've got the CIA's attention. Now Lydia is murdered and some cluck tells me I'm going away for it. What the hell is going on?" There was more puzzlement than anger in his voice.

At the knock, Josie walked quickly to the door and opened it.

"Hi, Josie," Sgt. Walters said. "You're easy to look at in that outfit." His smile of appreciation faded at the expression on her face.

"Join the fun," she said, opening the door wider.

Half a step inside, his face expressionless now, Hank swept the room with a glance that settled on Brad. Josie sat down on the couch, dividing her attention between the two men.

"Is she really dead?" Brad asked softly.

"Yeah." His dark eyes were nearly black. "One round through the pump." He moved to the window, watching Brad intently. "How'd you hear?"

"Some jerk just called. Scared hell out of me."

"How's that?"

"He claimed I'd be nominated." Hank was puzzled. Brad watched him mull it over, checking every edge and corner. "Am I a suspect?" Brad asked.

"I don't think so, 'cept you're her ex-husband. That puts you on the list of possibilities. It'd be nice if you had an alibi. Say maybe for three-thirty this afternoon."

"I was alone, sleeping."

"Must've been a good sleep. Your phone didn't answer. I called as soon as I heard." There was no suspicion, only hope of a good explanation.

"I had the phone unplugged," Brad said with a sigh.

"Not much help there," Hank commented. "It's too bad you didn't bed down with her," he said, nodding toward Josie with a grin. Her left eyebrow lifted slightly. Brad blushed.

“I’ll make a statement,” she said. “When I came in at six, the bed was warm. He had been sleeping at least two hours.” She caught Brad’s look. “It’s nothing to do with trust, Brad. I’m supposed to know what’s going on.”

“Will it help?” he asked Hank.

“Pretty slim.” He shrugged. “It’s worth a statement though.” He was lost in thought for a moment. “Lydia Allison had some strange friends and a lot of ’em. I don’t think the department’ll ever get to you.”

“The fella on the phone said different.”

“There’s nothing I know puts you in the picture.”

“What should I do?”

“Hang loose. Maybe drop by in the mornin’ and make a statement.”

“Should I bring Walden?”

Hank was silent for a moment. “That might be a good idea. Lt. Stratford keeps breathin’ over my shoulder. If he butts in, it would be nice to have Walden handy.”

“Why’s he on my tail?”

“He’s a hardnose who thinks you’re guilty. He’s just doin’ his thing.”

Josie stood abruptly, frowning. At the far end of the coffee table, she bent down and picked up a nickel-sized object from the carpet. She tossed it to Hank who scooped it gracefully from the air. He looked at it briefly, then let his glance drift lazily about the room.

“It was stuck to the table,” Josie commented, bending down and running her hand across the underside. She shook her head. “The wood grain was too coarse to hold it.”

She grabbed her purse and rummaged through it. She withdrew a penlight flash and moved to the dresser. She opened a drawer and began removing his shorts and socks. Hank began a slow stroll, stopping occasionally to study the room.

“What is it?” asked Brad.

“It’s a bug,” Josie replied.

“And it’s not ours,” drawled Hank. “We haven’t got that kinda budget.” He stepped into the kitchenette.

Josie removed another drawer, examined it, then examined the interior of the cabinet with the help of the penlight. “Somebody’s got a tape of everything we’ve said.”

Brad could not see Hank in the kitchenette, but he could hear cabinet doors being opened, then closed. He watched Josie. Finished with the dresser, she pulled a chair over to the wall under the ventilator system. Standing on it, she examined the area behind the screen, then the screws attaching the screen to the wall. Apparently satisfied, she stepped down and studied the room once more. Hank was doing the same from the kitchenette. “Only one isn’t likely,” he said.

Josie nodded agreement.

“Let’s get out of here,” Hank said softly.

Josie reached for her purse and walked to the door. Hank opened it for her and waited for Brad to follow. He glanced once more around the room before closing the door behind him.

* * *

The bar was filling; serious drinking had begun. Hank left the bug with the bartender, then followed Josie and Brad to a booth directly under a speaker emanating soft rock at a volume that covered quiet conversation. Hank was the last to sit, after looking the crowd over, particularly those seated nearby. The waitress took the order from Josie and left.

“What do you think?” Brad asked.

Josie leaned out on her elbows. “Somebody is trying to set you up. Maybe for Gerald’s murder. Or Lydia’s. Or something we don’t even know about.”

“Why?”

Hank answered, “They may be tryin’ to cover somthing. Or they want you runnin’ again. Or it’s somethin’ else. To tell it true, I don’t know what the hell is happenin’.

“And here’s another chuckle. The DA’s office stonewalled me.” His anger flashed brightly in his eyes, then faded. “Same shit. There’s

new evidence and they're evaluatin'. I'll have something tomorrow," he said grimly.

"I remember this feeling." Brad looked far beyond the wall he was facing. "I was ordered to take my platoon and sweep an area across a river. When we got to the water, I didn't like the feel of it. I went back and asked if we could wait for dark. But the word was go, so we went. My point squad was maybe halfway across, when twenty Cong regulars opened fire from dug-in positions. Only a dozen of us made it back.

"I've the same feeling now I had about that river. Somebody's out there." When he looked up, he could see Hank was worried. He couldn't read Josie at all. "I can't just wait for somebody to start shooting."

"We're not back to that, are we?" Josie asked.

"What's that?" Hank asked.

"He wants to find Gerald Allison's killer. Maybe you can talk some sense into him."

Hank hesitated. "I never gave it a thought. It's been three years, Brad. All I was figurin' was to get you loose. It'd be tough."

"Impossible?" Brad asked bluntly.

Hank made no reply. Josie was adamant. "Yes. It is. Check and you'll find that if a murderer isn't at least identified as a possible suspect within a couple of days, chances are he or she won't be caught at all."

"I hate to admit it," Hank said with a sigh, "but she's right. Sometimes we get a break later. Somebody speaks up. Or we get 'em for something else and make a lucky connection. But every year we get new file cabinets to hold unsolved cases."

"Without the killer, it can come back at me anytime. In Vegas, Josie, you suggested you might change your mind."

"What you want is a murder investigation, Brad," she said softly, reaching for his hand. "It would cost much more than you can afford. Even with unlimited funds, it's not likely we'd ever find the killer." She tightened her grip on his hand. "What's worse, if we did get lucky and we didn't get killed, chances are we'd never prove a case."

He acknowledged her words by stroking her hand with his thumb. He looked at Hank, then back at her. “So once a fella is charged, he can only hope to win. He can never prove he’s innocent.” His look was hard. Josie withdrew her hand. “I can’t buy that.”

“Seein’ how you feel, let Walden drag it into court,” Hank said. “That way you’d have an acquittal. Nobody’d be able to come back at you.”

“Why take the chance of a trial?” Josie asked. “It’s an unnecessary risk.”

“Don’t like the notion myself, now that I said it out loud,” admitted Hank.

“It’s not just Gerald now,” Brad said.

“I know,” said Hank. “And that bothers a whole lot. Seems to me that Josie’s got it right. Somebody’s settin’ you up or wants you runnin’ again. Any I’m wonderin’ about that bug.”

“Tell him about the CIA, Brad,” Josie said.

Brad repeated the story. When he’d finished, Hank said, “I can buy the bug as federal. They got something about expensive gadgets. But CIA? That’s hard to swallow.”

“There’s more,” Josie commented. “They didn’t behave like federal agents.”

“How’s that?” Hank asked, looking at Brad.

“They were puffed up some. A lot of God and country.”

“It happens,” Hank said. “I’ve seen those folks take it too serious.”

“It’s the younger man, Feldersen,” Josie said, “that worries me. Apparently he lost his temper. Not at all what you’d expect from a trained agent.”

“How far’d it go?” Hank asked.

“If the older guy, Cogswell, hadn’t been there, it might have been interesting.”

“That bad?” Hank responded thoughtfully.

Brad nodded.

“I’ll be damned. A wild-eyed federal agent can do real damage. Feldersen, you say his name is? And Cogswell?”

Brad nodded.

“The feds don’t give much info, but it’d ease my mind to know more about those two, Feldersen most of all.”

Brad watched him file the details carefully in a front corner of memory for quick reference. Josie was lost in her own thoughts.

“I did hear something from Tuckman,” Brad said.

“What’s that?” Hank asked.

“He’d made a deal with Gerald to buy his part of Overnite Air. When he was killed, Lydia took it because of their dad’s will. It’s far out, but maybe she killed him to get his share.”

“You just got my attention,” Hank said sharply. “There’s nothing in the original case file about that. And there sure as hell should be. Remember, she said she saw him killed. That would put her on the scene.”

“Tuckman wants that airline,” Brad said. “Maybe he killed Gerald because he changed his mind about selling.”

“Possible. Yes, indeedy.” He frowned. “There are a lot of questions all of a sudden, and they need answers.” His tight, lazy smile was back. He leaned forward. “With Gerald, there’re a couple things I can check, includin’ what you just told us about Tuckman and Lydia.” He looked at Josie. “All I need is ten more hours a day.”

“Is there a hint in that?” Josie asked.

“I hear you’re good.”

“You said you might change your mind,” Brad reminded her.

“There are things you could do,” Hank suggested.

“Such as?”

“Check on Lydia’s murder. My hands are tied there.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s Sgt. Broadmore’s case. He won’t stand for much of me.”

“And while I’m solving a murder all by my lonesome, what will you be doing?”

Hank laughed easily. “I’ve got Gerald’s case. I can dig.” His tight smile had a touch of grimness now. “And I’ve friends. I can feed you a lot. I just gotta stay in the right channels officially. What do you say?”

Brad reached out and clasped both her hands in his. “You could make a difference.”

She tossed her hair over her shoulder and smiled. “I’ve been outvoted. I’ll see what I can do.”

Grinning now, Brad released her hands and grabbed his wallet. Hastily he reached for her purse and stuffed a sheaf of bills inside. “Too late to change your mind. You’ve been paid.”

“I don’t want your money. At least not yet. Amanda already paid me for a week.”

“She’s done enough. Tear up her check.”

“I already did.”

Brad reached for her chin and kissed her lightly. He watched her startled look change to something he couldn’t identify. He wanted to crush her against him. Instead he sat back in his seat.

“What have I let myself in for,” she murmured.

“One kiss leads to another,” Hank commented.

“I was thinking of a certain investigation. I’m a little overwhelmed.”

“Start in my office in the mornin’,” Hank said. “I’ll give you all I’ve got and some stuff I’m not supposed to have.”

She nodded. “And what about Brad? Amanda doesn’t want him alone, and I agree.”

“You’re right again. He should be nowhere alone.” Hank grinned. “How about he goes with you? I can’t see him fittin’ in too well down at the station.”

Josie was shaking her head as Brad spoke. “Look. I can’t just sit around waiting.”

“You never could,” Hank said. “And there’s been a couple of times you almost lost your ass. Mine along with it.” He grinned, softening the complaint. “Have you got something specific in mind? Or do you just want to rattle some cages?”

“What do Tuckman, Gerald, and Lydia have in common?” Brad asked.

“Go on.”

“An airline. Overnite Air. Gerald and Lydia had it; Tuckman wants it.”

“So?”

“Maybe I can get a job.”

“That’s reaching a long way,” Josie said. “I don’t see what you’d gain.”

Hank was thoughtful. “Sure. It’s probably a waste of time, but it’d get him out of our hair.”

“Thanks, buddy.”

“Look at it this way. You’d be with people and we need that.” He shrugged. “Who knows? You might even get lucky.” He stood up. “I best be gettin’ along. It looks like a busy day tomorrow.”

“You don’t want Brad to be alone here in the hotel tonight, do you?” Josie asked, as she also stood.

“I figured since Amanda gave you orders, you’d be stayin’ with him.” He grinned.

“I’ll make my own plans along those lines.”

“Well, buddy, I tried.” Hank said, still grinning. “My place doesn’t come with playmates, but there’s a couch.”

“Your place’ll do fine, Hank,” Brad said. He hoped his deep blush was hidden in the dim bar light. He watched Josie’s look soften into a smile. “Luck all,” she said, and was gone. Both men watched her exit with keen interest.

“You could do worse,” Hank commented. “I’d bet she does good with those sweet legs.”

“I’m like her,” Brad said. “I like to do my own arranging.”

“But you’re so damned slow.” Hank laughed. “I’m just tryin’ to help a buddy.”

“You could maybe pay the check?”

Still laughing, Hank dropped some bills on the table. He picked up the bug, then they gathered up Brad’s things from his room and left the hotel.

* * *

Once inside the apartment, Hank had tossed Brad fresh sheets and a blanket, pointed to a couch and headed for his own bed. Sleep had not come to Brad. Once more he looked around the living room.

It was a bachelor’s paradise. There were half a dozen small lamps; none would have bulbs too bright. Two couches dominated the

room. Large pillows scattered about the deep pile carpet added to the playpen effect. Somewhere, he knew, there was a tape deck and some good solid blues to which Hank was addicted. Four speakers were corner mounted near the ceiling. He'd noticed some video tapes near the VCR and TV. He was pretty sure *Two on One* had never played in local theaters. Hank, at least, hadn't changed. Women were his true vocation.

Why is it so hard for me? he wondered. Two consenting adults. To be near someone. To hold each other against those things that go bump in the night. Where's the harm? What if it's only for a few hours? The closeness is of value in itself, beyond elemental physical experience. And if the cruel light of dawn says so, find another. It's the way of things.

He sighed. He was the original tangle foot where girls were concerned. He always had been. He knew he attracted attention. Girls liked him. But he could carry it only so far. And they wondered why. Some were willing to play at love. Why wasn't he? But it had never been play to him. Part of him desperately wanted it to be so. But it was not. He wanted much, much more. Somebody like Josie, maybe.

Thoughts of long, dark hair, dangling earrings, and long, strong legs flooded in erasing all others. He did not think of murder, the CIA, or Judge Tofler. He rolled over on his stomach and sought to carry further speculations into dreams.

* * *

Josie Botsworth looked out at the night lights of the city. It was the reason she'd taken the apartment, this view of the San Fernando Valley all the way north to the San Gabriel Mountains. This nightly sitting always brought a serenity, a sense that all is well. But tonight, that sense of inner calm eluded her. She loved the honest fragrance of soap and the feel of roughly towed flesh soothed by the pale blue silk kimono. Tonight it didn't seem significant.

"Damn," she muttered aloud. What have I let myself in for? If I get caught working an open police case, they'll yank my license immediately and Sergeant Walters knows it.

It was not their arm-twisting. Even Amanda's wishes were not enough. She'd never seen such a mess. It played like a scenario of a bad daytime serial. The ingredients were unreal. Two murders, the latest victim the sexually perverted ex-wife of a Vietnam war hero. A trucking magnate trying to steal an airline. And the CIA with all the dread touches of those real covert operations, that are never revealed.

She'd placed herself squarely in the center of the web alongside Brad Ashton and his worthy sergeant. But this was no ordinary web, for there was more than one black glob of spidery legs working toward the center. She shuddered, the silk kimono icy across her breasts and stomach.

Some of the spiders might be stopped, even killed. But there were more than enough to arrange the quiet silken wrappings of all concerned, then to safely tuck them into a quiet corner of the great web.

Slowly she forced grim thoughts aside, making room for plans. The mental gearing hummed as she checked off the things to be done and knew the days would be too short. As was her practice, she reviewed the day in mental playback, focusing on pertinent items and reminding herself of questions unanswered. But it didn't work this time. There were too many questions not even asked, all blotted out with, "Why am I doing this?"

She'd counted the money Brad had given her. It was nearly four thousand dollars. Had he given her his last dime? When he'd kissed her, she'd felt it in her loins. That had never happened before from only a kiss. And this one so lightly given. She felt a wetness creep forth now, remembering. She didn't need that. A man did not fit into her plans. A boyfriend would be welcome. But it hadn't worked before. And she had decided Brad did little casually.

No. The only reason she'd agreed was the challenge itself. It had little to do with her client. Certainly she had no personal plans. She really had no desire to be kissed again. Or to be enfolded in his powerful arms. Or to be drawn to the solidity of his chest, to feel her breasts against him as a strong, tanned hand on the flesh of her buttocks pulled her to him.

It was much later when she padded barefoot across the carpet to her bedroom, the silk kimono sliding against her thighs. She slipped it off, hung it up and lay down on the bed. Later she fell into fitful sleep.

* * *

That Lydia was dead changed the situation dramatically. As he reached for his drink, light from the lamp on the table was reflected momentarily in the red stone of his ring.

The risk had been increasing lately. It was harder each day to fool the feds, bunglers though they were. Lydia's addiction to sexual action and toys had become difficult to satisfy of late. At least this problem had been resolved. He remembered the dark stains on the white wool carpet where her blood had soaked quickly through to the pad below.

Yes. It had been coming on. Now it was time to finish it. He set his drink on the table and picked up the short-barreled .38. With practiced ease, he fitted the silencer securely, then checked the load. It was a cold piece, a killing weapon that could never be traced to him. As he toyed with the gun, he thought of the money he was throwing away.

Smuggling heroin was extremely profitable. He sighed, thinking of what his decision would cost in dollars. Then he smiled slightly, looking at the deadly little killer in his hand. He let himself flow into it, the pure unadulterated thrill of the hunt before him. He did not forget the ending. No. To kill was the ultimate high. The pain of lost money paled to insignificance as he let his thoughts drift, seeking to encompass the whole of what lay ahead.

CHAPTER 6 TUESDAY

Shortly after nine the next morning, Brad sat down with Jeffery Walden across the desk from Sgt. Walters. Hank leaned forward. “Brad, before I turn this tape on, get this straight. Don’t volunteer anything. Just answer the questions. Got it?”

Brad nodded. Hank leaned back in his chair and pressed the record button. With carefully constructed questions that sounded extemporaneous, Hank led Brad step by step through his movements and activities since his return. He did not mention the anonymous call, Brad’s being followed, the bug, or the visit from the CIA. He referred to an earlier statement from Josie regarding the bed being warm. He turned the recorder off and leaned back smiling. “It’s too bad you didn’t tuck that broad into bed with you.”

The office door opened and Lt. Stratford stode inside. The atmosphere changed abruptly as he smiled at the three men. There was no expression in his pale blue eyes. Brad could feel a sudden dryness in his mouth. Walden was more attentive. Hank gave no outward indication things were different.

“Statement?” Lt. Stratford asked politely. There was a hint of his rank in the way he asked.

“Just finished up,” drawled Hank. “I thought you were assigned to narcotics, not homicide.”

“True, but old cases, like old habits, die hard.” He turned his full attention to Brad. “I hope we haven’t inconvenienced you, Mr. Ashton.”

Brad made no reply.

“Coincidence, don’t you think? Your ex-wife killed so soon after your return?” He smiled. “I dropped by to see her, just yesterday morning.” He sat on the edge of the desk, leaning on his left arm. His coat hung open, revealing the short-barreled .44 magnum strapped to his left hip, butt forward. The pistol seemed to enhance the slight slender figure in some way Brad did not quite

understand. “I wanted to ask again about her statement, the one she changed.”

“Funny,” remarked Hank. “I thought that was my case now.”

“Oh, it is. It was just a feeling I had, something I had to get out of my system. It’s difficult to let a case go, particularly one you were so close to making.”

“Maybe you should try harder,” Hank said mildly.

“I’m not doubting your abilities, Sergeant. It’s only that the suspect is such a good friend, I thought you might overlook something. You are good friends, are you not?” Lt. Stratford asked Brad.

Brad nodded, desperately wishing he was someplace else. He’d had more than enough of this three years ago.

Walden spoke. “Was there something specific, Lieutenant?”

Stratford nodded. “It’s about Allison’s murder. Gerald’s, that is. It’s a little too soon to know much about his sister’s death, don’t you think?”

No one answered.

“As I mentioned,” Stratford continued, “I spoke with Lydia shortly before she was murdered.” He looked hard at Brad. “She told me something that was overlooked in the original investigation.”

He paused, then stood up. “Now mind you, Mr. Ashton. It may be nothing. But then again it could add substantially to your motive for killing Gerald Allison.” He leaned his hands on the desk and demanded, “What can you tell us about that landing zone? LZ 307, I believe it was?”

“Nothing special. I and my team used it a couple of times,” Brad replied quietly. His face was expressionless. He knew no one could see his hands tucked under the desk. He resisted the impulse to wipe them on his pants.

“Come now, Mr. Ashton. I’m sure you can do better—”

“My client has stated there is nothing to tell,” interrupted Walden.

Lt. Stratford looked hard at Walden. “Right. Perhaps Danielson can deal with this in court Monday.” He straightened and looked down at Hank. “I’ll give you the details later, Sergeant. You seem

busy at the moment.” He smiled at them and left. The door closed softly behind him.

Involuntarily, Brad shivered. Both Walden and Hank were watching him closely. Hank broke the silence. “If you want, I’m gone. But if there’s anything at all, you’ve got to level with Walden. Else he can get jabbed and you can get hurt.”

Brad nodded, surprised at the anger after all this time. He took a deep breath and began, “It was one of those routine patrols. You know the kind I mean, Hank.” He laughed, but there was no humor. Hank nodded his understanding.

“The run was clean. We did the job and made it to LZ 307 about dusk the third night out. We were moving good, but somehow we got some attention or maybe they were just watching the LZ. Anyway, we started taking fire. Small stuff. We handled it good, but one of my people took a hit.

“When it was clear, we called in the choppers for a pickup. We must have missed some people, because a few rounds came in just as the first chopper touched down. Maybe he took a hit, I can’t say. But he climbed right back into the sky. I grabbed the radio to see what was happening. Hell. One burst from those choppers and there wouldn’t even have been a jungle. But it was Gerald Allison who answered.”

Walden was listening attentively. Hank was leaning forward, elbows on the desk.

“He must have recognized my voice, just as I recognized his. When I told him to dump a few rounds and come on in, he chuckled and told me to call back when I’d cleaned up the ground fire. Then they were gone.” He paused, remembering.

“More people showed and we began taking heavier fire. We broke out, but it cost us. I lost two of my people and the radio. The war was over for another one we carried out. We made it to the secondary LZ, but without the radio we had to wait. Our ammo was nearly gone and we were hungry as hell before another team landed four days later. Must have scared hell out of them, popping up like we did. Anyway, we made it back, what was left of us.”

“Did you report the incident?” asked Walden.

“Yeah, but I didn’t use Allison’s name. There were a lot of chickenshits out there. He was just one more.”

“How’d Lt. Stratford get this?” asked Hank. “Did you tell Lydia?”

“No. Gerald might have.”

“Did you ever take further action?” asked Walden. “Perhaps threaten him in front of someone?”

“Only at the LZ. I swore I’d grab him by the throat and not let go until he took his last breath. But I was talking to myself; there was nobody near enough to hear.”

“What do you think?” Hank asked Walden.

“If they can get it on the record, it improves their motive, but they had that already. I don’t think the DA will use this. With both Gerald and Lydia dead, Lt. Stratford has only hearsay evidence, something Lydia told him.

“Brad was home nearly a year with no indication of acting as he threatened. I don’t see anything here to stop Judge Tofler from dismissing.” He rose. The other two men followed suit. Walden reached across the desk and shook Hank’s hand. “Nice fellow, Lt. Stratford. He must be bucking for captain.”

“He’s been passed over twice. I think he’s given up on that. Except for being a conceited self-righteous sonofabitch, he’s not so bad. He just thinks Brad’s guilty.”

“And what do you think?” Walden asked.

“Hell. I wouldn’t believe it if I’d seen him do it.” Hank was still grinning when they turned away.

* * *

After a long talk with Walden that encouraged him, it was nearly one o’clock when Brad parked at the Burbank airport. He ignored a host of signs carrying various threats, one of which was “No Admittance. This Means You.” As he made his way through the warehouse of Overnite Air, he noticed the orderliness of the shop, even though it was badly overcrowded. Someone knew what they were doing.

He moved with easy confidence through the temporary halls of goods. He’d put on his boots this morning; he fit right in. He

stopped for a moment to chat with an old timer, meticulously noting carton counts per skid. He got the name he wanted and moved off in the direction the old man pointed.

The man he approached was close to fifty, inches shorter and pounds lighter than Brad. He radiated competence and skepticism as Brad introduced himself as Tom Fairchild.

“We ain’t got a thing,” Milder said bluntly.

“Looks like you’re two, maybe three days behind.”

The comment brought a scowl, then anger to the eyes he faced. “Now I got bums off the street telling me my troubles.”

Brad smiled and said, “I’ll grab a short stay, if that’s all you’ve got.”

“You any good?” Milder asked suspiciously.

“I’m good with those.” Brad pointed in the direction of three idle forklifts parked to his left.

“Who’d you work for?”

Brad gave him a name and number in Chicago. Milder disappeared into a closet-sized office. Brad followed. It was clean and sharp; the man was proud of his work.

As Milder hung up the phone, he said sarcastically, “Nobody’s that good. What’d you pay him?” Brad grinned as Milder dialed again. Three secretaries later, he got his man. “Listen good and don’t give me no crap, Franklin. I’m at least two days behind down here and you damn well know it.” He ignored Brad’s broad smile. “I know you said no more people, but I want to put a guy on. If he don’t work out, I’ll dump him. At least we’ll have a chance to get caught up.”

Milder listened for several moments. “Where the hell’s your profit coming if I don’t move this shit?” He listened. “Yeah. I know you got troubles. Can I put him on?” He listened again. “Thanks. Why didn’t you say so in the first place?” He slammed the receiver down.

“Let’s see your papers.” He scanned them quickly, dug into a file cabinet and brought out a packet of forms. “If you can write, fill these out.” He tossed Brad’s papers back. “Those have expired. You’ll have to square it with the union rep when he shows.” He left the office as Brad turned to the forms.

* * *

Driving a forklift loaded with a half ton of cargo requires skill, quickness, and good judgment. Within half an hour, Brad was up to speed, working efficiently.

Milder must have been watching, for he approached him and said, “Guess Chicago told me straight. Can you work late?”

Brad nodded.

“Take the swing shift, then. Be here by four tomorrow.”

Within an hour, he’d met most of those working the shed and had the names straight. To all, he was open and friendly. When he could, he helped. In an isolated corner of the warehouse, he found a giant of a man with a fiery red beard, trying to maneuver a large crate onto a skid. The two of them managed, but not without good sweat and strain. “Name’s Pat,” he said and rolled off with his load.

By three in the afternoon, he’d figured when most took their breaks. He began planning his work in order to spend the maximum time with the most people.

While hunched over a cup of coffee in the snack bar, a woman with bleached blonde hair and melon-sized breasts she was proud of took a seat next to him. He guessed she was probably past forty, trying to look thirty. “Where’d you drop in from?” she asked with a warm inviting look.

“Just started today. In the shed,” he answered with a smile.

“Well, don’t get to liking this dump. That’s my advice. I’m in accounting, see. This outfit’s getting broker every day. I don’t see how you got a job, unless it was a woman who hired you.” She studied his shoulders, her glance drifting downward. “You’re a big chunk, aren’t you?”

He smiled.

“Gotta name?”

“Fairchild. Tom Fairchild.”

“Mine’s Connie Artwald. The last name’s all I got from my ex-husband.”

“Wore him out?”

“Wish it were so.” She sighed. Her ample bosom inched further out over the counter. “We just got older. And he decided he liked young stuff.” She was wistful for an instant. “But since then, I’ve had it good.” Her broad smile was a clear invitation for him to find out just how good it could be.

“I believe that.” He laughed. “You serious about our jobs?”

“Honey, I’m serious about most things.” Her boldness would have been unacceptable in most women. Brad smiled and waited. She sighed again and continued, “I got this friend in the main office, see. He gives me stuff I don’t see at my own desk. So yeah, I’m for sure serious.” She paused, wetting her lips suggestively with her tongue. “You heard about your new boss lady? Lydia Allison?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, nobody can figure how that’ll do us. My friend says it don’t matter ’cause it’s a corporation and all. But me, I don’t know. Things were bad before. I don’t see how her getting killed’ll help.”

“Milder runs a good shop, seems like.”

“They say he’s tops. It’s something else wrong. My friend, he talks about bad management. I can’t say from what I see. One thing, though. Last month we were three days late with a payroll. They blamed it on the computers, but everything else was coming out all right. Only the checks were missing.”

“Job hunting?”

“You bet. I don’t want to be caught uncovered.” She grinned. “’Cept in certain situations, you understand. Well, gotta be getting back.” She gulped the last of her coke. As she slid off the stool, her lower stomach rubbed firmly along his leg. “Give me a call, huh? Extension 232.”

“Might do that,” he said with a smile.

“Hope so.” She grinned and left.

On his way back to the cargo shed, he stopped at the phone and called Tuckman.

“Ashton here. You hear about Lydia?”

“Yeah. It’s a damn shame.” Brad could almost see the canary feathers in his grinning voice.

“How’s that leave your case?”

“Real good. So good, in fact, I’ll up my offer to thirty thou, if ya get your butt in here right now.”

“It’s a nice number.”

“Now listen, Ashton. Don’t go jacking me around.”

“If you’re better off with her dead, maybe you arranged it.”

“Get off it, Ashton. I still gotta win the suit. Only now it’s against a probate court. My lawyer says it’ll be ok; he didn’t say it’d be easier, ’cept maybe we don’t deal with that crazy broad no more.”

“The police think I might be good for it.”

Tuckman laughed. “Ya better grab my offer fast. Walden costs a lot of dough.”

“Let’s say I didn’t do it. Who would you pick?”

“Christ! There ain’t enough paper in this whole office to write all the names. Did ya see her since ya got back?”

“No.”

“She still looked great, but it showed some. She was hard into kinky sex. Maybe sick some other ways, too. It’s like she was trying to prove ya can’t wear it out. She went for quantity. Bunches of guys and broads. Hell, I even hear tell of animals.” He paused as if the words tasted bad. “With drugs thrown in, it’s a real long list. She probably brushed somebody who wasn’t ready to go.” He paused. “That’s enough of that shit. How about my offer? I’m not a patient guy.”

“Why do you want an airline going broke?”

“That’s my business. Not yours.”

“Give.”

“Get your ass in here and get this bread before I change my mind. Ya hear me?” The crash of the receiver being smashed into its cradle echoed in his ear all the way back to the shed.

The rest of the evening was busy, but uneventful. From Pat, the red-bearded giant, he got confirmation of what Connie Artwald had told him. A payroll had indeed been missed. And there’d been unexpected layoffs and people let go. Everyone was nervous about their job.

His work wasn’t difficult. He picked up a ticket from the office. If the shipment was outgoing, he collected it and moved it to

a spot on the apron near the planes. If it was incoming, he moved skids from the apron into the shed, distributing them according to their destination. Occasionally he had to move a few crates by hand, but the forklift did most of the work. It gave him time to think. Except for Tuckman and Lydia, there wasn't much to think about. When he caught himself thinking about Josie, he had to concentrate to keep his thoughts only on the work she was doing.

As directed by Milder, he knocked off at nine, made his way to his car and headed back to Hank's apartment. He stopped for a light dinner and later, for some milk for breakfast. Mostly his thoughts were of Tuckman.

The man was capable of many things. Even murder, if that was what it took to get what he wanted. But he couldn't see a way the man could profit from the death of Gerald or Lydia. What puzzled him most was why a smart operator like Tuckman was scrapping for an airline going broke. He thought of dozens of reasons which, in the end, left him with none.

As he parked the car, grabbed his milk and headed for Hank's apartment, he noticed a tan Plymouth drive slowly past the parking lot. Involuntarily he lengthened his stride.

* * *

Hank punched the TV off as Brad entered, walked into the kitchen and tossed him a beer.

"Somebody's out there," Brad said. "Tan Plymouth."

Hank slipped into his shoulder rig. He checked to see a round was chambered in the 9 mm Beretta auto-load and tucked it away. "I've a .357 you can use. It's not registered to anybody."

Brad shook his head. "Handguns don't do much for me."

Hank nodded. "If you need it later, it's in the nightstand beside my bed. The rounds are custom and super hot." He slipped his jacket on. "Let's have a look," he said, heading for the door.

It wasn't like old times exactly, for they walked openly with long strides side by side. But the familiar tension was back. Although there was no need for stealth, they made no sound. It took

only moments to check the apartment parking area. There was no tan Plymouth.

The street has harder. They studied it carefully. There was no sign of the car. To the left, the street ended in a cul-de-sac. They walked to the right, checking each driveway, any point of vantage of Walters' place. As they approached the corner, Brad headed suddenly out across the street. Hank saw it too, a tan Plymouth with two men in the front seat; one had light colored hair. But the car was moving now. They stopped, watching it disappear. As one, they turned and headed back.

Once inside, Hank grabbed the phone and dialed. He identified himself and said, "I need a rundown on California 499CFT. Call me here." He gave his number, hung up and joined Brad at the kitchen table. Brad idly erased wet circles on the table with the bottom of his beer can while creating more.

"I know a guy with clout in the CIA," Hank said. "I caught him late today. He doesn't know all the players, but he couldn't come up with anything about Feldersen or Cogswell."

"Then who are they?"

"I haven't a clue; I wish I did. The good news is the CIA hasn't got an operation goin' in LA. At least not at the street level, anything that'd mean tailin' you or anybody else."

"So who's on me?"

Hank shrugged. "I'll give five to one it's not CIA."

Into the growing silence, Hank said, "So tell me about Overnite Air."

When Brad finished, Hank said, "Tuckman. Yeah. It's time to stop around to see what shakes out of his tree. And I've got to take a closer look at Lydia as a suspect."

"What about that new evidence?"

"All they've got is that bit at the LZ. The guy I talked with said without more, they'd have to drop charges. But the lieutenant's still pitchin'."

"He's bugging me."

Hank laughed. "Me, too. But he outranks me." He shrugged. "Forget him. He hasn't a thing, and he's not about to get more."

“Expect you’re right.”

When the phone rang, Hank answered. He listened briefly, said, “Thanks,” then hung up. “The number on that Plymouth belongs to a woman in San Francisco. But her car’s a white Camaro. The plate must have been taped.”

“How’s that?”

“Maybe blue tape over the bottom of an E so it reads F. I’ll check possibilities tomorrow, but it looks like we missed.”

“You hear from Josie?” Brad asked.

“She spent the mornin’ goin’ over all I got. Didn’t say much, but I could tell she was gettin’ it all. When she left, she was after a copy of the will that gave Lydia Gerald’s share of the airline.” He grinned. “Now what you gotta do is grab that one, buddy. She’d be real good to you.”

“Uh huh.”

Hank persisted until Brad headed for the couch, pulled the blankets up around his head and curled up with his back to Hank.

* * *

This would be easy. Sam Gates was a punctual man. And reliable. He could be counted on to do as he was told. That’s why he’d selected Sam. A courier had to be reliable, punctual and able to follow orders precisely. No question, he was a good man, but Sam Gates could identify him.

He sat in the back seat of the car in the corner nearest the sidewalk. Even with the window open, his dark suit and shirt made him nearly invisible to any passerby. Light from a passing car bounced off a window and the red stone in his ring. Briefly the silenced pistol in his lap gleamed dully.

At eleven Sam turned the corner and continued walking at a steady, lumbering pace. He was a heavy man with broad shoulders and a balding pate. He knew Sam thought he had two blocks to go, but he was wrong. He cocked the pistol. When Gates was beside the car, he fired. The sound was swallowed by the silencer and the rich interior of the car.

He watched the falling body for only a moment. The bullet had entered an inch above the right ear. He slipped into the front seat and laid the silenced pistol beside him as he settled behind the wheel. The car started instantly and moved quietly away into the night.

CHAPTER 7 WEDNESDAY

When Brad parked at the Burbank airport, he had an hour before reporting for work, time to listen to more conversation in the snack bar. As he entered the building, he noticed the tan Plymouth. It required all the discipline he could muster to replace the grimace in his eyes and mouth with an easy smile.

Connie Artwald was seated in a booth with two mechanics when he entered. She flashed her sexiest smile, her look inviting as her glance drifted downward. He picked up a cup of coffee and joined the three, crowding in beside the two men. Connie's disappointment at his choice quickly evaporated. She was in her element, flirting with three men at the same time. When she left, she gave Brad a long look of invitation. The three men turned to watch her depart. Unanimously they agreed; she had a way of moving.

When the mechanics left, he was joined by the red-bearded giant, Pat. Others drifted in and out. Brad listened, but heard nothing new. At four, he clocked in.

Brad spent some time helping load a plane, then more with a couple of trucks. As often as possible, he joined the others for coffee, listening. For the most part, he worked the shed.

Easing down a particularly narrow corridor between stacked crates, he moved slowly into the more open area at the end of the row. Another forklift was hot-dogging toward the loading apron. The two heavy machines met at right angles. Brad was carrying his load low; the other driver was carrying his high. He lost it. Crates and boxes exploded off his skid as it passed over the top of Brad's.

Brad cut his engine and slid off his lift to face the furious driver of the other machine. The man was an inch taller and several pounds heavier.

"You fuckin' shit! What the fuck you doin'?" Some of the men were watching, clearly expecting trouble.

“I’ll help get your load together.” Brad spoke mildly, a pleasant expression on his face. There was a hard watchfulness in his eyes.

“You jivin’ me, fuckhead?”

“No.” The last thing he needed was a brawl, but it seemed inevitable. The man took another step toward him, arms slightly forward. If it came, it would be an eye-gouging, ball-crunching attack.

“Nobody fucks with me, asshole.”

“Offered to help, is all.” He’d seen it before and he’d been looking for it or he’d have missed it. The flashing angry eyes he faced dulled briefly. The anger rushed back with even greater force, but the big man’s stance showed caution.

“You do that!” he snarled. “When I get back, I want that shit back on the skid and on the apron, fuckhead. Or your ass is mine.”

The man spun angrily on his heel and stalked off in the direction of the snack bar. The others lingered a moment. Most gave Brad a brief smile or nod. Pat came up, a broad grin lighting his entire face. “That one’s stomped every guy in the shop. Except me, of course.” His grin increased an impossible inch. “You handled him real good,” he said admiringly. “But you should have taken him.”

“No point if there’s another way.”

“Ah, but it would have been fun to watch you whip ’im. I’m the only one here who has, and he’s the sort needs a good beating now and then.”

“You sure I’d manage?” Brad was amused; he enjoyed this big man.

“There’s a look about you,” he said knowingly. “Me, I’d rather fight than eat. But with you, I think it’d be best if we were on the same side.” With a deep laugh, he jumped to Brad’s lift, backed it up and joined Brad in rebuilding the dumped skid.

When Brad clocked out at midnight, he was discouraged. So far he hadn’t learned anything useful. Josie and Hank had been right; he was wasting time. But the feeling was stronger than ever; somebody was out there.

By the time he turned onto the Golden State Freeway, he knew he was being followed again. His hands on the steering wheel tightened. It was probably Feldersen and Cogswell, but he was fed

up with guessing. How could he make sure? A dead end street his followers didn't know about? That might do.

The freeway let him move at a rapid rate. This was ground he knew well, but he couldn't remember anything helpful. He was on top of the Van Nuys exit when it came to him.

He slashed across two lanes of cars, trying to ignore the sounds of tires squealing, then rushed down the off ramp at good speed. As he turned north on Van Nuys, he watched in the rearview mirror. His followers had made it, too. Now his problem was to hold the slight lead he had. The rental car made it tough; it had no desire to rush madly down busy streets. But it wasn't far; he could make it.

Six blocks later, he made a skidding turn onto Dalbert. He saw the yellow road sign that proclaimed, "No exit," and hoped his followers would not. He raced down the long block and squealed to a stop, beside the cars of residents already parked in the cul-de-sac.

He abandoned the car and dashed for the opposite side of the street. He flattened himself to the ground behind a large clump of bottlebrush near the sidewalk. He was invisible to any curious homeowner or from the street.

The Plymouth took the corner fast. He saw the brake lights flare as they saw his car. The driver allowed his car to drift on. As they passed, he recognized Feldersen. The other man was not Cogswell.

He had what he wanted, but now he wanted more. He wanted to jolt this man in some way, to at least get his attention. He watched the car begin a turn within the cul-de-sac.

Three doors down, an elderly man struggled to the curb with a barrel of trash. Watching him and listening to the night, Brad almost missed the Plymouth. It was approaching from his right from behind parked cars. The headlights brightened the quiet yards on both sides of the street. He buried his face in the fallen leaves of the bottlebrush; only light reflecting off his face could give away his position.

When his ears told him they were past, he rose quickly and dashed after the slowly moving car. The window on the driver's side was open. As he came up to it, he slowed. "Looking for me, Feldersen?"

The pale blond head jerked back and around as if the man's hair had been pulled hard, suddenly. Brad stopped; the car came to a halt twenty feet farther on. The backup lights came on; the car moved slowly back to where Brad was standing.

Feldersen's face was in shadow; Brad could see nothing of it, except the tight set of his jaws. He wondered what the man was thinking. Would he do something unexpected? For an instant, frustration overwhelmed him. He hoped Feldersen would do something, anything to give the chance to physically demonstrate how he felt. "Why are you following me?" Brad asked, trying for politeness and falling short.

The silence dragged on as Feldersen studied him. "I think I should arrest you, take you downtown and see what else can be arranged." There was anger, but the words were said with a controlled effort at politeness.

"Where's Cogswell?"

Feldersen gave no indication he'd heard.

"You're not CIA. Who are you?"

"I don't answer your questions. Remember? You're going to answer mine."

"Not likely."

"When we saw you at the hotel, you knew it was your ex-wife who put us onto you. Is that why you killed her?"

"Ignorance can be dealt with. Stupidity is tougher."

Feldersen had his hand on the door handle, his arm rigid. Brad tensed. It would be foolish to let the agent get out of the car. But this whole scene was the essence of foolishness. Where was the gain? Brad realized he was cold. "I'll be at Hank Walter's place. Wouldn't want you to get lost."

He walked quickly away, got into the rental and drove toward the cul-de-sac. He came up the street, passed the unmoving Plymouth, then took the corner. He saw the headlights flash on behind him. All pretense was gone; they were right on his bumper. If he stopped suddenly, he'd have two federal agents close to, if not in, the back seat of his car.

* * *

When Brad entered the apartment, Hank was putting the finishing touches on a sandwich. Brad opened the refrigerator and put away the milk and the six packs of beer. He took a cold one off the door and turned toward Hank who was trying to swallow in order to speak.

“There’s a game tonight. It might take your mind off your troubles,” Hank said.

About to snap open his beer, Brad paused. “The stakes?”

“Maybe a grand to the winner.”

Brad shook his head and opened his beer. “Go ahead. I’ll be ok.”

“No big deal.” Hank grabbed a beer to go with his sandwich and moved into the living room. Brad followed. Seated, Hank said, “We found two more bugs when my pad was swept this afternoon. Somebody’s real interested in you.”

“I was followed again. Feldersen. He was with some other fella, not Cogswell.” Brad told him what had happened on the dead end street.

“I couldn’t get a make on that car last night. Was this the same one?”

Brad nodded. “I was close enough to see the plate was taped, but not how.”

“Whoever they are, they’re not CIA.”

“Did you hear from Josie?”

“She called this afternoon. She got a copy of that will, and it’s like you said. Lydia got Gerald’s share when he was killed. She asked a couple questions, but she didn’t have much to say. I got a little more on Tuckman.”

Brad leaned forward.

“He’s a tough bird. I checked his two boys. From their records, they may be even tougher; they like to beat on folks. I don’t know how that baby-faced guy got a license to carry a weapon. Tuckman must have some high-up clout.

“He lost a chance to buy half of Overnight Air when Gerald was killed, so he doesn’t look good as a suspect. Lydia, on the other hand, got real lucky. Right now she looks like our best bet.

“There’s an interesting twist. One of Tuckman’s drivers was busted at the Mexican border with half a million worth of coke. The DEA has him locked up tryin’ to get him to blow the whistle on Tuckman. But the driver claims it was a solo deal.”

“Can’t figure who called me at the hotel about Lydia,” Brad said. “Could it have been Tuckman?”

“He seems more an upfront type, a guy who’d come right at you. He’d have used his name.”

Brad tugged on his ear. “What the hell’s it all mean?”

Questions beginning with “What,” “Who,” “How,” and “Why” filled the room. They lingered in Brad’s thoughts after Hank went to bed. As he curled up on the couch, even images of Josie failed to stem their flow. There were no answers. There might never be. This thought kept him awake for another hour.

* * *

It was a good bolt lock. It had taken almost three minutes to pick it. But the rest of the place was a dump. He moved silently about the small apartment. He knew no one was there, but the .38 in his hand was cocked, the silencer in place. In the darkness, the red stone of his ring had no color.

The stink in the bedroom was pronounced. It reeked of mold and the unwashed toilet. The bedsheets looked as if they hadn’t been changed in a month. Dirty, smelly clothes littered the floor. It offended him, such filth. Back in the living room, he chose the chair by the slightly open window. It was not the best position and one of the springs poked hard into his buttocks, but he needed the air, smog filled or not.

Jason Talbert liked coke. This could account for the state of disarray and deterioration in the apartment. But Talbert was also a good aircraft mechanic. To his orderly mind, there was a contradiction here, as there had been when he’d persuaded Talbert to assist him. He knew “persuade” wasn’t quite the right word.

Actually it had been simple blackmail, a briefcase filled with coke that went unreported. So far as he’d been able to discover,

Talbert's lifestyle hadn't interfered. The man was a genius at duplicating aircraft struts and braces that were hollow shells, to be filled and emptied of heroin as needed.

At the sound of someone slipping the key into the door lock, he straightened slightly and lifted the pistol, hammer back. The bolt slid free and the door opened to admit a tall, slender man. For a moment, Jason Talbert was silhouetted against the night sky, his shoulders hunched in characteristic fashion, somewhat obscured by his long unkempt hair.

Talbert closed the door and reached to lock it. The first round hit him hard under the heart, the second high between his shoulders. If he could have screamed, he would have. If he could have looked toward the .38, he'd have been startled by the amount of light in the fire cone that nearly touched his shirt. But he was looking elsewhere now, as he slowly crumpled to the floor, wedged against the door.

The man in the chair did not move for several moments. He watched the dying man intently, watched the jerky dance of death steal through the body. The smell of gunpowder faded others in the room. He liked it.

He stood finally, grabbed the long hair and casually pulled the body free of the door. He reached down for the pulse in the man's throat. There wasn't much; he knew it wouldn't last. But he was always a careful man. The dull thud of the silenced pistol died quickly, but not the smell of scorched hair.

He removed the silencer and slipped it into his coat pocket. He tucked the pistol behind his belt, and opened the door. There were no sounds that shouldn't be there. He closed the door softly behind him and walked quietly toward the street. His rubber heels made no sound and his dark suit blended with the fading night. Only occasionally did light reflect off the red stone in his ring.

CHAPTER 8 THURSDAY

When Brad entered the snack bar, he picked up a cup of coffee and joined the red-headed Pat sitting alone at a table on the left. As he sat down, Pat said, “Have you ever run into Jason Talbert? A real hotshot mechanic?” At the puzzled look on Brad’s face, he added, “A greasy-looking guy. Had a scar on his left cheek.” Pat indicated its position with a finger across his cheek.

“Got it.”

“He got himself shot early this morning. A couple of guys heard it on the news. There was blood and guts all over the place, the way I hear it.”

Wonder why? Brad’s thoughts raced. Could this be important? Something to dig into?

“I didn’t know him really,” Pat responded. “I’ve seen him around. But talk is he was a dooper. If he was, there’re a thousand reasons.”

Brad nodded, trying to remember exactly what Jason Talbert had looked like. Connie Artwald joined them. Her improbable breasts got the attention she wanted. She, too, had heard of the killing. “Talbert was always somewhere half past high. How he kept his job, I can’t even guess. Maybe he just had a gun, see, wondered what it was for and pulled the trigger.”

“Ah hell, Connie,” Pat commented. “That don’t make it. He was shot three times.”

Brad did not contribute, as Connie and Pat argued over possibilities. When it was time to clock in, he excused himself. He punched in, grabbed a stack of work orders and climbed up on the forklift. Except for more talk of Jason Talbert, he heard nothing new.

On his first break, he called Hank. After telling him about Talbert, he asked, “Any chance of finding why he was killed?”

“Maybe,” Hank said. “I’ll see who’s handlin’ the case. It’d be nice to know.”

“Yeah. The talk here is he was into drugs.”

“Maybe you’re not wastin’ time like we thought. I’ll see what I can do. Incidentally, I’ll be workin’ late tonight. Instead of headin’ straight for my place, maybe you can find a busy bar, talk to some folks with names and give me a call later.”

“Will do.”

“Be cool, buddy.”

His thoughts floated aimlessly between Lydia, Tuckman and Talbert. He was glad Hank had taken him seriously about the killing. All he had was a feeling that it did relate in some way. A good hunch could lead to a better decision than his head could provide.

He tried Josie several times, but all he got was the sound of her voice on a recorder asking him to leave his name and number. Despite himself, he thought more of her than his work. He kept seeing the way she walked, and the way she tossed her long, dark hair over her shoulder.

A little before nine, the night foreman gave him a key, pointed to a skid and told him to take it to the aircraft service hangar. He didn’t need the key; the hangar door wasn’t locked. He slid it open, moved the lift inside and deposited the skid.

As he whirled the rig, he saw Roberto Sanchez, the lead mechanic, working on a C47 long past its prime. One of the landing lights was dangling; Roberto’s left arm was buried to the elbow in the hole where it had been. That explained why the door wasn’t locked; Sanchez worked odd hours. In response to his casual wave, Brad received only a dark scowl. Sanchez turned abruptly back to his work. With a shrug, Brad headed back to the shed.

The rest of the evening’s work was uninteresting. There was something about Sanchez that bothered him. Jason Talbert and Roberto Sanchez. Both were good mechanics. Both worked for Overnite Air. And one of them was very, very dead. Sanchez had seemed friendly enough when they’d been introduced earlier. Why the scowl? When he checked out at eleven, he still had the key to the hangar. One more look wouldn’t hurt.

This time, the hangar was locked. He used the key. Inside, the service platform was parked against the back wall. Brad grabbed a stepladder and carried it out to the plane. From the top step, he

studied the light Sanchez had been working on. Why would a lead mechanic be working on a landing light at nine o'clock at night? Surely this old derelict was not desperately needed by anyone. As far as he could see, Sanchez had simply installed a new one, something any flunky could do.

He put the stepladder back where he'd found it, locked the door and returned to the shed, coming in as if from the parking area. As he approached, the night foreman looked up. "Thought you'd left."

"Did. Forgot the hangar key."

"Right," the foreman said, slipping the key into his pocket.

* * *

As Brad turned north on Sepulveda, he thought he recognized the headlights behind him. As the car passed under the street lights at an intersection, he knew he'd guessed right. The tan Plymouth. He toyed with the idea of losing them, just for the hell of it. It would at least spoil their evening. But how?

At Victory, the light was dead red when he reached the intersection. He beat the cross traffic; the tan Plymouth could not. But they ran the red light, then came on fast, dodging light traffic. As he watched in the rearview mirror, a third car, a large dark sedan, made a sliding turn onto Sepulveda and accelerated, gaining quickly on the Plymouth. Suddenly the driver of the dark sedan cut sharply across the front of the Plymouth, forcing it to the curb and into a light standard. With the Plymouth out of it, the sedan closed rapidly.

Fun time was over; Brad knew he was the object of this exercise. Whoever it was wanted more than to shake his hand.

Brad took a hard right, knowing he couldn't outrun his pursuer in the rental car. Still, sixty-five miles an hour on a city street, with light traffic, offered opportunity. He tried to ignore the car behind him, to picture the road ahead.

The dark sedan was gaining steadily. He concentrated on keeping his own car on the road. He took a skidding turn to the right and gained ground. This street was wider; the sedan closed rapidly.

As it pulled even with his back fender, he saw what he badly needed, a narrow alley ahead on the left.

Locking four wheels, the rear end of his car drifted slightly toward the sedan, which was also braking. When his car slid into it, the sound of wrenching, screaming metal filled his ears. He yanked the wheel hard to the left as the windshield exploded; he hadn't heard the shorts. With tires squealing, he made it into the alley. Two more rounds slammed into the back of the car. He hadn't seen or heard a weapon fire. Without options now, the sedan charged on down the street.

Brad fought for control of the car, his vision hampered by the shattered windshield. Despite his efforts, he bounced two trash cans high in the air and tore out a dozen feet of grape-stake fencing before he could center the rushing car in the alley.

A dozen turns later, he pulled to a stop on a quiet residential street. In the dark shadow of a giant elm tree, he killed his lights, but kept the engine running. He was careful to keep his foot off the brake while watching to his right and in his rearview mirror. He dropped his hands to his lap in an effort to reduce the shaking. This reflex action was automatic now, learned long ago. Slow, deep breaths were his answer to the tremble in his legs and the ache in his kidneys.

Within minutes, only the ache in his kidneys remained and it had diminished. His hands were steady when he returned them to the wheel. The fear in his gut was a living thing. He did not take his eyes from the street.

His thoughts raced wildly in a variety of directions. If someone wanted him dead, he was a threat. Maybe there was something he could find. Maybe he'd already found it and didn't know it. Hank's place was out; too many people might look for him there. What next? Josie?

He searched deeply and found her address buried beneath growing frustration that could easily convert to anger. He waited another five minutes, watching the empty street, then slipped from the car and opened the trunk.

Using the lug wrench, he knocked out the rest of the windshield with four quick strokes. He tossed the wrench to the floor, brushed shattered glass off the seat, and drove quietly away. Free-ways were out. He didn't want to answer any police questions just now. Avoiding even major surface streets, he drifted south and west toward the Hollywood Hills. It was slow going, but he wasn't in a hurry.

* * *

Josie's apartment was in a large, three-story complex two blocks west of Haskel. He drove into the underground garage and parked in a back corner. A few yards from the car, he turned and looked at it. Even in the dimly lit garage, the shattered windshield was clearly visible. And the two bullet holes in the rear were at least holes that shouldn't be there. Even more obvious was the torn rear fender; the dark blue streaks of paint on the light beige screamed for attention.

He noticed a car to his left, draped with a cover. He moved closer; it was coated with dust. Gambling the owner would not need the car for awhile, he grabbed the cover and draped it neatly over the rental. Satisfied, he moved up the stairs to the lobby.

From the directory, he got Josie's apartment number. The access ways were open balconies. The view of the valley to the north was magnificent, but he took little notice. He rang the bell several times. There was no answer. Despite the heavy drapes, he could see the switch of an alarm system beside the door. The window was also wired.

Back down in the underground garage, he searched for the power box. He found it underneath the bottom of the stairs. As a convenience for tenants, no doubt, the padlock meant to secure the box was locked with the panel open. Each switch was labeled with the apartment number. He threw the switch to Josie's apartment, cutting off all power.

Back at her apartment window, he slipped out of his jacket, draped it over his hands and drove both fists through the edge of

the glass. There was surprisingly little sound as broken shreds of glass fell to the inside onto the carpeted floor.

He waited, motionless for several seconds. A good alarm system has battery backup, but all was quiet. He reached quickly inside and unlatched the bolt. Within moments he was in the apartment, the door closed behind him. He waited by the broken window, listening for any indication he'd been seen or heard.

Satisfied, he turned his attention to the broken alarm system. He moved silently to the kitchen and rummaged about. He found a kitchen knife, extension cord, and a roll of scotch tape.

Back at the window, he cut wire as needed from the extension cord. He used tape to insulate the twisted connections he made. He yanked the wires from the switch on the doorjamb. With more wire and tape, he created a closed circuit. He left the door latched, but unlocked, and returned to the basement garage. He reset power to the apartment, listening for any sign of alarm. There was none.

Back inside her apartment, he turned on a light and made a quick tour. It was neat and clean, expensively furnished. Creative good taste and style were evidenced throughout. There was an authoritative feel to it. The little knickknacks often found in a woman's place were markedly absent.

He found the phone and dialed Hank. He wasn't in. He left a message, saying only he wouldn't be able to see him tonight, that he was with a lady. He hoped Hank would understand.

A different reaction began to take hold, a feeling of lethargy enveloped him. For now, he didn't care who'd killed whom, only that he be left out of it. He located the Toshiba tuner. At the low end of the dial, he found what he wanted. Brubeck laid mellow sound into every corner of the room. He set the volume low, turned out the lights and lay down on the couch to listen, to quiet his racing thoughts. The couch was comfortable.

* * *

The slam of the apartment door woke Brad with a start. Josie, her .357 clenched in her right hand, towered over him. "What in the

hell is this?” There was no sympathy or understanding that Brad could see. He’d forgotten she was so tall and wondered how he could have.

“Well?” she snapped.

He tried fire against fire. “You wouldn’t call so—”

“Crap! Your money doesn’t give you the right to break in here.” She stalked to the stereo and snapped it off.

“How’d you beat the alarm?” she demanded.

He told her. She threw her hands toward the ceiling. Whether she was asking for guidance or silently screaming, Brad couldn’t tell. “Someone tried to kill me,” he said evenly into the brief silence.

“Dark sedan?”

He nodded, his eyebrows raised in question.

“Later.” She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Where’s your car?”

“Downstairs. It’s beat up some.”

“Terrific. The police will have it before morning.”

He explained about the car cover. She looked at him oddly. A small frown creased her forehead. “That ought to work. Belongs to the Brandasens. They won’t be back for a week or so.” She studied him intently for several moments. “You bother me, Brad Ashton. You really do.” She took another deep breath. “We’ll talk in the morning.” Moments later, the bedroom door closed firmly behind her.

He listened to faint sounds from behind the door fade into silence. Sleep escaped him. Too many notions whirled and scrambled through his head. He sketched light fantasies of opening her door, of her arms inviting him into her bed. This ended abruptly, blasted by the memory of bullets and his lucky dash down the alley.

* * *

Roberto Sanchez was nervous. He wondered what Brad Ashton had concluded about what he had seen. But it was the names of Gates and Talbert that were uppermost in his mind. Was he next? He paced the living room of the expensive apartment, trying to think it through. He knew he was important to the operation, third

in command, actually. He knew all the players; he'd insisted on that. Certainly there'd never been any slips, unless Ashton's interruption counted. He knew Sam Gates could easily be replaced; couriers were always available. And Jason Talbert had done his job; they could use the fake parts he'd made indefinitely.

His thoughts turned to the woman, and he felt himself growing, remembering the night he'd been introduced to her. Lydia Allison was special. The way she could use her tongue to tease, to pleasure and to tease further, nearly beyond endurance. Then to take all of him deeply. Never had he known such as she.

He stopped pacing, remembering Lydia's hard refusals to further meetings, his unanswered calls. It had been difficult, but he'd come to understand he was not important to her. And she was dead.

That decided it. Importance was a fleeting thing. If she was of so little importance she was dead, he was not really important at all. It was past time.

Hastily he gathered what he needed and stuffed it into a travel-all bag. He closed the door behind him and started toward the parking area.

A man walked toward him; light flickered briefly in the red stone of his ring. Sanchez knew it was too late, but he wheeled and ran. He heard a soft thud. He didn't know it, but it was his kidney exploding that dashed him with cold piercing pain. He remembered falling, tumbling, then nothing. He did not hear the second shot fired into the top of his head.

CHAPTER 9 FRIDAY

The slap of the cast iron frying pan on the stove woke him. Groggy, Brad crawled up the back of the couch to see into the kitchen.

“You’re difficult to wake up,” Josie said brightly.

“Only in the middle of the night,” he mumbled, wondering if she was still angry.

“It’s seven.” The drapes were open and sunlight flooded the room. Brad glanced at the gaping hole in the window and felt a hard twinge of guilt.

“Fix it,” she said. “Find some wood.” She had laid a hammer and nails on the window sill. “Try out back of the building.”

Dutifully, still groggy from ragged sleep, he struggled up from the couch. Once upright, his head began to clear. Awed by the rush of sounds from the kitchen, he left the apartment. Behind the building, he found a sheet of plywood, four-foot square. He returned to the window and nailed the wood in place. Back inside, he turned cautiously toward the kitchen, carrying the hammer and remaining nails.

“Still mad?” he asked.

“Yes. But mostly at myself. I know better than to forget to check the battery in the backup system.”

“Maybe a key lock on the inside?” he asked, testing.

“I should have thought of it myself. Here.” She handed him a plate. “Eat.”

The ham and eggs disappeared quickly. The coffee was strong and hot.

“Have you any idea who tried to kill you?” she asked.

“No,” he replied. Whatever lightness had existed was gone. “Didn’t get a look. Was a little busy staying on the road.”

“I looked at the car this morning,” she said. “You were fortunate.”

He nodded acceptance, knowing she was right. “You were following me, too?”

She nodded. “Sgt. Walters suggested it. I was a little too close. I almost ran into a pole myself. But it worked out. When the police arrived, I stayed close. Feldersen and his partner are federal agents, but they’re DEA, not CIA.”

“Why would they say CIA?”

“That puzzles me, too.” She laughed lightly. “Perhaps it’s that precious image the CIA has of being a bunch of foul-ups. They may feel to call themselves CIA is good cover.”

“Doesn’t make much sense.”

“Perhaps it does. When they told you they were CIA, they kept you from thinking of narcotics. Right?”

“I wouldn’t have known what to think anyway,” he replied disgustedly. He thought a moment, grasping for any kind of straw. “Feldersen and Cogswell were interested in Tuckman. Maybe he’s smuggling.”

“It’s possible.”

“Maybe he wants Overnite Air to expand his operation. Maybe he killed Gerald because he couldn’t make a deal. If Lydia dead made it easier, maybe he killed her. When I didn’t run, he tried to kill me, too. With me gone or dead, he could leave me with both murders.”

“That seems unlikely,” she said with a sigh. “But I would like to know how Tuckman’s case changed with each death.” Mentally she drifted off as if reviewing her thoughts.

Brad took advantage of the moment to study the way the early sun highlighted her hair. She caught him at it and came back with a start. “Take care. I’m in no mood . . .”

“The light from the window is doing real trick things with your hair. There’s more red than I thought.” The minute he said it, he wished he hadn’t. He could feel the blush on his face.

“It’s dirty and ratty. I haven’t washed it in over a week,” she said softly. “Let’s keep our mind on business, shall we?”

Brad nodded, still blushing.

“Tell me about Overnite Air,” she said.

He related in detail everything he’d seen or heard. “Since they’re losing money, I can’t see why Tuckman wants it. And Talbert dead may mean something. But I don’t see a good idea in any of this.”

“It’s too soon to tell,” she commented. “Any little thing could be vital.” She paused, then continued, “I’ve been checking with Lydia’s neighbors. I’ve started on her acquaintances. All I found was what we already knew; your ex-wife was not a very nice woman.

“Yesterday I checked with people who serviced her place. I learned a lot more about her, but only one item may help. The man who took care of her pool had orders not to enter the yard if there was a car parked in front. From the leer he gave me, I knew he understood why. Lydia hadn’t wanted any interruptions to fun and games. Monday at 3:35, he stopped by, but drove on because of a parked car. He has it logged with his other calls.”

“That’s about the right time.”

She nodded. “He didn’t see anyone. The car was backed up to the front door on the grass. He was puzzled about that. So am I.”

“The way the yard is landscaped,” Brad said, “with that mound beside the front walk, it would be tricky getting a car backed up to the door.”

“I know.” She sighed. “I’m certain he saw the car the murderer drove, but that’s all there is. He wasn’t even sure of the color. A light blue or perhaps green.” She was silent a moment. “I’ll try to find out what cars Tuckman has available and where he was at the time.”

“It’d be nice if he owned a dark blue sedan streaked with beige paint,” Brad said, with a hint of longing. He stood up and stretched.

“If you want to shave, there’s a razor in the shower.”

“Prepared?”

“Go jump,” she said. “I use it on my legs.”

He showered quickly. The razor blade wasn’t up to the task; it pulled out more whiskers than it cut. When he returned to the kitchen, Josie was looking out the window, her forehead furrowed in thought. When he sat back down at the table, she rose. He watched as she poured him a cup of coffee, then sat back down and handed it across the table.

“Brad, about the money.” She hesitated.

“Need more?”

“What if I did? Can you afford it? I’ve got this feeling you gave me everything you had.”

He smiled. “I’ve more.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded.

“In that case, I need more. I’ve got to buy some information and possibly help as well.” She watched him speculatively.

“My credit’s no good?”

“It has dropped considerably since I looked at your car.”

He lifted his shirt, unbuckled the money belt and tossed it onto the table.

She looked at it thoughtfully, picked a pocket, opened it and thumbed through the bills it contained. She re-snapped the pocket and counted the number of pockets with her eyes. “If I have this your credit is excellent. Have you more?” she asked softly.

“I’ve a couple thou in my wallet. But I can get more if we need it.”

She lifted the belt as if weighing it, then let it fall back to the table. “That’s a lot of money.” Her face showed suspicion.

“It’s legit. You know I play poker,” he added as explanation.

“How much is there?”

“About sixty thou.”

“Either you are very good or you cheat.”

“I’m better than most. Got a place for that?”

“How about a bank?”

“Rather you had it in case something goes wrong.”

“Why?”

“I want you to find the killer even if I’m not around.”

She returned his hard look with a hardness of her own. Finally she picked up the belt and walked into the bedroom. Brad followed. She sat on her heels in a corner of the closet. He watched the play of muscles across her shoulders and the way she brushed her hair out of her eyes. He could see the safe as she leaned forward and tucked the belt inside.

Satisfied, he returned to the living room. Maybe two good men could carry the safe a short way, but first they’d have to break it loose from concrete. And there weren’t many who could open it. Having inherited the couch, in a way, he sat at one end, leaning

back against the armrest. The air was clear; he could see through the window across the valley to the mountains.

“When Josie returned, he asked, “Use the phone?” She picked it up and brought it to him, untangling the long cord. When she sat down, he could see her suspicion had been replaced by puzzlement. He dialed.

“Detectives. Sgt. Walters.”

“Ashton.”

“You where I think you are?”

“Expect so.” Brad could picture Hank’s lazy smile changing into a grin. And he could see the hardness take over the dark eyes as he related last night’s chase.

“Are you hurt?”

“Nervous, is all.”

“Any idea who?”

“None.”

Hank was silent for a long while. “There’s more news. A guy by the name of Roberto Sanchez was gunned down last night. He worked for Overnite Air. Know him?”

“Met him.” He could see Sanchez scowling at him from the service platform under the wing of the C47.

“It makes things kinda interesting. That’s two mechanics in two nights, both workin’ at Overnite. And there’s a third body; Sam Gates was killed Tuesday night with the same .38. You may get nothin’ working there, but your hunch about that airline looks real good right now. What’s the plan?”

“What if there’s smuggling?” He told Hank about Sanchez working on the C47. “Think I’ll go in today and see if I can find where that plane came from.”

“I can do that. You shouldn’t be out and about just now.”

“Overnite is okay. There’re lots of people around. Besides, there’s a fella named Rhoads who handles flight scheduling. I can get to him without others knowing we’re interested. And I might pick up something about Talbert or Sanchez.”

“I don’t like it much, but you’re mostly full grown. Is the woman there?”

“Yeah.”

“Put her on.”

Brad rose and took the phone over to Josie. “Yes,” she said. He returned to the couch and watched as she listened. Apparently in response to a question, she told of her encounter with the agents, that they were with the DEA. She listened further, then said, “I’m going to see if I can find how Tuckman’s case changed when Gerald died and then later, when Lydia were killed.” She listened a moment longer, then said, “I can do that.” She hung up and set the phone beside the chair.

“He said he’d have your car towed. He wants the bullets.”

Brad nodded.

“And he wants me to take you to work and pick you up as well. Okay?”

“Sure.” He stood and began pacing the room. Finally he stopped, facing her, tugging on his ear. “What the hell is happening?” he asked mildly.

“I wish I could say,” she said. “It seemed simple back in Vegas. Now it’s clear you’re facing a good deal more than Judge Tofler.”

He shook his head, as if trying to loosen an idea. Even one item clearly understood would be an improvement. He returned to the couch and sat down. “If I had anything at all, I could figure a move.”

“We just have to keep digging. Something will come of it.” Her voice rang with confidence; he wondered if she believed what she said. “I’ve got to go. You’d better come with me. You shouldn’t be alone.”

Brad shook his head slowly. “Only Hank knows I’m here. If it’s okay with you, I’ll stay.”

She chewed lightly on her lower lip.

“You can call whenever, if you think I might need another alibi.”

She nodded. “I’ll pick you up at 2:30.” She collected her purse and a sweater, then left. When the bolt slid closed behind her, he wished she hadn’t gone. But had she stayed, what then? He sighed, remembering her smile, the dark blue of her eyes, and her long legs as she moved to the door.

* * *

“I love this place.” Josie let her glance sweep Amanda Pothmore’s office once more. “All these oddball things. Every piece is choice. I don’t see how it works, but it does.”

Amanda smiled, idly picking up a pencil from her desk. “I fell in love with one item at a time. But it does work, doesn’t it? Good fortune, I suspect.” Amanda laid the pencil down, then looked up. “But that’s enough of that. Tell me about Brad.”

Josie did. Amanda leaned forward over the desk. When Josie finished, Amanda said, “It seems a bit messy all in all. He called this morning, but you paint a darker picture. Tell me more.”

“He must be both afraid and angry. But he doesn’t show it.” Josie paused, thinking. “He seems more puzzled and confused than anything else.”

Amanda nodded. “His father showed him anger is futile, that it blocks clear thinking and can lead to costly errors. Confusion is the response I’d expect from him.”

“Remember when you teased me about his being cuddly and I said like a bear?”

“Yes,” Amanda replied, puzzled.

She hesitated, searching for words. “He’s as dangerous as I thought, but there’s more. And I can’t put it into words.”

Amanda looked at her sharply. “Try,” she demanded.

“It’s as if he’s waiting.”

“I don’t think I understand.”

“I’m not sure I do either.” Josie looked at her hands lying face up in her lap. “He seems lost, vulnerable somehow. He’s a study in contradiction.” Looking up, she continued, “I think if he knew who, he’d move and no one could stop him.”

“Yes. I would expect him to take harsh action, given a target,” Amanda said softly, toying with the pencil. When she laid it down, she looked up and asked, “Is there anything else we can do?”

“I’ve some things to check. Sgt. Walters is doing everything he can. But he’s becoming angrier by the minute; he also needs only a target. But there’s nothing, no one.”

“Should we bring more people onto the team? Perhaps assign someone to cover Brad?”

“That would help. I can’t really be with him and get much done. And there are lots of things I haven’t had time to look into.

“That’s partly why I’m here. We need to talk about money.” She told about the money belt and the sixty thousand now locked in her safe.

“Are you wondering where he got it?”

“Not working in gas stations, certainly. He claims he won it playing poker.”

“Then he did. He wouldn’t lie about that. I suspect he didn’t brag, that he made light of it.”

“You’re right. But how can anyone treat that much money so casually? He tossed it into my lap without a second thought.”

“Like his father, he lives cheap. Other things mean much more to him than money. He sees it as a tool that matters, but nothing more. As for giving it to you, it only means he trusts you.”

Josie nodded, as she continued curling her hair around a finger.

“I can see you’re still not convinced,” Amanda said with a smile.

“Almost,” Josie said with a sigh. “So you think I should go ahead and use what he gave me?”

“Yes,” Amanda said without hesitation. “And if you need more, come straight to me.” Her eyes twinkled. “You may have to do that sooner than you think. I doubt he’ll let you use his money to pay for people to guard him.”

Josie nodded agreement. “I can manage today. I’ll talk with Sgt. Walters and see what he thinks. Perhaps that’s what we need, an army of experts digging in hard.” She paused, glancing at the floor.

“What is it?” Amanda asked.

“I’ve a personal problem.”

Amanda invited her to continue with a nod.

Josie hesitated. As she began framing the question that was haunting her, she abruptly changed her mind. “This whole matter has become confusing,” she said. “All the pieces may interrelate in some odd way. I’ll lose my license if anyone decides I’m working an open police case.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know Jeffery Walden well. Could you talk to him? If he’d hire me to investigate on behalf of his client, I’d remain legally clean. No money needs to change hands.”

Amanda nodded. “I’ll call him right away. He’s not at all happy with the way things are going. He may actually ask you to check some things out.”

“I’ll be glad to,” Josie said.

When Josie stood, Amanda did the same, and walked around the desk. She took Josie’s hand in hers and said, “Watch Brad carefully, my dear. Remember I didn’t say he was incapable of anger. It may be building nicely now. I don’t envy you the task of stopping him if he decides to ask.”

“If he explodes, I don’t believe I can stop him. Slamming a door in his face, even locking it, would slow him only temporarily.”

Amanda chuckled as they started for the door. “Why do I have this feeling you have something more to ask?”

“Because you’re perceptive,” Josie replied ruefully, turning to face her. “Why does he blush so at any allusion to sex or sexuality?”

“Charming, isn’t it?” She was smiling brightly. “I don’t know, really, but I suspect he lacks self-confidence with women. And Lydia didn’t help. Beyond this, I can’t say. I know he does nothing half-way. He’s not a man of casual interests. I don’t know that this holds for his girlfriends, but I suspect it does.”

“Are you trying to tell me something?”

“Call it an old woman’s prerogative?”

“All right, I’m braced.”

“If you become involved with him, it’s not likely to be a casual relationship or a brief interlude.”

“You’re thinking about yourself and his father, aren’t you?”

Amanda nodded, smiling broadly. “Brad is, after all, his father’s son.” She gave Josie a hug and a brief peck on her cheek, then released her and opened the door. “Of course, I might be wrong.” There was a twinkle in her eyes, matching her smile. “It’s times like this I’m delighted to be of respectable age with these sorts of things well behind me.”

Amanda's quiet laughter lingered and drifted subtly amidst Josie's thoughts as she made her way downstairs to her car and drove off. She wished somehow she hadn't visited Amanda today.

* * *

Brad had been at the curb in front of Josie's apartment at 2:20. She had eased the Trans Am to a stop and was moving before he'd latched the door. Something was different about her. Yet she was as open and friendly as usual. It was as if she'd pulled part of herself inside. He decided she was only more worried than she'd admit. He noticed she had not looked at him; her eyes remained on the road.

At his suggestion, they'd stopped two miles short of the terminal and waited for a bus that would drop him off in front of Overnite Air. She agreed there was no point in letting anyone see the black Trans Am until later.

When he left the bus, he could feel the tension in his shoulders. His walk to the terminal building was unhurried, but determined. In the snack bar, he surveyed the small room, looking for Alex Rhoads, the man who handled scheduling. He wasn't there. With coffee in hand, he joined two men from the shed. He positioned himself so he could watch both entrances. "So what's new?" he asked.

"Cops," the taller man said. "All over cops. They were on us all morning."

"The killings?"

Both men nodded. The taller one continued, "They must think somebody here done it. They spent near half an hour with each of us."

Brad felt the beginnings of a tremble and gripped his coffee cup firmly. He didn't much want to talk to police right now. He certainly didn't want to explain why he was using the name Tom Fairchild.

"Well. Gotta go shovel more crap," said the shorter man.

Both rose. "See ya," said the other.

Brad toyed with his coffee cup, wondering if he should walk right back out the door he'd come in. Then he saw the stooped,

rounded shoulders of the slight, bespectacled man he was looking for. Alex Rhoads, with coffee and doughnut, chose a table by himself. Brad rose, coffee in hand, and walked to the table.

“Join you?” he asked.

“Of course,” Rhoads replied, waving a hand airily toward the bench opposite his.

“Some excitement this morning,” Brad remarked.

“Yes. Indeed. Policemen everywhere. First Talbert, now Sanchez. And apparently there’s another killing connected somehow. It’s all very exciting. I’ve never been questioned by the police. I was surprised at how well they handled it. Not at all like on TV or in books. I have the distinct impression I don’t want those men looking for me.”

“I know what you mean.” Brad paused, searching for a way to find what he needed. “Got a dumb question.”

“All right.”

“How come this outfit’s still using C47s? Seems like they’re pretty old.”

“They certainly are. They should have been junked years ago. Everyone knows it, but no one seems able to get rid of them.”

“How many do you have?”

“Just three.”

“Use them often?”

“No. Only occasionally. They certainly don’t pay for themselves.”

“How’s that?”

“In the first place, any airplane is expensive to maintain. Unless it’s in the air, you’re losing money. But worse than that is flying planes that aren’t fully loaded. I think that’s why we’re in financial difficulty. Too many planes flying nearly empty. And the C47s are the biggest losers.”

“For example?”

“That one out there in the service hangar?” Brad nodded. “It came in yesterday morning from Puebla, Mexico. You wouldn’t believe the manifest. Less than a thousand pounds. The freight billing didn’t even cover the cost of the fuel.”

“Why don’t you rework the schedules?”

“Heaven knows I try. But I take orders as we all do. If they tell me to schedule a flight from Puebla, I do it, even if I know it’ll be a losing run.”

“Must be hard on you.”

“It is. But I guess as long as I don’t get the blame, I’ll be all right. Still, if there’s trouble, I’d be a marvelous scapegoat for poor scheduling.”

Brad rose. “Looks like we’ll all need jobs soon.”

“Yes. It does, doesn’t it?”

Brad left Rhoads deep in thought, his forehead furrowed, his shoulders hunched far out over the table. Puebla, Mexico, he thought. Narcotics. Talbert. Sanchez. Tuckman. He knew nothing of Gates, but it could fit. So what? Unless it could all be tied to Gerald and Lydia Ashton, it wouldn’t help him one bit.

Outside the snack bar, he paused, undecided. He had the information he wanted, except possible news of Talbert or Sanchez. Should he leave now? He certainly didn’t want to talk with police. On the other hand, if they came back and he wasn’t here, they’d come looking. Maybe they won’t be back today, he thought. Then I’d be clear until Monday.

“Damn,” he muttered out loud. “I can’t decide a thing.” He squared his shoulders and walked toward the shed.

* * *

Brad eased a heavy skid to the floor and swung the forklift around. Two neatly dressed men blocked the aisle. Wondering what a big city killer looked like, he tensed until he saw the badge the taller man was holding. He cut the engine and stepped down. Motion eased the tension in his legs.

“Tom Fairchild?” asked the taller man. He was neatly dressed in dark slacks, a light gray sport coat, a tan shirt and tie.

Brad nodded.

“I’m Santino, homicide. He’s Farley, narcotics. Could you answer a few questions for us?” he asked politely.

“Sure.” He chose a crate and sat, leaning back against a second one stacked on the first. His seat was not wide; he was really half standing. He wanted it that way, for it made it easier to hide trembles.

Santino, the taller of the two detectives sat down near him on another crate. Farley, the man from narcotics, stepped toward him and asked, equally polite, “May I see your papers?”

Brad dug them out and handed them to the detective. He doubted the casual glance missed anything. Farley pulled a small notebook from an inside pocket, thumbed it open and read Hank’s address and phone number. “Is this correct?” he asked.

Brad nodded, wondering if he’d ever be comfortable talking with police officers. Farley handed his papers back, closed the notebook, tapping it idly against his other hand as he leaned back against the tall crate opposite Brad. Both men were between him and any reasonable exit.

“I guess you’ve heard about Sam Gates, Jason Talbert, and Roberto Sanchez?” His smile was easy and pleasant and friendly. His eyes were watchful.

“The guys have been talking about it.”

Farley smiled, nodding. “Did you know these men?”

“I met Talbert and Sanchez, but I only started here. Never spent any time with them.”

“I noticed that. You started Tuesday, right?” He glanced briefly at a page in the small notebook, then looked back at Brad. “Gates was killed that same day, Talbert the next and Sanchez last night.”

“Must make you a bit uncomfortable,” said Santino on his right. “You start to work and three men die.”

“Hadn’t thought about it that way.”

Farley smiled and said, “It’s just a coincidence, I’m sure.” He glanced at a page in his notebook. “I noticed from your papers you haven’t done this sort of work in some time. Can I ask what you’ve been doing and where?”

“I’m a good mechanic. Been working in Vegas since Chicago.”

“Like to gamble?”

“I’m into poker.”

Farley nodded his understanding. “Is that why you left Chicago to go to Vegas?”

“Mostly, but I like to move now and then.”

“I see. So you just moved on here to LA?”

“Not quite,” Brad said with a sigh. “I got cleaned. LA is where the jobs are.”

“That’s what I hear,” Farley said thoughtfully. “So you’re renting at this address?” He tapped lightly on his notebook.

“Staying with a friend.” He hadn’t thought of this question or what he knew was coming next.

“And your friend’s name?”

“Jerry Hiddy,” he said easily. But the lie tasted badly. He wished he hadn’t come to work today.

Farley’s pleasant expression turned solemn. “Ever been arrested?”

His heart missed a half beat before remembering he was Tom Fairchild. “Couple times. Once in Atlanta, then in Chicago. But they turned me loose both times.”

“I see,” said Farley. “And the charges?”

“Don’t think there were any in Atlanta. But it was a fight. Someone screamed for the police. In Chicago, some fella tried to punch me out.”

“Do you play rough, Mr. Fairchild?”

“I don’t hunt trouble.” He looked the detective squarely in the eyes.

“Do you own a gun?”

“Nope.” Brad was thinking of Gerald’s .45. It was a technicality, but he’d never really owned it.

“Have you ever used, sold or been connected with narcotics?”

“In Nam, I was around it a lot. Since I got back, seems like a lot of people use it. But booze suits me.”

“So you were in Vietnam. Combat?”

Brad nodded.

“What was your rank?”

“Lieutenant.” Tom Fairchild had been a corporal when he died. But Brad knew it was easier if most of what he said was true.

The questioning continued easily without pressure. Both detectives were polite, pleasant and persistent. There was no pattern Brad could see, except that certain questions were repeated, always in a slightly different form.

What kind of combat experience? Had he ever been in Mexico? Any connection with smuggling of any kind? Then more about Talbert and Sanchez. What were they like? Did he have any thoughts about why they'd been killed? Had he heard anything? Where had he been at the times of the murders?

Brad could feel a fine sweat on the small of his back and the palms of his hands. He was being questioned in more detail than his fellow workers had been.

“Well, I guess that about does it for now,” Farley said finally. “We both want to thank you for being patient with our poking and prying. Perhaps you have a question or something to add?”

“Seems like you guys covered it.”

“You're not curious why narcotics and homicide are teamed up here?”

Brad shrugged. “An airline that flies to Mexico. One of the dead men a Mexican.” He looked squarely at the homicide detective. “Murder's your department. And if there's smuggling, you'd be interested.” He looked back at Farley.

“Right, Mr. Fairchild.” He studied Brad intently. Then turned to Santino who said, “You say you've never been in Los Angeles before?”

Brad shook his head. Not as Tom Fairchild, he thought. He knew he wouldn't like what was coming.

“Funny. You look familiar. Should I know you?”

“Don't see how.” But Brad knew. When he'd run, his picture had been well publicized.

“Just one of those things, I guess.” He turned to Farley and said, “Mr. Fairchild has an interesting background. Maybe a formal statement would help?”

“Could you do that for us, Mr. Fairchild?” Farley asked. “We'd be glad to give you a lift to the station and back.”

“Sure.” It was the last thing he needed. “Right now, if you want.”

He watched the quiet tautness fade from Farley's stance. Santino rose. “We really appreciate your help, Mr. Fairchild. We'll check a couple things. Maybe we won't need a statement. Okay?”

Brad nodded.

“Thanks again,” said Farley. Then they were gone. Brad remained seated for a long while. He wanted something stronger than coffee, but he knew where he could get some of that. He strode toward the snack bar.

* * *

Brad had made his deal with the night foreman several hours earlier. Things were quiet; he had no problem convincing him the girl he would meet couldn't wait. He checked out an hour early, hoping a killer would not be expecting it.

As a further precaution, he left by the rear of the terminal. He walked left to the end of the building, then headed for the street up the alley where Josie would be waiting.

The alley was nearly forty feet wide, brightly lit at the street end, but darker here. Warehouse debris was randomly but neatly stacked along one side. He was two hundred feet from the street when he heard it. Before he could start a turn, one word, spoken softly, stopped him.

“No.” It was a deep voice, pitched low, dripping with satisfaction and confidence. “Stay real still.”

Brad made no move, but strained to hear the footsteps coming closer behind him. He felt the barrel of the pistol pressed into the ribs to the right of his spine. “The man wants to see you. Okay?”

Brad nodded slowly. He could see Josie at the far end of the alley, both hands locked on the .357. But she was too far away to do him much good, unless she wanted to gamble and simply fire.

He took a precise fix on the barrel of the pistol pressed into his back. He knew that before the gunman could fire, he'd be moving. He whirled to his left. Flame seared his flesh and the alley was filled with the thundering blast.

He continued as in a single motion. The man was backing now, but he was much too late. Brad drove his forearm up under the man's chin as if to drive it through the jaw. Another shot pounded the receding echoes of the first one, but the bullet ricocheted harmlessly down the alley. The sound of the cracking of the jawbone

and teeth splintering was gruesome accompaniment to the skittering clatter of the pistol sliding on concrete. Brad ran.

With only a few feet to the street remaining, a heavyset man with a cap pulled low, stepped into his path, bringing his pistol up.

“Freeze,” Josie cried.

The man hesitated, almost as thinking to turn toward the sound of the voice. But when he saw how close Brad was, how rapidly he was closing, he ignored whatever might be behind him.

Brad jumped feet first, a continuation of his run. He rolled slowly sideways in the air. His right boot was a bit high. Blood exploded from the man’s nose and mouth. His left foot found its mark, just below the heart. The man was hammered back and down, his pistol also skidding on concrete.

As Brad fell, he saw Josie rushing toward him. He landed on his hands and toes and rolled to his feet. Josie held the .357 pointed midway between the two men, her eyes constantly moving, searching for further intrusion. Brad scrambled toward the man nearest him, rolled him over and grabbed his wallet.

“Let’s go,” Josie said, nodding in the direction of the main terminal building. Two airport security guards, weapons drawn, were running toward them. Brad dashed for the car. Josie was behind the wheel before he could close the door. Then the car moved off powerfully, tires smoking.

In the late night traffic, she slowed slightly for the only two red lights encountered. Once on the freeway, the speedometer surged past redline. Five miles later, she slowed to the legal limit and looked at him. It was then she noticed the blood tracing patterns on the white velour upholstery. “Hospital?”

“Don’t think so.”

Grimly she shoved the accelerator back down. The pain in his back dominated, as the adrenalin faded along with the ache in his kidneys. He held the crash bar and armrest firmly, stifling the tremble in his hands while easing the effect of the hard motion of the fast moving car on his back.

In her apartment, Brad removed his bloody shirt and sat sideways on the kitchen chair. The blood dripping to the tile floor would be easy to clean up. Josie returned from the bathroom with gauze, tape and an array of bottles and tubes. The contents of some went into the pot boiling on the stove. When she turned attention to his back, she chuckled briefly.

“It’s funny?” he demanded.

“I was thinking of my comment in Amanda’s office about whether or not you were tough enough. I’m seldom that wrong.” She sighed. “I gather the scars on your back are from beatings in that prison camp.”

Brad nodded. “And they had a thing for knives.”

“And the bullet holes?”

“It’s called combat,” Brad commented.

She sighed again. “If I were dealing in human hides, yours wouldn’t be worth much.”

“It still works for me.”

“This latest contribution won’t amount to much.”

“How deep a gash did the bullet cut?” he asked.

“Not enough for stitches. It’s hardly bleeding now.”

He could feel her strong fingers whisper-light upon his back. Whatever she was using to clean the wound, caused him to grip the table hard.

Only when he felt soothing ointment on the burn, did he begin to relax. She taped gauze in place, then gently but firmly wrapped long strips tightly about his ribs. He did not move as she rinsed some things behind him and carried the unused items back into the bathroom.

When she returned to the kitchen, he heard the sound of ice cubes in a glass. She set a goodly portion of bourbon beside him, within easy reach, then knelt on the floor and began cleaning.

He’d had two long swallows before she rose. He watched her dump his torn bloody shirt, the rag she’d used on the floor and bits of gauze and bandage in a paper bag. “Stand up,” she said.

He did, slowly. It hurt, but the thrusting, bolting, slashing pain was gone. She washed his light brown slacks as best she could.

“I’ll be back,” she said and left the apartment, stuffing the rag into the paper bag. She’d be a while; it took time to wash blood from white velour upholstery. Gingerly, he bent his head down to look at his pants. There’d be stains, but they’d do. Carefully he walked to the sink, built another drink and returned to the table. The apartment was cool, but sweat glistened on his chest and stomach accenting sharply defined muscles.

When she returned, she locked the door behind her and set the alarm. He noticed guiltily the broken window had been repaired and the alarm system rewired. She picked up the phone, carried it to the couch and dialed.

“Sgt. Walters, there’s been some trouble,” she said grimly. She described what she knew and what Brad had briefly told her in the car. “Perhaps you could find out who they were. Brad didn’t recognize them, but one had a wallet; the name on the driver’s license is Georgio Lampino.” She listened a moment. “Good.” She returned the receiver to its cradle and the phone to the floor.

She went into the bedroom and returned with another .357 and an old ragged sweater. “Try this,” she said, tossing the sweater on the table and laying the pistol down beside it. She turned off the lights one by one, then opened the drapes. He could see the city lights dancing in the clear night. When she returned to the table, he had only one arm in the sweater.

“Here. Let me help.” Gentle fingers eased the sweater up his right arm. He ducked his head and she slipped it down over his shoulder to his waist. She poured herself a drink and sat down at the table beside him. The short-barreled .357 filled the center of the table. For several moments they watched the city lights.

“That’s all he said, ‘The man wants to see you’?”

He nodded.

“And you didn’t recognize him?”

“Never saw him before.”

“And you hurt him badly?”

“Broke his jaw and some teeth.”

“I sure wasn’t much help,” Josie said disgustedly.

“If I hadn’t made a move, you’d have figured something. And you did make the second guy hesitate.”

“Perhaps,” she murmured. She picked up the wallet he’d taken and opened it once again. “Georgio Lampino. Does he belong to Tuckman?”

“Maybe.”

“We need rest now,” she said. “Perhaps we can make some sense of it in the morning.”

He nodded.

“You don’t look too good. How does it feel?”

“Not bad. It burns a bit.”

“The bullet only grazed you. It’s the powder burn that smarts.” She paused. “Would you be more comfortable in the bed? I can take the couch.”

He shook his head.

“Will you be all right?” She reached out and covered his hand.

“Expect so.”

Finally she released his hand. She shoved the .357 closer to him. “Are you any good with one of these?”

“I can use one, but I’m no expert.”

“If that alarm goes off, shoot. I’m not expecting anyone friendly.”

He nodded.

She looked down at the table, frowning. “You know,” she said softly, looking up, “when I’m sure I’ve got you all figured, you do something that wipes out the whole picture.”

“What now?” he asked softly.

“You’re worried about those men in the alley, aren’t you, just as you were worried about those three in Vegas?”

“Not Lampino,” he said. “He’s been hit before. But there’s one fella who needs his mouth rebuilt.”

“He had a gun; he knew the risks.”

“He paid a high price.”

“If you must, will you use that pistol?”

It took a long time to get it said. “Yeah.”

She stood, looking down at him with an expression he couldn’t identify. “Wake me if you need anything?”

“Will do,” he said softly, knowing he needed her badly, but not in the way she was thinking.

“Night then.”

* * *

Only when he moved too quickly, were sharp spikes driven home. But sleep was beyond him.

It had all gone sour. He could smell the stench of it. Even if Judge Tofler turned him loose, he wouldn't be out of it. Just the lies he'd told today were enough for good trouble. And there was still a faceless killer roaming the city jungle out there.

Maybe it was time to quit. Leave the money belt with Josie and let her and Hank try to sort it out. For sure he wasn't being much help.

He let his thoughts do their thing. This time the fantasies were overpowering. Long, dark hair flared on a white pillowcase. Silken satiny thighs spread, inviting him downward, inward.

He shook his head suddenly and wished he hadn't. Neither the flash of pain nor the ache in his loins was fantasy. He eased off the couch, stuffed the pistol behind his waistband and made his way to the kitchen. As quietly as possible, he built another drink, ignoring the ice for the sake of quiet. He carried the drink to the window and sipped slowly as he gazed out at the city lights.

He became aware of her beside him and didn't know how long she'd been there. She was wearing a blue silk kimono, belted tightly at the waist. The swell of her breasts was only suggested in the deep folds. As he turned, so did she.

“Is your back all right?” she asked softly.

He nodded, trying to read her face in the night light, particularly her eyes. He reached out with his left hand and gently stroked her right arm. He thought she trembled slightly. Then he wasn't sure.

“I want you,” he said.

“I know.” She looked down at his hand, not meeting his gaze.

“Crazy, right?” He let his arm drop to his side.

“Yes.” She looked up, searching his face. She reached up, brushing his cheek lightly with gentle fingers. Then she was gone.

CHAPTER 10 SATURDAY

He awoke with a start, not sure where he was. When he moved, he remembered. The pain in his back was gone, except when he twisted it. Then it stabbed sharply, but with discomfort, not agony. Gingerly he sat up. So far, so good. He picked up the .357 he'd placed on the floor last night, and laid it on the coffee table. The drapes were closed. Bright sunlight trickled around the edges.

He made it to the kitchen, poured coffee and sat down at the table. Each step was easier than the last. The note on the table said, "Stay inside. Soon."

Half finished with his coffee, he rose and went into the bathroom. Carefully he removed the bandage and examined the wound in the mirror. The bullet-notched groove didn't amount to much; it was hardly more than a deep scratch. The powder burn formed a narrow triangle, flaring to several inches at his side. Satisfied, he showered, shaved and returned to the kitchen. He left the sweater off, letting the cool air soothe his back.

When Josie returned, she dumped her packages on the couch and asked, "How's the patient?"

"Alive."

"I bought some clothes. I had to guess at sizes." She moved around behind him and examined his back. He felt gentle strong fingers roam. "Good. No infection. Try the clothes."

She'd bought three sizes of tan slacks. The size 37 fit well as did the larger of the two brown flannel shirts. When he returned to the kitchen, she poured another cup of coffee for him.

"Will the phone reach?" he asked.

She nodded. He picked it up and carried it to the table. There was no answer at the apartment. He dialed again.

"Detectives. Sgt. Walters."

"Ashton."

"She said you were ok. That so?"

“It’s nothing. What about those fellas in the alley?”

“Lampino split, but the guy they found is still in the hospital. There’s maybe more damage than you figured.”

“They belong to Tuckman?”

“No. Mike Rinolli.”

“Who the hell is he?”

“The man in heroin in LA. The key distributor. He apparently gets the stuff from a variety of sources, but no one has ever come up with a name.

“He’s a killer who’s stayed legally clean, but there’s been lots of blood. There’s independent action, but Rinolli stays on top of most of it.”

“What’s it mean?”

“I haven’t a clue. But whatever, it’s something with drugs. Now tell me, buddy. Who’s Jerry Hiddly? Lives at my place?” Brad could see Hank grinning. “Farley and Santino are real anxious to talk to you again. Somebody made you comin’ out of that alley. From what I heard, you did some mighty fancy work.”

“Any trouble for you?”

“Naw. Just told ’em I didn’t know a Tom Fairchild. They probably don’t believe me, but we can straighten it out after your day in court.”

“Got any good news?”

“I’ve something about those narcs. Talked with Feldersen. What an asshole. Christ. He’d last maybe two days where we’ve been.”

“Why are they dogging me?”

“They figure you handle the Mexican side for Tuckman. They’re still leaning hard on that driver of his, the one who got caught at the border with cocaine.”

“What about Cogswell? He seemed to have more sense.”

“That’s like an itch I can’t scratch. Feldersen claims he was re-assigned. And get this. Reassigned out of the country. I got a feelin’, but all it tells me is something’s wrong.”

“So where’s that leave us?”

“Nowhere, buddy. Absolutely nowhere. One thing, though. About those three kills at Overnite Air?”

“Yeah.”

“The bullets in your car were from a .38. Ballistics says there’s maybe not enough for a courtroom, but it was the same piece that killed all three at Overnite.”

“What the hell is happening?”

“I don’t know, but it means something. We’ll get it.” The mouth-piece was covered at Hank’s end. Brad couldn’t hear the words, but a sense of urgency came through. “Gotta run,” Hank said grimly. “Get back at you real soon. Will you be with her?”

“Expect so.”

“Tell her to keep that .357 close and the hammer back.” Hank hung up.

Brad relayed what he’d learned to Josie. She listened intently, elbows on the table. Twice she interrupted with a question. “You know,” he said, pulling gently on his ear, “all I ever wanted was a job, a place in the hills, and a couple of kids.” Josie leaned further forward to hear. “Doesn’t seem too much, does it?”

She started to reach for his hand, then stopped. “This will pass, Brad. I know it will.”

“Expect so,” he said, but he couldn’t believe it just then.

When she finished her coffee, she got up and hunted up her frying pan, some bacon and eggs. This morning, there was no clanging or dashing about. The late breakfast was a quiet affair; not a word was spoken.

He watched her as she cleaned up and tucked things away. In the late morning light, the dark red of her hair nearly overpowered the black. Turning away from the refrigerator, she caught his look. He did not look away. His voice carried clearly. “What I said last night, it’s true.”

She was motionless, one hand on the refrigerator door. He watched her quickened breathing in the rise and fall of her breasts against the satiny folds of her blouse.

“You have lousy timing,” she responded softly. “You should be thinking of other things right now.”

“Expect so.”

“Besides,” she continued, even more softly, “I can’t see myself in that house in the hills. Can you?”

“Maybe it’s not a house I’m looking for. Maybe just the right to have one, to come and go like everybody else.” He watched the tension of her, the tautness of her arm extended. “My name’s Brad Ashton. I’m fed up with Tom Fairchild.”

God, how he wanted her. He’d never felt such compelling demand; his entire being contributed to the desire. He wanted desperately to wrap his arms around her, to hold her close, to feel her hands on him and more, much more. She turned slowly back to the sink, as if closing a great door against further words. He moved to the couch and sat down, listening to her finish in the kitchen.

Any dolt could see it now. It wasn’t going to be easy, nothing close to what Josie had described in Vegas. Funny how long ago it seemed. Monday and Judge Tofler were coming up at good speed.

There had been nothing wrong with the plan. Having Hank Walters at hand had been an unexpected bonus, like an extra division of well-armed rangers. He knew Josie’d done well. And Amanda couldn’t have been more supportive.

But it had gone wrong; he thought he knew why. Someone was out there. The shots fired at him were proof he didn’t need; he could feel it. It was time for a change. It wasn’t possible now to wait for what might come. He had to take it to them, whoever they were. Disrupt their timetable, their communications. Arrange a neat ambush here and there. If he could find the targets, he’d manage. But that was the catch. Who? Where?

He looked up slowly, surprised he hadn’t noticed Josie sit down in the chair.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

“You.”

“Not just then,” she said shaking her head. “It was something else, and I’m not sure I like it.”

He shrugged. “Guess you’d have said if you had anything new on Tuckman.”

“I saw his attorney and Lydia’s. Both agree he didn’t benefit from Gerald or Lydia’s death. Lydia’s attorney didn’t give much,

but from what he said, I suspect Lydia was difficult to work with. There wasn't enough time to check out Tuckman or his cars. Which brings up a point. We ought to spend some of your money on help. Amanda agrees. What do you think?"

"Whatever you say." A couple more guys might help, but he doubted it.

"I'll do it then. And I'd like to put some people on you."

"Bodyguards?"

"Call it protection. You'd have good legal firepower on all sides and a built-in alibi for anything that comes up."

"Nope. I'll be moving. I wouldn't want to be stumbling over people."

"You mean you're planning some things you don't want anyone to know about, don't you?" Her voice was hushed.

"That's not it."

"What else can it mean?"

"I move better alone." It wasn't much of an answer, but it was all he was going to give. He rose, grabbed the phone and dialed.

"Ashton here."

"If ya ain't ready to deal, hang up," Tuckman responded.

"Those CIA types I told you about?"

"Yeah?"

"They're DEA."

There was silence at the other end of the line, broken finally by a soft grunt. "Those fuckers again. I've had that feeling lately, mostly since that driver of mine was busted."

"You been bad?"

"Up yours. I've had my days. But the only junk I haul now is in cartons, legal as hell. They grow a hundred million bucks of pot every year in Mendocino county alone." He laughed hugely. "Right alongside those fancy California grapes."

"They must have a reason."

"I cut a corner, now and then. Make a little deal here and there. But the loads are legal as hell."

"Do you know Mike Rinolli?" Brad asked.

"He passes out the H in LA. Nobody messes with him. Why?"

“I thought maybe the narcs had tied you to him.”

“Never met the guy. Listen, are ya gonna make a deal or do I get rough?”

“Get rough.” Brad hung up abruptly and turned to Josie. “He’s tough and probably should be in jail for some things he’s done. But I can’t see him as our killer.”

He paced the room for several minutes, then turned to face her. “In a poker game, hours can go by without any decisive play. Sometimes you can force it. You play weak cards and back them with more. With luck, you can steal a few pots and put yourself in a position to win.”

“You can also lose faster,” Josie commented. “What did you have in mind?”

“Rinolli.” He paused. “If it’s heroin being smuggled, he’s the buyer. Or he knows who is. Let’s go see him.”

“That’s as good a way as any to end it quickly. He’d as soon kill you as talk to you. Two of his men already came close. And remember you hurt one badly.”

“Maybe I should be more patient. Wait it out. Let you and Hank deal with it. I’ve gotten into trouble before, not waiting. But right now, I want to see Rinolli.”

“You don’t even know where to find him,” she said, exasperated.

“You can find out.”

She held his hard look, then slowly rose and walked to the small table by the door for her purse. Brad followed her.

* * *

It was in an army surplus store Brad found what he wanted, a combat knife, thin-bladed with a long thin handle. He bought two of them, one off the shelf and the one on display, well honed and polished. He paid a premium for the one displayed; he didn’t want to take the time to put a good edge on a blade. He bought a sheath, one of soft thin leather made for a different knife.

Later he asked Josie to stop on a quiet vacant street beside an empty lot. He got out of the car and drove the unhone blade deep

into a telephone pole. He could feel the strain on his arm as he pulled sideways on the handle. The blade held. He'd guessed right. It was good steel. The flatness of the blade made it easy to loosen and withdraw the knife. He took five steps away from the pole, turned and let the knife fly. He'd judged it right; the knife was buried three inches into the pole. Again he loosened the blade, knelt, drove it to the concrete, then examined the slender point. Only an eighth of an inch had snapped off.

Back in the car, he dropped the damaged knife on the floor of the back seat. He pulled up his right pant leg, lashed the sheath with the sharpened knife to his leg, then pulled his pant leg back down. The knife would be invisible to most. Driving now, Josie said, "You seem to know how to handle that thing." Her voice was flat and hard, filled with distaste.

"I've used one now and then."

"If you're going to kill someone, why not use a pistol?"

He made no reply.

"A knife's no defense against a pistol."

"Expect you're right."

"What is going on? I don't like this one bit. There's something you're not telling me."

"I'm moving out, is all. I need more than my bare hands."

"This is utterly ridiculous. You can't just start killing people."

"Josie, I'm not planning to kill anybody. But someone out there is playing rough. I can't carry a handgun. Any cop in town would throw me in jail."

"That knife's not exactly legal."

"People won't be expecting it. And if I'm caught with it, there'll be less hassle than with a handgun."

"Why not do as I asked? Go to Palm Springs. Or take a place in Malibu. I know people a SWAT team couldn't handle. You'd be as safe as a baby in a cradle."

"I believe you."

"Then forget Rinolli and let me set it up."

"Maybe later."

"You're going to get yourself killed."

“Ever see a bullfight?”

She shook her head, puzzled.

“The bull really never has a chance. It’s only a carefully staged show. But if they let that bull loose in the streets, it’s something else. I feel like I’ve been trapped in an arena. Everybody’s watching to see how long I’ll last. I’m just taking to the streets is all. Maybe it’s hopeless. But I’m going to make it tougher to get at me.”

“I don’t think I know you at all,” she said. “And I don’t like what I’m seeing. It’s something you should have left in Vietnam.”

He made no reply; he reached down and adjusted the knife and sheath strapped to his leg.

* * *

As Josie drove slowly around The Pink Lady, they examined all sides of the building. The cars in the parking lot were expensive or new or both. As they watched, a Lincoln Continental pulled up. One of the four attendants moved swiftly, opening the door for a well-dressed woman. Another was quickly behind the wheel, driving sedately toward a parking spot. At this early hour, there weren’t many cars.

Josie stopped on the street, a half block short of the restaurant. She nodded toward the west side of the building, to their front. “That’s the only side without an exit.”

She dug into her purse and fished out a small set of binoculars. “I’ll park where I can see all the exits. If you’re not out in an hour, I’ll call Sgt. Walters. I’ll tell him I’m witnessing your murder. And I’ll probably be right.”

He tried to reassure her with a look, wishing he could find something special to say. But the words weren’t there. They never were when he needed them. He got out of the car. As he turned toward the entrance, she drove toward the tree-lined street to the east.

Inside, The Pink Lady was distinctly pink. Everything was pink, the carpet, furnishings and lighting. Even the expensively tailored waiters were dressed in pink coats, their black slacks contrasting in

pleasing fashion. Instead of being absurd, it was elegant. Brad cringed at the thought of paying a dinner tab here.

As he moved farther into the entry, he was intercepted by an older man, elegantly clothed in a pink silk suit. “Can I be of service, sir?”

There was a classic blend of manners and arrogance, both in his voice and pose. Brad smiled. He wasn’t going to be allowed to become a guest, not the way he was dressed. “Maybe.”

Only the eyebrows were raised. A touch of anxiety entered the eyes, as if fearful a guest might enter before he was able to deal properly with Brad.

“I’m here to see Rinolli.” His voice was flat and even. The smile was gone.

“Mr. Rinolli, sir, does not work here; he owns the establishment.”

“I still want to see him.”

“He’s not available, sir,” he said, closing further conversation by turning away.

“I’ll wait.” Brad turned to the plush pink leather couch behind him.

“Perhaps, sir,” the older man said in a rush, “you’d be more comfortable in here.” Brad allowed himself to be ushered into a small reception area facing a short hall with narrow offices on either side of it. He took the offered chair. It was not pink and soft; it was wood and hard.

Moments later, a tall, powerfully built man dressed in a conservative gray suit strode purposely down the hall toward him. Brad stood; it was Giorgio Lampino, the man in the alley he’d hit hard with his booted feet. His nose and mouth were heavily bandaged, his face mottled with hues of black and blue.

Brad watched recognition flicker briefly in the man’s eyes, instantly replaced with rage. He waited, unmoving, his glance never leaving the man’s face. Slowly, as if in pain, Giorgio turned and strode back the way he’d come.

Minutes later, Lampino returned and led him back down the hall and up the flight of stairs. When he knocked on the door, it

opened, and Brad was ushered into a luxurious office. The man behind the large desk was writing rapidly. He was much younger than Brad had pictured, less than fifty. He wore the vest of a tailored, light brown three-piece suit; the coat was hanging on a set of moose antlers anchored to the wall. His rolled shirt sleeves revealed brawny, hairy arms.

He laid down the pen and looked up, smiling. There was no expression in his dark eyes. His full mustache added a sinister look to his dark features.

He rose gracefully and stepped around the desk. “You’ve been in the news, Mr. Ashton. Have a seat, please.” His voice was mel- low, but the warmth was forced, his expansive gestures were studied.

As Brad sat in the offered chair, the knot in his stomach tight- ened. Lampino stationed himself beside the desk, standing, watching him with hate-filled eyes.

Seated once again, Rinolli reinforced the smile on his face. “I’m into electrical gadgets. This console here,” he said, pointing to his right, “tells me you’ve a nasty bit of metal with you. Probably a knife. Strapped to your leg?” His smile was unchanged.

Brad reached slowly, pulled his pant leg up, then the knife from its sheath. He laid it well out on the desk.

Rinolli glanced at it, then back to Brad. “A fine weapon. Very professional.” There was no enthusiasm. “Do you know Georgio would be delighted to return your favors? It was his partner you sent to the hospital.”

“Mr. Rinolli, would you like me to leave?”

“I frighten you then?” he asked, amused.

“Yes.” He didn’t have to fake the emotion in his voice.

“Splendid. It’s refreshing to find a man of good sense. And the reason for your visit?”

“You wanted to see me.”

“So you rushed right over?”

“It seemed best, considering the talent you have available.”

There was a long silence. Apparently Rinolli’s smile was fixed in place; it never varied. The dark eyes were colder now. “Georgio, please leave us.”

“Hold up a sec,” Brad said, laying Lampino’s wallet out on the desk.

The man hesitated, finally picked up the wallet, then slowly walked from the room closing the door softly behind him. When Rinolli pressed a button under the top of the desk, the bolt slammed home.

“Coincidence bothers me.”

“I’m not following.”

“You’ve been away about three years?”

Brad nodded.

“When you return, Lydia Allison dies suddenly. Is it coincidence? Or did you kill her?”

“I had no reason.” He could feel the dryness in his throat.

“Some men don’t need one, Mr. Ashton. It’s in their blood. You’ve killed before. In Vietnam at least. Did you get a kick out of it? A special kind of high?”

“No.” Despite himself, he said it harshly, demanding rebuttal or retraction. He leaned forward in the chair.

Rinolli watched with alert eyes, but gave no sign of response. “If you didn’t kill her, we have a coincidence, do we not? You return; she dies. It worries me.”

“Why? What’s your interest in my ex-wife?”

“Then,” Rinolli continued, as if he hadn’t heard, “you went to work at Overnite Air on Tuesday using the name Tom Fairchild. And suddenly others begin dying. A coincidence certainly, but a bothersome one.” He paused, stroking his mustache. “Did you know Gates, Talbert or Sanchez?”

“I met Talbert and Sanchez; I never saw Gates.”

“You only met them?”

Brad nodded.

“Can you see my problem, Mr. Ashton? These people can easily be replaced, but it wouldn’t do to let others believe there is no concern over their untimely departure. I must be absolutely certain you’re not involved. Can you help me out?”

“I had this notion you might have arranged those kills.”

Rinolli smiled, but his eyes called Brad a fool. “Those people were useful,” he said patiently. “Not fundamental, you understand.

Still, they were useful. One does not discard useful items.” He paused. “You, on the other hand, are of no use to me at all.”

Brad clasped his hands tighter.

“Why use the name Tom Fairchild?” Rinolli asked sharply.

“Fairchild has papers; Ashton doesn’t.”

“But why Overnite Air, an airline owned by your ex-wife? It’s another coincidence that bothers me.”

Brad was silent a moment. What could he say to interest the man? “Do you know Willard Tuckman? Lydia’s uncle?”

“Runs a trucking outfit?”

Brad nodded. “Seems he wants Overnite Air. My ex-wife owned it. I’m trying to find who killed both Lydia and her brother, Gerald. Overnite Air seemed a good starting point.”

“I can understand about Gerald Allison. You stand accused of his murder. But why the interest in Lydia Allison?”

“There are those who think I killed her.”

“Mr. Ashton, let me be frank. It’s not that I disbelieve you. It’s that I’ve too many unanswered questions. For example, you were in Vietnam. Did you do any intelligence work?” He held up his hand, stifling Brad’s reply. “Were you involved with drugs? Have you been drafted by a federal agency since coming back? Narcotics?”

“Nothing like that.”

“I want to believe you. I truly do. But the questions keep coming. Is there anything you can tell me that might ease my mind?”

Brad shook his head. “I’d like to.”

“My methods are somewhat simplified. Rather than spend great effort in investigation, it’s often easier to remove a possible source of difficulty. You understand my position, don’t you?”

“All I could tell you is that some federal types have been following me since I got back. They claim to be CIA, but they’re with the DEA.” He paused, mentally taking a deep breath. It was a weak card, but he’d have to play it; he had nothing better. “They seem to think they’re close to a case against you.”

For an instant, Rinolli’s smile faltered. It was as if he’d shoved a large bet only to find he’d misread his hole card. “Interesting,” he said, then was silent. He stood. “I appreciate your stopping by.”

Rinolli reached for the knife and handed it butt-first to Brad who returned it to its sheath. “May I offer a suggestion?”

Brad nodded.

“I know more about you than you might think. Without meaning to, I’m sure, your path has crossed mine. If it were to happen again, it would be an intolerable coincidence. I might be forced to take action you would not approve of. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Ashton?”

Brad nodded.

“Good. I sincerely hope you’ll act accordingly.” Rinolli sat down, picked up his pen and began writing. Brad stood and walked toward the door. A few feet from it, he heard the bolt unlatch. The door swung open.

As he passed through, it closed behind him and the bolt slid home. He didn’t see Lampino as he left. He didn’t miss him at all.

Once outside, he moved quickly away from the building with long strides. Movement eased the tightness in his gut and the tension in his neck and shoulders. In the open, beyond the parked cars, Josie pulled up beside him. He shivered, as he settled into the seat beside her. As she drove off, she said, “We’re being watched. There’s a man with binoculars on the top floor.”

“Mike Rinolli’s a careful man.” He shivered again, trying to relax deeply into the velour bucket seat.

“My place?”

“Yeah. And let’s bolt the door when we get there. That fella is trouble.”

“Was it worth it?”

“Maybe. I got his attention when I told him about the DEA. It seemed to be bad news to him. It could make him nervous.”

“And if he gets nervous?”

“He could make a mistake, back a bad hand.”

“I doubt that. Men like Rinolli don’t get to the top making mistakes,” Josie pointed out. “Besides, I don’t think he had anything to do with killing Gerald or Lydia. He’s a killer, but he wouldn’t leave bodies lying around. His kind bury them deep. No body; no crime.”

“He said he knew a lot about me. It didn’t sound like he’d been reading newspapers. Wonder what he meant? If he figures I know too much, he’ll come down hard.”

They rode in silence, each with their own thoughts. About a mile later, Brad said, “Rinolli may think I killed Lydia and those people at Overnite Air. He acted as if they were his. It almost sounded as if he was doing some smuggling of his own.”

“Certainly someone is smuggling. There’s no other way to bring heroin into the country. But unless he killed Gerald and Lydia, I can’t see what you’ve gained. Frankly, I think you’re off the mark.”

“He didn’t seem to know Tuckman, so maybe he’s not involved.”

“We’ve one thing for certain,” she said. “Don’t look back, but there are two men in a pale green Ford following us.”

“Is one of them Feldersen?”

“I think so.”

“It’s time we had a talk.”

“That’s not a good idea.”

“Head for Van Nuys.”

“Why?”

“Can you lose them?”

“In this car, I can lose anyone anywhere.”

“Good,” he said, patting the dashboard encouragingly. “Let me off in front of the Archer Building, then drive on. One of them should follow me on foot. You shake the car and get back to pick me up.”

“This is dumb, Brad. Those are federal officers. What can you possibly gain?”

“I don’t know.”

“First you tackle Rinolli, who probably has more kills than any other hood in California. Now you want to take on the U.S. government.”

“Nope. Just one guy.”

“You must have a compulsive death wish.”

He wanted to reach over and stroke her thigh gently, to reassure her somehow. Instead, he said, “I’m fed up with being some kind of mouse to all these big fat cats.”

“Any one of those paws can take you out easily.”

“Humor me.”

Reluctantly she turned east and drove into the city. She pulled to the curb in front of the seven-story building. “Are you sure?”

He nodded. “I’ll be walking north. Pick me up where you find me.”

Once out of the car, he pretended to search the nearby buildings for an address. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a man get out of the Ford. It was Feldersen. And the car was the one he’d first seen when they’d followed him to the hotel from Tuckman’s. He smiled to himself. This might be fun. The Ford moved out after Josie. He had only a brief glance at the driver, but it wasn’t Cogswell.

Hoping he hadn’t miscalculated, that another agent wasn’t nearby, Brad entered the building and joined the group waiting for an elevator. There were too many for the one now emptying its passengers. He glanced at the indicators. Another was coming down; it was on the third floor. Resisting the impulse to look behind, he hung back. He was one of the few unable to get on. When the second elevator was empty, he entered, pushed seven and moved to the back, followed by half a dozen others. Feldersen stood at the front, facing the control panel.

At the sixth floor, the last passenger got off, leaving them alone. As the elevator rose, Brad noted the increasing flush on the back of Feldersen’s neck. He’d been caught and he knew it.

When the doors opened on the seventh floor, Brad stepped forward, speaking quietly. “I’ll be in the john.” Without pausing, he strode swiftly to the men’s room at the end of the hall.

He was drying his hands when Feldersen shoved the door open. His beet-red face contrasted harshly with his long, pale blond hair. “You’re a real sweetheart, aren’t you?”

Brad made no reply.

“I’ve a mind to take you down. I hate punks like you, hiding behind your constitutional rights like they were your mommy’s skirt.”

“Something you wanted? Or do you get your kicks this way?”

“I’ve got a couple things. What were you doing at Rinolli’s?”

“Somehow you don’t make it as a highly skilled, highly trained federal agent. Last time we met, you were CIA. Who are you today?”

“I’ll ask the questions,” Feldersen snapped.

“Maybe. First, who are you?”

“DEA. That’s who. You didn’t think we’d find out about you, right? But you’re easy to figure. You’re the Mexican side and Tuckman handles this end. We’re that close to bringing you both down.” He held up his left thumb and forefinger an eighth of an inch apart.

“Did you get all this from Lydia?” Brad thought he saw a touch of caution in the tall man’s eyes, maybe even fear. Then he wasn’t sure. Whatever it had been, it was now overlaid with heavy anger.

“Answer the question. What were you doing with Rinolli?”

“Like before. Get a warrant.”

“This is a federal investigation. You answer right quick or you’re going to get busted up. There’s nobody here to protect you. And when I’m finished, I’ll dump you into a federal jail. After that, if you haven’t aged too much, I’ll turn you over to the local cops.”

“For what?”

“There’s a warrant out for your arrest. Seems you killed your ex-wife. Hell, I could shoot you now for resisting arrest.” Brad could see it in his eyes; he liked the idea. He eased his weight forward. None of his thoughts showed outwardly.

“Now maybe you can find an answer. What’s with Rinolli?” Feldersen demanded harshly.

“Screw you.”

Feldersen reached quickly under his coat for his pistol. Brad slammed his left hand flat into the man’s chest, grabbing the arm, holding it motionless. The startled look on Feldersen’s face changed to a dazed expression as his head smacked into the mirror over the sink. The mirror cracked, a single jagged diagonal line.

Brad felt much of the tension disappear from the arm he held, but he didn’t loosen his grip. With his right, he drove a short jab into the center of the man’s stomach. Frustration lent strength to the delivery. Feldersen shuddered under the impact. With a second blow, Brad tried to drive through the man and the wall behind him.

He released his grip on the arm, trembling slightly. Feldersen slid slowly off the sink and crumpled to the floor. Without a look at the unconscious man, he left the restroom and walked back to the elevators. He waited only a minute for a ride down.

On the street, he turned north. He stretched his stride; moving eased the tension. What in the hell was he into now? The questions tumbled over one another, unanswered. The least of his troubles was pounding on a federal officer. It wasn't until Josie tapped the horn that he noticed her car beside him. When he got in; she moved easily into the flow of traffic.

“What is it?” she asked, keeping her eyes on the traffic.

“They want me for killing Lydia.”

“Oh, my God! Who managed that bit of nonsense?”

“Don't know,” he sighed, still trying to ease the tension in his shoulders. The pain in his back was minor, but it was there. He leaned forward, reached back and examined the wound with his fingers. It felt all right, and the scab was unbroken.

“Are you okay?”

He nodded. “Maybe a drink?”

She chose The Office on Roscoe. Only a few customers lingered over lunch. He walked to the phone, dropped in a quarter and dialed.

“Detectives. Sgt. Walters.”

“Just got the good news.”

“Give me your number.”

Brad gave it.

“Give me three minutes.” Hank hung up abruptly.

Brad picked up the phone on the first sound of a ring. “Why this?”

“Too many people can hear my end upstairs.”

“So?”

“So Sgt. Broadmore's got a witness. Just wandered in off the street. Claims she saw you goin' into Lydia's place.”

“What time?”

“A little after three-thirty.”

“Did she see a car backed up to the front door?”

“It wasn’t mentioned. She only claimed she saw you.”

“What about the pool guy? He saw the car.”

“I know. I’m going to talk to Broadmore about that.”

“What about motive, Hank? Doesn’t Broadmore need one?”

“He knows she stole your folk’s place in divorce court. He figures it’s enough for now.”

“Should I come in?”

“Forget that.”

“That’s a hell of a thing for a cop to say.”

“Shit. Maybe livin’ in a suitcase isn’t so great, but it beats hell out of a cell. Somebody’s tryin’ for you real hard. I don’t know if I can stop ’em. Until I do, you do like I say. Besides, there’s more.” The silence dragged on as Brad waited. “Judge Tofler won’t be turnin’ you loose on Monday.”

Brad’s stomach suddenly had no bottom.

“Seems they retested the .45 you gave Josie. Now they claim it is the one that killed Gerald.”

Brad was stunned.

“You still there?”

“Sorta.”

“Don’t be too shook. I’ll testify a first test was different. I haven’t talked to Walden, but it might help. You can see it wouldn’t be a good time to come in.”

There was another long silence.

“Ok?” Hank asked softly.

“Mostly,” Brad answered finally.

“Where’ll you be tonight?”

“Not sure.”

“Give me a call?”

“Yeah.”

Brad listened to the dead line for a long time. Slowly he hung up and walked to the booth where Josie was seated. He swallowed his drink in two fast gulps; the bourbon smarted nicely. Josie, watching closely, motioned for another. “What is it?”

He told her what Hank had said, enunciating each word with care. He wondered why his voice sounded so far away.

“That’s plain awful,” Josie said. “How can you take it so calmly?”

“I guess I expected something like this.”

“And he told you not to come in?”

He nodded. He took the glass from the waitress before she could set it on the table. “It’s time we split up,” he said quietly. “Too many people know I’m with you.”

She toyed with her drink, moving it slowly from hand to hand. “Is that what you want? To be alone?”

“I’ve got to disappear. I can handle it, but you wouldn’t like it much.”

“And I wouldn’t like what you plan to do with that knife?”

“Expect not.”

“Just like that? I’m supposed to walk out of here? And if I did, what would you do?”

“Let you and Hank do what you can.”

“I asked what you’d do.”

He sighed and looked steadily at his half empty glass. “Like I said. I’m going hunting.”

“What can you do alone?”

“Don’t know. But in war, there’s always a chance.”

“You see this as war then?”

“Close enough.”

“And you feel you can handle that?”

“Better than most.”

She was silent for a long while, then looked up and met his glance. “There’s something else, isn’t there?”

“Like?”

“You’re afraid of what might happen between us.”

He toyed with his glass for several moments. When he looked up at her, he said, “I think I’m in love with you.”

“That’s insane. You don’t know me at all.”

“Enough I don’t want you hurt. I don’t want you standing anywhere near me if someone starts shooting again.”

“On the other hand, I’m pretty good with that.” She pointed toward her purse and the .357. “With a little luck, I might keep you alive a bit longer.” She finished the rest of her drink. “Let’s get out of here.”

She reached for her purse and rose. He didn't move. She turned and faced him squarely, head high. He stood slowly, trying desperately to read what lay behind those incredible blue eyes. Finally he nodded. She turned and walked toward the door. He followed her out into the bright afternoon sun.

* * *

Josie opened the door to her apartment, and let Brad enter ahead of her. Inside, she closed and locked it, then leaned back against it. As she gazed at him, he couldn't read her look.

When she started for the window, she took her earrings off and tucked them into the pocket of her jacket. Then she slipped out of the jacket and draped it over the back of a chair. She stepped out of her sandals, then used her feet to tuck them under the chair.

She turned, then, to gaze out the window. She had folded her arms under her breasts, which added a delightful uplift. She was motionless, as if unaware she was not alone.

Brad stepped up beside her. Apart from noticing her enticing breasts, he was content to look out over the city, to wait.

Slowly she turned to him. She was so close she had to tilt her head back to meet his gaze. "Kiss me," she murmured, "the way you did in the hotel restaurant."

He thought he saw something of confusion in the brightness of her eyes, but then he wasn't sure. There was no other expression in her features. Her arms had not moved; her breasts were still thrust boldly upward.

He cupped her chin with a thumb and forefinger, then kissed her lightly. He watched her eyes close, then he sensed a soft shudder. When she finally opened her eyes, he could see they were clear of confusion, or of whatever he had seen.

"Again?" she murmured.

When he brought his lips to hers, she tucked her arms around his neck and pulled herself against him, deepening the kiss, clinging to him, as if afraid to break it off.

When she did, she met his glance and said softly, “This can’t matter. Okay?” She tightened the grip about his neck as if demanding he agree.

He shook his head. “It already matters to both of us.”

She held his glance for several moments, then laid her head on his shoulder. “Carry me like in the movies,” she murmured with a sigh.

“There aren’t any cameras here.”

“Pretend,” she whispered, closing her eyes and pulling herself tightly against him.

He scooped her up and started down the hall. She cuddled even closer, as if this mattered most of all.

* * *

In the growing dusk, Brad leaned against the headboard, stroking her hair. She was using his shoulder for a pillow, etching random patterns on his chest with her nails. Her nakedness highlighted by a sheen of perspiration. “You fooled me.”

“How?”

“All that weathered, outdoorsy look. I didn’t expect your gentleness. It’s a nice bonus.”

“Any complaints?”

“Maybe one.”

“Yeah?”

“You know too much about this sort of thing. I tingle all over.”

He chuckled softly. “It’s you, not me. You’re easy to please.”

“Not really,” she murmured as she crawled up his chest and kissed him, seeking to cover every inch of his skin with her own.

* * *

Later, after carting the empty dishes to the sink, Josie sat back down on her side of the table and said, “Now this half of the table is mine. That half,” she said pointing emphatically, “is yours. You stay there. Okay?”

“What’s on your mind?”

“I’m not ready for this.”

“What?”

“A relationship with you.”

Brad stood, picked up his chair, and settled it beside her, then sat back down.

“You promised to stay on your side.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Damn,” she muttered.

He reached out and enclosed her hands in his. “I’m missing something. Tell me more.”

She rolled her eyes at the ceiling. “I already said it. I like my life the way it is. I don’t want to swap my career for mommyhood.”

“Did we sign contracts? Or speak of agendas to be amended?”

“No, but . . .”

“Did we make promises? Or offer guarantees?”

“No.”

“Then we’ll both have to do whatever to make things neat for each other.”

She gazed at him for several minutes. He had no clue to her thoughts.

“You’re terrible,” she declared finally, her lips curled up at the corners as if about to smile. “Will you kiss me again?”

Without waiting for an answer, she tucked her arms around his neck and pulled his lips down to hers.

* * *

Sgt. Hank Walters sat staring at the lab report, the one Sgt. Bradson had handed him this morning. He didn’t have to read it again. He knew what it said.

From the folder, he picked out the earlier report and compared the two. Only one bullet had been recovered from Gerald Allison’s body and it was distorted, having lodged against bone. The other two had completely penetrated and had never been found. In this, both reports concurred.

The new report was quite different, however. It seems the gun Brad Ashton had with him had killed Gerald Allison three years ago. “Bullshit,” he said aloud.

But there was no one to hear, no one to read the anger in his eyes, the tension in his shoulders, or the tremble in his hands holding the second report.

He found the name he needed. Lt. Stratford had requested the second test. But why?

He gazed out into the squad room without really seeing it, his thoughts drifting, but seemingly determined to focus on Lt. Stratford. What did he really know about the man? Why was he so determined to lock Brad away? That he had no answers, did not bother him. Answers could be found. The trick was in asking the right questions.

His thoughts were interrupted by the opening of his office door. Captain Haywood entered without preamble and settled into a chair. As always, he was immaculately dressed, his nails clean and polished, his shoes shined beyond requirements.

“Lt. Stratford tells me you’re thinking of doing something very foolish.”

“I was with Sgt. Bradson when he made this first test,” Walters commented, holding up the report. “I’ll testify as to the results, if that’s what you mean. And Bradson will have to confirm my statement. We’ll let the jury decide which one is right.”

Captain Haywood shook his head slowly.

“Worried about the department image?” Walters’ lazy smile tightened. “Like we don’t make mistakes?”

Captain Haywood sighed and straightened his tie. “I’m not concerned about images right now, only about you. You’re one of the best; possibly the best I’ve ever worked with. But we may have to get along without you.”

“Are we talkin’ off the record?”

Captain Haywood thought about it a moment, then nodded.

Walters leaned forward and said, “What makes you and your team better than most in the department?” He leaned back. “It’s all about loyalty and support. You support your people, so they support you. And each other.”

“There are other factors, but that one is important.”

“To me, too. But add this. I also support my friends.”

“Do they appreciate that?” Haywood asked.

“They often don’t. But that’s not the point. Supporting my friends, you, and our team is part of who I am. Take that away, and I’m somebody else.”

Haywood nodded. “But Ashton has crossed the line. He’s no longer entitled to your support.”

“You’ve been listening to the wrong people.”

“For instance?”

“Sgt. Broadmore. He claims he’s got a witness who saw Ashton enter Lydia’s home at about 3:30.”

“Claims?”

“It never happened. First, Ashton lived in that house for a time; he’d know how to get in without being seen. Second, point him at a place he’s never seen, and he’d be inside before anybody could identify him. That witness is lying.”

“Did you explain this to Sgt. Broadmore?”

“He’s not buying.” Walters shook his head. “I also told him that Jeffery Walden, Ashton’s attorney, has hired Lambert & Banks to help him build a defense for Ashton. They have a witness who was there at 3:35; he saw things differently. First, he didn’t see Ashton or anybody else. Second, there was a car parked on the lawn backed up to the front porch. Broadmore’s witness didn’t notice it.”

“Didn’t he check this out?” Haywood asked.

“I don’t know. But he said he was satisfied with his witness.”

“Santino and Farley aren’t happy. What have you done about that?”

“Ashton was working at Overnite Air as Fairchild, so he had to stick with that name when talking with our guys. It explains the few things he said that weren’t so.

“I did talk them into checking where Ashton worked as Fairchild over the last three years. Ashton gave it to them straight. So he’s no longer a serious suspect.”

Walters continued by telling about Brad being followed and shot at, that the slugs came from the same .38 that killed three

people at Overnite Air. He spoke of Mike Rinolli and the two guys who had tried to grab him last night. And of Feldersen and the DEA.

When he'd finished, Walters leaned back in his chair and gazed up at the ceiling for a time.

"Is that it?" Haywood asked.

"No," Walters said softly as he leaned forward in his chair. "Buried in all this we've got a dirty cop."

"Are you certain?" Haywood demanded sharply.

Walters picked up the new ballistics report. "There's only one way this report could have come up."

"And that is?"

"Somebody switched the original test bullet and the barrel in that Colt .45. It had to be somebody here in the department."

"Nobody could get to that weapon."

"While Sgt. Bradson was running that first test, I could have made those switches, if I'd had a bullet and a barrel."

"But that would mean one of our people killed Gerald Allison, then kept that .45 all these years."

"That's true, Cap."

"Have you got a name?"

"Maybe. But only for you."

Haywood nodded.

"Lt. Stratford." Walter sighed. He picked up a folder, then dropped it back to the desk. "The problem is I don't like the guy, so I may be biased. Still, he was there when the gun was tested the second time. He could have made a switch."

"Damn," Haywood muttered. He sat without moving for several minutes. Slowly, he stood. He placed his knuckles on the desk, then leaned out over them. "What you have is plausible. If you're right, Ashton is clean. But you can't leave him out there."

"That VC prison camp did him in, Cap. He'd lose it in a cell."

"It would give him a good alibi. If whoever is behind all this gets lucky, they can build a better frame, one that works."

"We'll have to risk that."

"He's fair game for any cop looking for a gold star."

“Ashton isn’t easy to kill, Cap.”

Captain Haywood shook his head slowly, frustration deeply etched in his features. “I hope you’re as good as I think you are,” he said evenly. Slowly he turned toward the door.

“What do I tell Internal Affairs?” Walters asked.

Without turning, Haywood said sharply, “Everything you told me. And any details you overlooked.”

“But not Stratford’s name, right?”

Haywood nodded. “Not until we’re certain.”

* * *

James and Blakefield from Internal Affairs were not as patient or sympathetic as Captain Haywood had been. Nor did they believe him. At the end of two hours, Walters stood abruptly. “You’ve got all I know. I can’t see any sense to more of this shit. If you want my badge, it’s yours. If you want to do it right, check out what I said.”

James and Blakefield looked at one another, then back at Walters.

“It would help if you’d tell us where Ashton is,” said the older man. “Better yet, go bring him in.”

“I don’t know where he is.” He could guess, but they hadn’t asked him to guess.

“But you’d tell us if you did?”

“I don’t know that either.” But he knew he wouldn’t.

“I guess that’s all for now, then. A word of caution?”

Walters waited silently.

“Be careful. You’re stepping on mighty big toes.”

“That’s true.” It was the first time he’d agreed with them.

* * *

It was full dark when Willard Tuckman rose from behind his scarred desk and put on his coat. If his two bodyguards, also standing, were disturbed by the lateness of the hour, there was no hint of it. The shorter man with the baby face, loosened the pistol in its holster

and walked quickly to the door. He was the first one outside, followed by the big man with the pock-marked face, then Tuckman.

At the car, both men waited as Tuckman glared disgustedly at the right front fender of his new Cadillac. It was badly torn and crumpled; the midnight blue paint was streaked with a light beige color. “It was like this when ya picked it up?”

The slender man nodded.

“And there ain’t nothin’ else wrong with it?” His wave encompassed the entire car.

“Runs sweet as ever.”

Tuckman grunted, then settled himself in the back seat. The pocked-face man drove. The man with the pistol also sat in the front seat, alert as always. The side mirror on his side was adjusted for him, not the driver.

“Get it fixed tomorrow,” Tuckman muttered.

“Right,” said the driver.

Tuckman leaned back, his thoughts drifting. He knew he didn’t have all the facts and he hated that. It was tough to build a deal without all the facts. He did know Lydia was dead and a couple of hotshot mechanics at Overnite Air. He didn’t give a thought to Lydia, but good mechanics were hard to find. All he knew for sure was that if he was going to make a deal with Ashton, it’d have to be real soon. Otherwise, the man would be dead or buried in a jail cell. But he was frustrated and knew it. He didn’t have a clue to a next move.

* * *

“Yes,” said Mike Rinolli into the phone.

“Your line clean?”

“It doesn’t hurt to be careful. What do you want?”

Soft light bounced off the red stone in his ring, as he moved the receiver to his other hand. “I’ve closed down this end for now. And I’ll soon take care of the other end.”

“So Ashton wasn’t involved at all?”

He laughed. “Not in that.”

“In what, then?”

“Ashton saw Sanchez pick up the last load; he followed me.”

“To me?”

“Do you find that interesting?”

“Who is this guy?”

“Some sort of special investigator, I suspect. That’s all I can think of.”

“That seems unlikely,” Rinolli said suspiciously. “He doesn’t have those kind of moves.”

“I tried to take him last night, but he got lucky. He’s running now and I can’t find him. Unless you believe I’m lying, one of us had better get him. And sooner than later.” The red stone flickered once more as he returned the phone to its cradle. He was smiling broadly as he turned toward his car.

* * *

Mike Rinolli remained motionless, the dead receiver clutched tightly in his hand. “Damn that sonofabitch,” he said as he slammed the phone down. There was a good chance it was a lie. He remembered the last pickup. The man had insisted he handle it personally. He hadn’t liked the feel of it; he’d been careful. There wasn’t any way Ashton or anyone else could have seen him. Then again, there was always that outside chance. He hadn’t gotten this far taking unnecessary chances. “Georgio,” he yelled.

First he’d get Ashton, even though he was sure it wasn’t necessary. He knew Ashton hadn’t killed Gates, Talbert, or Sanchez. And he certainly wasn’t a special investigator. Yet how could one know? The smart move was to act, to diminish any possible risk.

Then, he thought, smiling, I’ll hit that smooth-talking sonofabitch just for kicks. Christ. He didn’t even check with me before making his move. He looked up at Georgio, standing in front of the desk. “Get some people,” he said. “And find Ashton.”

“You wanna talk again?”

“I don’t want him talking to anyone, ever.”

Georgio smiled broadly and left the room.

CHAPTER 11 SUNDAY

By the angle of the sun's rays, Brad knew it was late in the morning. Never had he had so little sleep and felt so refreshed. He turned to look at her. He wanted once again to run his hand across her silky thighs.

Then he thought of Hank and all the crap of that other world descended suddenly, heavily. He sighed and rolled gently out of bed. He slipped on his pants, picked up his shirt and moved to the living room, closing the bedroom door quietly behind him. He dialed Hank.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"Thought you were goin' to call last night."

"Got busy."

"The broad?"

"I don't think she'd like that word."

"You at her place?"

"Yeah."

"Don't go nowhere. I'll be right there." The line went dead.

Brad went back into the bedroom, sat on the side of the bed and began stroking Josie awake with his fingers on her back.

She opened her eyes, then smiled. "I thought I wore you out," she said sleepily. His shirt was unbuttoned; her fingers traced idle patterns down his bare chest.

"Close," he said smiling. "But Hank will be here in fifteen or twenty minutes."

"That's not enough time for what I want."

"Maybe it's enough to get underneath some clothes?"

She sighed, rolled out of bed, gave him a kiss and walked to the bathroom.

When Walters stepped inside, Brad knew he had the picture, but he made no sign. Brad also knew he never would.

“Coffee?” Josie asked.

“Another cup can’t hurt much.” He sat down on the couch beside Brad. A moment later, Josie handed him a cup and sat in the chair facing them.

“It’s not working out too well, is it?” Brad asked.

“Cap Haywood wants you tucked into a cell. For your own good, of course. Internal Affairs wants to salt me down permanently, if I don’t make it happen,” Hank said.

“I’m not up to that.”

“Then do as I suggested,” Josie said. “Pick a spot somewhere and let me get people to cover you around the clock.”

“I’m fed up with sitting around and letting others decide my future. And even if I have one.”

“Then you’ve only one option,” Hank said grimly.

“And that is?”

“Split,” he said, without hesitation. “Pick a nice new name and bury yourself somewhere while me and her figure this out.” He nodded in Josie’s direction.

Brad shook his head.

“Why not? You’ve been there; you can handle it.”

“Things are different now.”

“Yes, indeedy. Now you’re wanted for two murders, instead of one. Federsen is scourin’ this town lookin’ to give you a beatin’, like enough for a wheelchair maybe. And persons unknown are tryin’ to kill you. Buddy, it’s time for farewells.”

“Not now.”

“Not even if I go with you?” Josie asked quietly.

His look was hard. He started to speak, then held back. She didn’t know what she was saying. Crummy rooms in crummier towns, paying more attention to those behind than in front. If it didn’t destroy her, it would at least kill whatever future they might have together. But the words wouldn’t come. “That’s a tempting offer.”

“Take it,” said Hank.

“Remember, Hank, that time we got boxed? We could have bellied out. Right?”

Hank nodded.

“But we didn’t. We took out the headquarters, the ammo and fuel dumps, then a supply train as well.”

“This is different, buddy. We don’t have eleven good dudes beside us, and we haven’t a clue to a target.”

“Maybe not. But following the rules won’t get it done here any better than in Nam.”

“You always were one stubborn sonofabitch,” Hank noted.

“That’s so.”

“What’s different now than last week in Las Vegas?” Josie asked. “You were ready to run then.”

He stood and paced the room. When he turned to face them, he said, “Me, I guess.” He combed his hair back out of his eyes with his fingers. “I can’t just sit back and wait. It’s time for me to play a hand, maybe even deal one.”

“Just what are you planning?” Josie asked.

“No. I don’t want either of you taking any more chances. When I leave here, I’ll go alone.”

“Bullshit. Without somebody coverin’ your back, you won’t last a week.”

“We’ll see.”

“I’m not gonna change your mind, am I?” Hank asked quietly. Brad shook his head.

Hank was a pragmatist, if nothing more. His tight lazy smile returned. “Then how do you see it, buddy?”

“Suppose this whole deal’s smuggling and I happened to walk into it. Tell me a story, one that might be true.”

“Let me try,” Josie said.

Hank nodded.

“When you came back, Brad, someone for reasons we don’t know, felt dangerously vulnerable. He or she decided to close up shop. Lydia was killed, then Gates, Talbert, and Sanchez. He or she must believe you know something, because they tried to kill you,

too. We know this because they used the same weapon. It could be Tuckman.”

“Maybe,” Hank said. “But I think it’s a cop. A guy in narcotics who is dirty could come up with the same inside info.”

“Stratford?”

“Might be,” Hank said nodding.

“Is Rinolli the buyer?” Brad asked.

“If they’re smuggling heroin,” Josie said, “he controls distribution.” She thought for a moment, then asked, “Why was Lydia killed?”

“You ask too much,” Hank said. “But as a guess, it looks like Overnite Air’s involved. Maybe she was part of it. Maybe she arranged the right schedules.”

“And the DEA is on Brad because they think he’s involved,” she added.

“Funny thing, that. Remember Cogswell?” Hank asked. “It still bothers me, his sudden transfer, I mean.”

“How’s that?” asked Brad.

“First, if they’re running a big case like they say, they wouldn’t move a key man. Second, it stinks. I’ve a hunch there’s more here than a transfer.”

“For now that blond-headed jerk’s enough for me,” Brad said thoughtfully.

“Forget these things for now,” Josie said. “We need to know what you’re planning, Brad.”

He lost himself in her dark blue eyes. It came to him suddenly; he’d never be able to lie to her, so long as he could see her eyes. “There’s a word that hasn’t come up.”

“What’s that?” Hank asked.

“Mexico. More than likely the stuff’s coming in from there and they’re using Overnite Air. Seems like something was in that C47 Sanchez was working on and it came from Mexico. Tuckman hauls from Mexico. And those narcs wanted to know what I was doing down there.”

“So?” Hank asked.

“So I’ll wander down that way and take a look.”

“For what?” Hank asked.

“People. I could get lucky.”

“Not lately,” he snorted. Then, grinning he said, “You could take some bread, get a new name and stay awhile. That’d help.”

Brad ignored the comment. “Neither of you’ll know where I am. I’ll call when I can and that’s it.”

“And about Judge Tofler?” Josie asked quietly.

Brad shook his head. “Not now.” He wanted to say more, something to ease the look of sadness on her face, but he couldn’t think of any words that had a chance of helping.

“And the bail money?” Josie asked.

“I’ll take Tuckman’s offer and pay Amanda back.”

“That won’t leave much for the people Walden is putting to work,” she said.

“Don’t give it a thought,” Hank said bluntly. “I got some stashed and Amanda’s good for more.”

“Seems like you’re spending a lot of my money,” Brad commented.

“Won’t go over a couple thou a day. Hell. You’ll never miss it when you get blown away.”

“I appreciate your confidence, but do you think any of that will help?”

Hank shrugged and turned to Josie who answered, “As I said earlier and often, probably not. Have you a better idea?”

“No.”

“Hell, it’s only money,” Hank said.

“Right. It’s only money.” Brad looked hard at Hank and reached for his hand. “Now get your butt out of here. Okay?”

“Done,” he replied. Brad could hear his quiet whistle until he started down the stairs. He wished he had left with Hank; he wasn’t at all sure he wanted to be alone with Josie just now. He picked up the phone and dialed.

“Amanda Pothmore.”

“Brad here.”

“I’m glad you called. I’ve been hearing a lot and all of it bad. Is it true?”

He told her all he knew.

“And now?” she asked, trying to cover her worry. But he knew her too well; he could feel it. He told her of his plans and what Hank and Josie would attempt.

“Then you’ll miss court on Monday, won’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Judge Tofler will be angry. It’s difficult to tell what he may do.”

“Take your money, for one thing. But I’ll get it back to you.”

“Posh. Don’t worry about the money. Use what you’ve got to pay the people Walden hires. That’s the sensible thing to do.”

“We’ll see.”

“For once in your life, Brad Ashton, do what I ask. Remember, if it weren’t for my grand plan, you wouldn’t be in all this trouble.”

“It had to happen. Better to put it behind us now than later.”

“Brad,” she said softly. He could almost see tears in her eyes. “I can’t tell you how dreadfully—”

“As you would say,” he interrupted, “posh. Nobody gives guarantees and those who do are mostly liars. We’ve just had bad luck, is all.”

“What about you and Josie?”

“Yes?”

“Are you and she . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“Are we what?”

“Sometimes you can be so exasperating.”

“Say what you mean.”

“Are you involved?” she asked finally.

“Of course. She’s been working extra hard ever since I got back.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it.”

“Expect so.”

“All right, you young whippersnapper. You listen to me. You take care and make absolutely sure she’s not hurt in any way. Is that clear enough?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“You’re impossible.” She hung up.

Brad turned to Josie and said, “I best be heading out.”

“You wait a minute. Have a beer or something. I want to clean up.” Then she was gone, leaving him open-mouthed at the beginning of a protest.

He had finished only half his beer when she returned wearing gray slacks, a matching jacket, and black high-heeled sandals. In her left hand, she carried his money belt.

At the hard look in his eyes, she said softly, “After all these years, I stumble into a good pair of arms. Almost an accident, you might say. Do you really think I’m going to let you walk out that door without me? Besides, Lambert & Banks can do better than I can.” She tossed him the money belt which he deftly picked out of the air. “Count out \$9,000 for them. You’ll find some envelopes in the left-hand drawer in the kitchen.”

He found an envelope, counted out the money and sealed it. He strapped the belt around his waist. By the time he’d finished his beer, she was at the apartment door, a carry-all bag over her shoulder.

“I don’t think—”

“That’s best,” Josie interrupted with a grin. “Don’t think. First we’ll drop the money off, then find you some more clothes. We’ll eat at the airport. Okay?”

He walked toward her slowly. For all the facility of her words, her uncertainty was plain in her eyes. He bent and kissed her. She let the bag drop off her shoulder and gave all her attention to the embrace. It was later when she said huskily, “We’ll be terribly late, unless we leave now.”

He wasn’t sure what they’d be late for, but he released her, picked up her bag and followed her out the door.

* * *

The flight to Mexico City was smooth and uneventful. As the plane settled into final approach, the lights of the city, a dim glow through the haze, rapidly focused as if a giant microscope was being adjusted by unseen hands. Street lights, then the headlights of cars and finally the runway lights, rushed by them. Josie, dozing with her head against his shoulder, awoke when the wheels touched down.

“You’ve a nice shoulder,” she said, smiling. She pulled a mirror from her purse and began making last minute adjustments to makeup and hair.

Mexico City, like most capital cities throughout the world, keeps a watchful eye on tourists; it is profitable to keep them happy and contented. Formalities were kept to a minimum. The rental car Josie had arranged for was ready. Thirty minutes later they were in their room at the posh El Presidente Hotel.

An hour later, she fell asleep in his arms. She had come to him naked and glowing in the bright moonlight through the great window. Subdued by their thoughts, they sought to lose themselves each in the needs of the other. Afterwards he held her closely until she slept, then gently disentangled himself, rubbing his right arm to restore circulation.

He moved gently on the bed so as not to disturb her. Propped against the headboard, he watched the lights of the city through the window. One by one, sometimes in bunches, they went out. As if controlled by a master director, the city grew darker.

CHAPTER 12 MONDAY

After breakfast in the hotel dining room, they made their way to the tourist information desk. With Josie's Nikon camera draped over his shoulder and two extra lenses dangling, Brad looked the part of a well-heeled tourist. Their animated chatter with the suave young man behind the counter accented the image. They paid for two tours they would miss, included a sizable tip and left the hotel, her arm linked in his. No one could have guessed Brad was overdue in a Los Angeles courtroom. Josie hadn't mentioned it, but he suspected her thoughts were as his, grim and dark.

There had been no hint anyone would seek them out, but Brad had insisted. Anyone looking for them today would be looking in Mexico City. Three hours later, they parked in front of the small Overnite Air cargo terminal in Puebla, ninety miles to the east.

In her dark gray skirt and tailored jacket, Josie was the lady in charge. Her press credentials gave her name as Ms. Jane Quist, noted freelance writer and investigative reporter. Brad was her photographer.

Josie had explained on the plane that she knew Jane Quist well. She had occasionally passed on information that had led to published articles. In exchange, Ms. Quist had provided her with identification. There was even an editor in New York who could recognize a description of Josie.

The charming young secretary in the small office spoke only Spanish. Brad did the talking.

"*Por favor,*" he said. "Ms. Quist is preparing an article on airlines and the shipment of cargo by air. She has finished early with your competition." Brad smiled, pointing across the crowded parking area toward the offices of Air Express. "She would like to talk with someone here, if it is convenient."

Returning his smile, the young girl rose. With an envious look at the elegant *Americano* lady, she slipped into the inner office.

Moments later, a tall portly man, neatly dressed in a pale blue suit, faced Josie politely. “Senora Quist?” he asked.

Josie nodded, flashing a dazzling smile.

“My name, it is Raul Perez.” He bowed slightly. “How can I help you, please?” His brown eyes were friendly and courteous. His English was heavily accented, but clear.

“I’m working on an article about air transport.” She waited to be certain she was understood. On his polite nod, she smiled again and continued, “We’d like to ask a few questions; perhaps take a few pictures. I would like to learn, for example, what advantages you may have over larger carriers. And other things of this sort you might like to mention. Would that be possible, Senor Perez?” Her smile was overwhelming; any man would find it difficult to ignore.

“Come in, please.” He gestured toward his office. “Unfortunately, I must call Mexico City. I, myself, would enjoy your company. But people of the press”—he shrugged—“sometimes the company has objection. I must call,” he ended apologetically.

“I quite understand,” Josie replied brightly. “It was rude of us to arrive without an appointment. We sincerely appreciate the time you have already given.”

Senor Perez was clearly delighted by the intrusion of the lovely lady. He seated them in the two most comfortable chairs in his small office.

When he hung up the phone, he was smiling even more broadly. “I had no thought you were so important. Senor Hildalgo says you are a very famous lady in your country. I am honored.” Again he bowed; he was as elegant seated as standing. “I am at your service. Where will we begin?”

“Perhaps you could show me what your people do.” She whipped out a small notebook and pencil. “And you can tell me something of the difficulties of the business. We can talk as we walk.” She stood up. Senor Perez was immediately by her side. His hand lightly on her arm, he directed her out of the office. Brad knew he wouldn’t be missed as he drifted to his left into the warehouse area.

Inside, he slipped the camera from its case and took a few pictures. The three men working showed polite interest. His offer to

take their picture broke their reserve. He posed each man carefully, performing a difficult task. He caught the larger of the three, Juan, lifting a large crate, the muscles of his back and arms rippling broadly under the strain.

Leaning back against a crate, he asked polite questions of the three men seated around him. He asked the name of the mechanic he had glimpsed briefly through a hangar door across the narrow loading apron. “Alfredo Peron,” replied Juan. “He is a very important man. He is the head mechanic for all Mexico. Permit me to introduce you.” After a gracious, “*Adios*,” and a warm handshake with each of the other two men, Brad followed Juan across the apron.

In the hangar, Alfredo smiled as he was introduced to Brad; his dark eyes showed little. When Juan returned to his work, an amused look settled on Alfredo’s face. He declined to have his picture taken. As Brad listened, asking an occasional question, it became clear Alfredo Peron was a knowledgeable man; that his knowledge was not limited to aircraft.

He answered Brad’s questions politely, but the openness Brad had obtained with the three warehousemen was missing. Yes, he enjoyed his work. Yes, he traveled frequently when there was trouble with the planes. He often came to Puebla. Only last Wednesday, he’d solved a difficult problem here.

After a few pictures of the shop, a few more of the two planes on the apron, Brad tucked the camera back in its case. He returned toward the reception room to wait for Josie. As he passed by Juan and the other two workers, they returned his wave in friendly fashion. Brad thought of the warmth that had not been there while he had talked with Alfredo Peron.

When Josie returned, Senor Perez was in love. Brad smiled to himself; if there was anything the man knew that Josie wanted, she already had it. “But must you leave so soon?” Senor Perez asked.

She glanced at her watch, flashed a dazzling smile and motioned to Brad. “Unfortunately, we’re already late for another appointment. I’m extremely sorry,” she said, clasping his hand. “You’ve been most gracious, Senor Perez. I want you to know how much I appreciate it.”

“It was a fine pleasure, Senora Quist.” He bowed, touching his lips lightly to her hand.

Brad followed her from the office, noting the disappointment on Senor Perez’s face. Even his shoulders slumped slightly as he sighed and turned back to his office.

He fell in step beside her and said, “Another conquest. He’s in love with you.” He grinned.

“I like him,” she said. “He’s a gentleman. There’s something about that kind of man.”

“You want chivalry and the ERA amendment on the same ballot?”

“Chivalry’s dead,” she snapped. “If it ever existed.”

“So you’ll settle for ERA?”

“I’ll settle for some food,” she said brightly.

“Mexican Mexican or American Mexican?”

“Mexican Mexican,” she answered. “But don’t poison me.”

* * *

“That was wonderful,” Josie said contentedly, as she sipped the wine. “But don’t tell me what was in it. You could spoil the whole effect.”

“Then talk to me.”

“I didn’t learn a thing. And from what you told me, I don’t think you did either.”

“How did you react to Alfredo Peron, the mechanic?”

“A competent man. Perhaps older than he looks. Dresses well, under those coveralls. Thinks he’s a winner with the ladies and probably is.” She thought back, trying to remember. “He had beautiful hands,” she added. “Did I miss anything?”

“He seemed almost formal; I didn’t get much of a response.”

“I didn’t notice that. Maybe it was because he was trying to see through my blouse.”

“Wasn’t he a little too neat, maybe too sharp for a mechanic?”

Josie frowned in thought.

“Talbert and Sanchez were mechanics,” he said pointedly. “And he was here last Wednesday, about when that C47 would have been loaded.”

“That’s not much to go on.”

“I’d like to talk with him privately,” Brad said with a touch of grimness in his tone.

“You want to walk in and bounce him around to see what falls out,” she translated sarcastically. “What if he’s not the man you want?”

“I just want to talk.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “There’s no writ of habeas corpus down here. The police lock you up first and talk later, much later.”

“I just want to follow him home and have a little chat.”

“We don’t have to follow him.” She sighed. “I got all the addresses when Senor Perez showed me a list of names so I could spell them correctly. He’s here just for the day on a special problem. He lives in Mexico City.”

* * *

Back in Mexico City, Brad drove slowly past the apartment complex. They were in a newer part of the city; the building was large. An inner courtyard of tile and young trees was surrounded by three floors of apartments on three sides. No parking area was visible. He found the alley behind the building. Parking was off of it. He drove past and pulled in behind a smaller building.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“We could miss him coming in.”

“Wait here.” He walked back up the alley toward the building. Despite his dark tan, his light skin set him apart from the occasional people he met. Since it was futile to try to blend in, he took the opposite tack; he smiled and nodded to those he met, speaking when it seemed appropriate.

Entering from the parking area, he strode purposefully up the stairs. Consulting a blank piece of paper, he looked left and then right. He moved to the door of the apartment next to Alfredo’s and

knocked. He quickly constructed a bit of nonsense to account for his presence. But it was wasted effort; no one answered his knock. With a last glance at Alfredo's door, he started back down the stairs to the parking area.

In the car, he backed out and drove on down the alley. "Any good with locks?" he asked.

"Not in Mexico."

"We need to get in. We'd be noticed waiting outside."

"I don't think I like what you're thinking."

He stopped the car suddenly. Leaving the motor running, he picked up a wooden crate from beside a trash container. Its top was still nailed to one edge. He tucked it in the back seat of the car, then drove on.

* * *

An hour later, Brad struggled valiantly with the heavy crate. Sweat dripped from his forehead; it had soaked the back of his shirt. He carefully eased it to the walk in front of the manager's apartment. His knock brought a quick response.

"Well?" She had been beautiful once. Age had treated her roughly. She studied the *Norta Americano* suspiciously.

"The crate." He smiled. "It is for Alfredo Peron. And he is not here. *Por favor?*"

"I am not an innkeeper, senor. Leave it at his door."

"*Si*, but it very valuable, the crate." Brad consulted some papers. "Nine thousand pesos. Perhaps I could leave it with you?"

"It looks heavy." She glanced at the crate, then back to Brad's sweaty brow.

"*Si*. I would be happy to carry it to Senor Peron's apartment. Perhaps you have a key?"

She placed a foot firmly against the crate and pushed. It did not move. She turned back inside, returning moments later with a key. She moved quickly across the courtyard. Brad struggled to keep up, wishing fervently he'd left out at least half of the sand.

At the foot of the stairs, he paused, resting the crate against the railing. She turned, gave him a withering look and said, “I have matters of importance.”

“*Si.*” Brad shrugged. He struggled on up the stairs. She had the door open when he got there. He staggered a bit, as he moved into the room. He eased the crate to the floor. In the doorway, his back to the doorjamb, he waited for the woman to finish her visual inspection of the apartment. As she reached for the doorknob, he said, “*Gracias,*” smiled and left.

From the entry way to the parking area he watched. When the woman closed the door to the office, he turned again to the stairs. Moments later he was back inside Alfredo’s apartment, having removed the wad of paper from the doorjamb that had prevented the locked door from latching.

He stood motionless, his back to the door, examining the room and its contents with his eyes. It was essentially one large room with sleeping and kitchen areas separated from the living room by chin-high partitions. Behind the door to his right was the bathroom. The furnishings were modest; the items seemed hastily, carelessly assembled. There was no evidence of wealth, no indication that Alfredo Peron was more than a mechanic with Overnite Air.

Methodically he searched the room. Every picture was moved. Every bit of carpet was lifted to expose the wooden floor. Next he turned his attention to the furniture. He found the .38 auto-load almost immediately, tucked behind the cushion of the overstuffed chair.

Having a weapon did not make Alfredo a smuggler, but it did set him apart from others he had met at the airline. The pistol had been well cared for; it was fully loaded. Thoughtfully Brad emptied the clip and slipped the round out of the chamber. He replaced the empty clip, then tucked the pistol back behind the cushion.

A soft knock on the door startled him. Cautiously he moved toward it. The knock was repeated with insistence this time. His weight well forward on the balls of his feet, he yanked the door open.

Josie swept by him into the room, ignoring the look of surprise on his face. He closed the door quickly, but quietly. “You were going to wait.”

“In Mexico,” she replied, “there’s not much difference between committing the crime and being an accessory to it. Besides, I’m curious.” She raised an eyebrow in question.

“Nothing,” Brad said disgustedly. “No sign of extra money or anything special.” He told her about the pistol. She looked hard at the chair.

An hour later, they had found nothing new. They were still looking, when they heard a key inserted in the lock. Brad strode quickly into the bathroom, closing the door halfway for cover. Josie stood facing the door in the center of the room. He wished he had his knife and that Josie had her .357, but they’d been left behind in the trunk of her car before leaving Los Angeles; Mexican authorities take a dim view of such tools.

Alfredo Peron entered swiftly. The surprise on his face at seeing Josie lingered under an easy smile. “Senora Quist, isn’t it?” She nodded slightly. “Undoubtedly you have more questions?”

“No,” she said.

“It’s me that’s got questions,” Brad said from the bathroom doorway.

Alfredo whirled to face him as he stepped into the room. “Ah, the man with the crate. I should have known.” He glanced down. “Sand?”

Brad nodded. Alfredo looked back and forth between them. “I think I should call the police.” His smile broadened.

“There’s the phone.” Brad’s voice was mild, pleasant, markedly uninterested.

“You want me to call the police?”

“Might be a good move.”

“Maybe, if I had an idea of your questions?”

“Simple. We need the name of your boss.”

“I work for Overnite Air.” His smile was working overtime.

“Your other boss. The one who told you to load some stuff behind the landing light of the C47 last Wednesday in Puebla.”

“I don’t think I understand.” There was a cautious expression in his eyes.

Brad moved to the couch and sat down. Josie sat beside him. Alfredo watched closely as she crossed her legs and leaned back.

“We need that name, is all,” Brad said politely. “And we have news that might be helpful.” The picture of indifference Brad offered was marred by the intensity of his gaze. Everything about Peron shouted there was something to be learned here; he wanted it badly.

Alfredo sat in the overstuffed chair, his right arm across his body. His confidence was enhanced, this close to the pistol.

“What is the news?”

“American and Mexican narcotics people have joined hands in a certain matter.” He watched closely to see if the lie was believed.

“And the matter?”

“Smuggling heroin. In cargo planes. They don’t know which airline yet, but we could help them. They would be interested in your travels to the airports of Mexico.”

Alfredo was still; his smile gone.

“Talbert and Sanchez are dead,” Brad commented. “Shot to death.”

The .38 was in Alfredo’s hand now, the hammer back. His confidence and smile returned. “I think,” he said, “it’s time to go. Somehow I knew it when the lady was killed.” He spoke almost as if speaking to himself.

“What lady?” Brad asked, leaning forward toward the barrel of the empty pistol.

“The owner of the airline. Senora Allison.” He looked up, surprised. “I thought you knew.”

“But she wasn’t really the boss. Who is?”

“I do not know his name. Now, you must excuse me.” He rose, as did Brad. “I must go.”

“And if I have more questions?”

“I would have to kill you both.”

Brad watched him consider the idea. “Not with that gun,” he said, tossing the cartridges he’d removed on the carpeted floor between them.

In the silence, there was a sudden snap of the hammer falling on an empty chamber. Alfredo threw the pistol. As quickly as Brad moved, the heavy automatic nicked the right side of his head.

Dazed momentarily, he struggled to hold his balance, his left arm braced against the end of the couch. Josie was at his side, steadying

him. He shook his head gently from side to side, seeking to clear a nasty lingering hint of dizziness. Thinking only of the immediate task, he took a tentative step, then another, toward the door.

“He’s gone,” Josie exclaimed. “Take it easy.”

Brad continued out the door, his head clearing now, but he grabbed the guardrail firmly. As Josie closed the door behind them, they both saw Alfredo leap down the last four steps and dash into the hallway to the parking area.

The three soft thuds were barely audible, but there was no mistaking the source of the sound. The three rounds stopped Alfredo Peron abruptly, almost as if he’d run into a clothesline. His head and upper body were driven backward; his legs momentarily continued forward. He landed hard on his back.

Brad was moving quickly now, but with his left hand on the guardrail. He looked about the large courtyard, and at the windows and doors of the apartments. He could see no one, nor any indication anyone else had heard the deadly sounds below.

Moments later they stepped into the courtyard, scanning it one last time. Then they moved quickly into the hallway. They needed only a glance at the fallen man; with three tightly grouped rounds in his chest, Alfredo Peron was dead.

As they moved down the alley, Josie reached for his hand, slowing his pace. The urge to run was strong, but he knew she was right. Strolling lovers attract little attention. He could see the car when he heard it, the tight piercing scream of a woman; it sent shivers down his spine. He felt a surging guilt at having left the tumbled body for the woman to find. Moments later, they were in the car.

He drove directly to the airport and returned the car. He bought an overnight bag in one of the shops, along with some essentials. Josie checked them in on a Los Angeles flight. She also called the hotel; there had been an emergency and they must return home. For a fee, the hotel would be happy to forward their things to Josie’s address. They boarded the plane five minutes later.

At the trunk of Josie's Trans Am at Los Angeles International Airport, Josie slipped her .357 back into her purse. "Can you drive?" she asked.

He nodded and climbed behind the wheel of the car. He carefully strapped the knife and sheath to his leg. Once clear of the parking area, he noted with pleasure the feel of heavy-duty shocks and the powerful engine. The Mexican Ford they had rented was a kiddy car by comparison.

A half hour later, as they neared the driveway to her apartment, Josie suddenly gripped his arm. "Police. Keep driving. Look at me." She also looked to the right, pointing as if indicating something the driver must notice.

The road curved to the right. She glanced through the rear window. The police car was out of sight. "I don't think they noticed us. But let's go someplace quickly; we don't want to talk with them just now."

"We need sleep," Brad declared, several miles later.

"I'm all for it."

North of her apartment on Sepulveda, Brad found a motel with parking in the rear. He registered, paid cash and returned to the car. In an isolated corner of the lot, he parked between a large trash bin and another car. He moved the trash bin to cover the rear license plate. It would require an unusually eager police patrol to spot the black Trans Am. They'd have to move the bin to see the plate.

With what he'd hastily purchased in the airport in Mexico, which included a bottle of bourbon, they made their way to their room. He poured liberally for each of them. Neither seemed to notice the absence of ice. Josie, dressed only in panties and bra, collapsed into the only chair. Brad threw his shirt on the nightstand, turned on the television set and settled against the headboard on the bed.

Listening to the world news, the smiling faces indirectly assured Brad he need not worry about a mere murder charge or even two; the world would shortly be gone in any one of several untidy ways. The first item of local news was a clear, sharp picture of himself. Both he and Josie leaned forward intently.

The announcer said, “When Mr. Ashton failed to appear this morning, Judge Tofler stated, ‘The man is making a mockery of the court. He’s to be apprehended and held without bail.’ Mr. Ashton is also wanted in connection with the murder of his ex-wife, Tuesday of last week. The accused slayer is reportedly in the company of Ms. Josie Botsworth, a local private investigator. Mr. Ashton is described as . . .”

Josie snapped the set off. “Just what we need, your picture in every living room.”

She swallowed the rest of her drink, turned out the lights and slipped into bed. Gently he massaged her shoulders, then the muscles of her neck and back. She rolled over, grabbed him around the neck and pulled him to her. Her warm kiss held none of the day’s frustrations. He held her in his arms, stroking her long dark hair. Sleep did not come to them until much later.

CHAPTER 13 TUESDAY

He awakened slowly with Josie running her fingers through his hair. He pulled her to him and tried to erase the wrinkles of worry and concern with gentle kisses. Failing, he released her.

“What now?” she asked.

“Tuckman.”

“We shouldn’t,” she said, reaching for his hand and gripping it firmly. “With the television coverage, you haven’t a chance. Some eager cop is going to put a bullet right between those lovely gray eyes of yours.”

“You could be right.”

“What else is there?”

“Tuckman.”

“We haven’t a thing.”

“We didn’t have anything when we went to Mexico,” he pointed out. “But we got something. We connected Lydia to a smuggling operation.” He gave her hand a firm squeeze, rolled out of bed and went into the bathroom for a hasty shower and shave. He tried not to think of the hint of tears in her eyes.

* * *

An hour later, Brad had acquired a brown Stetson, wraparound sunglasses and cowboy boots. They stopped in a field where he rubbed the newness out of the hat with the help of dirty sand and scuffed up the toes of his boots. It wasn’t much of a disguise, but he looked nothing like the picture shown on TV last night.

They selected a small coffee shop for breakfast. Josie smiled at his determination to wear the hat throughout the meal. When he said, “Us cowboys never take off our hats, ma’am,” she laughed, but the gaiety was forced.

When the meal was over and fresh coffee had been poured, Josie could not hold even a semblance of lightness. “Brad, you have to go in or run. More and more frequently, fugitives”—she cringed at the word—“are shot and killed. ‘Apprehend’ has become a license to shoot.”

“I know.”

“Then do as I ask. Leave it to Hank and the people Walden has working right now.”

“It’s not people, Josie, it’s the system I don’t trust. It’d be too easy for them to settle on me and forget the truth.”

“But what can you do that professionals can’t do better?”

“Look,” he said. “Gerald was killed three years ago. The day after I got back, Lydia was killed. Then Gates, Talbert, Sanchez, now Peron. It might be I’m the only one who can find out what it is. I can at least talk with Tuckman.”

“And if that doesn’t work?”

“I don’t know.” He took a deep breath and leaned forward, enfolding both her hands in his. “I need a witness with Tuckman; I may get lucky. Either way, I want you out of it after that. Okay?”

She was quiet for several moments, caressing his hands lightly with the hand she had freed. “Let’s go see Tuckman. Then we’ll see.”

He shook his head slowly; further talk would be futile. He made a phone call before leaving.

* * *

A So-Cal truck met them in the alley. If the driver thought it unusual to pick up a cargo that consisted of a cowboy and his lady in a deserted alley, he gave no sign. He closed the cargo doors behind them and drove the few blocks to the warehouse. When the doors opened, they were inside. They stepped out onto a loading platform and walked up the stairway to Tuckman’s office. They were invisible to anyone watching outside.

Tuckman ushered them inside as if unaware of the Stetson and boots. “Ready to deal, right?” he asked, as they seated themselves.

“First, get rid of those two.” Brad nodded in the direction of the two bodyguards.

Both men bristled. Tuckman hesitated, then said, “Scram.” The door closed quietly behind them.

“A couple questions first. Do you know Jason Talbert or Roberto Sanchez?”

“No. I hear they’re dead; they worked for Overnite. So?” Tuckman seemed genuinely puzzled by the question.

“Sam Gates?”

“No.”

“Alfredo Peron?”

“What’s this all about?”

“Smuggling.”

“And you think I’m into that?” He leaned back in his chair, grinning. “You’re as crazy as those narcs.”

“Then you have seen them.”

“Yeah. Since you called, I been nosing around. They left tracks. But they’re wasting their time, same as you.” He leaned forward, elbows on the desk. “What the hell are ya dreaming?”

“I saw Sanchez unload a shipment of heroin last Thursday night at Overnite Air. Yesterday, in Puebla, Mexico, Peron told us Lydia was paying for the work, but that you were the man in charge.”

“Lydia smuggling heroin?” The wonder on his face faded slowly. “Possible.” He nodded. “But I’d like to talk to that lying little wet-back who gave ya my name. Where the hell’d he get it?”

“Where were you last night about seven?”

“Right here.”

“You can prove it?”

“Yeah. So?”

“Peron was killed about that time. You could have hired it. How about last Thursday, about eleven thirty?”

“I’m covered.”

Josie asked, “What kind of a car do you drive? What color is it?”

“A dark blue Caddy. Why?”

“Have you had an accident recently? Perhaps some damage to the right front fender?”

“It was torn up some Thursday night, but I wasn’t in it.”

“Who was?” Brad demanded.

“Some asshole stole it. Joy riding, the cops say. I got it back Friday. It’s still in the shop. So?”

“So somebody in a dark blue car tried to kill me Thursday night. We tangled some. I’ll bet the paint streaks on your car were beige.”

Tuckman was startled. “They were.” He looked back and forth between them. “This is crazy. You’re saying someone stole my car and tried to hit ya?”

“Or you loaned it to someone.”

Tuckman was silent for several moments. “Listen. I’m gonna say this only once. Then we make a deal or I throw you out.”

Brad nodded.

“I ain’t never messed with hard stuff. And there’s a real simple reason. No way can ya keep it up and not get busted. Then it’s long hard time. Heroin just ain’t my style. Ok, so far?”

Brad nodded again, unhappy because he felt certain Tuckman was telling it straight.

“Now, what ya got figured is the narcs are onto me, that maybe my driver they busted will tie me in. So I wipe out my organization. Did ya check me out for when Lydia was killed?”

“Yes,” Josie said. “You were here in your office.”

“So again ya figure I hired a shooter. No way. Suppose I wanted a guy dead. Ya know what I’d do?”

“I’m listening.” Brad had the distinct impression he was about to hear the truth.

“I’d do it myself.” He grinned, leaning out on the desk. “It’s the only way. Ya hire a shooter, then the shooter knows; it’s a loose end. Me, I don’t like loose ends. That’s why I’m offering ya thirty thou for something ya ain’t even got.

“And I sure wouldn’t use a gun.” He smiled, almost as if remembering. “I’d arrange an accident. Maybe the guy falls off a bridge or out a window. Maybe my eighteen-wheeler shoves his car wide on a turn. Hell. There’s lots of ways better than shooting.”

He was silent again. “What bothers me about all this crap, even more than my car, is what that bastard in Mexico said. With them

narcs around, that makes me nervous.” He took his glasses off and rubbed his nose.

Brad shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Josie gave him a quick glance. “Peron didn’t give your name. I was just fishing.”

“You sonofabitch! Why me?”

Exasperated, Brad rose and began pacing slowly. “I’m in a box with no place to go. When Peron said there was somebody else, yours was the last fit for a name,” he finished lamely.

“Shit! That don’t make it. I must’ve done something.”

“I am curious why you want Overnite Air, unless maybe to expand some kind of illegal operation.” Brad leaned on the back of his chair, watching Tuckman intently. “Why do you want an airline losing money?”

“I told ya before. That ain’t your business.”

“Humor me.”

Tuckman sighed, replaced his glasses and leaned back in his chair. “How come I don’t just toss your ass out of here?”

Brad shrugged.

“Ok.” Tuckman leaned forward once more. “In the last ten years, I ain’t got a dime for my twenty-five percent. I plan to get me a whole lot real soon. That airline could easy make big bucks; it could be the biggest thing on the west coast. All I gotta do is reschedule the whole operation and change some rates.”

“I don’t get it,” Brad said.

“It’s the same in a lot of businesses. Take trucking. Ya got the rigs, the drivers and maybe some warehouses, but nothing to haul today. So ya pick up a load that maybe’s only even money, or worse, just to keep the drivers happy and the trucks rolling. Pretty soon, ya look around and ya got no time to haul a money load; you’re all contracted out for break-even stuff. I seen guys go under.

“That’s what’s wrong with Overnite Air. They got a bunch of runs going out light or even empty. All I gotta do is make sure the schedule’s right, so the planes are loaded. Maybe I have to use some trucks to haul to a central site and shut down some smaller offices.”

Brad glanced at Josie. “Don’t look to me for financial evaluation,” she said. “I’m no expert, but he does make sense.”

“So where’s that leave me?” Brad said disgustedly, sitting back down.

Tuckman was all business now. “Thirty thousand dollars richer, maybe enough to pay Walden. Ya gotta take my deal.”

“I’ll go for fifty thou,” Brad said to Tuckman.

“That’s a bunch of crap! The most trouble ya could cause me would be maybe forty. Where’d you get that number?”

“It’s what I owe a friend.”

“You’ll take forty or forget it. And that’s ten more than I figured. I ain’t interested in your troubles.”

Brad rose, turning to Josie. She also stood and they started toward the door.

“Ok. Ok!” Tuckman surged to his feet and lumbered around the desk. “Ya’ll sign a total release?”

“Yeah, but I’ll need cash.”

“Where the hell am I gonna get cash?”

“Can you picture me in a bank with a check?”

“I see what ya mean. But it’ll take time.”

* * *

An hour later they watched the same truck and driver that had picked them up, drive off down the alley. The money was a comfortable bulge inside Brad’s shirt. In the car, he handed the fat envelope to Josie. “Get this to Amanda.” He unbuckled the money belt, counted out some bills and stuffed them in his pocket. He tossed the belt into her lap. “What’s there is yours. When it’s gone, I’ll find more.”

“That doesn’t leave you much, does it?” She looked at him with an expression he couldn’t read.

“Won’t need much. I’ll be free, dead or behind bars before I can spend what’s in my pocket.” He started the car and drove off.

As he approached a small shopping center, Josie said suddenly, “Pull in here.” He did. “Park over there,” she demanded, pointing. He watched her disappear into a K-Mart. When she came out, she had a box, paper and string. Then she was gone again, into the

post office. She clung to the semblance of a smile when she returned without the box; it was not reflected in her eyes. “I mailed it to Amanda. Now let’s get out of here.”

“Where to?”

“Let’s get something to eat. Then we’ll—”

“You’re out of it,” he interrupted firmly.

“Why?”

“Up to now, we’ve done what seemed reasonable.”

“What you’re planning is unreasonable?”

“I’ll do whatever needs doing,” he said grimly. “Don’t think you’ll much like it.”

“You’re probably right, but I’m staying.”

“There’s your license.”

She didn’t answer.

“You wouldn’t like jail.”

She still did not reply. Her gaze remained fixed on the sky over the Hollywood Hills. Slowly she turned to face him, placing her hand on top of his. “I want you to take me with you and run.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’m tired of waiting.”

“For what?”

“Freedom, maybe.”

“What are you talking about?”

“When I was a kid, I wanted to be grown up so I’d be free to do what I wanted. What I did and saw in Nam messed me up inside. I lost track of what freedom was.”

He took both her hands in his. He didn’t notice her efforts to hide the pain from his grip.

“When the Cong tossed me into that black hole in the ground, I finally began to understand. Don’t suppose I’ll ever know all of it. But freedom’s an idea, something to reach for.

“When Gerald was murdered, I ran to a freedom beyond a cell. But it was only a bigger cage, filled with things I couldn’t do or hope to have.

“Now I’m back. I’ve had a taste of freedom of a different sort. I like it. There’s people I can love, things I can do and dreams to dream. It’s bounded by death or worse. But I mean to have it.”

“Or you’ll die trying?” Josie shivered.

“Whatever, but I’m through running.”

“I’m coming with you,” she said with finality.

“I could leave you right here,” he said.

“Don’t do that.” Again he became lost in the blue of her eyes.

“Guess I’ll have to feed you then.” He released his grip, started the car and drove from the parking lot. He didn’t notice Josie rubbing her hands briskly to restore circulation.

* * *

In the early afternoon, the coffee shop was nearly empty. Brad and Josie took an isolated booth against the far wall. When the plates had been removed and fresh coffee served, Brad tried to remember what he’d just eaten. Had it tasted good?

“So,” Josie said, “we’re looking for the head of a heroin smuggling ring, someone who has decided to quit, at least for now. Someone who’s killed everyone involved.”

“What about Gerald?”

“Perhaps it’s the same person. Gerald may have found out what Lydia was doing and died because of it. It’s possible he wanted in on the operation.”

“Suppose you’re right? The question is, who is the killer? Rinolli comes to mind.”

“Possible. Let’s put him at the top of the list.”

“It’s a short list. Who else is on it?” he asked.

“It’s probably someone we don’t know about and wouldn’t suspect if we did. If Sgt. Walters is right, it’s a police officer.”

“Lt. Stratford? He’s on my case.”

“He’s a possibility, but only that.”

“There’s Walters.”

“Sarcasm isn’t going to get us far.”

“How about that narc, Feldersen?”

“Come on!”

“Yeah, you’re right. I just feel boxed.” He paused, then a slight tight smile settled on his lips. “If it was Rinolli, I could get real interested in going at him.”

“He wouldn’t close down because of you. He’d have had you killed.”

“Expect you’re right.”

“Lydia was your wife. Could there be anything there?”

He shrugged again.

“Look,” she began, enthusiastic now. “You were married to her. Maybe you know something you don’t recognize as significant.”

“Like what?”

“Something personal. Something she wouldn’t share with most. How did you meet her?”

“We were both pretty active supporting the war in Vietnam. My dad was always quick to salute the flag. Guess I took my direction from him. Anyway, I was really into it. Busy hating the guys skipping out to Canada and the long-haired types protesting. Lydia was around a lot. Looking back, I don’t know why. She didn’t seem to believe in much of anything.”

“How did you get involved? Sexually, I mean?”

“I don’t see how this can help.” He could feel his face flush.

“I’m not going to be bruised by something that happened four years ago. How did you connect with her?”

“She was beautiful. Probably the most beautiful girl I’d ever been close to. Fellas were always around, their tongues hanging out. One night, after a big ball game I’d won with an interception, we ended up in her apartment.” He paused, remembering and editing what was to come.

“It was a new experience for me. No fondness or gentleness. Just waves of exploding sensation. Over the next few months, she kept me busy.”

“Did you love her?”

“I thought so. I know now, she didn’t love me.”

“I wonder why she married you?”

“I haven’t a clue. But then I didn’t understand a lot of what she did. One Thursday afternoon, she picked me up from school and

told me we were going to Vegas; she wanted to get married. I guess I only went along for the ride.”

“But even married, she was involved with others?”

“Yeah,” he said softly.

“You mentioned finding her with a woman. How did you learn about the others?”

“I stumbled across her diary. If you like that sort of thing, it made good reading. Maybe that’s the real reason I enlisted.”

“Sounds like quite a girl.”

“She was the closest thing to total animal I’ve ever known. She did as she pleased and didn’t give a damn about consequences.”

“Did she name names? Mention particular events?”

“It was more a mental garbage bag. The only names were those she made up. She called me Squarehead. Guess I didn’t measure up.

“Real events were mixed with fantasy. The daydreams were ultra erotic, mostly pretty sick. In describing real events, she’d say how she felt and what was missing, the things she wished had happened. All of it was gross.”

“Was it all erotic?”

“I didn’t read much.” He was blushing again. “But there was a lot about power. Like she wanted to be queen of the world. She was fascinated with death and torture and such.”

“Do you think she was still keeping a diary when she was killed?”

He shrugged. “Seems like the cops would have found it. And if there’d been anything in it, Walters would have told me.”

“Where’d she keep it?”

“She had a hidey hole in the bottom of a closet in the hallway.”

“Why don’t we go take a look? Even if we don’t find a diary, we might turn up something. The police were conducting a murder investigation, and she was the victim. They weren’t looking for evidence of a smuggling operation.”

Brad didn’t reply. He seemed to be trying to decipher a coded message in the pattern in the formica tabletop.

“You’d rather take on Rinolli, wouldn’t you?”

“He can wait.” He looked steadily at the tabletop. “I’d rather not open a can of dead worms, is all.”

He rose slowly, adjusted the brown Stetson and walked with Josie to the cashier.

Brad drove. He stopped by a pay phone in the next block. “Best let Walters know what’s happened.”

She nodded and left the car. When she returned, he asked, “What’d he say?”

“ ‘Thanks’ and ‘Now get that man’s ass out of town.’ That’s a direct quote.”

* * *

Brad drove slowly past the homes which backed up to Lydia’s. Stopping in front of a large green house, fronted with massive shade trees, Brad left the car. If he remembered correctly, an older couple without children lived here and both worked. At the front door, he knocked several times. Satisfied no one was home, he made his way into the back yard as Josie drove off.

Lydia had added panels of fiberglass all around the top of the six-foot block wall. The massive swimming pool was an extension of her sexual playground. Examining the panels, he found the end of one that was loose. He knocked it free and scrambled over the wall. He carefully replaced the panel; it would hold for a time.

Four years ago, there had been a key near the pool cabana. He dug with a stick. The plastic container was there. Moments later, he snapped the police seal on the rear door and used the key. He walked quickly to the front door and opened it two inches to let Josie know he was inside.

He was still examining the door when she entered. The police seal had been broken, but not by him. As she closed it behind her, she said, “Someone was in here. As I pulled up, a heavysset man ran to a gray Buick. The driver took off like the proverbial bat. He must have seen you when you came over the back wall.”

“Why did he run?”

“He wouldn’t, if he had a right to be here.”

They moved swiftly through the house. There was no sign anyone had been looking for anything.

“Let’s get to it,” Josie said.

Brad walked to the linen closet in the hallway, hesitated, then opened the closet door. The shelves were unfinished cedar. The bottom shelf held only a pair of sheets and a blanket. He tucked his fingers into a small notch at the back of the shelf. When he tugged, the shelf slid forward exposing a three-inch gap between it and the concrete floor. He explored with his fingers, then withdrew them suddenly. He stood, wiping his hands roughly on his pants. “They’re there,” he said, not looking at her. He turned and left the hallway.

Minutes later Josie entered the living room, sat down on the couch and spread five journals out on the coffee table. She ordered them by date of first entry. She pulled a small notebook from her purse and began reading. She made occasional notations.

Brad could not watch; reading those diaries was a task he was glad to ignore. A room at a time, he searched the house. Every item was carefully examined. He removed each drawer and examined the drawer itself, then the cabinet, as he’d seen Josie do at the hotel. His methodical efforts did not include returning anything to its proper place.

Two hours later, he’d found nothing unexpected. Lydia had collected a wide variety of sexual toys he had not seen before, but he had seen no suggestion of smuggling. He’d found a stash of grass and another of coke, overlooked by the police, but only usable amounts, nothing saleable. The Polaroid shots of groups of people entwined in sexual embrace demonstrated she had been interested in quantity and a variety of activities. He suspected some of the video tapes by the recorder and camera might also be records of sexual activity. He did not test this theory.

When he came up on the gun rack, he stopped. His glance was locked on the dark brown stain that contrasted sharply with the ermine white carpet. He knew it had been bright red, as blood had flowed from Lydia’s body. The whole of it grabbed tightly, and refused to let him think of anything beyond bright red turning dark brown on a white background.

Finally, he shook his head and looked up at the gun rack. He reached out and opened the ornate hand-carved doors. The weapons were expensive. Two hand-engraved shotguns were the most impressive pieces. A variety of handguns were prominently displayed. The scoped 30-06 was a notable piece. None were what most women would choose.

As he closed the cabinet, he looked at Josie in the living room. She was writing in her notebook. Remembering a bottle of bourbon he'd found, he walked over to her, laid the Polaroid shots on the coffee table, then turned toward the kitchen.

She was a gun freak, all right, he thought. He sat down at the kitchen table with a light drink, remembering how often she'd fired at a bush or tin can in the back yard. He also remembered the neighbor's reluctant resignation; they'd heard it before and calls to the police had proved futile. He wondered, idly, as he sipped his drink, what had happened to her nickel-plated, pearl-handled .38 revolver. When he'd known her, it was her favorite.

Abruptly he stood and moved back to the gun rack, trying to ignore the dark brown stain on the carpet. The back of the cabinet was lined with velvet. Behind one empty slot, there was a slight impression. He reached for the .32 and moved it to the empty slot. It fit the impression well. He examined the velvet behind where the .32 had been. There was a fainter, larger impression, unnoticed at first glance. Thoughtfully he returned to the kitchen. Lydia's nickel-plated .38 had been hanging in that gun rack until recently.

He was still thinking of the missing pistol when Josie joined him. Even in the growing dusk, the harsh lines of her face were clear. There was an undefinable expression in her eyes, bright and hard. As she sat down across from him, her tightly drawn lips stretched even further. She grabbed a glass and poured a hefty dose of bourbon.

"As you said, she wasn't a very nice woman. To put it kindly, she should have been put away." She handed him one of the diaries and pointed. "As near as I can determine, she wrote this about three years ago."

Brad willed himself to look where she had pointed. He read aloud, "When he came to the car window, I reached beyond his

hands, grabbing his wrists.” Brad looked up at Josie, pleading. She was looking at the pool in the backyard; she would not meet his glance.

He bent his head and continued reading silently. He had trouble identifying even simple words. “It seemed like years passed before Luie fired three times. I was filled with the feel of it, the greatest high ever. The shots sounded like one continuous rolling crash of thunder. Blood exploded all over the blue silk shirt I’d bought him for his birthday.”

Brad could not continue. He remembered the blue shirt. It had been one of Gerald’s favorites. He’d been wearing it when Brad had taken the .45 from him in the bar the night he was killed. He felt cold, even as sweat beaded on his forehead. He also looked out at the pool, not wanting to look at Josie. “Her own brother?”

“It would seem so.” Josie shivered slightly. Her voice was cold, her face pale, older somehow, in the growing darkness. “She had quite an imagination. Sometimes it’s difficult to know whether she’s describing something in her mind or something that really happened. But that section is a description of a real event. Gerald was shot three times in the chest, just as she describes.” She paused, taking a deep breath. “Do you have any idea who Luie might be?”

“No.”

“The name comes up throughout the diaries. It’s the only name repeated over the years.”

Brad was silent, watching the breeze ripple the surface of the pool, reflecting unseen lights.

“She refers to shooting at Tuckman, much as he described it to you. Of course, she has more to say. She seemed to regret not having shot him. Luie was mentioned as if she thought he might help in some way, but it wasn’t clear how.”

After a time, she continued, “Almost every idea, action or fantasy she describes has a sexual connotation, even if it’s not a specific sexual experience. But there is another theme, I think. It would take a psychologist to say for certain. She seemed preoccupied with killing. It may well be that even beyond participating in Gerald’s murder, she had actually killed. If not, she’d have gotten around to

it. Soon, I think.” Again she paused, breathing slowly. “I feel I’m in the presence of evil.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Brad said, suddenly standing.

Josie followed him to the rear of the house. He stopped, once outside, breathing deeply. Even the smog tasted good. The door closed and latched behind him. He tossed the key into the rosemary bush beside the house and turned to look at her. She held his glance, then nodded. Their pace was less hurried outside in the dusky night. As they stepped past the front of the house into the open carport, he saw movement in the shadows near the street and knew he’d made a mistake, the kind that kills. He’d forgotten the gray Buick.

“Get back!” he cried, diving to the walk behind the heavy junipers beside him, desperately hoping to draw fire away from her. As he dove, he saw her move, not back, but down as she pawed for the .357 in her purse. Shot rattled the branches above him, grim accompaniment to the slamming echoes of the shotgun blast. Flat on his stomach, he used his hands and arms on the bushes before him to pull himself forward as fading echoes of the explosion were overlaid by the slide of the shotgun driving another round home. His head and his shoulders were beyond the junipers as the second blast slammed echoes into the carport and heavy shot into the junipers just over his back. A few pellets glanced off branches hitting the backs of his legs.

It hadn’t been a plan, really. He’d only hoped to give Josie a chance to escape to the rear of the house. But she had stayed; he couldn’t run now. He rolled free of the junipers onto grass and scrambled on elbows and knees toward the street. A slight mound of earth, part of the landscaping, partially protected him from the shotgun, but not the sound of another round going home.

Josie fired twice; he heard the shotgun clatter to the concrete walk. He clawed at his pant leg with his left hand and pulled the knife free with his right. Another pistol fired. It wasn’t Josie. He heard her cry out. It was futile, but he lunged up, the knife behind his ear. He began his throw as his head cleared the junipers. The tall figure before him still had his gun on Josie as he turned toward

Brad. The man who'd used the shotgun lay still, midway between Brad and his target.

It was too much to ask. It was a long throw without time to properly judge the rotation of the knife. Hoping only for distraction, he drove his arm forward and let the knife tumble slowly in the twilight. He dove over the tops of the junipers, landed heavily on his shoulders, then rolled. He grabbed the shotgun and rolled once again toward the street, bringing the weapon up.

It was wasted effort. Georgio Lampino had dropped his pistol and was pulling gently on the knife buried to the hilt below his breastbone. He finally managed to free it; he let it clatter to the sidewalk. He hugged both hands to his chest for a moment, then held them out in front of him. Blood coursed down the vest of his three-piece suit and dripped off both hands. There was no pain in his face, only a puzzled, quizzical expression as he examined his hands. Suddenly his knees buckled; he fell face first to the concrete.

Not knowing how many had been waiting for them, Brad held his position listening intently to the quiet night. He could hear only Josie's ragged breathing. In a low crouch, he moved to the man who'd had the shotgun. He was dead. One round had hit him in the chest and his left eye was gone, fluids and blood had mixed on the cold pavement under his cheek.

Concentrating on the night sounds, he moved quickly to Josie. She was unconscious. There was too much blood. The round had caught her in the shoulder as she lay nearly flat upon the drive. Gently he explored for an exit wound. There was none. The bullet had tumbled downward inside her body.

Shotgun ready, he ran for his knife, wiped it hastily clean on Georgio's tailored coat, then ran back to Josie. He laid the shotgun down and gently cut away the part of her dress he could get at without moving her. The knife flashed in the light as if a living thing. He cut strips of cloth, then made a small pillow of the rest of the dress he'd cut and used it as a compress on the top of her shoulder. Gently, moving only her arm, he wrapped it tightly in place with the strips of cloth he'd cut.

It wasn't much of a sound, but he heard it, a shoe sole brushing the concrete sidewalk to the right of the junipers near the street. Silently he picked up the shotgun and moved toward the street, cuddling against the prickly branches. Four feet from the sidewalk, he waited. If it was one of Rinolli's soldiers, he wasn't much good; there was too much quiet sound. When the head peered cautiously around the bush, he moved the shotgun forward slightly. The eyes grew impossibly large.

"Show yourself now," Brad snapped. With only a slight hesitation, the man moved into view, a pistol held loosely in his right hand, his left dangling aimlessly. He was a tall, gangly man with a balding head and a thin, scraggly beard. Perhaps he'd been up to such games once, but now he only stood quietly shaking, the essence of fear.

"Neighbor?" Brad asked.

His mouth moved to reply, but no sound came. He tried to swallow and settled for a slight nod. His glance jumped back and forth between the two bodies and the pooling blood under each.

"You call the police?"

He nodded again, still looking beyond Brad.

"An ambulance?"

He shook his head, his eyes now on Brad.

"Do it. And get some blankets for the lady back there." He nodded behind him. The man had not looked in that direction. Again he tried to swallow. "Now," Brad snapped, shoving the shotgun closer.

The man fled in a gangly skittish gait, the pistol in his hand forgotten. Brad turned quickly back to Josie. He heard the door slam next door as he bent to examine the bandage on her shoulder. Gently he felt beneath her. There was no fresh blood, but that was the only good news. Her ragged breathing had slowed and softened and his hand on her neck felt little pulse.

At the sound of distant sirens, he scooped up her .357. He heard the door open next door, as he tucked the pistol inside his waistband. Maybe he'd do after all, he thought. Certainly it took courage to come back outside the safety of his house, to come near

known death again. He heard him speak for the first time from the other side of the junipers. “It’s me. I got blankets.”

“Toss ’em over,” Brad replied. He caught them in the air and turned back to Josie as the man scurried back inside. The sirens were closer. He gently tucked both blankets around her. He took his coat off and lifted her head slightly to slip a few layers of cloth between her pale cheek and the cold concrete. He sat back on his heels and studied her face. The sirens were near now. “Gotta go,” he said to her softly. He leaned down and gently kissed her cheek.

He grabbed the diaries and ran toward her car. The engine roared to life as two squad cars turned onto the street behind him. He pulled away slowly hoping not to draw attention, but only one car stopped. The other, lights flashing, gained quickly on the Trans Am. At the corner, he turned left and slammed the accelerator to the floor. He ran the red light at Balboa, leaving behind a host of angry frustrated drivers sliding in disarray into the intersection and each other.

It slowed the squad car, but only for a moment. The speedometer needle bounced off redline as he eased his way through the scattered traffic. Now and then he drifted to the left of the double line in order to hold speed. The squad car did the same. This was his country. There was only one light between him and Foothill Boulevard. If he couldn’t outrun them, he’d outdrive them on the turns. At least that was his plan. If he wasn’t pulling ahead, they weren’t gaining. He knew the real danger was in the power of their radio. All he needed was five or six minutes. Could other cars join in so quickly? Was there a police chopper nearby? He couldn’t know.

The light was red, half a mile ahead. Only one car waited at the intersection. He saw a car turning left toward him from the side street and tried to decide when or if to brake. His luck held; the light turned green while he was still a hundred yards from it. As he flashed through the intersection, he could see the cruiser was gaining on him. At the crest of the hill, he eased off the gas a bit. He knew the cruiser must do the same or lose control. It was downhill here, through an S-curve that tightened at the bottom of the grade. He felt the car drift out of its track, coming out of the last curve.

He slammed the pedal to the floor, felt the car straighten, then steadily accelerate.

At the crest of the next hill, he could see the bridge across the Golden State Freeway. Balboa ended at the far side of the bridge at Foothill Boulevard. It was this hard right turn he had to make. He tested the brakes, gently slowing the car as it rushed onto the bridge. He locked the wheels and the back end began drifting to the left. Fifty feet short of the turn, he slammed the pedal to the floor. For an instant, he thought he'd lost it, but there was just enough left in the heavy-duty shocks. His left rear tire drifted briefly onto the shoulder before the powerful car straightened out and charged down the highway.

In his rearview mirror, he watched the squad car on the bridge, slowing. He held his breath, watching the road ahead and the mirror. He saw them drift into a racing turn as he had done, but the back of the squad car didn't come far enough around. They slammed at an angle into the wooden barrier on the other side of the highway. He saw tires smoking, as the driver tried to back the car. His view was cut off when his car drifted through the curve under the Foothill Freeway.

With a long mile lead, he was clear unless blocked ahead. But he only needed a few moments more. There were side streets intersecting now. Even if the squad car was coming on, they'd never see his turn. He rolled down the window, hoping not to hear the sound of a police chopper. The roaring wind was all he heard as he angled slightly right off Foothill onto Glenoaks. Only then did he begin slowing. At Roxford, he made a respectable turn back south toward the valley, holding his speed to forty-five, ten miles an hour above the stated speed limit, an offense that would go unnoticed in southern California. Three minutes later, he was on the Golden State Freeway in heavy traffic, headed south. Ten minutes later, he was off the freeway in a phone booth. He tried Hank without luck. Amanda answered on the first ring. "Amanda Pothmore."

"Remember where Lydia's place is?"

"I do."

“Josie was shot there. I don’t know where she might have been taken. Can you find out and get over there?”

“Is she badly hurt?”

“Yes.” There was a long silence; he could hear her deep even breathing. “Can you hunt up a good surgeon?”

“I’ll take care of it.” Her voice was low; it sounded far away.

“And stay in touch with Walters. Okay?”

I will. You take care, do you hear?”

“I’ll try.”

Gently he replaced the receiver to its cradle and ran for the car. Five minutes later he was at Hank Walters’ apartment. It took him another ten minutes to be certain no one was watching for him.

Inside he went quickly to the bathroom, snapped on the light and looked at himself in the mirror. It was really not as bad as it looked. Cuts and scratches mostly, with a good deal of missing hide on his right elbow. He quickly showered, shaved, touched up the major visible marks and put on clean clothes. He borrowed Hank’s shaggy brown corduroy jacket.

He found the cartridges where Hank said they’d be. He took all six-speed loaders, dumped Josie’s .357 and reloaded with Hank’s ammo. He stuffed the pistol and ammunition, along with an extra box of cartridges, into his coat pocket. He laid Lydia’s diaries on the kitchen counter next to Hank’s liquor supply. Then he left, closing the door softly behind him.

The stores would be open in Van Nuys. He could buy what he needed. He knew he had to get to The Pink Lady as soon as possible; it was the best place to look for Mike Rinolli. He tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

* * *

Clothes don’t make the man, but Brad’s new suit and a fifty-dollar bill got him the seat he wanted inside The Pink Lady, a small table near the entry that led to Mike Rinolli’s office. The .357 magnum was uncomfortable, tucked in his waistband, but it was reassuring to have it near. When the waiter brought his drink, he laid the

menu aside and ordered another. He studied the diners around him. The restaurant was nearly full. No one seemed to notice him; at the prices they were paying, the guests were working very hard to have a good time. Hovering waiters made it easy to order the unneeded drink or elaborate dessert.

He shifted his chair a bit to the left for a better view of those coming and going through the lobby. He desperately needed a better plan than wandering back and knocking on Rinolli's door. But he was no nearer a decent idea now than his racing thoughts had provided while getting here. When the waiter deposited his second drink, he waved him away; what he wanted to order wasn't on the menu. As casually as possible, he watched the lobby; he saw guests enter and leave, Hollywood playtime smiles firmly in place.

Without warning, he felt a sudden tightening in his chest; it was difficult to breathe. All thought vanished, wiped aside by a clear picture of the way she'd looked, the blood oozing from her shoulder and the paleness of her cheek. He remembered the coldness of her when he'd kissed her.

Slowly he forced it aside. He wiped dampness from his eyes; there was no time for Josie now. As he rubbed his face in his hands, he remembered the hard wooden chair in which he'd waited for Georgio the last time he'd been here. He tried once again to remember everything Georgio had done as he was taken to Rinolli. He looked up suddenly. He waved off the waiter who started in his direction. What was it? It was almost there, tugging at the edge of memory.

Rinolli was into electronic gadgets. He remembered the metal detector and the electronic bolt on his door. But he'd seen no indication Rinolli had a view of the hall beyond the closed door.

How had he known it was Georgio who had knocked? Was there something special about the knock? A code maybe? Or was it only that Georgio was expected? He tried to remember the knock. Ta-dah, ta-dah-dah, almost like Morse code. Could it be that simple? Impatience goaded him. Even if Rinolli was here, it was doubtful he'd catch even a glimpse of him from this chair.

He waited until several groups entered almost on each other's heels. He waved to the hovering waiter and asked where the restrooms

were. With a nod of thanks, he strode purposely out of the room, holding his shoulders forward so the drape of his coat would hide the pistol. There was no one in the lobby; the staff was busy escorting new guests. He strode boldly to the door to the offices, opened it and stepped inside, closing the door behind him. He moved to the wall, drew the short-barreled magnum and waited, the pistol tucked under his left armpit.

He was completely exposed; anyone moving into the hallway would see him. He'd be as safe knocking on Rinolli's door as anywhere else. He tucked the pistol behind his belt, kept his hand on the butt and walked quickly down the hall and up the steps. Ta-dah, ta-dah-dah.

The bolt opened and the door began to swing open. His mouth went suddenly dry. He wiped his palms on his pants, pulled the pistol with his right hand and stepped through the door.

"You better have a good . . ." Mike Rinolli, standing behind his desk, stopped abruptly at the sight of Brad, his eyes locking with his, disdaining to glance at the weapon. If he heard the hammer cocked, he gave no indication. Brad closed the door behind him. "Lock it."

With casual indifference, Rinolli touched the bottom of the desktop and the bolt slammed home. "You surprise me, Mr. Ashton. Really you do."

"You thought I was dead?"

"You are, actually. But no, what surprises me is that you came here."

"The girl. She's dead." He hoped it was a lie, but he knew full well it could be true.

"Ah. I see. Revenge is sweeter than the grape. Something like that?"

"Yeah." He was puzzled, but tried to keep it from his eyes. If he was dead, so was Rinolli. Why wasn't the man worried?

Either Rinolli read minds or Brad's poker face had slipped, for Rinolli asked, "And you wonder how I can be so calm about all this?"

Brad nodded, without much enthusiasm. He felt rather like a lion hunter facing a much larger lion than expected, a hunter who'd forgotten his gun.

"Let me explain. When one chooses my line of work, death is not an unexpected outcome. One lives with the presence of it. But believe me, you won't kill me."

"Got a reason?"

"By now, your mind is working. You're trying to find a safe way out of this predicament. I suspect you'll try to make me hostage to your effort. A gun barrel in the ear. That sort of thing."

"And that won't work?"

"Absolutely not. I have my orders; my people have theirs. We're all part of a team. They'll try to take you and save me. But if all else fails, we'll both die." His shrug was elegant. If he was bluffing, it was the best Brad had seen. "They never fail," he added.

"And I've no options?"

"One, perhaps."

"And that is?"

"Leave without me. Leave now. I'll hold my people."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Yes, when you've thought it through. The Pink Lady is almost my home. Who wants blood in his living room? Or in his front yard? There would be far too many questions."

Brad was silent, studying the man's face. Everything he'd said might be a lie, but there was no hint of it. Slowly he moved away from the door. He was cheered by the wariness that flowed into the eyes before him. He stopped only when blocked by the desk, the pistol steady, pointed three inches to the left of the second button of the tailored pale gray vest. "Why do you want me killed?" he asked.

Rinolli scowled. Brad held his hard look, unmoving, unblinking. Rinolli broke it off, glanced down at his desk and back at Brad. The intensity of his inspection had been replaced with cold anger. Gently he rapped his knuckles on his forehead. "You really don't know, do you?"

"No."

“Me! I’m supposed to be the smart one, the guy on the way up. That goddamned smart-ass lieutenant.” He pointed a fist gently against the desk.

Brad’s pulse jumped and a new fine sweat erupted from every pore of his body. Luie in Lydia’s diary! “Stratford?” he asked softly.

“How did you know?” His look was fierce, the polish of civilization wiped away. “Tell me,” he demanded.

“Just a guess.”

“A guess? Don’t insult my intelligence.”

“Here’s another. He’s been supplying you with heroin, hasn’t he? With the help of my ex-wife and her airline. He told you something, didn’t he? Something that set you after me. What was it?”

It was the quietest, most deadly rage Brad had ever seen. Mike Rinolli wanted to tear and rip the guts of another human being. Brad tightened his grip on the pistol, his thoughts racing. What card could he play? How could he turn this fine rage to advantage?

“Try this, Mr. Man-On-The-Way-Up.” He paused; he could almost see steam rising off the man before him. “Stratford decided to close down for a reason I don’t know. Maybe he just figured he’d had enough. He killed Lydia and anybody else that could hurt him, then set you on me. It didn’t matter which of us went down, he’d have one less problem to handle. Nice, don’t you think?”

“On the outside chance you get lucky and something happens to me,” he snarled, his face a mottled ugly red, “that fucker uses the name of William Mitchell on a safe box at the Wells Fargo Bank downtown.” He moved abruptly, sat down and almost died. It was so very close, Brad’s hand shook. Rinolli never noticed. “Now get your ass out of here. I got business.”

“And the girl?” Brad asked softly.

“If that fucker hadn’t told me you saw something you shouldn’t have seen, she’d be alive. Go lay it on his ass, not mine.”

“Expect I’ll do that. First, I want out of this.”

“So go.” He reached for the button on the desk that opened the door bolt. Brad shifted the gun slightly and fired. The bullet ripped a gash in Rinolli’s right cheek. With more self-control than

Brad believed possible, Rinolli rose slowly, ignoring the blood dripping on his vest.

“So that’s how it is.”

“Yeah. We’ll go out together.”

“I told you how that would end.”

“We’ll give it a try.”

Slowly Rinolli reached again for the button on his desk. The recocking of the pistol stopped him. Brad shook his head slowly. “Use the back exit.”

Again the elegant shrug, as he reached to the other side of his desk and pushed a different button. Slowly, in ghostly silence, a full panel at the end of the wall behind the desk swung open. The hall beyond it was unlit.

Rinolli dropped to the floor behind the desk as two men with Uzi submachine guns charged, firing. Brad fired once, as he dove for the floor. He was rewarded by a heavy grunt and a prolonged burst ending with a body crashing to the floor. He rolled, took aim and blew out the fluorescent light fixture. In total darkness, he felt better.

These were city types, unused to moonless jungle where every sound was potentially fatal. He rolled without sound toward the front door, putting as much distance between himself and the desk as possible. He could hear Rinolli fumbling in a desk drawer, looking for a weapon. Although incredibly faint, he could hear the cautious steps of the other gunman, moving for an angle to the front of the desk.

Again a machine gun roared. On the first round, Brad fired twice from the floor near the door, then watched rounds drift toward the ceiling as the gunman crumpled backward at an impossible angle. In the deafening silence that followed, he jettisoned the empty casings and slammed home a full load with a speed loader. He dropped the empty casings into his coat pocket. Was Rinolli waiting for him to try for the open doorway? Was he waiting for reinforcements? More importantly, where was he?

As last he heard what he so desperately needed, the faintest sound of a body moving on carpet. Rinolli, full length on the floor,

was moving slowly out from behind the desk to the left. Brad, lying facing the sound, estimated his head had cleared the desk by now. Then he heard what he didn't need, the thundering pounding of heavy feet in the unlit hall beyond the open door.

He fired six fast rounds nine inches apart, four inches off the carpet. Two missed, four chunked solidly into flesh; Rinolli gasped, then was silent. Brad jumped to his feet, ejected the empties, slipped them in his coat pocket and slammed home another load as he dove over the top of the desk. He found several buttons and pushed them all.

The bolt opened in the front door. With the feet pounding closer, it was his best chance. He could only hope all of Rinolli's soldiers had rushed to the back when the rear door had opened. He dashed through the front door, his new shoes slipping on the highly waxed floor. Then he was in the lobby, out the main entrance and into the open, leaving several guests in shock and one kindly looking gentleman on his rump.

He paid particular heed to the parking lot attendants, but no one hindered his wild dash through the lot. He glanced over his shoulder. Three men were coming out of the entry, but he had fifty yards on them. He dove for the car; it started immediately. By the time his three pursuers reached the street, his taillights were two hundred yards away. The three men disappeared from his view when he took a skidding turn to the left.

* * *

It had been an unnecessary risk, one easily avoided. But Brad hadn't felt like ducking anything. He'd driven thirty miles past an unknown number of police vehicles to sit on the sand near the remains of the storm-battered Santa Monica pier.

The Pacific tide was incoming. The waves were breaking heavily, but farther out. Moderated by distance and broken pilings, they were much smaller on their final break, drifting up the beach, slowing as they approached where he sat before slipping back gently under the next invasion. Arms about his legs, chin between his knees, he

hardly noticed. An uncommon dampness clouded his vision. All he could see was the pale cheek that had been laid down hard on the cold concrete walk.

He had stopped twice to call Hank Walters, but hadn't connected until he'd gotten to the beach, using the pay phone back by the car. As before, there had been no names. Three minutes later, Hank had called him back. "How is she?" Brad had asked, aware of the dryness in his throat, nose and mouth.

"Amanda's with her."

"So answer the damn question."

"She's critical. That's all I got."

"What the hell's 'critical' mean? Does that hospital know what they're doing? Are there any doctors there who know their ass from a hole?"

"Amanda rounded up a doc she thinks is good. What can I tell you? They say she's critical."

"What the shit does that mean?"

Brad became more demanding, Hank more patient. Finally Hank said softly, "It means she may not make it, Brad. You know that as well as I do."

The tears coursing fiercely down his weathered cheeks were incompatible with the distant look in his eyes and the hard set of his chin. "Give me a minute," he said hoarsely, laying the receiver down. He walked the few steps across the broad sidewalk, tucked his hands in his pockets and watched the pounding surf, letting the roar of it overpower him. It was later when he rubbed his eyes slowly and noticed the dampness on the front of his new suit. He turned determinedly back to the phone. "Still there?"

"Yeah."

"Don't know how much of this you want officially, but here's a rundown." Bluntly, with a terse economy of words, he told Hank all that had happened.

When Brad finished, Hank said simply, "So now you want Stratford?"

"Bet your sweet ass. Here's what we'll do."

"What we'll do?"

“Yeah. You and me, buddy. Just you and me.” He continued talking earnestly for nearly five minutes, overpowering every objection raised with argument or outright demand.

Finally, Hank said, “You sure about this?”

“I’m sure.”

“Ok.” He sighed. “I’ll go along, but I’ll lay nine to one we come up empty.”

“Be home later?”

“With all the action you laid on me?”

“Will you be home later?”

“Yeah. Probably not before two or three, the way things are going. Before I hit the pad, I’ll check with Amanda at the hospital. Ok?”

“Thanks,” Brad said. Then he hung up the phone, turned back toward the beach and walked slowly down the broad steps to the sand.

When he sat down, the strongest waves were dying twenty feet away. Now most lapped the tops of his shoes. Surprised, he realized his butt was wet and had been for some time. Slowly he stood, watching the waves roll over the tops of his shoes. He turned and walked along the water.

He could ignore it no longer; it was time to get out of sight. A passing cruiser might notice the car and run the plates. He couldn’t afford that; he had no right to take any more risks tonight. He had to be ready for the morning. Determinedly he trudged through the heavy dry sand, back up the steps and over to the car. His shoulders slumped in uncharacteristic fashion.

He took the back roads. Old Supulveda Boulevard had been left to local traffic by the surging San Diego Freeway that now dominated the pass into the valley. But the old road suited him fine this night. Once in the valley, he tried Hank’s number, but got no answer.

He located the motel where he and Josie had stayed the night they’d got back from Mexico. When was it? A month ago? Two? When he refused the offered key and asked for room 17, the tired clerk started his trite routine with, “Hey, mister—” He stopped

abruptly at the set to Brad's face and what little was revealed in his eyes. He turned quickly back to the board and grabbed the key to room 17, laying it gently on the counter.

Outside, he called Hank again. "Yeah."

"So?"

Hank's sigh was deep. "She's critical, Brad. They still haven't got the slug out. They'll try again in the morning. That's all I got."

"Thanks," was all he could manage before hanging up. In his room, their room actually, he opened the blinds and drapes. The morning sun would be his wakeup call. He dropped his coat on the floor, kicked off his shoes and lay down on the bed. When it came, it was a dreamy, fitful sleep that amounted to almost none at all.

CHAPTER 14 WEDNESDAY

Brad dialed police headquarters. “Lt. Stratford?” he asked politely.

“Hold on.”

“Lt. Stratford.”

“There must have been some mistake,” Brad said. “I asked for William Mitchell.”

He could hear deep breathing on the other end of the line. It was Stratford who broke the silence. “Why are you calling?”

“Returning a favor.”

“What’s that mean?”

“You once called and warned me when Lydia was killed. Course you didn’t leave a name.”

The quiet chuckle lacked humor. “This isn’t the same thing. You can’t tie me into your troubles.”

“That’s true. Still, things need to be evened out some way. I got Rinolli last night. You’re next.

“I picked up a 30-06 this morning with a real nice scope. Better than anything I had in Nam. I can drop you from five, even six hundred yards.” Stratford said nothing, but the rate of his breathing had increased noticeably.

“Maybe it’s better this way. Better than proof, I mean. Least I’ll see you go down. And with a six-hundred-yard headstart, I’ll be long gone, I’ll drop off the face of the earth.” He hung up the phone and returned to his table at the window of the coffee shop.

He had a good view of the entrance to the Wells Fargo Bank across the street. He reviewed his brief call, wondering if he’d said enough. Or maybe too much. Waiting was all that could be done for now.

* * *

As Lt. Stratford left the bank, Brad stepped up beside him. “Lied some. It’s a .357 magnum.”

Stratford turned slowly, his face a mask of fury.

“Die here or walk and live awhile.” Brad’s voice was pitched low, the tone mild. There was no expression in his eyes. He was relaxed, weight forward, his left arm loose at his side. His right hand was tucked casually in the pocket of Hank’s corduroy coat. Neither man paid any attention to the hustling pedestrian traffic flowing past them.

Reluctantly Stratford turned and began walking. He gripped his briefcase tightly. Brad walked a step behind.

“That alley,” Brad said, moving closer to Stratford as the man turned. A hundred feet into the alley, Brad said, “Here’s good. Easy like, take your weapon out and drop it into the trash bin.”

Stratford didn’t move. Brad eased the .357 out of the pocket and let his finger tighten on the trigger. There was no one in sight. Farther down the alley, cartons were stacked high against a building. An occasional large trash bin and assorted smaller containers bordered the vacant alley. At the far end, two cars were illegally parked. There was no one to be seen. The only sounds were traffic noise drifting in from the street.

Once committed, Stratford did it right. He reached slowly under his coat and, with two fingers on the end of the butt, lifted his snub-nosed .44 revolver out of his holster. He raised it slowly over the edge of the bin and dropped it; sunlight flickered off the ruby stone of his ring.

“Now the briefcase.”

Stratford turned slowly, his face mottled with total rage. For an instant, Brad tensed; he wasn’t going to do it. Without taking his eyes from Brad’s face, Stratford slowly lifted the briefcase and let it fall into the trash bin.

“Let’s start with why you killed Lydia.” A car turned into the alley behind Brad. He ticked the .357 under his left armpit. When the car had passed, he said, “Well?”

“What’s to start?” The sunlight reflected off Stratford’s balding head. His pale eyes in shadow were nearly colorless, but rage and hate were there. “Some whacko doesn’t like the way I do my job and tries to kill me. This guy is so out of it he doesn’t remember

killing his ex-wife. He even thinks I did it. What a laugh. Why would I kill her?”

“You really think I killed Lydia?”

“Lt. Broadmore has a witness. Have you really lost it?”

Brad leaned forward, listening with total attention. Stratford believed what he was saying. “You’re wrong,” Brad said. “I didn’t kill her.” He straightened, watching Stratford intently. “If I didn’t, what would that mean to you?”

Stratford’s expression didn’t change, but Brad was sure he’d scored a hit. The man had never looked beyond him as the killer.

“It might mean I’ve done a lot of unnecessary work.”

“Like killing some people and shutting down your smuggling operation?”

“Nothing like that.”

This was looking more like a bad idea every minute. Brad desperately wanted straight answers he wasn’t getting. What he needed was a nice quiet place in the hills where no one could hear the screams. “Did you know Lydia kept a diary?”

“Why would that interest me?”

“Your name comes up often.”

“Oh?”

“For example, she talks about the thrill of holding her brother by the wrists while you shot him in the back with a .45.” He thought Stratford’s face paled slightly, but he couldn’t be sure.

“That bitch,” Stratford said, then laughed. “Why would she write something like that? She must have been hallucinating.”

“You’re a bright guy. Look what you’ve managed. You and Lydia ran a smuggling operation for four years I know about, without the feds or your own people even picking up a clue. Now you’ve wiped out the operation; you’re clear. But you’ve been dumb about me.”

“How’s that?”

“I’m real close to a pine box paid for by the county. If you can’t help me out, somebody’s going to find your bullet-ripped carcass right about where you’re standing.”

“I may have misjudged you.”

Brad could feel it; the man was going to make a move any moment. “Believe it.”

“There’s nothing I know that would help in the case of Lydia’s death.”

“Which means there is in Gerald’s?”

“Perhaps.”

“You’re beginning to bore me, Lieutenant.”

“The briefcase?”

“I don’t need it.”

“If the barrel on that .45 you took from him was switched, it could explain why it now matches the murder weapon. You might find a key to ballistics in my apartment.”

Brad heard the truck rumble into the alley behind him. He moved to his left to give all the room needed. It wasn’t much of a slip, but for an instant his left foot was sliding in alley debris. He was off balance. The roaring truck engine was beside them now.

Helplessly he watched the solid flat-footed kick catch him hard in the chest, numbing his right arm. The .357 tumbled to the pavement; he staggered backward for balance. He ducked a kick that was meant to sever his head from his body. As he dove for the pistol with his left hand, Stratford backed off, looking hard at the trash bin. Brad managed only to touch the butt of the pistol; it was enough.

Stratford bolted toward the alley entrance and was gone. Out of the corner of his eye, Brad saw one of the parked cars at the far end of the alley surge toward him. It was Hank.

He pushed off the ground and the wall behind him. Feeling was returning to his right arm. He scooped up the fallen pistol and ran to the alley entrance. He turned left, colliding solidly with a hard-faced angular young man. He jumped clear and climbed a fire hydrant, holding onto a bus stop sign for support.

Anxiously he scanned the street. There were at least a hundred people in sight; none of them running and Lt. Stratford was not among them. Disgustedly, he climbed back down. The angular man he’d knocked down, grabbed him by the shoulder and whirled him around. Whatever he had planned to say or do was left undone; his eyes held steady on the pistol clutched in Brad’s fist.

“Sorry, buddy. My fault,” Brad said politely, tucking the .357 behind his waistband. Ignoring the gaping mouths of onlookers, he strode quickly back into the alley.

Hank, his feet scrambling in air, was rummaging around in the trash bin. With a final surge, he eased back out with Stratford’s .44 in one hand and a powerful pickup transmitter in the other. When he saw Brad, he grinned and tossed the pistol and transmitter into the back seat of the car alongside the briefcase and an expensive-looking portable tape recorder. “You blew that, didn’t you?”

“Can we get out of here?” Brad growled.

“Sure,” replied Hank, still grinning. He moved quickly to the other side of the car and got behind the wheel. Brad got in, dragging the briefcase to his lap from the back seat. As Hank started the car, he snapped the case open and lifted the lid. Both men were stunned. “Oh, sweet Lord Jesus,” Hank murmured with a sigh.

They’d expected money, but not this. Brad thumbed a couple of stacks of hundreds as he estimated the number of stacks. “There’s near two-hundred thou in cash here,” Brad said softly. “And look at this stack of cashier’s checks!” With reverence, he latched the briefcase and set it gently on the floor in the back seat. Brad shook his head. “Wonder what he has stashed in other banks.”

Hank, shaking his head, drove slowly out of the alley.

* * *

Hank had parked in the red zone in front of Sallatti’s and had chosen a table from which they had a good view of Hank’s car. Neither man was paying much attention to his beer.

“You believe Stratford?” Brad asked.

Hank, with a look close to sadness in his eyes said, “He didn’t kill Lydia.”

The silence between them lasted several moments. “Will that fella you called get it done?” Brad asked.

“Kraboski?”

Brad nodded.

“For sure. By now he’s tearin’ hell out of Stratford’s place.”

“Will he find that key to your lab?”

“If it’s there, but we don’t really need it. You’re clear on Gerald’s murder. Stratford said enough. And we got it on tape. That and Lydia’s diary will turn the trick.

“Gerald found out what they were doin’, likely got greedy, then dead. Or Lydia wanted to keep him from sellin’ to Tuckman. Whatever, Captain Haywood can get it squared away.

“If nothing else does, that briefcase will make it work. That kind of bucks doesn’t come from playin’ bingo. Everybody hates a dirty cop, Haywood most of all. And he’ll get Judge Tofler off your neck, too.”

“Will Stratford run?”

Hank nodded. “Even if we can’t prove a thing, he’d face too many questions he doesn’t have answers for. He’ll run, alright.”

“How’re you going to handle those bodies at The Pink Lady?” Brad asked.

“Gangland slaying,” Hank replied with a grin.

“What do you mean?”

“Our guys got to Rinolli’s before they had a chance to clean up. Bullet holes and blood all over hell. For someone not into pistols, you did good. Beats me how you got outa there alive.” He eyed Brad speculatively, as if seeing him in a new light.

“You used my rounds which were super hot loads. And you took the casings with you. So ballistics won’t help much. And you don’t have a motive. I like it. ‘Gangland slaying.’ It’ll be in the headlines by tonight.”

“People saw me.”

“Sure. And we got descriptions. But folks got pretty excited and did some ducking. You’d laugh if I showed you what we got. Nobody came close. If we keep you out of a lineup, who’ll know? I’m not gonna lose any sleep.”

“Guess I’ve got to believe you, but my name’s coming up too often.”

Hank grinned. “True. There’s Georgio Lampino.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s different. You left your fingerprints on the shotgun, but he shot Josie. It won’t be a problem, but you’ll have to make the inquest. Again, it was a couple of hoods. Who really gives a damn? Besides, a knife against a pistol and a shotgun? Hell. You oughta get a medal.”

“Which brings us back to Lydia.”

“I don’t see a problem. I finally got that witness nailed. The address in Glendale’s a phony and so’s she. There’s just no case.”

“Expect you’re right, but that was true with Gerald. I’d feel a bunch better if we knew who did kill her. I was so damn sure it was Stratford.”

“It wasn’t,” Hank said.

“Then who?”

The silence dragged on. When they’d finished their beer, Hank glanced at the car again, then shrugged and waved for another round.

“I’ve got it,” exclaimed Brad. “Josie told me after reading the diaries that Lydia seemed keen on the idea of killing.”

“Yeah, I saw that. So?”

“The last thing she wrote was something about shooting their balls off, if they ever came back.”

“So who the hell are ‘they’?”

“Feldersen and Cogswell. It was Lydia who put them onto me. They didn’t like the way things went; I had the feeling they were going back to see her. Cogswell hasn’t been seen since.”

“You’re outa your cage. You’re sayin’ Lydia wasted Cogswell and Feldersen wasted her?”

“Where’s her nickel-plated .38?” Brad asked.

“On the bottom of the Pacific Ocean for all we know.”

“The pool guy said he saw a green car at Lydia’s place, backed up to the front door. Feldersen and Cogswell were driving a green Ford that day. If Feldersen moved a body, he’d back the car up that way for cover.”

“You’re full of crap. Why would those guys want to cover a righteous shooting?”

“I’ve no idea,” Brad said, shaking his head. “But you’ve often said feds do weird things.”

“That’s so,” Hank murmured.

“Who planted that bug in my hotel room? Nobody was inside except those two feds. Cogswell was sitting at the end of the couch where he could easily have tucked one up under the coffee table.”

Hank frowned and took a long sip of beer. “I think you’re certifiable.” He sighed, then took another sip. “But if you’re right, the DEA has a surveillance tape that will prove you were asleep when Lydia was killed.”

Brad leaned out on the table. “Get with it, Hank. Come up with something.”

“Like?” he asked softly.

“Can Captain Haywood help?”

“Warrants from a federal judge might do.”

“Go for it. Ask for a copy of the surveillance tapes, the ballistics report on Lydia’s .38 and where Cogswell is.”

“Yeah. And for clout there’s that briefcase in the back of my car.” He nodded, then stood abruptly. “Let’s go.”

* * *

Josie’s Trans Am was parked besides Hank’s car near the back of the parking lot at the Federal Building. Never into waiting, Brad paced restlessly near the block wall bounding the lot. Hank and five other LAPD officers had entered the building over an hour ago.

He’d been over and over it in his mind. And once again a rerun began.

Lydia’s .38 didn’t matter. Who had shot whom didn’t matter. Even the reason for the cover-up meant little to him. He had bet it all on Cogswell having planted the bug and Hank finding a surveillance tape. If the tape showed him asleep in his room when Lydia was killed, he was free. And that was all that mattered to him.

While he’d been watching for it, Brad didn’t notice Hank leaving the building. But he saw him now, making his way between parked cars. His grin was impossibly broad. Brad’s reaction was to slump tiredly against Josie’s car. He hadn’t felt so relieved since he’d come back to LA.

As Hank hurried up, Brad asked anxiously, “You got the tape?”

Hank nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah,” he said, still grinning. “Seems you were snoring real good when Lydia went away.”

Brad shook his head, almost as if not believing. “Sounds like we got lucky.”

“Yeah. And there’s more,” Hank said. “You guessed right. Cogswell is dead, buried at Forest Lawn. And it was Lydia’s .38 that did him.”

“Why hide any of this?” Brad asked, clearly puzzled.

“Nobody’s sayin’ much. They didn’t admit Lydia shot Cogswell, only that her .38 was used. And they didn’t have a comment when it became clear that Feldersen took out Lydia. But to tell it true, I don’t give a damn. You’re out of this mess.”

“It’ll take time to get used to the idea.”

“Take all you need,” Hank said, grabbing him around his shoulders and leading him to the back of the squad car. He opened the trunk and said, “I’ll need that .357. Unload it and keep the rounds; likely your prints are on them. Then wipe it down good. Your shirt will do.”

“What about Stratford?”

“I want this piece to go into ballistics as coming from Josie. Then it’s linked to the shooting at Lydia’s place. And nobody’s going to connect it to Rinolli.”

Brad sighed, wiped the pistol down, and reluctantly dropped it into the plastic bag Hank was holding. When he looked up, Hank was holding another bag open.

“I’ll need the knife, too,” he said.

As Brad started to reach for it, he hesitated.

“Got to have it, buddy,” Hank said evenly.

Brad shrugged, freed the knife, then tucked it into the bag butt first.

“I want to see Josie,” Brad said.

“Wait ’til I find somebody to go with you. Stratford may still be around.”

“I’ve waited long enough.”

“Be cool. Give me thirty minutes, and I can get somebody to keep you company.”

“Have them hunt me up at the hospital. Can you kill the warrants on me?”

“With a call on this radio.”

“That’ll be enough,” Brad said. “I’ll take my chances.”

Brad stood motionless as Hank climbed behind the wheel of the cruiser and drove off. When he pulled out of the parking lot, Brad turned back to Josie’s car. He found the knife he’d driven into concrete on the floor in the back seat where he’d tossed it, then tucked it into the sheath. True, it needed sharpening. And a bit of the tip was missing. Still, it was a weapon he could count on.

* * *

When he killed the engine in the parking lot in front of Holy Cross Hospital, he couldn’t bring himself to get out of the car. The lot was crowded. How many were here to visit a doctor? Was the owner of the gray Lincoln he had parked beside visiting his wife? His sweetheart? How about the owner of the black Buick to his right? It was after three, a beautiful cloud-free day, the kind southern California was known for. Even the smog had taken the day off as the beginnings of a Santanna drifted down from the San Gabriel Mountains.

He knew he couldn’t know more sitting here, but he wasn’t up to answers he didn’t want to hear. He tried to remember when he’d felt this tired and failed. Several minutes passed before he reached for the door and unlatched it.

He heard the last footstep, but it was too late. He felt the gun barrel at the back of his left shoulder. “I knew you’d want to see the girl.”

Brad turned his head slowly, just enough to see the eyes and the silencer on the .38 held firmly in Stratford’s right fist. “Is that the piece you used on the others?”

“It is. But it’s not worn out. There’s enough left for you, unless you’ve still got the money.”

“And if I have?” The tiredness had fled; every sense was doubly alerted.

“You might live a little longer.”

“But not much, right?”

“Who can say?” But Brad could see it in the pale blue eyes. He was a dead man who just happened to still be breathing. What could he say? More importantly, what could he do? Death was less than a half-ounce pull away.

“Well?” Stratford moved forward slightly, sunlight reflecting off his balding head, pale eyes gleaming.

“I can come up with the briefcase easy enough,” Brad said. “But I’d need a reason.”

Stratford had moved further forward, turning to face the car. If he fired now, the bullet would angle downward into his heart. Could he take a round and still make it, assuming it was only a torn-up shoulder? He braced his right foot more solidly against the hump in the floor of the car.

Stratford was not a big man; Brad had eighty pounds on him. And the man was near fifty. Would his natural quickness be enough? He knew he couldn’t know, but he also knew he had no other option.

With every ounce of strength he could muster, he whirled, ducked, and slammed into the car door. Even expecting it, the soft thud of the pistol was awesome. The shock was more than he remembered; his left shoulder and arm had suddenly become molten lava. But the door had opened, flinging Stratford back against the gray Lincoln parked beside him. Whatever he was going to do, it had to be quick. He couldn’t last long.

Brad drove his right arm around Stratford’s neck and dove to the ground, dragging the man with him. When he slammed the man’s head into the asphalt, he was momentarily dazed. Brad dropped both knees on Stratford’s right arm at the wrist.

Even hurt, Stratford would be able to free the arm quickly, to bring the .38 back into action. Brad tried to ignore the pounding of Stratford’s left fist on his crippled shoulder as he lifted his pant leg to get at the knife. It slid easily from its sheath. The broken tip slowed penetration through the man’s coat. But it slipped between the ribs easily enough. With his remaining strength, he drove it upward as consciousness fled.

* * *

Slowly Brad became aware of bright lights overhead. He knew he was lying on a hospital gurney. He tried, but he couldn't move his left arm. "You'll be fine, buddy," said the doctor. Brad opened his eyes, glimpsed the man in white, then closed them quickly against the brightness. "You lost some blood; we replaced that. We had to do some sewing; some muscle tissue was torn up pretty good. But there are no bones broken." He worked as he talked, wrapping more gauze around the shoulder, using the armpit to secure the wrap. Brad heard him say something he didn't understand, then leave. He didn't really care. He only wanted to be left alone.

He couldn't be sure, but it seemed about an hour later when the doctor returned. "Can you sit up?" he asked.

His first effort was a total flop. Finally he remembered how to use his right hand. He pushed himself slowly to a sitting position with the doctor's help. A nurse moved up to support him. She'd never know how grateful he was for her help.

It was then he saw them, two uniformed cops eyeing him with hungry suspicion. "What happened to the other fella?" Brad asked.

"Dead. They'll want to talk to you about that."

Expertly, the doctor fashioned a sling and gently lifted the forearm across Brad's chest and tied it off behind his neck. He walked over to a small table against the wall and scribbled hastily on a tablet. He returned and handed it to Brad. "If those people let you, have this prescription filled. That's going to be quite painful for a week or more. Exercise a little when you can. By the scars on your hide, I suspect you know the rules."

Brad nodded.

"Good." He walked to the door. "Guess he's all yours, officers." Then he was gone, leaving two advancing cops, a touch of eagerness in their step. The nurse still held his good shoulder firmly, bracing him. The shorter man took out a small note pad. "Your name, sir." His voice was academy polite; he was too young to have been on the streets long.

Brad took a deep breath, hoping Hank Walters' plan had worked. "Brad Ashton." It felt good to say his name aloud.

The young cop's hand dropped to his holstered pistol. The older cop asked, "The Brad Ashton?"

"The same."

"That was a cop you killed out there."

"He wasn't one of the good guys." He started to swing his legs off the gurney, but a look from those street-wise eyes stopped him.

"Maybe you could make a call?" Brad asked mildly.

"A lawyer?"

Brad shook his head. "Sgt. Hank Walters or Captain Haywood."

"Why would I want to bother a captain?"

"Maybe I'm not in any kind of trouble."

The big cop didn't believe it, but the names were right. "May I use the phone?" he asked the nurse.

"Dial 9, then the number you need." Ignoring the young officer, she helped ease Brad's legs to the floor.

"You're a first-class angel," he said.

"Want to try to walk?" she asked with a smile.

"Why not?" But it seemed a long way to the floor. He hoped she wouldn't let go. He made it to the wall, then back to the gurney with her help. The pain in his shoulder blinded him only when he moved it; otherwise it was only a pulsing, throbbing ache enveloping his entire left side. He set out for the chair in the corner, waving off the nurse with a slight smile.

Seated, he asked her, "Know where I can find Josie Botsworth?"

"Third floor, room 307."

He didn't know how to ask. "How's she doing?"

"Your girl?"

He nodded.

"I don't really know. You'll have to check with the doctor. But she's out of intensive care, and that's a good sign."

He felt he could fly; he felt just fine. The nurse returned his smile. Then the older cop was in front of him. The hard look in his eyes had been replaced by puzzlement.

“Seems they don’t want you downtown, but we’re supposed to keep you covered, and there’s two other men on the way.” Clearly surprised by this turn of events, he turned to the nurse. “Where do we wait?”

“Ask him.”

“Third floor, room 307.”

* * *

In the third floor hall, Amanda rushed forward to greet him. Tiredness and worry had marred her face, and it wasn’t softened by the hard look at his shoulder.

“Are you all right?” she asked anxiously.

“Yeah. What about Josie?”

“They had to perform a second surgery this morning. The bullet apparently lodged near her heart.” She placed a gentle hand on his good shoulder. “She’ll be just fine.”

It had taken repeated telling of all the details before he was satisfied. Then it had taken a great deal of reassurance about his shoulder before Amanda had finally left. The two cops had found chairs and settled in by the door guarding the room.

Now he sat beside her bed. She was sleeping. He watched the even rise and fall of her chest. Even in the dim light, he could see her color was good. He knew the tubes in her nose and arm meant little.

Gently he leaned forward and kissed the back of her hand. When he gave it a gentle squeeze, she opened her eyes and looked at him. She tried to speak. He leaned toward her. “It’s over. We’re free,” he said softly.

He felt her return his squeeze ever so lightly, then her eyes closed. Holding her hand, he leaned back in the chair and watched what remained of the day’s high bright sky outside the window turn to one of glimmering, shimmering stars.