

One Deadly Sister

By

Rod Hoisington

Smashwords Edition

ISBN 978-1-4524-2615-0

Copyright 2010 Rod Hoisington

Available in paperback at online retailers

Smashwords Edition License Notes

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then you should return to the vendor and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

N01g06r13

Sandy Reid mystery series
by Rod Hoisington

One Deadly Sister
The Price of Candy
Such Wicked Friends
Chasing Suspect Three

Chapter One

When Ray Reid phoned his sister in Philadelphia, and told her he was in a Florida jail on a murder charge, she told him to go to hell.

She slammed her phone down, shoved the book off her lap, and got out of bed. Nervy bastard, she thought. He can't really be doing this. Geez, why didn't he make his one phone call to a friend or a lawyer?

Sleepless now, she clicked on the eleven o'clock news: something about an assassination in Florida, some politician. She heard her brother's name.

She picked up the phone then tossed it back down—she didn't need this. He had ignored her distress call years ago, and they had lived on different planets ever since. She stared at her phone. It rang startling her. "I told you to go to hell."

"You didn't tell me anything. Are you in some kind of trouble, Sandy?"

"Joanna, is that you?"

"Yeah, worked late as usual, just got home. I wanted to warn you some media types phoned for you at the office. You've had calls from Fox, some producer at WCAU-TV, and get this...I talked to Gretchen Henson at CNN in person. They wanted your home address and phone. Luckily, I was the only one in the office. They got nothing from me. What'd you do, kill someone?"

"Maybe my brother did. He got himself tossed in a Florida jail. How'd they trace me so fast?"

"You told me your brother is dead."

"He was, now he's trying to resurrect himself. He wants me to go down there and help him. He mentioned some problem with a woman."

"You going?"

"And screw up my great job up here? Not likely."

"Well, good luck with the media. You'd better figure on extra mirror-time in the morning. If they're not at your door with the cameras at dawn, they soon will be. Let me know if I can help." And Joanna said goodnight.

Back in bed, Sandy turned off the bedside light, and jerked the covers over her. Damn him upsetting her like this, she thought. Should go down there just to watch him suffer. It was no use; she was too irritated to sleep.

She turned on the light, found her phone, and clicked his call. He answered on the first ring. She snapped, "You managed to get yourself on the national news, and now the media are after me. Thank you very much."

"Sandy! You called back, great to hear your voice."

"You're guessing it's me, you forgot what my voice sounds like. Did you happen to give out any info about me down there?"

"No, well...maybe, the detective asked if I had any family. I said just a sister in Philadelphia."

"Damn it, why did you give them my name?"

"I didn't see any harm. I tried to show I was a straight guy with nothing to hide."

"My employer was already called. Raymond, I work for a classy law firm with a spotless reputation. I could lose my job, if the media disrupts the office." She understood it wasn't his fault if some jerk cop

down there leaked her name to the media. She cooled off just a bit. “How come you rate a phone in jail, anyway?”

“The police took mine for evidence to examine the directory to see who I’ve called and who’s phoned me. They gave me this disposable loaner.”

“It’s tapped Raymond, the old loaner-phone trick. Watch what you say.”

“They think I’m calling my mob mouthpiece in Philly right now. Anyway I’m innocent.”

“Innocence is beside the point. *Suspicion* is your problem.” She tried to sound unconcerned. “Isn’t this where you’re supposed to ask how I’ve been the last few years?”

“Oh yes, how are you Sandy?”

“You see, I get this call from some guy who says he’s my brother. I heard my brother moved to Florida, but it can’t be him because he never calls me. As much as I’d enjoy his being in trouble, there’s no way he’d be so ballsy as to phone me. You’ve got the wrong number, buddy.”

“Sorry. I’m not very good at keeping in touch.”

“Are you going to pretend you actually do call me now and then?”

“Didn’t I phone at Christmas?”

“Yeah, two years ago, you wanted someone’s address. The TV says you murdered a senator. So, you work there as a hit man?”

“No, I landed a good job down here with a stockbroker doing what I did in Philadelphia. The dead guy was a state senator running for governor. I had absolutely nothing to do with it. You see I met this woman at a party, and we went back to my place. Okay, so maybe I have a tiny bit to do with it. But I wasn’t the one who shot him. Can I tell you about her? I didn’t know her age then.”

“No thanks.”

“I’ve barely moved in down here and don’t know anyone.”

“A lot of folks would look forward to spending the last few days of their life in Florida. Where are you located?”

“Park Beach, a small town on Florida’s east coast. Someone killed their favorite son, and I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. The town wants my blood. There’s a big commotion outside right now from all the TV people. The police are crowded around the windows here gawking out. They’re heroes for getting a dangerous character like me off the street so quickly. The state attorney doesn’t bother to say alleged, just refers to me as the perpetrator. They’ll probably skip the formality of a trial. I need someone to find out what’s going on, someone to rescue me.”

“That’s what attorneys are for.”

“In this little town my attorney will turn out to be the prosecutor’s brother. A jury here will enjoy hanging me.”

“I promise they won’t hang you, Raymond, they use lethal injection in Florida. Now if I lose my job because of your mess, I’ll come down and strangle you myself. They’re probably outside my apartment right now setting up a satellite TV truck. I can’t wait for my boss to see me on the morning news.”

“You ever get your law degree?”

“See what I mean. You’ve no idea of my situation. They could have your little sister kidnapped in Baghdad for all you know. I still work for Walde & Walde, the criminal defense law firm. Ran out of money for my law degree. Paying off student loans. Work outside the office. I’m the field investigative girl, all criminal cases including murder. I do the legwork. I run around the tri-state area, search through public records, find witnesses, and take their statements. I find out the things the prosecution doesn’t want found out. Love it.”

“That’s precisely what I need.”

“The firm’s going to reimburse me for tuition, so I can get back into law school. When I pass the bar, a lawyer position is waiting for me. Is that dreamy or what?”

“Yes it is. Now, that first night with the woman from the party was no problem. Then she wanted to meet me again at a motel. Somehow, I just ignored the age thing. When she showed up in that tiny thong, I should have known something was going on. But I was too eager.”

“Excuse me, you were asking about me. You didn’t hear a word I said.”

“I heard you, sounds great.” He took a quick breath. “The second time we were at a motel. But it’s not what you think. I don’t mean it was the second time at the motel. I mean, the second time we got together was the first time at the motel. Then I talked to the murdered guy. Before he was murdered, of course. The police didn’t understand at all.”

“Imagine that.”

“I’ve got a big problem Sandy.”

“If you’ve no friends to call when you’re in trouble, you have an even bigger problem. Everyone needs someone they can phone at 4 a.m.”

“You’re right. This call isn’t going too well is it?”

“Raymond, where were you when I was in trouble?”

“Are you talking about juvie hall? Good grief, that was ten years ago, more. Can’t you get past that?”

“Yes, I should get over it but I haven’t. I’ll work on it. You sit there in jail, and I’ll work on it.”

Silence.

Was she gone? “Sandy, you still there?”

“Are you convicted yet?”

“I was afraid you’d hung up.”

“The longest conversation with my brother in my entire life, and I should hang up?” Her voice had softened somewhat. “Do I wear glasses?”

“What?”

“Do I wear glasses, yes or no?”

“Glasses? Yes, ah no, I don’t think so.”

“I rest my case. You’d walk right past me on the street. Somehow, I have it in my mind that there are things you should just know about your sister. That’s a stretch for you isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry Sandy, but there are years between us. It’s not like we were joined at the hip.”

“But I thought we were at least friends. Don’t you get it? We were *born* friends. You just don’t want to connect with me.”

“When I get this behind me, I’m going to make it up to you. Can you forgive me?”

“Forgive you? How about I just forget you?”

He said nothing.

“I know you’re in a deep hole down there, and I don’t mean to minimize it.” The irony of him being the one now in trouble didn’t escape her, and maybe she was being too harsh. Nevertheless, it was unfair of him to ask. “I can’t leave, Raymond. I’ve worked hard for this job. I’m not going to screw it up.”

“You’re right, don’t screw up your job. Somehow I thought—.”

Then sounding upbeat, she said quickly, “Hey Raymond, hope things turn out all right for you down there. Bye now, I’m gone.”

“Wait! I know I’ve been a lousy brother and don’t deserve your help, but there’s no one else.”

“I’ll phone you at Christmas,” she said.

The line went dead.

Ray sat on his bunk and tossed the silent phone from hand to hand. He was tempted to smash it against the wall. What was wrong with him, he wondered, how dare he ask her for anything? So she's out of it. Couldn't blame her.

Was there someone else he could call, someone he hadn't screwed up with his indifference? Certainly, no one down here, probably no one up in Philadelphia either. Sounded pathetic when he thought about it. He didn't think of himself as friendless. He was well liked by his co-workers and wasn't unsociable. It was just that he enjoyed his solitude, and didn't spend much time thinking about friends. Friends just appeared in his life from time to time. They happened, he didn't seek them out.

He stared at the other bunk in the cell. The bulk of a smelly old man in rumpled clothes was lying there dead drunk on his back snoring, with his head hard against the wall. "Looks like we both could use a friend. I don't know anyone else in your damn town," Ray said aloud surprising himself. The man didn't stir.

The jail cell felt airless and hot, yet Ray started shivering. He looked down again at the worthless phone. He was drowning. The phone in his hand was like a lifeline with no one holding the other end.

Chapter Two

Ray Reid had moved down to Florida from Philadelphia to start a new job in Park Beach, a small oceanside town, three weeks earlier. Moved to get away from the scene of his divorce, start new. His ex-wife had once told him she was attracted to him because he had a great job and a nice house. When they split, she accused him of being one of those nice guys who would never make a success of anything.

Nothing much to move down with him. She took everything, even kept his dog. He did manage to rescue some of his history books and string quartet CDs from the curbside trash in front of the house he had paid for.

His new employer, a Florida securities broker, E.J. Bradford & Co., needed a back-office manager. That was Ray's specialty: running all the numbers and seeing that the firm handled the buys and sells properly.

The job had started well and his associates liked him. Nothing very threatening about Ray, an everyday forty year old, never quite made it to six feet, with short brown hair already thin at the temples. His face was "okay"—at least that's how a girlfriend in college once described it. Another girl told him his black-rimmed glasses were unquestionably a date-loser. He'd always worn that kind, they fit fine and weren't expensive.

Each day after the market closed an attractive young stockbroker at the firm, Meg Emerson, would stride to the back office, still charged with energy, and chat with him to calm down after her hectic day. Meg was a sales whiz, the number one producer in the office. All the sales reports crossed Ray's desk, so he knew she grossed twice as much as her boss. She could afford to dress in a fabulous manner, yet he noticed she favored a conservative look and wore her blond hair short and straight. She pushed the upper limit on the height-weight charts, although she didn't seem concerned.

Ray was ten years older. He thought she had a wonderful mind. She wasn't afraid to discuss serious subjects like art and antiques. There were several younger, better-looking guys around the office, yet for some reason Ray was the person she wanted to talk with. She never missed a day.

It was Meg who invited him to the party that started it all. She just gave the party...he couldn't blame her for his meeting Loraine there.

When the party day arrived, Ray was still settling into his new apartment. He needed to paint the place, and shop for a lamp, a screwdriver, and a can opener. He had little interest in going to a gathering of strangers and doing his wallflower routine while planning a polite escape. Not his idea of fun. Nevertheless, he did go. Meg had been so insistent.

Meg gave him a warm greeting at her door, including an unexpected kiss on the cheek. A look around the room convinced him he had made a dreadful mistake. He had the awful feeling that he should be around at the back door making a delivery. This wasn't his crowd at all. The room glittered with classy people laughing and clinking glasses. She had suggested jacket, no tie. Her guests, however, seemed dressy to him. Meg wore a black linen cocktail dress with a breathless plunging V-neck.

Ray came dressed in the same jacket he wore to work every day, and a lightweight turtleneck. He felt about as stylish as a dishtowel. If somehow he could ever get out of there, he'd never leave home again.

Her beachfront condominium on the barrier island was impressive. The building sat on the narrow island between the ocean and the Intracoastal Waterway. Consequently, she had an expensive view from either end of her condo.

"Realtors call it a front-to-front," Meg explained. "Instead of just a wall on the rear side away from the ocean, there's a second balcony overlooking the waterway."

The layout amazed him. Some of her guests were on the ocean side balcony, almost the size of Ray's entire apartment, looking down at the beach and out to the Atlantic. A more normal-sized balcony was at the opposite end of the expansive living room. From there, guests had a view of the waterway, a cove dotted with undulating boats on moorings, and on across to the lights of the city on the western horizon.

She had decorated her home in subtle shades of high-level income. Although Ray was aware she had some money, he never suspected the engaging young woman who stopped at his desk every day enjoyed that manner of lifestyle.

Meg wanted everyone to meet him and after graciously zigging and zagging the crowd for his wine, she introduced him around to get him started. He saw no other co-workers present, not even her boss; all these prosperous people must be clients or friends.

The cordial group welcomed him to Florida and made the polite newcomer-fuss. Not so bad, in fact the evening turned out well. Or so he thought at the time.

Two white wines later, after he had met a dozen mostly interesting people and forgotten their names, he noticed a woman with long red hair talking with a group out on that huge ocean-view balcony. Her back was toward him. The ocean breeze seriously teased the hem of her short green dress and that caught his attention. The somewhat tall woman in her somewhat short dress showing great legs was pleasing.

When she turned, he saw she was older than he'd anticipated. He wasn't certain just what gave him that impression. Her features seemed a little sharp; still he liked her face. There was a bangle on one wrist otherwise he saw no jewelry. Her body needed no adornments, she stood erect, and her shape was trim. Whatever her age, she was confidently attractive.

His eyes wandered around the room but kept going back to the redhead, green dress, and legs. He stood with his wine glass trying to appear casual and watched her mingle. She seemed to drift nearer to where he stood. Minutes later, she was much closer and held her gaze on him. *Him?* She came over and introduced herself, Loraine Dellin. He fumbled a few words expecting her to ask why he had been staring, but she started right in with party talk.

She made drawn out comments about what was good and what was a shame. She frequently reached over and touched his arm to emphasize a point he usually didn't get. All very polite and clever. Easy

going, he just smiled and nodded, grateful for her casual rambling that kept the conversation running without his input. Silence would mean death.

The wine tasted good, he felt comfortable and was now enjoying the party. She stood quite close to him and with heels was eye to eye. Quite enjoyable having this attractive woman standing right there with those pale green eyes focused on him. Her face showed deep lines around the eyes, but that didn't seem important. He was careful about looking down; she couldn't have known just how loose fitting her neckline was. There seemed to be quite a bit unconstrained down there.

She wanted to know about him. "So, you're down here alone, no wife, no kids, no attachments?"

"Just a sister up in Philadelphia, we don't keep in touch much."

She asked how he knew Meg.

"We work at the same firm," he explained. "Nothing exciting, my office is buried in the back." He tried to sound smooth, but his mouth was dry and not working well. She nodded approval and said she happened to have an account with his firm.

After a few minutes, she stepped back. So, that's it, he guessed, now comes the polite "nice chatting with you" part. Well, it had been nice. Coming to the party had been worthwhile after all. He certainly had received more than his share of her attention. He assumed she was parting to resume mingling, but she just reached to the table for a canapé. She didn't seem to notice her breast brushed hard against his arm.

Events moved fast from then on.

Abruptly, she whispered something about leaving the party. He thought she meant later and alone. She meant right then and with him. He went over and thanked Meg for the invitation. She apologized for not getting free to talk with him and suggested he stick around. They could talk after the party. Loraine was already waiting by the door so he supposed he'd better go. Meg appeared troubled.

As soon as they got outside, Loraine grabbed his arm and started to walk fast. "Let's go."

"You want a ride home?" he asked.

"Anything to drink at your place?"

"My place? Uh, wine?" He should explain his new apartment was barely furnished.

"What kind?"

"Not sure...it's white."

"How cute, it's white. Christ. Is it at least fresh? Never mind. Your place will do. Where's your car?"

"That's mine over there, the green one." He pointed.

"You've got to be joking. We'll take mine."

She started off and he hurried after her. Understanding women wasn't one of his strong points.

At the end of that night with Loraine, there was no doorstep affection, no exchange of phone numbers, and no promise to meet again. He gave her an awkward little grin meaning such casual sex was unusual for him. She, no doubt, had already figured that one out.

And that was it.

That's what he thought.

She phoned a week later on Saturday morning. He was making instant coffee, and his biggest problem was whether he could get by that day without shaving. Regrettably, he answered the phone.

She wanted to meet him at the Inn Towner motel. Sounding frantic and insistent, she hung up without explaining. At that point, he didn't think she was actually nutty, only a bit off, and he could live with that. Normal women weren't within the range of his experience anyway.

Why the call? Wasn't their night together supposed to be just a party thing? Of course, one-night stands happen all the time—well, not to him. Perhaps he'd been better in bed than he thought. Deciding

on a Saturday morning rendezvous with a woman wasn't difficult even if it meant changing out of his sweats and sneakers. He didn't want the relationship to go anywhere, even so would he like a second go around? Sure. Counting the months before the divorce and the time after the divorce, he had a lot to make up for. And there was available and willing Loraine perhaps phoning for an encore. Whether a woman desires only a one-night stand had always confused him.

He realized his fantasies might be getting ahead of him. Could this be one of those "be careful what you wish for" deals? Why else the troubled voice? Likely, she wanted something else from him, wanted him to do something expensive or stupid, maybe both. The least he could do, he decided, was to show up and see what she wanted. Wouldn't most people say, don't ask too many questions just go?

At the motel, he found her in a poolside setting lifted straight off a Florida postcard: a lounge chair by a palm tree, a green bikini, sunglasses, and a floppy straw hat. She even had the requisite one-knee-drawn-up pose.

She didn't look bad. The unforgiving bikini provided no place to hide physical flaws yet presented no problem for her body. The bikini top was crowded yet borderline respectable. The scanty bottom, however, belonged on some topless rollerblader down at South Beach.

Loraine had put it all there to be looked at.

The pool area, circled by the small three-story motel, wasn't crowded. November was warm though still too early for many snowbirds. A young mother waded with her three children at the far end. Across the pool, two women sat on the edge talking and dangling their feet in the water. A balding, overweight man had strategically located himself in the center of the pool in line with Loraine's legs and enjoyed what he considered his good luck. A bikini can unlock a lot of imagination. She noticed but ignored the sneaky peeks.

After greetings, Ray sat on the edge of a lounge chair facing her. Up close for the first time in daylight, he noticed the lines across her forehead. Her nose seemed more pointed, and she was even older than he had supposed at the party. He chalked it up to the wine then, and the bright Florida sun now. She had tied her red hair back. Oversized sunglasses hid those unflinching pale green eyes.

He felt this calm poolside scene didn't match her frantic phone call. "What's this all about, Loraine?"

"I enjoyed last week at your place. I'm glad we hooked up."

"Yes, it was fun. I never expected a follow-up call." He started to relax, must have overreacted. How bad could the situation be? She was there lounging about poolside as carefree as a puppy. "You sounded as though you needed help. You didn't mention this poolside event and the green bikini."

"Chartreuse."

"Really kind of skimpy isn't it?"

"Yes, glad you like it." She moved her sunglasses down on her nose and looked over at him. "First time I've worn it. It's a thong in the back. Here...I'll show you."

"No! Stay still. Don't move anything." So much skin made him uncomfortable. He glanced around quickly to see who else was taking an interest. A young man with a towel around his neck appeared, from somewhere, and sat innocently a few chairs away. Ray guessed soon another man, and then another, would show up to enjoy a look at the pool. He began to think he had given her too much credit for being clever.

"Can't wait to go to the beach," she said as though reading his mind and confirming his judgment.

She seemed completely cool now, not agitated as on the phone. He tried again to get her on track. "Your phone call, what's up?"

She was quiet for a moment then, "I do need your help. Maybe I'm in trouble."

"Okay. Before you start a public disturbance, can we end the show here and talk in your room?"

“Well, just let me tell you. Ah—.” She appeared serious now. She sat up and arranged her beige see-through beach shirt around her shoulders. Then blurted out, “My best friend was raped.”

“My God! That’s what this is about?”

“Happened in her apartment, night before last.”

“They catch the guy?”

“Oh, we know who did it, Sonny Barner, her boyfriend. Her bastard boyfriend.”

“Date-rape? How is she?”

“Beat the hell out of her, blackened one eye. I told her to call the police. She was shaking. Kept mumbling about maybe it was her fault, maybe she teased him. All that cliché crap. The next day she was still hurting, still curled up.”

“Rape by a boyfriend tough to prove, he-said she-said. Is she going to let him get away with it?”

“The next day she decided to call the cops.” She shrugged. “But by then it was too late.”

“Why?”

“Because I had already shot him.”

Chapter Three

Ray scanned the circle of windows that looked down on the pool, certain the entire town was watching and had heard what she said. At first, he could only stare, giving her a look a father would give a child. He grabbed her arm. “To your room, now...fast!” She led the way up the steps to her second floor room.

The motel room was dimly lit, heavy drapes drawn. She blocked his hand, when he reached for the light switch. “Don’t spoil the mood.” She tossed her sunglasses on the nightstand, kicked off her sandals, let her hair fall loose, and got onto the bed. She adjusted the bikini and leaned back casually against a mound of pillows. “I liked your dimly lighted bedroom when we made love at your place last weekend.”

“I didn’t have a lamp.” He leaned against the desk, away from the bed. That was as close as he dared. Was she wild enough to kill a second man? “Now call the police!”

“Don’t shout. I’m sorry now I killed him, but it’s not as if anyone knows I did it. Nobody even knows I was there.”

“Well everyone knows I was here. You had us down there chitchatting about your bikini. Call them now.” In a high-pitched voice he said, “Yes, Officer, that’s the man who was sitting by the pool with the bikini murderer.”

“No! I don’t want to get involved.”

“A bit late for that, Loraine.”

“What I meant was they don’t *know* I’m involved.”

“Did you give a second thought to getting *me* involved? I can’t believe this. Of course, they’re going to catch you. You didn’t kill a stranger, you knew this person. You’d be a suspect in any case. Just as I’m now a suspect because I know you. Know you? Hell, I slept with you.” He thought about that for a second, then said, “I slept with a murderer.”

“Do you have to use that word? Well, what do you want?”

“I want the clock turned back. I haven't been here, you haven't seen me, nobody has seen me, and I haven't been out of my apartment all morning.” He wanted to shake her by the shoulders. “And I want you to put on some clothes.”

“In a minute, I'm still a little warm.”

“So, what happened?”

“Well, Tammy Jerrold is my girlfriend and Sonny Barner is one of her men friends. She's *popular*, if you get my drift. When I went to Tammy's place, Norma Martin was already there. Norma's her best friend, after me of course. We saw Tammy and felt so sad for her. You should have seen her. Norma told her to let it go. She and Tammy are truly a pair, shuffling men back and forth. However, I couldn't stand it. Men shouldn't do that. I was mad.”

“You went after him.”

“I got his address and went to his house to tell him off. I figured it's the least he had coming. Didn't want him to get away with it by claiming she agreed or something, you know. Well, he got mad at me. Can you believe it? The rapist, or whatever you call him, gets mad at *me*. He told me to get the hell out of there. We started arguing, and when I didn't leave he got his gun out.”

“You stood there. He pointed a gun at you?”

“Guns don't bother me, grew up with them. You should have seen the expression on his face, when I just grabbed the damn thing. The bastard was shot with his own gun. Now that's some sort of poetic something.”

A wild story, nevertheless it described self-defense. Ray felt slightly better.

“I know all about guns. My daddy had guns.” She pointed to a small box resting on top of an overnight bag against the wall. “That one's about as small and light a .38 you're going to find. Feels good to a woman. Don't bother with peashooters, that's what daddy called .22s, not enough smack. Take a look.” She pointed to the glossy cigar-box-size carton sitting in plain sight.

Ray was startled. “The gun's in there?”

“No, no, that's a different gun, that's my gun. Bought it yesterday. Was going to use it to shoot him but got scared. As it turned out, I didn't need to buy it after all.”

Ray turned on the desk lamp and carefully picked up the new gun box by the corners. On the top was a multi-color picture of a small revolver nestled in the folds of an American flag. Printed across were the words Ladysmith Special. Cautiously he opened the box, handling it by the edges. Inside he saw a small revolver, only about six inches long, wrapped in plastic and resting in Styrofoam. It appeared the gun hadn't been fired, never even unpacked.

“You say this gun has nothing to do with the shooting. Where's the actual murder weapon...as they say?”

“Guess it's still there, beside Barner. Should we go get it?”

“What's this 'we' stuff? Why did you bring that new gun with you here?”

“Would look funny if they found it at my place, I'd have to explain.”

“The police could be swarming your place right now.”

“Don't need it now. Maybe I'll take it back to the store for a refund. What do you think?”

“You shouldn't go anywhere near that store ever again.” He realized the police would construe any advice he gives her as conspiracy.

“What should I do with it?”

“Get rid of it, I don't know how. It screams out premeditation.” He thought throwing it off a bridge would be smart. He didn't say that aloud, didn't want her to repeat those words to the police.

“You could get rid of it for me.”

“No thanks, I never saw this gun.” He gave the box a symbolic push away with his fingertips. “Why did you phone me? You got me involved in this mess by calling me here and confessing a murder. Now I need help too. What am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know, I thought we fit pretty well after the party, and you seemed to like me.”

“So, you called me over for old times’ sake to see if I might want to get involved in a murder?”

“Well, can’t you help? Aren’t there certain things you’re supposed to do in these cases?”

“Yes, get a lawyer.”

“Don’t know any lawyers. Tammy sort of knows one. She smashed into a couple of parked cars last year. She gave this lawyer a trade, that’s what she called it, for helping her out. No, I mean don’t we have to do things about the body, the gun, things like that? Should we move him?”

Ray gave her an eye roll. “You’ve really screwed me up. You’re forcing me to call the police.”

That seemed to surprise her. “Hey! That’s not right. Don’t do that. I was in trouble and believed I was calling a friend. I wouldn’t have phoned you, if I thought you were going to turn me in. You’re not involved.”

Ray sat shaking his head. “I now have criminal knowledge of a murder, and I’m helping you...to some extent. That makes me an accessory after the fact.”

“I don’t know about that stuff.”

“Well the police do. Sorry, you’re giving me no choice. As soon as they arrest you, they’ll come after me. No question about it. The only action I can take now is to report it before your arrest, before my name comes up. I have to appear open and cooperative.”

“You don’t like me.” She squirmed on the bed and folded her arms across her chest.

He didn’t think she understood. “You’ve a good case of self-defense. You were angry about the guy raping your girlfriend. Very understandable. You were so infuriated thinking the bastard might get away with it that you went to his place to tell him off. He had to pay for what he had done. He pulls a gun. Luckily, he’s the one that got shot and not you. The defense rests.” Again, he had conspired with her by opening his mouth and giving her a feasible script to run with. He could hear her telling the police, “*But officer, that’s what he told me to say.*” He was getting in deeper.

“What do we do now?”

“What do *we* do? We say goodbye. That’s what we do. I’ve listened to your story, now I’m calling the police to report what you told me. I’ve no choice. There’s not a chance in hell I’m going to avoid police questioning, thanks to you.”

“You’d turn me in? That’s a rotten thing to do.”

“Hello! You got me over here and displayed me to the world. There are a dozen witnesses outside that door ready to testify we met here. If you’d whispered your secret to me out on the street somewhere, I’d have a choice but not now. Don’t you get it?”

“But no one knows I was there. I can get away with it, if you’ll just keep your damn mouth shut.”

“Well, you won’t. Murderers always fail to notice something. For one thing your prints are on the murder weapon.”

“No, don’t think so. I grabbed his hand not the gun.”

“You just told me you grabbed the gun. Which was it, his hand or the gun? You see the police will jump on little things like that. Your DNA is on his body if you struggled. I don’t know. Or they’ll find out you bought a gun. Something. Where did you get his address? Tammy gave it to you, didn’t she?”

“Don’t remember.”

“Police will find out she gave it to you. Bingo, you’re tied to Barner. You need to call Tammy. She has to report the rape. Going to her doctor would be good even if too late for treatment. Photos of her bruises would be great.”

“The doc will find old bruises.”

“Really!” That stopped him. Who are these people? He hadn’t considered that kind of reckless lifestyle. “Tammy into drugs or something?”

“She’s into showing off her boobs.”

That didn’t answer the question. Nevertheless, drug use would explain the loose sex and the destructive behavior. Toss drugs into this mess and proving rape would be impossible, he thought. And a trial for Loraine would be disastrous. If drugs are involved, the police will not only question him, they’ll test him for drug use, and tear up his apartment. No question now, he should run the other way. “Okay, forget the medical exam. Still, you do need evidence to support your story of why you lost it and went after him.”

“I don’t get it. Why is Tammy reporting the rape so important? I still shot the bastard.”

“If there’s no rape why did you shoot him? The rape has to be there. The rape is what set you off. The rape is why you went after him. The rape explains everything. Have you tried to reach her?”

“She didn’t answer. Don’t know where she is, hiding I guess.”

“Well, keep trying. Once she reports the rape then your retaliation becomes justified in the minds of most people. Some will even consider you a hero for avenging the wrongdoing. You’ll be the darling of the feminists. You’ll be on TV. You can write a book.” He tried to keep it light, but she didn’t seem to get it.

“It’ll be tough with the police,” he continued, “However, your attorney will handle that part. You’ll be all right, self-defense with no premeditation. They might even acquit you. But not without a reported rape.” He didn’t entirely believe everything he was saying.

“Will you at least help me find Tammy?”

“You mean will I delay calling the police and implicate myself?”

She started crying. He moved to the bed, sat beside her and tried to calm her. “With those legs you’ll look great on the witness stand,” he said trying to make her smile.

She did smile although with a calculating look. She sat up, and as she leaned forward, the bikini top slipped off. She watched his eyes fasten on her breasts. She took his face between her hands, drew him closer, kissed him, and slowly ran her tongue across his lips. “I didn’t get to do everything I wanted the other night.”

“I can’t imagine what you overlooked.”

“I know you’ll help me,” she whispered. “Don’t call the cops.” She pulled his head down. He was filled with the musky scent of her drying perspiration blended with the perfume he remembered from his bed after she left his apartment last week. He pulled back and stood, yet his eyes couldn’t leave her.

She frowned, leaned back on the pillows, and studied his face. Then she reached down and pulled on the little bow at the side of the bikini bottom. She slowly raised her hips, and with a bounce, the bottom slid off and dangled around one leg. She raised the leg high, and watched his eyes moving over her body as she reached out and slipped the bikini bottom off her ankle. She laid back and twisted for a moment, as though the movement was necessary to find a comfortable position.

He gazed down at her soft touchable skin. “This teasing routine isn’t making it easier.”

“I’m not going for easy.” She reached over with her hand.

Could he stop himself, if he let her touch him? He took a step back and looked down at her. Her tan hadn’t started yet, and she was wonderfully white, naked creamy white, stretched out with her long red hair flowing across the pillow.

She gave him a sweet, pouty look. “I’ll let you do anything you want with me.” Her tongue moistened the pink gloss on her lips.

He was unable to focus on anything else. He felt his heart beating and a rising wave of heat.

“Come on,” she said softly, “whether we play around on this big bed for an hour or so isn’t going to make any difference to anybody.”

He had a warm growing feeling that she made perfect sense. The warmer he got, the more sensible she sounded. He wasn’t part of this situation anyway. He could do whatever he wanted. They could lose themselves in bliss for an hour and drift away from this damn situation.

She ran the palm of her hand playfully around her nipples. “I say when it comes along you gotta take it.”

She was right. He’d be an idiot to pass this up. They’d done it before, so they do it again, would make no difference at all. He’d never be in a situation like this again. Besides, he deserved it. It was the only reasonable thing to do.

“Be smart, Ray. Come closer.”

He fought back the intense feeling. He blinked hard and shook his head trying to do away with the thought. At last, he caught his breath and inhaled deeply. He backed up, still shaking his head.

His head was clearer now. It was back to business, the business of getting out of this woman’s life. He checked his watch. “Look, it’s eleven now. I’ll make you a deal. I’ll wait until three before I go to the police. That’s four hours. You can spend the time squirming around on that bed deceiving yourself about whether they’ll catch you. However, I suggest you get dressed and go find a lawyer.”

Mercifully, she closed her legs, sat up, and brushed her hair back with her hand. “So, you’ll try to find Tammy?”

“Okay, I’ll try to find her and explain what she needs to do. Then you turn yourself in.” That would be one way out of this, he thought, and it might work. Once Tammy reports the rape then Loraine would feel better about coming forward. If she doesn’t, then he’ll go to the police anyway and explain what he knows.

She seemed to go along with it. “I don’t know where Tammy is now. Maybe she’s scared, maybe she ran. I’ll give you her address and unlisted phone number. Just don’t get cozy with her.” She pointed to a motel note pad. “You can nose around. Could be she left a message with a neighbor or something. What’s your phone?”

“Let’s exchange numbers.” He wrote down the information. “Her friend Norma Martin could back this up. How do I reach her?”

“Not sure, I think she’s a waitress at the Jardin Café.”

“You’ve got four hours, Loraine, until three, okay? I’m giving you four hours.”

She grinned. “Hey, if you aren’t in the mood now, why don’t we get together tonight? I don’t want this to affect our relationship.”

That senseless offer meant zero to him now. The affair was over. He went to the door and looked back at her. Still enticingly naked, her arms wrapped around her pulled up knees. He felt pity for her. He slowly closed the door and stood at the railing. Fresh air made it easier for him to think beyond the reality of her lying there so easily accessible.

He shouldn’t be seen there. He glanced around the balcony and down below at the pool area. Two maids talked at the foot of the stairs, and two other women were now poolside. He took the opposite direction down the back stairs to the parking lot. He held back and waited while an older couple packed the car next to his and pulled out.

This wasn’t how he had intended to spend his Saturday. Two hours ago, he was going to shop for a lamp, now he was behaving like a fugitive. He’d go along with it for a few hours. If he can’t find Tammy and Norma by three, then he’ll go to the police and then so long Loraine. He could hear the police saying “*Come on, Reid, you aren’t really an innocent bystander, now are you?*”

Chapter Four

Ray switched on the radio as he drove away from the motel. Nothing about a murder, at least not yet. Soon the media would be all over the story: sex gone awry and a revengeful hometown killing—hot story of the year. Police might already be looking for Loraine, maybe that's why she left her house and went to the motel. When they find her, he knew he'd be next.

She had confessed a murder to him; he couldn't just walk away as if it never happened. People saw him with her. Better to report it and explain everything before they came looking for him. What if they clear her because of self-defense, and he goes to jail as an accessory?

What he should do is stop worrying about her and drive straight to the police, but he gave her a three o'clock deadline. Waiting a couple of hours shouldn't hurt. Find this Tammy and convince her to report the rape, then Loraine will have her justification for shooting Barner. That's all he's going to do. Then he's out of it. Goodbye crazy Loraine, you're only a one-night stand from hell.

He phoned the Tammy Jerrold number given by Loraine. No answer. Good, she had an answering machine. He left a message.

What's next? Norma Martin was a waitress at the Jardin Café, so said Loraine. Maybe she can be Loraine's excuse for dishing out instant justice at gunpoint. He remembered passing the Jardin Café in the sticks on the county's far western edge. He headed there.

Ray drove from the motel across the Intracoastal Waterway Bridge to the mainland. He looked down at the waterway that divided island living and the mainland, from the Georgia line down to Key West. The waterway ran through the middle of Park Beach, leaving the barrier island and the mostly privileged on one side, and the less fortunate on the other. The Jardin Café was far out on the less fortunate side.

He drove west past the charming old section of town and through the unremarkable new neighborhoods on into the countryside. Once spread with shady citrus, the area was almost entirely cleared to make way for progress. He was west of town now, skirting the south county line, driving along a canal. Canals were frequent in this area. Not the picturesque winding boating canals that lead to the ocean from private docks positioned at the foot of vast sloping lawns behind great houses, as in Fort Lauderdale. Up here, they called the roadside drainage ditches canals. Designed to catch rain runoff, but sometimes catching a vehicle that got too close to the soft shoulder on a Saturday night. People can drown driving home.

He found the Jardin Café sprawling back from the highway on a narrow and deep lot more valuable than the creaky wood structure sitting there. At one time, it was a tolerated boozing hangout named the Jungle Club for the dense woods nearby. The woods were gone now. There never had been a garden near the Jardin Café. There was a new roof and fresh paint however, mandated by the last hurricane.

The restaurant wasn't open, the sign said four o'clock. Ray drove around back where a worker was picking up trash around the dirt parking lot. He said of course he knows Norma Martin—she owns the place.

Ray's phone buzzed, a text message, 'im at ambassador arms 701 dont tell'.

Very good, he had left a message for Tammy and now he gets a text back. Seems she's willing to talk.

The Jardin Café and Norma could wait. He hurried back into town, asked directions, and found the Ambassador Arms: seven floors of apartments converted to condominiums in an upscale, oak-tree-lined

neighborhood. The imposing over-done architecture was now out of style, yet the charm was timeless and now priceless. Tammy must have something going for her to find refuge in this part of town.

The street door was unlocked and the inner lobby door locked as expected. He stood reading the Owner Directory, feeling conspicuous even though no one was in sight. This wasn't the sort of building to wander around in, knocking on doors, and asking about some woman he had never met. The directory listed #701 to A. Towson. Ray pushed the button, heard the door buzz, and was in.

He stepped off the carpeted elevator onto the gleaming restored wood flooring of a wide hallway with mahogany paneled walls and costly framed mirrors. His first impression was of a renovated mansion. This was the top floor and he noticed just one other unit. Before he could knock, the door to 701 opened and facing him was an older man, tall with broad shoulders like a college athlete. Ray guessed that with the gray hair at the temples he was in his sixties. He wore jeans and a loose white dress shirt with rolled up sleeves.

The man said, "I was expecting—."

"Sorry to interrupt your morning." Ray stood there feeling stupid with no idea who the man was and no idea what to say next. He didn't dare to explain the situation and decided it wasn't wise to mention Tammy's name at this point. Perhaps she was inside.

The man's face relaxed with recognition. "You're that new guy in town. I was expecting a reporter, come in."

Expecting a reporter? Perhaps about the rape or the murder? Ray's mind raced trying to think of where they might have met.

"Let's go in the kitchen. Still some coffee left. We've met remember? I'm Al Towson. Your name again?"

"Ray Reid. Coffee sounds good, thanks." He followed the man across the living room with its high-coved ceiling, hardwood floors dotted with antique, oriental rugs, and heavy furniture pieces in glowing woods. He glanced around, taking in the elegance. He recognized one of the paintings on the wall but couldn't think of the artist.

Towson ushered Ray on into a dining room adorned with splendid silk wallpaper with matching wainscoting and an ornate chandelier. Just before passing into the kitchen, Ray stopped when he noticed a large antique cupboard in the corner. Towson saw him pointing.

"Chinese porcelain," Ray said with some excitement. "This entire cabinet is filled with Chinese porcelain."

Towson's eyes widened, pleased with the observation. "Well, I'm impressed. Yes, that is indeed genuine Export China, rare and expensive. Not one person in a thousand would know that."

Towson opened the cabinet's glass-paneled door, and took out a cup and saucer. He held out the lustrous blue and white cup and saucer. Ray folded his arms and stepped back, reluctant to touch them. Towson carried them into the huge kitchen. "The Chinese developed porcelain over two thousand years ago. These aren't quite that old." He smiled at his little joke, and set the cup and saucer on a kitchen counter.

Ray said, "No, not two thousand. Yet, easily two or three hundred years old. And you have a cabinet full of them. I'm used to seeing such items behind glass in a museum." As fascinated as Ray was by the unexpected porcelain find, unless Tammy was hiding in a back room, he was wasting time here. This man couldn't help him. He had to politely go along and then soon leave.

Ray leaned closer to examine the cup and saucer. "I've studied some on seventeenth century history. He carefully turned the cup to examine it without picking it up. "As you know, trade was between China and wealthy Europeans. Mind if I tap the cup with this spoon?"

Towson gave a nod, but the slight frown on his face said he wasn't so sure.

“Chinese porcelain like this was all the rage. The upper classes just had to show off their china.” With a gentle tap, the cup rang out with a clear bell tone. “Any ship going near China tried to load up with this valuable cargo.” Ray then held the saucer high to verify that light could pass through it. “In the nineteenth century, imitation dishes flooded the world and were referred to as 'china', even so they weren't porcelain.” He set the pieces back down. “All of our grandmothers had a set of 'fine china', some handed down generations. God only knows what it actually was. That said, without question, you sir, are in possession of rare and genuine porcelain.”

Towson nodded his head vigorously and grinned with satisfaction. Then said, “As you might know, foreign traders weren't permitted into mainland China. Canton was where they traded. You'll appreciate this; I have in my safe a trader's directory from the sixteenth century listing the producers of china and their representatives at Canton. It's original and in mint condition.”

“Worth more than all the cups and saucers combined.” Ray was interested, however, he didn't have time for all this. He didn't know how to bring up the subject of Tammy. He had to make up a reason for coming there and find an excuse to leave.

“I was given the collection ten years ago in payment for a large debt. Just a couple crates of extremely well-packed dishes, as far as I knew. Didn't even unpack them for three years. Didn't know what they were. He took out a dishtowel and wiped the cup. “Cream or sugar?”

“Are you mad? Don't tell me you'd serve coffee in that rare cup.”

“I bring them out like now, for my own harmless amusement. I'll hand my guest a priceless cup to use without saying anything. Most people don't react, the more knowledgeable might say, ‘What a nice cup.’”

“You said harmless amusement. However, I feel that it's harmful to expose something irreplaceable to possible destruction. If your guests don't know the value, they might get careless and drop it.”

“You're too serious. It's exciting to be mischievous like that. When it ceases to be exciting, I'll lose interest. I broke two when I first got them fooling around like this.”

“Not my place to disagree, but the moment you learned of the uniqueness of these antique pieces, it became your duty to safeguard them for all time. One never truly owns antiques. One simply caretakes them for the next generation. You may not see it that way, but you're now their custodian and protector; as when you save someone, and then become responsible for them for the rest of their life.”

Towson continued to fill the irreplaceable cup with hot coffee. Ray reluctantly accepted the cup and saucer. He didn't need this extra anxiety on top of his nervousness from this morning's episode with Loraine. He realized this man was sharp, and would soon get past all these social niceties and demand some answers. Why did Tammy direct him here anyway?

“Excellent. Now down to your business for being here. You must have some influence somewhere, if Meg Emerson invited you to her party. That was a high-powered group. Tammy was there. The tall, let's call her healthy looking, young woman. Did you meet her? You were talking with Loraine, right?”

Then Ray understood—they were all at Meg's party. He began to feel more at ease. Now, he could place this man who looked like a dignitary and had moved easily about the party.

Ray also remembered being introduced to an attractive woman his own age. Her degree of beauty was instantly intimidating. That must have been Tammy. How could he have forgotten? He could picture her now, a tall brunette with squared shoulders and high cheekbones who was by far the best-looking woman in the room, if not the state.

So, that's who he was looking for. That woman was raped? When he put a face to the name, the rape took on a chilling new significance. Strange Loraine didn't mention Tammy was at the party. And she referred to Tammy as her best friend, yet he didn't recall them talking. Plus, Loraine must be twenty years older.

“You might not remember me as you were fully occupied checking out Loraine, who appeared rather wild, by the way. She indeed has kept herself together. Not bad for seventy.”

“Wha...Loraine, seventy?” Ray tightened his grip on the antique cup and Towson noticed his astonishment.

“In that neighborhood someplace. Yes, must give her credit. Always worked out, took care of her body. So, why do I have the honor of you at my doorstep?”

Ray didn’t have a ready answer. He was still working on the image of Loraine squirming naked on the motel bed teasing him at the age of seventy.

Being evasive didn’t seem to be a good tactic. He had to get things moving and was running out of time. With all his casual conversation, the man didn’t appear to have heard about the rape. He took a chance. “In fact, it’s Tammy I’m looking for.”

“Oh, that’s right, you’re new in town. In the market for some property, are you? Well, Tammy can certainly use the business. She’s struggling right now.” He studied Ray’s face for a moment then frowned and took a menacing step toward him. “Wait a minute, I smell a rat. Why come here for Tammy? You want a Realtor you let your fingers do the walking.” His genteel manner was gone. “I don’t like people who use deception to get into my private home. I can see it now in your shifty eyes. What are you after?”

He stared fiercely at Ray, raised his fist, and then unexpectedly slammed it on the kitchen counter rattling dishes in a kitchen cabinet. Ray flinched and to his horror, the cup fell from his hand to the marble tiled floor. Pieces scattered like confetti. Hot coffee burned his fingers and splashed on his ankle.

Towson ignored the broken cup. “What’s going on, fella?” He was almost at Ray’s nose now with his eyes narrowed and full of fire. “You didn’t even know she was a Realtor did you? Who sent you? Are you after her or me?”

“You’re right, I didn’t know she was a Realtor.” Ray struggled to speak, his hand and his ankle burned severely. Trying to think fast he lied, “I misunderstood. I thought it was her own property she was trying to sell.”

Towson slammed his fist on the counter again, harder. “Another lie. You lied to get in here didn’t you?”

Ray didn’t dare answer. He closed his eyes. He didn’t know how this person fit into the puzzle, and he didn’t want to explain about the text. Since the man displayed some concern for Tammy, Ray positively didn’t want to be the one to tell him about the rape, and didn’t want to be there if the phone suddenly rang with the news.

“Sir, I’ve made a terrible mistake, I’ll leave. I’ll pay for the cup.” He made a move toward the door.

Towson stepped in front of him. “Not until I get some answers. Something phony going on here. What’s my name?”

“What?”

“My name, what is it?”

“Al...Thompson.”

“Towson. You don’t know who I am, do you?”

Ray slowly shook his head.

“Now *that* I believe. If you don’t know who I am, then most likely you’re after Tammy not me. Everyone knows you left the party with Loraine. Most likely, you discovered she’s a dried-up ice cube. Now you’re going after the juicy end of the scale with Tammy. You saw her at the party. You’re trying to track her down. So you come here sniffing around for her. You’re weird, truly weird.”

Ray tried to back up but was already against the kitchen wall. “Look Mr. Towson, I’ve made a big mistake. I apologize. I’ll just leave, won’t bother you again.”

“You’re dreaming about getting close to her. She wouldn’t touch you anyway, certainly not after I phone her.” Towson took his arm and gave him a hard shove toward the door.

“I’ll pay for the cup, whatever it costs,” He said over his shoulder as Towson hustled him out.

“No, my fault, and you’d be paying for it the rest of your life. Too bad about your coffee burns. Here’s something else to remember me by, a warning to take with you. You wouldn’t believe all the folks around Florida who would love to do me a favor. I have a couple of friends that do special things for me. I’m putting the word out on you. If I hear somebody is bothering Tammy, they’ll come after you.”

Ray was out the door. Off balance, he wavered down the hall. He caught the elevator just as a slender man in gray coveralls stepped off. The man smirked when he saw Ray sucking on his hand like a two year old.

Why would a classy person like Towson show off Tammy at a party, if she’s as slutty as Loraine says and not particular about her bed partners? Something must be up if the text directed him to this address. And he *did* get that text.

He had promised Loraine he’d wait a couple more hours. He’d give it one more shot. If he couldn’t find Tammy, then he’d go to the police. Maybe he should run to the police immediately. It might be safer than waiting for those friends of Towson to find him.

Chapter Five

Back on the street, hurrying away from the disastrous encounter with Al Towson, Ray spotted a drugstore. He needed something for his scorched hand and a phone book. The pharmacist sold him some ointment and a bandage. Ray pleaded for one stray, by chance leftover tranquilizer, but the pharmacist wouldn’t oblige.

Towson had remarked that Tammy was in real estate, and indeed, Ray found a listing for Tammy Jerrold. He hoped Towson hadn’t phoned her yet. She answered sounding businesslike and agreed to meet him. She suggested coffee and gave him directions to the corner restaurant near her office.

He wondered which Tammy would show up, the pushover described by Loraine, or the statuesque beauty under Towson’s wing. He pictured her again at the party, of course that was before her ordeal.

How can he convince her it’s important to report the rape to get her friend Loraine out of trouble? He doesn’t even know Tammy. What does he say?

The small restaurant had booths on one side, tables across the front window and small palms positioned in each corner. The noon crowd was just starting. She sat quietly by the window. She wore her brown hair chin-length and was dressed for her real estate agent role in a beige suit with a smart white blouse. All matched with a brown suede satchel handbag, which rested on the window ledge beside her. She was remarkably attractive and perfectly composed.

She offered her hand. “When you phoned I had to think a minute, now I do remember you from the party.”

He studied her face for evidence of the assault—no sign of physical distress. He supposed her stylish sunglasses might hide a blackened eye. And there’s the magic of makeup.

“I can see why Loraine would be interested in you,” she said. “You seem to be her type. Serious people tend to attract each other.”

“Anyone Loraine’s type should be locked up.”

“You’ll have to explain that. She *was* dressed a little flashy at the party. I don’t have the nerve to dress like that. She must have been high...flirting around.”

“Maybe I caught her in a merrymaking mood.”

“I didn’t know she had one. What happened to your hand?”

“Burn, I was careless. Bought something at the drugstore. Used my left hand to wrap it.”

“Without a doubt the worst bandage job I’ve ever seen. Let me rewrap it for you, I used to be a candy striper.”

“No thanks, it’s going to be okay.” Her composure surprised him. Cordial chatting wasn’t what he expected. This wasn’t a woman in need of solace.

“Should I be frightened or flattered about your phone call?” The waitress brought her tea. He ordered coffee. “You sounded surprised I agreed to meet you.”

Ray glanced at his watch. “Can we stop right here, Tammy. You have me confused. Why did you direct me to Al Towson?”

“I don’t get you. You went to see the senator?”

His eyes widened. “Al Towson is a senator? You’re joking!” So, Ray had not only aggravated a prominent official, he had destroyed his valuable cup as well.

“Sure, a state senator not federal. You were introduced to him at the party, didn’t you catch that? He’s running for Governor next year. Should be a landslide. I might be on his campaign staff and go with him to Tallahassee.”

“That explains several things. So, you two are an item, as they say. He’s helping you with your...problem?”

“Problem? You mean the lousy real estate market? No, he’s not helping me with anything. We were never involved. I used to work for him on his staff at City Hall when he was mayor. We’re not seeing each other. He just didn’t want to go to that party alone.”

“Just escorting you?”

“Yes, a holdover from when I worked for him as his personal assistant. He’d get loads of invitations to everywhere...you name it, and countless free tickets. If he wasn’t seeing anyone special, or just didn’t want to go somewhere alone, he’d call to see if I was interested. His driver would pick me up and take me home. Back then at a party, he might go off and huddle up with some people, and I’d spend the evening picking cashews out of nut bowls. That was years ago. Selling real estate’s a tough gig, and I get sales leads from being in the loop and being seen with him.”

For the last few minutes, Ray had enjoyed looking at her and listening. She looked so perfect there across the table that she took his mind from the muddled Loraine mess and the broken cup. She appeared to Ray as an educated, classy woman, nothing like the loose woman described by Loraine. This woman displayed high self-esteem and wasn’t likely to tolerate any abuse.

She sat back. “Hey, I’m doing all the talking. Why on earth did you go to his apartment?”

“The text message you sent about an hour ago.”

“Not me, how would I have your number?”

“I left it on your machine.”

“Haven’t checked lately. What’s going on?”

“I was looking for you. This is awkward Tammy. I know what happened. Loraine told me all about it. You’re handling it very well.”

“You were looking for me at Towson’s?” She pulled closer to the table. “Why would I be at his place?”

“I know you don’t want to discuss this, especially with me. But Loraine wants to help and can’t locate you. She’s worried.” He glanced around at the tables near them and lowered his voice, “We believe it’s important for you to report the rape to the police.”

With a jolt, she was up out of her chair shoving it backward and pointing at him. “Who are you?”

People around them stopped talking and looked over. She gave an uneasy glance around and sat back down. He stared at her unsure of what to say. She leaned toward him, and in a hushed tone asked, “Is this some sick joke? You think I was...raped?” Her face was getting red.

“It gets worse, if that’s possible. Loraine left you and went after Sonny Barner. Found him and shot him. You might be telling yourself it was excusable date rape, however now he’s dead, and she killed him because of you.”

“Barner? Barner?” She wadded her napkin and threw it on the table. “Why are you talking crazy to me?” She brought her hands to her face.

“I’m just telling you what Loraine told me.”

“Then she lied to you. None of it’s true. What do you have to do with it anyway? Get this, I didn’t send you any text. Nobody raped me. I have nothing to do with Loraine, and she has nothing to do with me. She’s definitely not a friend. We like it that way. Furthermore, I think you’re sick. Go. Leave. *Now.*”

This can’t be true. Loraine told him she saw Tammy suffering, and said Norma Martin was there too. Someone’s lying. He had to press it. “Take off your sunglasses.”

“You’re weird and I’m out of here.” She shoved her teacup aside and stood.

He also stood. “Not yet, please humor me. Just take off your sunglasses. Then I’ll go.”

She shrugged and propped her sunglasses up on her hair, put her hands on her hips and leaned forward challenging him with mock wide eyes. What he saw was an unblemished face with perfect skin and warm blue eyes, which at that moment were dilated with anger.

All at once, the situation became clear to him. He nearly collapsed into his chair. Loraine had lied. That whole routine in the motel room meant—what? There was no rape. She must have had some other reason for shooting Barner. “Oh, God I’m so sorry. Please sit back down. What have I done?”

He was there embarrassing this poor woman for no reason at all. He had no defense, no excuse. In a low voice, “I believe you and I apologize. Will you help me? Do you even know this Barner? Have you ever dated him?”

She sat down still agitated. “Do you know what fat chance means? He’s the town bug man, not that there’s anything wrong with that. The man might be okay, but definitely not socializing material. How did he get into this anyway? You say he’s dead? Anything else? How about those spaceships you’ve seen? And those CIA agents who are gathered in town ready to launch their sinister plot? May I leave and go back to the real world now?”

“I deserved that, I truly don’t know what’s going on.” Either she was lying or Loraine had lied to him. Neither possibility made any sense.

“You know you can check your phone to see where that text came from. Are you the one lying?”

“I did check, but the origin didn’t mean anything to me.”

“You have a colossal nerve to come here without even knowing me and laying all this on me. What sort of man are you?”

“An idiot. Nevertheless, I didn’t come here intending any harm. I should have checked it out somehow and never approached you. Believe me Tammy.” There was no sign she was softening. “I know you can’t wait to get out of here. One more question before you leave, are you friends with Norma Martin?”

“I barely know the name. What’s she got to do with this?”

“Lorraine said the three of you are friends.”

“Really getting strange now. She owns the Jardin Café west of town. She’s Cuban-American from up north somewhere. I had the real estate listing for the restaurant for a full year yet I couldn’t move it. In the end, she bought it through another agent. I didn’t make a dime. I’ve never even met her.”

“Another of Lorraine’s lies. I wish I’d never gone to that party.”

“Kind of cool of you to be so unconcerned about a woman’s age and leave with her. No one can accuse you of robbing the cradle. I guess all her cosmetic surgery can fool some men.”

“I figured she was a little older. At first, I thought she might be as old as fifty. Then I got up close and started thinking sixty. Then Towson said she’s seventy something. Aren’t seventy-year-olds supposed to just read books and play bridge?”

“Towson ought to know, he was married to her.”

“What?”

“Sure. Back awhile, before he was mayor. Her maiden name was Dellin. They met at a Mensa meeting. How’s that for classy dating?”

“Married huh? How’d she ever get into Mensa?”

“You keep implying she’s dumb. She must be playing you. Lorraine is smart and sophisticated. You’re really out of it, you know. For a minute there I started to think somehow you might be a nice, harmless guy.”

“Help me, Tammy. Why is she doing this to me?”

“When did she tell you all this?”

“This morning.”

“You were with her this morning, where?”

He hesitated and dropped his eyes. “Well, actually we were at a motel.”

She raised her eyebrows at that. “This just keeps getting better and better. And you want my help?”

“We just talked. I was enjoying an innocent Saturday morning at home, when she phoned asking for help. I went over. I had nothing to do with any of this until she phoned.” He leaned closer. “Is it possible Lorraine is the one who was raped? That could be it. She didn’t want me to know. She’s calling out for help. She was hiding her bruises with her sunglasses. That’s why she didn’t want the lights on in her motel room.”

“Or to hide her wrinkles. So you two were just talking in the dark, both fully dressed at all times, of course. You’re one sad case. Does what you just said make any sense to you? Let me tell you, Sonny Barner is no match for her. If he ever accosted her, she’d aim that death ray look of hers at him until he started shaking, then with a snap of her fingers he’d dissolve down into a slippery, greasy spot.”

“She seemed so defenseless, like she needed help.”

“Lorraine hasn’t been helpless since she started changing her own diapers. Then again, maybe she had some other reason for shooting Barner. If in fact she did. Anyway, it’s not your concern. Get out of it.”

“I thought I could straighten it out. I’m going back and confront her now. She has to explain all this. I gave her a deadline of three o’clock to get a lawyer. I won’t wait that long if she’s been lying to me.” He glanced at his watch again.

“Deadline? What are you talking about?”

“I told her I’d hold off going to the police about the shooting until three. It’s after one now.”

“Wait, wait, wait, you’re not going to the police. You are *not* going to the police.” She put the palms of her hands on the table and leaned toward him. “Haven’t you ruined my life enough for one day? Have you told anyone about my supposed rape?”

“No!”

She raised her voice, “Are you certain? I don’t want to be the victim in any gossip. Any such rumors could ruin my reputation and my business. Were you so crude as to discuss it with Towson?”

“No, swear to God. I was careful not to mention it to him.”

“You absolutely are *not* going to the police.” Now she was furious, her voice was firm and sharp, “Get this straight, if you mention one word of this malicious story to anyone, including the police...especially the police. I’ll sue you for defamation, or whatever I can come up with. Do you have any idea what’s at stake here? I get into big money real estate deals, people have to trust me. I live on my spotless reputation. It took me years to get where I am. Any little hint of impropriety could ruin me in a minute. You can’t go to the police. Loraine probably made all this up anyway.”

“But possibly she did murder him, and if I don’t go to the police, then I’m on the spot as a criminal accessory.” But he knew Tammy was correct. The police would interview her whether it’s true or not. She’d be embarrassed, and that would be the least of her worries. The story was too good not to leak out.

“Thanks a lot, buddy.” She was silent for some time. She took a sip of her tea. She folded her arms and stared out the window for a full minute then back at Ray, studying his face carefully. Then another sip of tea. He wondered if she wanted him to just get up and leave.

Finally, she spoke, “Well, perhaps I’ve been too quick to judge. I was certain you were off the wall at first, yet you might actually have a slight streak of sanity. I don’t care for Loraine, but it’s horrible if she was raped. I can picture her going after Barner with a gun. That might have happened. You’re on the right track after all. Give her extra time today. Wait the three hours. Give her time to find a good lawyer. Then you come forward without being asked, and you’re out of it.”

“But you said—.”

“I’ll be okay. I can handle the police. I know the chief and most of those people anyway. I’ll just laugh it off with them. Yes, this will work. I’m not getting involved. However, you can call me at my office if I can help. I’ll be there until late.”

“Whatever you say Tammy, I just want to get out of this. I know I’ve upset you, and I’m sorry. I’m glad you’re okay after all. Can we meet again, perhaps have dinner sometime?”

She rolled her eyes. “Get a grip.”

Toward evening that day, Tammy Jerrold was back at her desk, alone in her real estate office. Talking to Ray Reid had started her thinking. She had exaggerated the glamour of being associated with Towson. In truth, he had called on her less and less and then lately not at all. The business referrals had dried up.

She had gone on and on to Reid about how great things used to be when she worked for Towson when he was mayor. Looking back, had it been all that great? It sounded as if he really appreciated her. Well, he did and he didn’t. She had given him good years of her life. Hearing herself talk about the old routine, about following him around, now sounded foolish.

She had accomplished a lot, and it was through her own efforts. Sure, he had given her leads from time to time, nevertheless she was the one that made the phone calls, made the deals, and made all those closings. She did it with hard work, nobody handed it to her.

Maybe it’s time to move on. Market’s slow here. Nothing is holding her to Park Beach. She had thought about a change. She was tired of this routine, tired of pushing real estate, and tired of keeping the perfect saleswoman smile pasted on her face.

Although Saturdays were usually good days for business, she wasn’t in the mood to concentrate on business, not in the mood for people. She sat there ignoring the office answering machine blinking with unanswered messages.

A different ring continued for almost a minute before she realized it was her phone.

“Ms. Jerrold, please hold for Chief Oehlert.”

“Tammy, this is Bill. Bad news. There’s been a homicide.”

“Oh, oh,” she said. “I was afraid of that, Sonny Barner.”

“Sonny Barner? No. Tammy sit down. The Senator...Senator Towson has been shot. Call just came in. I’m on my way over there now. I’ll call you back when I know more. I’m sorry, Tammy. I know you were just like family to him. I didn’t want you to hear from anyone else. National news has already picked up on it. Don’t know how they found out so fast.”

She hadn’t heard any word after “shot” because she started shaking. The phone slipped from her hand. She sprawled forward across the desk, motionless except for the sobbing and the uncontrollable flinching.

Abruptly, the desk phone jangled unbelievably loud, and she jolted upright. It might be more news. She must answer.

“Tammy, it’s Ray. Can’t find Loraine. I talked with Norma Martin, however. You were right she doesn’t know either you or Loraine. I don’t know what to do now.”

She tried her best to keep her voice steady. “Where are you?”

“In my car.”

“Come over here to my office as fast as you can.”

“Why? What’s wrong? You sound funny, you okay?”

“Come straight here. Don’t stop anywhere. Don’t talk to anyone. Get here fast.”

She hung up and buried her face in her arms for a moment. Then she picked up the phone again, inhaled deeply, and punched 911.

Chapter Six

Ray drove straight to Tammy’s office as she instructed. When he stepped from his car outside her office, bursts of lights struck like lightning around him. Police appeared from nowhere and rushed about yelling, pointing guns, and shining lights in his face. More blue and white cars screeched up. Slamming doors, flashing lights and crackling police radios jammed his head.

The confusion in his mind matched the chaos in the street. He had expected a police officer would come around, ask about how he knew Loraine, and jot down a couple of things in a little notebook. Not an armada like this. Did they believe *he* shot Barner? His head felt full and warm and a knot was forming in his stomach.

The uniforms parted for a man in plain clothes. He displayed no gun just flipped his badge, and stated he was Detective Goddard.

“Is this about the shooting?” Ray could think of nothing else to say.

“Sir, I’m going to ask you to lean over, place your hands palms down on your vehicle, and spread your legs. Do you have any weapons on your person or in your vehicle?”

Ray answered of course not. The detective frisked him and turned him around face to face. The detective was tall and stood board-straight. He didn’t appear too mean, yet was absolutely intimidating. Ray’s hands shook and he fumbled handing over the requested driver’s license.

“New in town, how long have you been working down here?”

“Almost a month now, I guess.”

“You had ten days after obtaining Florida employment to get those Pennsy tags off your vehicle,” the detective recited calmly. “That’s a violation, Mr. Reid. As of right now, consider your vehicle impounded. Please give me the keys. Do you mind if we talk down at the police station?” It didn’t sound like a question.

Ray began to sweat and could feel his heart pounding. The multiple colored lights from police vehicles continued to spin in his eyes. He leaned over against the car door and tried to get enough breath to speak. “You’re taking me to the police station to talk about my license plates?”

The detective didn’t answer. He opened the rear door of a nearby vehicle and motioned for Ray to get in the back behind the webbed steel dividing screen.

Saturday evening in the Park Beach police squad room was busy and noisy, when they entered through a side door. Then the room became stony silent. All heads turned as the detective led Ray to a chair beside his desk. A uniformed officer walked by and patted the detective on the back.

“There must be some misunderstanding.” Ray wondered if they had already picked up Loraine.

“How did you know there was a shooting, Mr. Reid?” Detective Goddard started typing on the keyboard and didn’t look directly at him.

The detective tossed off the question so casually Ray wasn’t certain if a response was expected. What was going on? They must have found Barner’s body. That led to Loraine. She gave the police his name or someone saw him at the motel. How did they put all this together so fast? Or, more likely Tammy Jerrold is the one. She must have called the police; can’t blame her for being suspicious. Yet he must be careful about what he says. He decided to just not answer for now.

The detective studied the driver’s license and continued punching in data, “Previous address?” Ray told him. “Philadelphia, huh, what did you do up there?” He went on with the background questions: ever use an alias, any priors, ever do any time, present employment?

“I work at E.J. Bradford.”

“You’re a stockbroker?”

“No, I’m Back Office.”

“What do I put down...back office?”

“That’s what they call it, just put down, Office Manager.”

“Family in Philadelphia?”

“No family, parents gone a few years ago. Just a sister now.”

“What happened to your hand, been in a fight?”

“Slight burn, I got careless.”

“We need your permission to look under that wrapping. We’ll have it rebandaged, okay?”

“Just leave it off. It should heal okay now.”

“How do you know Senator Towson?”

That was a surprise. “Towson? I met Towson at a party last week, why?” Towson must have called them, angry about the cup. Most likely, he has plenty of pull with the police, told them to harass him. Yet, all those cops swooping down just to throw a scare into him?

“Where were you this afternoon, Mr. Reid?”

No sense to any of this. “Why don’t you just tell me what you want?” If they found Barner’s body, what does that have to do with Towson? With each fragment of information he disclosed, another piece might fall off his innocent bystander argument. He wondered if Loraine had been able to get to a lawyer in time. That’s what *he* should do. He could hear a lawyer telling him to shut up. “Should I have a lawyer?”

Those must have been the magic words. Goddard pushed back from his desk and stood. “You’re not under arrest, but we’re holding you overnight.”

“You mean in jail? You’d actually lock me in a jail cell?” He felt his heart thumping. “Look, you don’t have to do this. I’ll tell you what. Just keep those papers right there. I’ll come back in the morning, and we can settle the whole misunderstanding. Okay? What’s tomorrow Sunday? Do you work Sunday? Is Monday better for you? You see, I don’t really have much to do with all this. In fact, I was going to call you guys today.”

Goddard raised the file folder to cover his smile. “I’d be happy to listen to you. Are you waiving your right to an attorney?”

Ray shook his head. It was unfair, talk-or-go-to-jail blackmail. Blurting out the long Loraine-Norma-Tammy story probably would change nothing right now. If it took spending a night in jail for these people to understand their mistake, then he’d go along. The detective said he wasn’t under arrest.

Ray had to ask one question, “What does Senator Towson have to do with this?”

Goddard gave him a puzzled look and passed him along to a police sergeant. “Test this guy’s hands for GSR, before fingerprinting, and save every bit of that bandage in an evidence bag. Bag all of his clothes and shoes, separate bags for everything, of course. I got to get back to the crime scene, if I can fight my way through the reporters.” Goddard started to walk away then turned back grinning. “Check his alcohol level while you’re at it. He’s talking weird.”

Chapter Seven

It was later that Saturday night. Dark outside, but the lights were bright along the jail corridor. Ray sat on the edge of his concrete bunk staring at the back of the drunk zonked out opposite him. They were in one of ten small cells in a basement area attached to the police station. They shared two concrete bunks with thin pads, a toilet without a seat, and a dirty sink. Ray was now wearing a hot baggy jumpsuit. He wondered why his cellmate still had his street clothes.

He heard the metal clang of a door down the hallway. A short young man wearing jeans, a polo shirt, and dirty sneakers strolled down the jail corridor and straight up to his cell. The guard at the desk near the door didn’t even glance up at him.

“I’m Beau Cobb, named for my granddaddy. Chip Goddard told me you might need some stuff.”

Ray stared curiously through the bars.

“Local bail bondsman, official and licensed. I’ll be around in the morning after you go before the judge.”

“I’m not sure I’m even under arrest. You said Chip somebody?”

“The guy who arrested you, Detective Sergeant Ronald Goddard, Jr., son of the former police chief. Chip, like off the old block, get it?”

“Yeah, I get it. I’m back in the South a hundred years ago. Everyone is named Beau, or Chip, or Bubba, and everybody with power is related.”

“Don’t know about that, but he’s not related to anybody. I heard about him in high school. Was a few years ahead of me. He was on the football team, went to college, and was a Marine. I decided not to do any of that, had some other stuff to do. He just made Detective. So, you think you’re not under arrest.”

“Just holding me overnight.”

“Heard that one before.” Beau glanced around then stepped confidentially to the bars and whispered, “Hey man, did you really off the senator?”

“What?”

“Senator Towson, you do him, whack him, close him out? They got a tip you were at his place today.”

“Towson’s dead?” Ray backed up and sat on the end of the bunk. He didn’t get it. Something’s wrong. Couldn’t be.

“Where you been? The whole country’s talking about it, all over the TV. I’m not supposed to talk about it, you know. Like it’s the big deal crime of the century for them upstairs. What’s your middle name? The *National Enquirer* wanted to know. They always include the middle name of assassins. Like John Wilkes Booth and Lee Harvey Oswald. You’re gonna be a celebrity.”

“That’s horrible, I liked the guy. They think I did it?”

“Hey, you’re the one dressed in gorgeous orange. So what is it?”

“What is what?”

“Your middle name. I’ll split what they pay me for it.”

He still couldn’t think straight and this character wasn’t helping. “What about Barner?”

“You know old Sonny, what about him?”

Now it was sinking in—not Barner, the senator. Towson was why he was there. That explains the uproar. No wonder all heads turned when the detective brought him through the squad room. He guessed they didn’t yet know about Barner.

They think one shooting is a big deal, wait until they discover Barner’s body; they’ll bring in Loraine for sure. Ray had been with her today as well. Within a few short hours, he realized, he was with the perpetrator of one murder and visiting with the victim of a second.

How’d all this happen? The police better get this mess straightened out fast. “What’s going to happen to me in the morning? The detective told me I wasn’t under arrest, yet they took my clothes.”

“Arrest isn’t what you need to worry about right now, thing is you’re in *custody*. Arrest can mean a lot of things. Custody means they got your actual stinking body locked up in the slammer. Learned this shit when I got my license. There’re people walking around on the street right now who are under arrest, but aren’t in custody because they’re out on bail. Know what I’m saying? Custody’s the thing, man, custody.”

“But don’t they have to arrest me, read me my rights and all that?”

“I keep telling you man, that’s coming. There’ll be a brief court hearing in the morning for the Saturday night junk. And in your case, the judge will find some reason to hold you. Your jumpsuit tells me you’re gonna be around awhile. They’re running a make on you right now and will search all night for evidence. Word is, whether they get a hit or not, you’re gonna stay in custody.”

“What about my snoring slammer buddy over there, why didn’t they take his clothes?”

“He doesn’t even know he’s in here yet, they’ll let him out when he wakes up, if he ever does.”

“I’ll miss him, he was such a good listener. Does he have any family?”

“If he does, they’ve forgotten about him. He’s a regular.”

“Beau, has anyone been arrested besides me?”

“Hey, it’s Saturday...hooker and drunk night. Oh, you mean for the senator’s murder. Don’t think so.”

“For any other murder?”

“Man, I don’t get that.” Beau gave him a blank stare. “What we talking about?”

Ray couldn’t sort out Loraine and Barner just now. He tried to play it through in his mind—arrest, court, judge. New situations with new rules that didn’t belong in his world. Rules he didn’t want to learn.

“Be back around in the morning, man. Forget about release, get comfortable.” Beau left.

Ray was past mere fatigue. The exasperating mix of Loraine, Towson, Tammy, and the detective added up to the worst day of his life; each was a puzzle piece that wouldn't fit into place. No use trying to relax. His head buzzed with confusion plus a headache. His stomach felt sick, maybe nerves, maybe hunger.

He heard some shouting outside, must be the TV people. From the hallway, he heard noises and the rising clatter of voices. He got up and stood at the bars. People noticed him and stared as they passed, looking in at the caged man on display. He moved to the back, far back, not wanting anyone to see him.

He sat huddled in the corner on his bunk with his knees up under his chin, as far away from the bars as possible. His jumpsuit was itchy and hot. He could smell the snoring drunk a couple of feet away. Over the next few hours, he would hear the clang of a door and indistinct voices. Blurry shadows would move past in the hallway. More shadows and voices as he slipped in and out of troubled sleep.

Chapter Eight

That night the news about the shooting raced through the small town. As rumor had it, the perpetrator was a hit man with a Philadelphia crime connection; a thug who had wormed his way close to the trusting senator and brutally assassinated him. Half of the citizens were phoning the other half telling them to turn on the TV.

When the Sunday paper hit the street the next morning, it confirmed the unbelievable. Outraged, the citizens read about the ruthless stranger who had shot the senator. Even those who had opposed Senator Towson in the past had to admit his death was an indisputable tragedy for the town and for Florida.

A handful of people had met Ray at the party a week ago and forgotten about him. Others were trying to catch his name from the TV item repeated every hour. Now, thanks to the newspaper, the entire town had the opportunity to frown at his blurred photo and read about this shadowy stranger from up north.

A record for Sunday circulation was set that morning, the paper sold out within an hour.

Ray was oblivious to the commotion outside. He was sitting on his bunk craving a cup of coffee when Beau Cobb hurried up to his cell waving the newspaper. "Seen the paper, man?"

"No, it was missing from my breakfast tray. They forgot the rosebud as well."

"Well, you're all over the front page." Beau passed the thick paper through the bars.

Ray was stunned to see his scary driver's license picture on the front page. Alongside, Al Towson smiled out in a charming studio pose. The headline, *SENATOR TOWSON FOUND MURDERED. ...his campaign manager, and long time aide, Anthony Hackett, discovered the senator's body in the Towson residence Saturday evening. Mr. Hackett was to accompany the candidate to a campaign function and became concerned when there was no answer on the victim's phone. Mr. Hackett and the building maintenance man discovered the body. A person of interest is in custody. The Governor is expected to make a statement later today. The Miami Herald is reporting it as an assassination. Party officials in Tallahassee couldn't be reached for comment. A spokesman at the FBI regional office in West Palm Beach had no comment....*

In the twenty-four hours since Loraine Dellin's urgent phone call, Ray had progressed from an unknown, to a person of interest, and according to Beau Cobb, on up to an alleged assassin.

"Beau, you said Goddard was a rookie detective. Does this town have the resources to make an adequate investigation?"

“You asking are the police any good? Not bad. They routinely bring in the state crime lab for backup, for DNA, and all the tricky junk. They have state investigators available in Tallahassee, but the local state attorney here seldom uses them. Doesn’t like to give up any control. Of course, he’s never handled anything this big. Now if someone starts thinking you’re a hit man from Philadelphia, the FBI will show up fast.”

Ray guessed Beau loved hanging around, thrilled to be on the inside of a big deal crime, and chilling with the perpetrator. “Beau, can you fill me in on a few things?”

“Well, here’s how it is, man. I’m not gonna make anything off your bail bond, you know, because like there won’t be any. Gonna cost you if you want services. I’m not sure if the tabloids are gonna come through like they said and buy my story. Hey, that reminds me, they want me to sneak out a picture of you.”

“Absolutely not!” Ray hoped the guy was joking about the tabloids. “How about twenty bucks to get a couple of things for me and fill me in a bit?” Ray wondered if the cops were also paying Beau to report these conversations.

“Are you one of those rich guys? You look like one of those trust fund babies.”

“Getting poorer by the minute.”

“Okay, twenty’s cool. Now if you really are a Philadelphia hit man, all my favors are free.” He made a weak laugh. “Don’t want my kneecaps shot off, know what I’m saying? Saw that in a movie.”

“How do I pay you for things? They took my money.”

“I’ll keep track. Of course, I know a lot of inside police stuff from upstairs, can’t give that out,” Beau said with a slight swagger.

“Tell me how to find a lawyer on a Sunday.”

“You might not find one on any day. Word upstairs is no lawyer around here is going to defend the perp of the Towson murder. They’re afraid the lynching party will string them up alongside you.” He chuckled. “Just a little jail house humor there.”

“I know the judge will appoint one, if I can’t afford it. Nevertheless, I want someone competent. I *can* afford it, within reason anyway. Problem is I must find one.”

“The judge will ask if you have counsel, and you tell him you need help to find one. What else?”

“Did Towson have enemies?”

“Sure, goes with the territory. A man of the common people, so he stepped on a lot of big toes. So those people didn’t want to see him make Governor.”

Ray guessed Beau hadn’t thought up that cliché all by himself. “Who are *those* people?”

“*You* are those people, according to the talk upstairs.”

“What about love triangles, jealous husbands, and so on.”

“Don’t think much about that sort of stuff, I’m more into car chases, junk like that. Oh, I get it, man. You’re wondering who wanted him dead. So for twenty bucks I’m supposed to solve the crime for you?”

Ray tried to bring the pieces together. “Do you know a Norma Martin?”

“There’s Nutty Norma. She’d come over here and do you right through the bars. Just let me know.” He grinned. “Guess you don’t mean her. Let’s see, Norma Martin? Don’t think so. Is she hot?”

“How about Tammy Jerrold?”

Beau brightened. “Of course, I know *her*.” He plainly had given some thought to this subject.

“How do you know her? She’s a generation ahead of you.”

“She’s around the city offices a lot. Got a smoking hot body. You seen the rack on that babe? And the word is they’re real. Yeah, she’s pretty old. The only forty year old I’d ever bang.”

“You’re a man of high standards. Was she romantically involved with the senator?”

“Romantically involved? Man, I’m gonna start talking like that. You mean like was he doing her? Now you see when I talk, people know what I’m saying. When you talk, people have to think. How did you zero in on them two, you being new in town?”

“What’s your guess, were they...banging?”

“You think a powerful man like the senator is gonna let that nice stuff jiggle around him and let it go to waste? Get real.”

“I know she doesn’t dress flashy, but I was told she’s a pushover.”

“Only in my dreams, man. You’ve seen her? Is she gravy or what?”

“Spectacular,” Ray said going along with it.

“Didn’t think of spectacular, that’s cool. So the dude’s looking for a get-out-of-jail-free card. Depends on the evidence don’t it? Depends on how it all shakes down. You can have many suspects, all of them with shitty alibis, and it don’t mean zip, if the lab puts you at the crime scene. And that’s just what they did.”

“What?”

“Oh, wasn’t supposed to say nothing. I guess you’ll find out soon enough. They found something proves you pulled the trigger on the senator.”

No question about how serious this had become, much more than expected. He must get a lawyer, any lawyer *right now*. He sent Beau off to find a pad, pencil, and phone book.

Ray sat reading the Sunday paper. In the back pages, there were other pieces on the life and times of Senator Towson. Ray could see that the senator had lived a meaningful and important life. The editorial demanded justice on a scale befitting such an outstanding public figure.

Ray was all for justice himself, he was counting on it. He was rereading the editorial when he looked up and recognized Detective Goddard. The officer with him began unlocking the cell door.

“We’re making it official. We’re taking you up before the judge for arraignment. You’re under arrest for the murder of Albert Towson. You’ve the right to remain silent—” Goddard continued with the routine spiel. The weight of the words seemed impossible for Ray to bear. His whole body grew weak. The detective noticed the prisoner’s face turning pale and sweaty.

The uniformed officer ordered Ray to put his hands behind his back. His wrists were forced together, and with the click of the handcuffs, his arms ached immediately. He could feel his heart thumping with an intense force. Suddenly, he couldn’t breathe. He made a choking sound. His knees melted. He collapsed forward. The officer tried to hold him up.

Goddard rushed into the cell just as the prisoner pitched forward and vomited wildly onto the wall and bunk. They lifted him onto the opposite bunk. Goddard quickly loosened the jumpsuit and motioned for the officer to remove the cuffs. “Let him relax then hook him up in front from now on, not in the back.”

Upon lying down, the color returned to Ray’s face, although he was still shaking. He gave the detective a meek smile. “Sorry, I’ve never been gagged like that before.”

“We didn’t gag you.”

“You didn’t gag me? Oh, I thought you did.”

“We would never gag you. Are you diabetic or taking any medications?”

Ray shook his head and slowly brought himself upright on the bunk.

“You okay now? Want to see a doctor?”

“Okay, now. This is all very disturbing. You definitely can’t arrest me. I definitely can’t remain in jail.”

The detective took Ray upstairs and completed the booking ritual, and then transported the prisoner across the boulevard to the Court House. The detective sat with him in a small room off the courtroom

until his case was called. A brief Sunday morning arraignment for the Saturday night offenders was routine. Other cases were DUI and minor wrongdoings; Ray Reid was a big deal.

The judge asked Ray if he was financially able and desirous of employing counsel. He said he was, although he hadn't been able to locate a lawyer. Whereupon, the judge postponed the First Appearance for another twenty-four hours, and instructed the State Attorney's Office to assist in finding suitable counsel for the defendant. The proceeding was short and dreadfully frightening.

They took him back to his jail cell. Last night, when they first put him in this cell, it was frustrating to be misunderstood, but he could bear it thinking the situation would straighten out in the morning. This morning, however, the authorities' massive power became clear. This time the metal clang of his cell door made him flinch, and the echo would never leave his memory. His small window of hopefulness had closed.

Beau, showed up with the requested writing paper and a borrowed phone book. Ray had intended to search for a hot lawyer, but now he'd wait and see who the Court came up with.

One name he did look up but wasn't eager to call, was his new boss. Maybe the boss would be sympathetic and offer some suggestions. He answered and coldly asked what happened, as though he was the one person in the country who hadn't heard the news. Ray stretched it, and said they might release him at any time, although he probably wouldn't be in Monday morning. He'd definitely get back at work as soon as possible. The boss explained Ray hadn't been there long enough for vacation or any special treatment. "I know you're in a jam but a couple days, Ray, and that's it. Can't cover for you any longer."

He began to hate his newly adopted town. He came here because this is where the job offer was, just a spot on the map. He wasn't looking for any trouble. Would people here actually convict him? Surely, it wouldn't go that far if he's innocent.

He sat at the end of the bunk staring out between the bars at the gray cinderblock wall opposite his cell. The cold blanket of reality settled down around him like a fog. Need to find a lawyer, he kept saying, need to get out of *custody*.

Chapter Nine

Early Monday morning, after Ray's second night in jail, attorney Jerry Kagan appeared, sent over as ordered by the judge. This wasn't a public defender; Ray would be paying for him. He could take him or leave him.

Ray didn't know what to expect. Just give him someone who can get him out of there. Someone between a youngster taking leftover court-assigned cases, and an oldster rising from his deathbed for his swan song. He got an oldster.

His first impression of the man wasn't favorable. He shuffled in carrying a well-worn briefcase that appeared to be empty. Not exactly a ball of fire. Hard to imagine him in front of a jury. No doubt tall and good-looking at one time, now the old man was stooped-shouldered and a bit shriveled. His suit was acceptable; however, the tie would need a decade to get back in style. Well past retirement age, his dynamic practice days, if they ever existed, had to be behind him.

He sat down out of breath, muttering about Florida heat in November. Said he was Jeremiah Kagan—please call him Jerry. Said he was eighty plus but not to let that be a bother. Said he knows the law,

just doesn't move around so fast anymore. "Stop talking to that bail bondsman, Beau Cobb," he scolded. The lawyer took out a large yellow pad. "What happened to your hand?"

"Well, that's part of a long and incredible story. I was at Al Towson's apartment by mistake, and he rather lost it when I asked about Tammy Jerrold. Do you know these names?"

"Yes, go on."

"I didn't know he was a state senator, didn't know anything about him. Anyway, he thought I was trying to pull something. He yelled. I dropped the hot coffee and burned my hand and ankle. Naturally, the detective was interested in the bandage. They tested for gunshot residue upstairs. I overheard a cop say there wouldn't be any residue left because I had rubbed ointment on the burn."

"Did anyone else see you wearing that bandage?"

"Yes, Tammy saw it at the restaurant around one o'clock."

"Then the police got it backwards. The ointment and bandage went on about noon and he was shot later that day. Any GSR from the shot would be on top of the bandage, not under it. You see how evidence can get screwed up?" Kagan slowly wrote himself a note.

Ray liked that. The old-timer knew what he was doing. "You're hired." They shook hands on the engagement. Would the guy live on to the conclusion of the case, was an additional question.

Ray went on and related the whole episode. The lawyer squinted down at the pad, slowly creating his notes. He occasionally pointed to his ear to request a louder repeat. He kept writing for several minutes after Ray had stopped. He thumbed forward and backward through the pad's pages. "Why would Loraine Dellin make up such a fairy-tale? Two murders out there and you're connected to both, plus a rape."

"She connects me to Barner because we discussed him, and Tammy Jerrold knows I saw Towson because I told her."

"What do the police know? Did you tell them this story?"

"No, not yet." Ray tried to remember what he had said to Detective Goddard. "I gave him all the background info he asked for. He asked how I knew Towson and where I was that afternoon. I said I met him at the party last week. I didn't answer his question on where I was the afternoon of the shooting."

"At least you stopped talking." Kagan spoke slowly. "What evidence do you think they have to justify an arrest? Any prior arrests? Do you own a gun?"

"Nothing."

"Not nothing, for one thing your burned hand is evidence of an argument. Any previous arguments, perhaps at the party or such as that?"

"Didn't talk to him at the party. And he was alive when I left him Saturday." Ray was warming up to Kagan and feeling better. Maybe there's hope.

"Indeed, as far as we know, their total case right now is you happened to meet him on the day he was shot. Let's hope someone saw him or talked to him after you left. Someone other than the murderer."

"I thought he was going to phone Tammy and warn her about me. That would show he was alive after I left, but she said he didn't. Also, can we get the police to check out who sent me that text message with Towson's address? It's on my phone they took."

"We need to hire our own investigator." He drew a dollar sign in the corner of his yellow pad and pointed to it. Ray saw it and understood. Kagan continued, "Okay, here's what we do. They have you scheduled for a First Appearance in front of the judge at two. Before that happens, I want you to tell your story to Larry Moran. He's the state attorney for this jurisdiction. He has absolute power over your incarceration."

"That doesn't sound good."

“He has assistant state attorneys, but he handles high-profile cases personally. He’s a real cutthroat. Don’t expect any pleasantries. Even so, your statement can’t hurt. You’ve nothing to hide. I’ll go see him right now to set it up. They should be eager to get your statement, and perhaps we’ll get an idea of the evidence they have. They won’t drop the charges. Nevertheless we might do enough good to get you bonded out of here.” Kagan stood to leave. “Okay, before I go, is there anything I can handle for you personally?”

“Not really.”

“Contact a relative, collect your mail, put a dog in a kennel?”

“No, thanks anyway.”

“No relative for me to call?”

“No.”

“You travel light, don’t you?”

“I’m beginning to realize that.”

Attorney Jeremiah Kagan left and made the short walk across the boulevard to the office of State Attorney Lawrence Moran, located in the courthouse. Moran was indeed eager for a statement from the suspect. “Bring him on.” Moran and Police Chief, William Oehlert, were already feeling pressure from the public.

The chief was personally troubled about the crime for another reason. He didn’t want any crime of consequence to happen in the city for the next 173 days. That was when he’d retire. Twenty years ago, the town was smaller and simpler, and he was one of only a handful of officers. Something was fudged back then, because he was unmistakably below the minimum height to join any police force. He was the shortest one on the force. Some continued to call him “Shorty Oehlert” even after the City Council appointed him chief. “Hey Shorty, be careful some crook doesn’t step on you.” “Hey, I hear your wife calls you Shorty.” In another 173 days, he’d tell them where they could shove their dumbass nickname.

His office closet held a half-packed cardboard box standing ready for the day he’d clean out his desk. Retirement was close enough he didn’t bother hiding his gardening books and catalogs. He wasn’t happy having the new homicide to deal with; he just wanted to get out while still healthy.

The chief assigned the homicide to Detective Goddard, for two reasons. He was better than the other detectives. And he was a self-starter who most likely wouldn’t bother the chief very much.

Best or not, not everyone liked Goddard. Some in the department believed he had progressed too fast. Other officers also had a degree in Criminal Justice, and some had more time on the street. Seniority, as they well knew, wasn’t enough to qualify them for promotion to detective; it merely qualified them to take the detective exam. Goddard had aced the exam. Some officers were watching and waiting for him to screw up.

Saturday evening they had called Goddard at home and told him to report to the homicide scene. He was there when the report came in about Tammy Jerrold’s 911 call. He went immediately to her office. He took suspect Reid into custody that night. He began the interrogation in a casual, non-threatening manner to keep the suspect responsive. Reid, however, had asked about a lawyer, and the questioning couldn’t legally continue.

Sunday morning, Goddard had met with Chief Oehlert and State Attorney Moran who then made the decision to arrest Reid. “It appears I’ll be facing Jerry Kagan in court again.” Moran smiled.

“I can see you’re trembling in your boots,” the chief said. “How did you finagle that?”

Moran chuckled. “The judge instructed our office to assist Reid in finding suitable counsel, so I helpfully suggested Kagan. Reid didn’t know any better and accepted him.”

Goddard was surprised the judge went for it. Somehow, he felt guilty about the underhanded setup. In any case, it wasn’t up to a detective to suggest counsel for the defense.

He recalled that old Jerry Kagan had dropped out of sight two years ago after facing Moran and losing a dramatic case. Kagan had defended an abused woman against the charge of murdering her violent husband. Kagan lost on a technicality when Moran was able to keep incriminating details of the husband's evil past out of the trial.

The woman was convicted. Each Christmas, they say, she sends Kagan a pleasant card from prison, blessing him, holding him blameless, and thanking him for helping her. He hates the holiday season that foreshadows the arrival of the unwanted reminder.

Goddard always found Kagan straight, a gentleman who just never really made it. Anybody's guess how sharp he was now. Shouldn't be much of a challenge. Goddard felt sorry for him having to face the ruthless state attorney again. No one liked to interact with Little Bonaparte. That's what some called him, not only for the physical similarities—baby faced, short, and stocky—but for his imperious personality as well. Goddard certainly didn't care for him.

At the requested meeting, Reid gave his statement relating the motel rendezvous with Loraine Dellin, the text message directing him to Al Towson's apartment, the encounter with Towson, and the meeting with Tammy Jerrold. Goddard studied the suspect's face, and decided he didn't believe his own words. Goddard knew, considering the town's mood, even the most logical statement wasn't going to get Reid released, and his statement was far from logical. Moran wasn't about to buy some half-baked, innocent bystander tale.

Kagan concluded by saying he hoped after hearing the explanation of why his client was at the victim's apartment, Moran might permit bail while they checked out Reid's story. Goddard quickly protested, but it was unnecessary. No way was Moran going to let this character out of jail.

After returning the suspect to his cell, Goddard reported to the chief, who asked, "What's he look like, Chip?"

"Ordinary, I guess kind of nerdy. He's seems a little out of it. Made a strange statement, Moran is sending over a copy. Some townies were named."

"For example?"

"He claims Loraine Dellin shot Sonny Barner who had raped Tammy Jerrold. Can you believe that?"

"Are we talking about *this* town? Say it again."

"And Loraine was wearing a thong at a motel pool."

"You just ruined my day, Chip. You should never mention senior citizens in thongs."

"All pretty wild, isn't it? He does admit to being in Towson's apartment. You'll see when you get the statement. He mentioned Norma Martin as well. Do we have anything on her?"

"Not that I remember," the chief said. "Where are all these names coming from? Damn it, we have to keep a lid on this. If any of this gets out...the names, another shooting, and a rape rumor...this town will go bonkers."

At two p.m., Goddard escorted Reid back to the courthouse for the First Appearance.

Ray Reid stood before the judge and entered a plea of Not Guilty. Kagan immediately requested Pretrial Release. State Attorney Moran objected stating that they have a witness who can place him at the apartment on the day of the murder, that the suspect's prints were on cup shards found in the victim's apartment, that they have evidence he had argued with the victim, and that he was the last person to see the victim alive.

Kagan retorted that in a statement just given to the prosecution, his client voluntarily admitted he was in the apartment on that day and had explained the broken cup. Furthermore, the police couldn't possibly have determined with any certainty at that early stage who indeed was the last person to see the victim alive and, in summary, the state's proof of guilt wasn't sufficiently evident to deny bail.

Moran informed the court that the defendant was new in town and had insufficient ties to the community to assure future court appearances.

The judge remanded the accused to police custody.

As Goddard escorted Ray from the courtroom, Kagan asked him, "Did you have a chance to dump the calls on my client's phone and get the source of that text? Someone directed him to Towson's apartment mere hours before the killing."

Goddard moved closer before answering, "Off-the-record, Jerry, that text originated from an Internet connection at the Inn Towner Motel."

Reid jumped in, "Yes! That's where we were, the Inn Towner! That proves what I told you. It was Loraine. She wouldn't use her own phone it could be traced. She knew I was eager to get in touch with Tammy."

The detective was willing to continue the subject since Kagan wasn't objecting. "Or did you send yourself the text from the motel before you left?"

Ray had no immediate answer for that theory. Then he remembered. "What about this? Loraine gave me Tammy's home phone number that is unlisted. I wrote it on a motel pad. The police took it from me when I was booked, so you have it. It proves Loraine gave me Tammy's number."

"Yes, we have the note, still it doesn't prove where you got the number."

"But I was in a motel room. How else could I obtain an unlisted number?"

"Realtors don't have unlisted numbers. You guys are going to have to do better than that." Goddard knew Kagan would attempt the standard maneuvers. Nevertheless, in the end Reid would remain essentially helpless in jail, while the State Attorney's Office used their considerable resources to prepare a case against him.

Later that evening, Ray snapped out of his miserable mood when the jail officer brought his supper tray and told him some woman came in to see him that afternoon. Exciting news for a lonely person facing his third night in the lockup.

"Too bad it was after visiting hours," the officer said.

"Visitors, I can have visitors?"

"Yeah, you'll be cuffed while you're out of the cell, but sure, we take you up to the visiting room."

A visitor would be comforting. He could use some of that. No doubt, the visitor would be some official with a form to fill out or the bearer of more bad news. "Well, who was it? What did she look like?"

"Don't know, wasn't there. Some guy upstairs said she was a looker."

"A young looker or an old looker?"

"Didn't say."

His first visitor. Who would want to visit the town pariah? What he needed was a magical visitor, young or old, that could get him out of there. A young looker described Tammy who thought he was a nut, so it wouldn't be her. An old looker would be Loraine. He'd love to confront her, but she wouldn't dare show up.

Who else is there?

Chapter Ten

It was Tuesday morning, three days after the murder, and Ray woke up wondering about the woman turned away after visiting hours yesterday. Would she come back? He skipped the breakfast tray except for the coffee and eagerly awaited the jailer. At last, visiting hours. The jailer secured the handcuffs, and escorted him to the visiting room.

She sat on one side of a long steel table in the sparsely furnished room. Against the wall, an officer sat on a high stool, and a sergeant was at a small desk positioned at the main door. Of course, Ray recognized her: the friendly stockbroker from the office, the party hostess, the one with short blond hair, Meg—what was her last name?

“Great that you came to see me. So, you bring greetings from the office, I guess.” He was smiling for the first time since being jailed.

“Greetings from only me, I’m afraid. The company regrets ever hearing of you. I hate to tell you, your boss has the word from upstairs. Embarrassment to the corporation must end. You’ll be fired as soon as they can legally cover their butts.”

“They sent you here to tell me that?”

“God, no. I’m on my own. I thought someone should let you know what was happening. Too bad I accidentally got you involved with the murder victim’s ex-wife at my party. Did you notice I never introduced you to Loraine? I never dreamed she’d try to hook up with anyone, especially not you. I told her to bring a friend. She showed up alone and jumped on you as if you were the last train out of town. She was on the hunt, so she brought out the big guns. Don’t tell me her short green dress with that neckline didn’t do a job on you.”

“You should have marked her with skull and crossbones. None of it was your fault. You didn’t know Towson would be shot, and I didn’t know that I was walking out the door with his ex.”

“All the people at the party saw you two leave. Now they know Loraine slept with the guy who shot her ex. I’m assuming you slept with her...none of my business. When that juicy tidbit filters into the community at large it’s not going to help your case.”

“You’re quite the sales person, aren’t you? You just told me my job and my life are doomed, and I’m sitting here grinning, eager for any more bad news just to hear you talk.”

“I could sell water to a drowning man.”

“Good that you’re so successful at something you like to do. All your buy and sell tickets come across my desk, I know you’re good.”

“Not successful every time. I’ve been working on a personal scheme for about a month now, trying to get a particular idea into a certain guy’s head. It’s not working. I can’t seem to get the pitch right. He’s ignoring me.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll win him over eventually. You have a marvelous appearance and a dynamite personality. I hope I thanked you at the party for inviting me.”

“Well, you didn’t exactly go on and on about it.” Her mood seemed to change. She shook her head slightly and stood to leave. “Must run, I’m supposed to be out making calls this morning. But I wanted to see you.”

“You’re my only visitor so far. Thanks for coming.”

“Ray, I know you’re innocent, and it’s horrible you’re in this mess. I want you to know there are people who truly like you and are pulling for you. I want to be your friend.”

“Well, I appreciate that.”

“No, you don’t, but you will someday.” She turned and left.

He started to get up when the officer put a hand on his shoulder. “Sit right there, you have another visitor.”

He looked over to see his sister charge through the door. Was that really her?

She signed in at the sergeant's desk, and then strode across the room with a briefcase tucked under her arm like a shotgun.

She gave her brother a half-hearted wave and declared, "Okay, I'm here. Geez, orange really isn't your color. And you're still wearing those dumb glasses."

They had known each other as adults and used to see each other a few times a year on holidays and such, invariably at their parent's house, before they died in an auto accident six years ago. Although they both lived in Philadelphia, their last physical contact had been at the funeral. At first, Sandy would occasionally phone him, and twice she invited him to dinner parties. There was always some scheduling conflict, and he was never able to make it.

Now in her late twenties, she had changed. This wasn't the sister he remembered. She seemed sharper, poised, and confident. She wore her brown hair quite short, and just then it was swished around in sassy disorder. A slight ribbon of midriff peeked between her sleeveless white blouse and knee-length denim skirt.

His eyes were still wide open. "I didn't think you'd come."

"God knows why I'm here, I certainly don't."

"I'm really pleased. Sis, you're really—"

She threw him a bored look and interrupted, "Don't call me, Sis. Don't *ever* call me, Sis." She smiled apathetically. "Other than being arrested and facing execution, how do you like Florida?"

"Dad and I loved your humor," he said. "We'd fall off our chairs and mom never got it. I should phone you just to get a laugh."

"You're talking about earlier, before you finked me out to the cops for supposedly doing drugs."

"I didn't report you, mom did. She called some teen hotline. That started it."

"Geez Louise, you ratted me out to mom, and I landed in juvie rehab!"

"Wasn't like that. I was leaving for college, and my little sister was doing her best to ruin her life. I was worried about you. I thought if mom were aware of what was going on, the family could talk about it. But she imagined you acting out scenes from *Reefer Madness*. She wiggled out, called Juvenile Hall or someplace."

"Okay, so I was kind of bent, did a little grass, maybe some pills. Nothing heavy. I tried some junk because it was new. Something to do."

"You couldn't wait to be eighteen. I was afraid you'd never make it. You stole from mom's purse, tried to be a mall chick, boosted junk, smoke, and drank. Even stole a car and wrecked it."

"I didn't steal that car. Yeah, I did wreck it...not on purpose. Butchie Cooper couldn't make out with me, so his smooth-talking old daddy thought he'd give it a try. He thought I'd be thrilled and express my gratitude, if he let me drive his brand new shiny silver Buick. So, I drove his brand new shiny silver Buick. The crash part *was* somewhat thrilling. He lost interest in me fast. Anyway, I was just a kid. Old lechers must look out for themselves."

"You tried to win acceptance from some trashy older girls or whoever your model was."

"*You* were my model. I was dying to be like my big brother. You were so cool, so self-assured, and so independent. I couldn't wait to grow up so I could be just like you."

"I was in a fog half the time. I didn't know what I was doing."

"You dated all the cool ones."

"No, I didn't. I had one girlfriend my entire junior and senior year, and she dumped me at the senior prom...actually, she dumped me on the way to the prom. She got out at a stoplight and into another guy's car."

"I didn't know that. I thought you were so totally with it."

"I guess I'm not the person you imagined."

“Raymond, why didn’t you come visit me in that so-called juvie rehab center in West Chester they sent me to? They were releasing kids three months early, if somebody bothered to show up and claim them. Mom couldn’t deal with any of it. Try counting every hour for three months. Three extra freaking months, Raymond! Three more months doing shit work and trying to keep creepy counselors off me, because you couldn’t be bothered to stop by and sign me out.” She stared at him until he looked away. “I showed your picture to everyone there. This is my big brother, he’s really great, he’s going to come and get me out of here just as soon as he can.”

“I never dreamed it was that way.”

“Buddy you don’t know. Someone should investigate that place. Some psychology grad student set it up with a grant. It was a sham. No rehab going on there. I did ATP just once. That’s what the girls called, ‘Assume the Position.’ This one counselor took a special interest in me because I was the new stuff. That’s how they talked, ‘Did you get some of that new stuff?’ On my first turn, I stood up and kicked him hard. He couldn’t move fast enough with his pants down around his hairy ankles. I missed, but I never had to touch him. After that, whenever he looked at me that way I’d chomp my teeth together. He left me alone but made it shit-tough. That’s what your little sister was doing while you skipped down the yellow brick road.”

“A nightmare, you’re still hurting.”

“Every now and then when I’m out on my job, waiting in some law office or something, I’ll use my laptop to keep track of the bastard’s whereabouts. He moved to Delaware, but I know exactly where he lives, even driven past his house. I know his wife’s name, kid’s names, and where he works. If I ever get my law degree, I’m going after him...payback time. I’ve made that vow to myself for the other girls. It’s there in the back of my mind. Sort of like on my permanent to-do list: start cooking, learn French, and nail that counselor.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right. I knew you were in that rehab place, and I made no effort to visit you. I was in college and facing a bunch of junk in my own life I believed was heavy. I’ve thought about you in that place over the years, but it was too late. Perhaps that’s why I’ve been avoiding you, trying to block it out, hoping I’d never have to deal with it. We’ve talked since, over the years, you never mentioned any of this.”

“You never asked one personal question about me. Geez, you talked about the weather and asked how my car was running. Every time we spoke, all you could think of was how’s the weather, and how’s my damn car.”

He put his face down in his hands.

She looked down for a moment slowly shaking her head and waiting for the memories to fade away. Then she smiled and glanced around the room. “Who was the sharp-looking woman who just left?”

“Someone from the office, Meg...I can’t remember her last name. She’s trying to help me, but it looks as though I’ll be fired.”

“She is *not* just someone. That’s obvious because she’s here. Are you friends with her at the office? What does she do?”

“Stockbroker. She comes by my office every day.”

“Didn’t you notice her clothes? I recognize those slacks, Italian Prato linen, very in. I have no idea where to buy something like that, Palm Beach, I suppose.”

She motioned with her hand, and the police officer positioned by the wall first hesitated and then came over. “Officer, would you please let me see your logbook? I need the name, address and phone number of that young woman who just left here. Thank you.”

The young officer was bewildered, “Ah, I don’t think...we don’t...we’re not supposed to do that.”

Ray raised his hand and started to speak. His sister shushed him and kept going, “Just now, to get in here, I was required to write down that same information about myself. Your prisoner has a right to know who you’re permitting in here to see him. That log is a public record, and it didn’t suddenly become confidential. The sergeant over there, what’s his name?”

The officer appeared panicky, as though wondering if he should disclose the sergeant’s name. “That’s...Sergeant Lewis.”

“Tell him I’d like to speak with him, please.”

Ray sat astonished. The puzzled officer called for the sergeant, who walked over. With his white hair and slight bend, he appeared to be pushing retirement age, yet was still in good shape. No doughnut paunch on that cop. She politely repeated her request.

The sergeant replied, “Miss, I see you’re from Philadelphia. We do things different in Florida.”

She gave him a courteous smile and repeated, “We do things different in Florida? Is that what you said? What’s a good-looking cop like you doing with such an old cliché? Please put me in touch with the DA immediately. You people are interfering with the defense in a capital case.”

The sergeant chuckled, “Okay, show the young lady the log book. And Miss, if you’re going to storm through Florida like a Cat 5, you should know that we don’t have District Attorneys down here. That’s what I meant by doing things differently. Florida is divided into judicial districts, each with a state attorney who does the prosecuting. Just say SA, or ASA for his assistants, and everyone will know you’re cool.”

She gave him a smile so warm and beautiful he no doubt would tell his grandkids about it. “Thank you Sergeant Lewis and I apologize for my attitude. I’ll appreciate any additional help you can give me.”

She leaned toward Ray and whispered, “You can close your mouth now.”

“What have they done with my little sister?”

The officer brought the logbook over, and she started copying. “Wake up, Raymond. Can’t you read people? That woman is a perfectly polished piece of work. She comes in here offering her help, and you don’t even find out her name?” She glanced down at her writing. “Megan Emerson.” She stared at him. “Emerson, Emerson, got it? She’s darling. Where is your head? The question remains, whose side is she on, and why is she helping someone like you?”

“She was just here on business from the office. Do you realize everyone in this room thinks you’re a lawyer?”

“Not my problem. Okay, here we go. I read about the murder in your local paper. Tell me your story. Give me the short version now, we can do nuance later. Make it fast. I need to crash someplace, I drove straight through.”

Each time he told his story, it sounded more implausible to him. He barely got started when she interrupted him. “Who did you say invited you to that Saturday night party?”

“Her, that Meg Emerson.”

She put down her pad and pencil and gave him a frustrated smirk. “Let me get this straight. The young woman who just came in here to visit you...even though you’re in jail accused of murder. The one that just happens, by some amazing coincidence, to buzz around your desk every day, gave a party and invited you?”

“Yes...?”

“Geez Louise!”

“I know what you’re thinking, Sandy, but Meg Emerson isn’t interested in me. She’s a big deal broker, really in the fast lane. She took over a bank trust department straight out of college, made them a ton of money. They were thrilled, gave her a marvelous title, a splendid office, and paid her peanuts.”

“She probably quit the bank, and went into securities sales where she could be paid on commission,” Sandy guessed.

“Exactly, and she’s breaking all sales records at E.J. Bradford. I know, I run the back office and my crew processes all the paperwork. The hottest stockbroker they’ve ever had. One of the top producers in the southeast.”

“Next she’ll take over her boss’s job.”

“She doesn’t *want* his job, she makes double his pay already, and next year it’ll be triple. Her dream is to start her own brokerage business and to buy her clothes in Milan.”

“That explains the upscale outfit she wore.”

“You should see the list of high-powered names she does business with. People you see interviewed on news shows. She flies around the country meeting securities analysts and giving speeches. Her condo apartment is incredible. I’m just not in her league.”

“Geez, perhaps someone should explain that to her.”

He continued with the bizarre story leading up to his arrest. She interrupted occasionally to get the spelling of a place or name. While the narrative went on, and his sister made notes, he noticed that all the other visitors and the young officer had left. Visiting hours were over. Sergeant Lewis remained, evidently permitting them to stay.

When Ray finished she said, “Self-confidence is one thing, but wearing a thong at seventy? I think age twenty-five should be the absolute limit. Obviously, she set you up. Loraine’s a bad, bad girl, and she’s used you. I know something about users. I don’t get why she came up with the rape or the Barner shooting. You said you didn’t have sex with her Saturday morning at the motel. Did she come on to you at all?”

“Does lying naked on the bed with her legs spread count?”

“Then forget about her being the one who was just raped. Unless she’s an inflatable doll, she wouldn’t be eager for sex so soon. For some reason, she actually did want to have sex with you again, probably to tie you closer. Anyway, she read you like a book, apparently an easy thing to do in your case. I’m beginning to doubt your judgment when it comes to women. I remember your ex-wife was a doozy too. You married the first girl who was nice to you, didn’t you? Mom told me she wrote on her body?”

“I didn’t know mom knew about that.”

“On her body, you mean like on her hand?”

“No, on her breasts and stomach. Can we talk about it later?”

“You mean sexy words like, come and get it?”

“No, bizarre symbols. I’m not sure. I never got that close. Never got to see the boob job I paid for either.”

“Never got close? Poor guy, I never thought about that. Let’s see, you went without getting laid starting a couple of years before the divorce, I’ll bet, and then tried to catch up with a seventy-year-old.”

“She appeared younger by candlelight.”

“Of course she did, and after a few drinks, and with the flickering candlelight, at times she even seemed to move...almost lifelike.”

“Oh, she was lifelike alright. I’m not going to explain further.”

“I’m sure she really knew how to bounce a bed.”

“Sandy, age wasn’t a part of it. Do I wish that she was actually interested in me, of course? Still, seventy’s not so bad. You’ll find out about this age thing for yourself one day.”

“Maybe, in which case I’d insist on no candles and lots of booze. How many women at that party turned you down before you hit on Granny?”

“It wasn’t like that. I’m not like that. I never thought about leaving with her. Never dreamed she wanted to spend the night with me, and then she unexpectedly phoned me and...oh well, one damn thing led to another.”

“I’m dying to get a look at that woman. How about this Tammy, are you certain she’s being straight with you? Not that you’d have the faintest idea one way or the other.”

“She called the cops on me, but that was a normal reaction. She was close to the victim so was upset about his death.”

“Why were you running around like Dudley Do-Right anyway?”

“What’s wrong with helping people? After all, I didn’t help you.”

“So, you went for the granny-sex to ease your conscience about me?”

“I’ve had some bad luck with women, now drop it.”

She stood and reached for her briefcase. “Job one is to get you out of here. That means we’ll start our own investigation. Give me your attorney’s name. I can do legwork for him and for you. Start getting your ideas together. I’m not a lawyer, and I’m not qualified to handle your defense. I am, however, absolutely incredible at running around and pissing people off. Did you sign a statement?”

“Yes, was that wrong?”

“Not if you told the truth. I need a copy of it. Your attorney will have it. I’ll go see him and then crash.”

“Lawyer is Jeremiah Kagan. He’s probably still alive. You can stay at my place.”

“Cops most likely got a warrant and tore up your place. Know a good motel, someplace with an Internet connection?”

“Try the Inn Towner,” he said half joking. “And Sandy, it’s great to see you.”

“Well, take a fast look at me, because I don’t intend to hang around here letting you screw up my life for very long.”

Chapter Eleven

During those first few days after the shooting of Senator Towson, the citizens knew only that the nearest thing to a celebrity the town had ever known was murdered. Their astonishment soon changed into outrage. The anger would worsen, if they became aware of certain undisclosed details. Neither the citizens nor the media were yet aware of the alleged rape, the suggestion of a Sonny Barner murder, or the names of the townspeople disclosed in the suspect’s statement.

State Attorney Moran and Chief Oehlert had good reason to be worried. Just a matter of time before details would leak out.

Early on Wednesday morning, Moran summoned Goddard to his office. The chief was already there pacing around nervously, and explaining they couldn’t locate Sonny Barner. “He runs his exterminating business out of his house. No sign of him there, and his answering machine is full. If he’s alive he stopped functioning.”

Moran studied the folder on his desk. “According to Reid’s statement Loraine Dellin shot him. You should be out looking for his body, Goddard. Do me a favor and find it before some reporter trips over it.”

The detective took the chair opposite Moran’s desk. “I don’t believe he’s dead. He was Towson’s exterminator and serviced his apartment the afternoon of the homicide. CSI found a service receipt from

Barner Exterminating at the crime scene. Marked 2:15 p.m., Saturday. So, he might be a second victim, but he looks more like a suspect to me.”

The chief didn't get it. “Are you talking about the timing?”

Moran referred to his notes. “Reid's statement has Loraine shooting Barner on Friday. Now we learn that the next day he's working in Towson's apartment. Obviously, she didn't shoot him, at least not on Friday, and Reid is lying.”

“Or Loraine lied to him about shooting Barner,” Goddard added. “Apparently, Barner and Towson were both alive Saturday at 2:15 p.m. The question is, was Towson still alive when Barner left?”

“Barner could have shot him then or gone back later and shot him.” Moran started thumbing through the folder. “Okay, so we need to rule out a second murder. But if Barner's not dead then where is he? Now, what about the rape of Tammy Jerrold?”

“Tammy says it never happened and is intensely afraid the allegation might become public,” the chief said.

“We don't want it public either. People would go crazy if a rape were tossed into this homicide.” Moran held up the folder. “Plus, look at the names we've got: Barner, Loraine, Tammy, and Norma Martin. They may or may not have anything material to do with Towson's murder, but what if these names get out?”

“Fortunately, we have a good suspect in jail,” the chief said.

“That reporter, Linda Call, is asking me for an interview.” Moran frowned. “I can handle her, but we need a response ready in case the details of Reid's statement become public. Goddard, give me another briefing, I may want to point you in a different direction.”

Goddard opened his notebook. “You have the M.E. prelim. Towson died from a single shot to the chest from a .38, most likely a revolver, close range, died quickly. CSI found a second slug in the wall behind.”

The chief said, “So, two shots were fired and one missed.”

“Let me go back over some crime scene details,” Goddard continued. “Shooting was in the master bedroom. They found him in his underwear...t-shirt and boxers. A stylish robe was on the bed nearby. He may have been dressing or undressing. His blood was limited to the antique rug under his body except for minuscule traces leading out of the bedroom. Someone has his blood on the bottom of his or her shoes.”

“Caught in his shorts suggests someone he knew. No defensive or scrimmage wounds. So, no struggle,” the chief added.

“...the bedspread, blanket, and sheets were all pushed down onto the floor. On each nightstand was an empty wine glass. The victim's prints and one set of unidentified prints were on the glasses. A trace of lipstick was found on one glass.”

Moran interrupted, “So, a female is involved...presumably.”

Goddard continued, “Yes, sexual activity is the obvious inference, except there is no trace evidence of recent sex on that bed. There was a hairbrush and a toothbrush with Towson's prints in the master bath. A second hairbrush and toothbrush with unidentified prints were in a small leather travel kit suitable for a woman keeping a few toiletries at his apartment. We're going after DNA, of course. Here's the kicker, the unidentified prints in the bathroom don't match those on the wine glasses.”

“Wait a minute,” Moran said. “There are two sets of unidentified prints? Tell me again, Goddard, because that doesn't fit. You said the bed was messed up, and a wine glass was on each nightstand. I get that picture so far. However, the prints on the wine glasses don't match the prints found on the female items in the bathroom.”

“Indicating a second woman,” Goddard suggested. “I say woman because of the lipstick trace on the rim of the glass. As expected, there are the usual other unidentified prints around in other places. In the kitchen, CSI found a large shard of a cup under a cabinet recessed toe-kick apparently undetected, out of sight. We figure whoever picked up the other pieces overlooked it. That one piece had an oily film on it, smelled like insecticide. Reid’s prints are on that shard. Remember he admitted he dropped a cup.”

“The apartment wasn’t disturbed otherwise, no apparent robbery,” the chief said. “On the face of it, Towson was murdered between two, the time on the service receipt, and six when Tony Hackett went to the apartment to pick him up.”

“M.E. says he has no problem with that timing and thinks closer to six,” Goddard said. “Hackett was to meet Towson to take him to a banquet for a campaign speech. Towson didn’t answer the buzz. Hackett phoned, no response. The maintenance man let him in. Hackett called out, walked around, and saw the body in the bedroom.”

“Did you check out Hackett?” Moran asked.

“He’s in the clear, I believe. He was in Tallahassee overnight Friday,” Goddard said, “and headed back around noon. We checked his phone. He called Towson three times from the Turnpike. The last attempt was around five. He got no answer the last time, so was concerned and drove straight to Towson’s. The rest agrees with what the maintenance guy told us.”

“We sent the rug and Reid’s clothing to the lab. We’re waiting for the follow-up report from CSI,” the chief said. “We’re interviewing every occupant of the building.”

“I talked to Tammy,” Goddard said. “According to her, she met Reid at the restaurant around twelve-thirty. Reid left after thirty minutes saying he was going to find Loraine. Tammy went back to her office. So Reid’s whereabouts are unknown from one o’clock until I picked him up at six-thirty.”

“I like Reid for this, but an immediate concern here is Barner,” Moran said. “Get more men on that angle, Chief. If he’s alive, then find him. If he’s dead, find his body. There may be a larger plot. What do you think, Goddard?”

“Barner could be the murderer and he ran. First, he just happens to service the Towson’s apartment a couple of hours before the shooting. And then he’s missing. Or, maybe he got in somebody’s way and his body is now sprawled out in his house. I’d like to search it.”

“Great idea, but you can’t,” Moran said. “We’d never get a court order to go in there, not this early. And if he’s involved in the murder, we can’t risk any findings being tossed out by the judge.” He turned to Goddard smirking. “Yes, too bad you can’t search his house.”

“If that’s all, I need to get back on the street.” Goddard left knowing exactly where he needed to go next. He looked up Sonny Barner’s address.

Barner’s small house was on a corner lot visible from two sides, exposing any vehicle parked on the street. Goddard drove up a dirt driveway at the rear and parked unnoticed in the ragged carport. At the rear door, he found an undemanding key-in-knob lock. He slid a plastic card along the jam, and the bolt moved enough to open the door.

All he needed was a minute inside. No detailed search, just a quick check, for a dead body or signs of a struggle, and Goddard would be out of there. He walked through the kitchen and dining area to the sparsely-furnished living room at the front. The place was standard bachelor-mess. Two old pump shotguns were resting in the corner of a hall closet. He held them up and smelled them. He didn’t know why, habit he guessed. The murder weapon was a .38 revolver, not a shotgun. Neither had been fired recently. Another door off the hall opened to a small bedroom jammed with boxes, tools, hoses, and containers smelling of chemicals.

He found something interesting in the other bedroom. On the computer desk was a large framed photograph of a naked woman. Beautiful with full breasts, sitting upright and posed looking into the

camera, with her hands resting on her spread knees. Looped over one corner of the picture frame like a souvenir, was a real blue bra. Matching panties were hooked on the other side. They didn't look new.

Goddard started to walk away when he realized something about the photo. He leaned closer. He recognized the woman. At least he recognized her face. It was Tammy Jerrold.

He studied the photo for signs of a paste-up. It was seamless. Indeed, it seemed to be Tammy posed there. Probably digitized software was used to put her head on someone's body.

Goddard's only concern was Barner possibly lying dead in the place. On his way out through the kitchen, he paused at the refrigerator; covered with cards, notes and an interesting newspaper clipping. The old clipping from the society page showed Senator Towson in his tuxedo standing with a group of people and Tammy Jerrold at his side. The image of Towson was crossed out with a red felt-tip. Interesting. But there was no dead body in that house.

Driving back downtown, he was waiting at a traffic light when a lipstick-red Miata dashed across the intersection directly in front of him. He had noticed the little convertible with the top down and bearing Pennsylvania plates earlier that day and had followed it for a while, watching the driver's short brown hair scattering about in the wind. He knew who was driving. He turned and followed.

Sandy Reid pulled into a space in front of the real estate office. The dark gray Impala she had noticed following her pulled across behind her, blocking her. Easy to spot a cop even in an unmarked car, she thought, they always sit up so straight.

She watched him walk up to the side of her convertible, and open his jacket slightly to show the badge clipped on his belt. Hot looking cop, she decided. Get him a decent sports jacket, and he could model for GQ. She looked up at him. "You don't want to look in my trunk, do you?" He didn't look amused.

"License, and please remove your sunglasses, Miss."

"Of course, is it sergeant or lieutenant?" She reset her sunglasses on top of her hair, reached for her handbag, and found her license. "May I get out of my car, please?"

She didn't mind him throwing a glance down her blouse, but he was over six feet, and she wanted to deny him the psychological advantage of standing above her. Besides, her denim skirt had ridden up and a flash of legs about now might be useful; there's more than one way to swing your legs out of a car. Let him pretend not to notice.

Goddard stepped back to let her out. He looked at her license and then at her: twenty-six, brown hair, hazel eyes, five foot nine, 120 pounds.

Behind the sunglasses, his eyes were unreadable, yet with the slight movement of his head, she could guess where he was looking. He was taking his time. "Leave something on me I might get cold."

"Sorry, was I staring?"

"Everything in its proper place? Maybe you're just trying to estimate my weight to compare it to my license. Cops can't be too careful these days." She noticed him looking down at her left hand. "I'm his sister. Not his wife. Not his mother." She took a slight step toward him, checking him out a little. She had a thing about smells. Up close, this guy smelled gorgeous. Love to see his eyes.

"Welcome to Florida, Miss Reid," he said routinely. "What's your business in Park Beach?"

"You can check my ID, but really that's it. My business isn't your business. Before we go any further, I'd like for you to identify yourself."

"Detective Sergeant Goddard. You can stop the performance. I checked with Pennsylvania and you're not a lawyer.

"I'm not performing. Impudence comes naturally to me. And I never said I was a lawyer. I signed your logbook as Sandra Reid and asked to visit Raymond Reid. I know you detectives watch for clues like that."

“You requested special treatment in the visitor room, you were at the Inn Towner earlier asking questions, running around since, and right now you’re outside Tammy Jerrold’s office. Obviously, you’re trying to worm your way into a murder investigation. I’m not going to allow it. I don’t want anyone, even an attractive woman, messing around in police business. You think you’ve some special status in this?”

“Yes, very special, I’m a citizen. Check that with Pennsylvania.”

The detective wasn’t used to challenges. “You’re pretty savvy with all this. I’m curious, would it violate your civil rights, if I asked what you do up there.”

“As a matter of fact, it would. Still, I’m going to answer the question, since we’ve taken such a liking to each other. I do grunt work for a firm of criminal attorneys. With white-collar crime, I find dirty little secrets hidden in records and reports. With blue-collar cases, I locate witnesses and talk to the cops when possible. We’re usually on different sides, however sometimes it’s to our mutual advantage to trade info. Did I mention I’m very good at this stuff?” She gave him a grin. “You need any help these days?”

“You may have been the darling of the police force up there, but you’ve absolutely no authority here, and you can’t scurry around questioning people. If you do there will be a problem.”

Her face colored with anger. “I don’t like your insinuation. My relations with the Philly police are strictly professional. I don’t drink with cops, don’t date them, and don’t hang in cop bars,” she said it sharply. “You must be thinking of one of your local badge bunnies.”

“Hey, slow down woman. I didn’t mean anything—.” He took a deep breath and removed his sunglasses. “...you misunderstood. I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking of anything like that.”

She stared at him. Loved his steely eyes. He appeared contrite, so she cooled a bit. “This is how it is. I’ll scurry around questioning anyone who cares to answer me. If they don’t want to talk to me, they can say no. You see, you don’t get to say no for them in advance. As for my authority, you can check that with the Supreme Court. Are we done here?”

He handed her license back. “I’m being straight with you, Miss Reid. We have some real problems here and don’t have time for this. If you interfere in any way with my investigation, I’ll deal with you. And I’m the one who gets to define interference, not you. If you don’t like it, you can debate the judge regarding the Supreme Court, and why you think you have a constitutional right to mess around in police business.”

“Nice try, Detective, but my personal problem trumps your job problems. You’re holding my brother for a crime he didn’t commit. On the day of the murder you couldn’t just let him wander away, I realize that. But by now, you should have crime scene reports, lab reports, and plenty of evidence that points elsewhere. Would you like to make a bet? Would you? I’ll bet my ability to set fire to the media against your evidence. We’ll see which of us folds first.”

"You're not going to push the police around."

"I'm not pushing. *You're* pushing. I'm holding my ground."

He frowned. “You really think you can handle this crime stuff, don’t you?”

“Don’t feel bad. Big-city Philly didn’t know what hit them either. You better get this tiny burg ready for me. Why don’t you admit you don’t have enough evidence to deny him bail? He’s new in town. He doesn’t know all those people he named in his statement and how they’re connected. How could he possibly come up with that Loraine in a thong? That whole setup had to come from her, just as he told you.”

“Our investigation is—.”

She interrupted, “If you guys think, if you can’t find the real killer, you can always fall back on my brother, forget it. It ain’t gonna happen. You’ll love reading my interviews and watching me on TV.

Innocent people will be embarrassed, and everyone will wonder how the hell the guys with badges let things get out of control. I can get real loud.”

“Sounds like a threat.”

“Of course it’s a threat. Geez, what do you think we’re doing here?”

She turned her back to him and leaned far over the convertible’s door to lift her briefcase off the seat. She could feel his eyes on her. She stretched out farther and took longer than actually necessary. No question in her mind where his eyes were and no chance he would forget her. She now had him on the defensive. She straightened and slowly walked into the real estate office.

Chapter Twelve

Thursday morning at eight, the chief was getting his first coffee, and Goddard sat thinking about his encounter with Reid’s sister. You can ignore some people, they just blend into the background noise, and some you need to deal with. Sandra Reid didn’t give you any choice. She had so easily placed herself right in the middle of the case, his case. She was so quick to blaze away at the slightest imagined offense. Yet somehow, it seemed refreshing coming from her. Not bad looking either.

“What are you grinning about, Chip?” The chief settled in behind his desk.

Goddard recalled what Sandra Reid had said about her brother’s statement. “Think about it, Chief, we catch Reid, and he’s spouting off a bunch of names in a scenario he couldn’t possibly have put together on his own.”

“So overnight you’ve lost interest in Reid. What happened to change your mind?”

“I don’t know. It’s just that he doesn’t know all these people and how they relate. How could he possibly dream up a tale of Loraine Dellin in a thong? I keep coming back to her. She and Reid have sex...her ex-husband is shot.”

“I get your point, but Reid does know *her*, and does know Tammy and Towson from the party. He had a week to put a plan together after getting involved with her.”

“But he mentioned Sonny Barner too. Barner’s at the bottom of the social visibility scale. How does this new guy in town know the guy even existed?”

“Okay, you’ve got me on Barner. Oh, you should know they’re taking away Reid’s loaner phone today. Moran told me he got nothing from the tap. Reid phoned his sister up there and his boss down here. That’s pretty much it.”

“I don’t think Moran has ever gotten anything useful from his cute loaner-phone trap.”

“Loraine Dellin phoned me late yesterday,” the chief said.

“Really? What’d she want?”

“Don’t know. I had already left. She left a callback.”

“I’ve got to get her statement. Even without the sex-with-the-killer angle, the ex-spouse is always at the top of the suspect list. Why don’t you call her back now? Tell her you’ll send me over there to let her know about the investigation. Imply that it’s a courtesy call. If I can get her talking, maybe we can get some unrehearsed answers. Such as, did she actually tell Reid all that bullshit? Also, does she admit to sex with Reid? Maybe eliminate her as a suspect and nail him. She’ll be a little off guard because she doesn’t know what’s in Reid’s statement. Okay?”

“Okay, except for one thing. Loraine Dellin has never been caught off guard in her entire life.”

Detective Goddard sat at one of the white round tables on the enclosed white porch that ran across the back of Loraine Dellin's white house, watching her arrange a teak tray with glasses and a pitcher of iced tea. From the porch, he could see out to the patio and pool area and beyond to the spacious backyard. Sliding glass doors connected the porch to a family room and kitchen area. Another glass door opened from the porch into the living room. Nice location, sitting on what passed for a hill in Florida. From the second floor, there was a slight ocean view.

He knew this house, had played here as a child back when she and Al were first married. Towson was entering politics, and this porch had been a popular gathering spot. As he recalled, she received this house in the divorce settlement. Back then, the house was all bright and sparkling. Even allowing for his exaggerated childhood impressions, the place seemed sullied now.

Harsh sunlight flooding the porch didn't enhance Loraine either, yet he had to admit she was in good shape. He tried to picture her in a thong as Reid had claimed, but the image wouldn't come. He couldn't imagine she'd actually wear one. But if she did, yeah, he'd probably look twice. "Do you use the pool much?"

"Ah, the interrogation has begun. I notice you checking me out. You're wondering if I work out. Yes, daily at the Club."

He remembered her from before he went off to college. His father had just made police chief. Al Towson had just won the mayoral election. He won in spite of her cleverly exaggerating the bitter divorce proceedings into a major campaign distraction. She would have preferred to stay married and play the mayor's wife, but it didn't happen for her. Sabotaging his campaign seemed the next best thing. Goddard was uncertain what she had been up to the last few years.

"Must be expensive to keep up a place this size."

"Is that code for my house appears shabby? To tell the truth I've been putting off some maintenance because a lot will be changed during the remodeling."

"Big plans?"

"Yes, I've decided to put a major amount of money into renovations." She passed the tea. "Everyone calls you Chip, right?"

Of course, she knew his nickname. She had called him Chipper and wiped his runny nose right here on this porch.

"Before you start asking, I wouldn't say we remained close after the divorce, just civil. We'd chat briefly at parties and such." She turned away from him and began fussing with the glasses. "Some love never fades."

He doubted that was true. "Sorry for your loss. We've a suspect in custody, Raymond Reid. Have you heard of him?"

"Save the nonsense Chip, it annoys me. It's all over the papers. I'm glad that man is behind bars. That's exactly where he belongs. That's why you're here isn't it? Shall we start over?"

"Sorry Mrs. Dellin. Your name came up."

"Which town bitch talked about me this time?"

"It was in Reid's statement. How did you meet him?"

"Megan Emerson's little soirée a week ago," she answered. "He came on to me. I guess you'd say I let him pick me up. How about that? First time for everything, they say. He was new in town, and I was a little high. I felt sorry for him, so I agreed. It might be an amusing way to end the evening. While we were driving to his apartment, he started talking crudely. I had second thoughts. I said I had a headache and asked him to take me home. He became angry and then started his pitiful begging. As a result, I went along with it, sort of a mercy thing, if you know what I mean."

He made notes. "You were intimate?"

“None of your business, yet I suppose I can’t deny it. I’ve never done anything like that before. An after-party fling for me, however he considered it the start of the romance of the century. I never dreamed he’d get serious. When he took me home, he wanted to come in. No gentleman would act in that manner. I had terribly misjudged him. I was frightened. I didn’t let him in. He phoned me the next morning. Said he loved me, for God’s sake, imagine. Pathetic. I tried to be civil at first, but he kept calling. During the week, he showed up at my door. He was actually right out there on my front porch. I didn’t call the police because I didn’t want to admit I’d been with such a person.”

“You met him later at the Inn Towner. Poolside I understand.”

“Of course not poolside. However, I did meet him there. Didn’t know what else to do. By then I was certain he was stalking me. There were times when he was here, outside my house, late at night trying to watch me. I couldn’t go on with that. Indeed, the next time he phoned, I agreed to meet him at a neutral location.”

“He phoned you?”

“Yes, he wanted me to come to his apartment. I suggested the motel. I didn’t dare to go to his apartment; he might tie me up and do whatever those men do. I thought I could explain I had no interest in him, and could let him down gently, so we met at the Inn Towner. I suppose it’s difficult to understand.”

“When?”

“Saturday morning, one week after the party, the day of the shooting. I thought the motel was better than being seen in public. That was a big mistake. I just intended to talk. He misunderstood. Thought we were meeting for sex. He threatened me when I refused. He was all hung up on Al being my ex. Al and I had laughed at something at the party and Reid saw us. He said he knew I was still in love with Al, and that I wanted to go back to him. Of course, now I regret leaving the party with the weirdo. When I read they arrested him, I phoned the chief. There you have it, Loraine’s big indiscretion.”

“I need to ask you where you were Saturday afternoon.”

“The museum most of the afternoon. Then home.”

“How long at the museum?”

“I got there about three and I left about five. I talked to a docent and a couple of guards. They know me over there. They’ll remember me. How long is this going to take?”

“Did Reid ever say anything to lead you to believe he might kill Towson?”

“Absolutely. He said I’d love Al as long as he remained alive, and he wished Al were dead. Is that what you mean? No doubt about it, he’s your killer. Are we about through here, I’ve got a hair appointment?”

He didn’t look up from his notes. “You’re lucky he didn’t decide you should be the victim. Do you know Norma Martin?”

“I know who you mean. I attended a luncheon once out at her restaurant. I didn’t meet her, but I assume she’s common, like her food. I think she’s one of those Guatemalans or something. Why would Al take up with a tradeswoman who fancies herself a restaurateur?”

“What did you say?” Goddard straightened in his chair.

“Guatemalan.”

“No, you said Al Towson was seeing Norma?”

“Indeed. They were seen places.”

“How about Sonny Barner?”

“The exterminator? What about him? I use him. Half the town uses him. He’s done handyman work for me around here.”

“So, he’s around here quite a bit.”

“Not lately. I used to save up little jobs I needed done, and he did them when he came around to do his spraying thing. I had to watch him every minute.”

“What do you mean?”

“I guess he’s okay but he’s a drinker. He smells of insecticide and whiskey, fortunately it kills his body odor. I caught him over here once in the middle of the night in my swimming pool!”

“That’s a serious intrusion.”

“Of course, and I put a stop to it immediately. He’s rather heavy-handed. Once I told him about a mole problem in the backyard. Later I looked out and he had a shotgun, I guess it was. I don’t know much about guns. I yelled out not to kill them. He wasn’t going to shoot them, he said. Just fire the gun down the mole hole. Said the moles go insane, stagger around for a while, and then wander off. I told him to put the gun away and forget about the whole thing.”

“When did you last see him?”

“I had enough of him. I told him to come for the spraying and absolutely nothing else. I guess he was here last month.”

“Everyone knows Tammy Jerrold. Did you talk about her with Reid?”

“Why would I talk about her? I ignore tramps.”

“Reid claims you told him you and Norma Martin knew that Tammy was raped by Barner, and for payback you shot him.”

“Ridiculous, why would I make up such an absurd story? Besides, I’m too busy to shoot someone whenever Tammy Jerrold forgets whether or not she gave consent.”

The mention of the rape and shooting didn’t seem to bother her. He wondered if anyone could ever tell when this woman was lying. “Can you think of any connection among Ray Reid, Norma Martin, Sonny Barner, and Tammy?”

“No, other than the Sonny-Tammy thing.”

He gave her a confused look.

“Never mind.”

“What about them?” He knew she was playing with him.

“Come on, Chip. All the police know how Tammy sleeps around.”

He thought that was ridiculous; however, he wasn’t there to defend Tammy. “Tell me about her and Sonny.”

“I’m not one to repeat gossip. Let’s just say outside of her apartment is a strange place to park his van overnight.”

Goddard let the whole Tammy thing go. “Okay, Mrs. Dellin. That’s it for now. We’re trying to punch holes in Reid’s story. If it became necessary, would you be willing to come to my office and make a formal statement?”

“I’ll do no such thing. I think I’ve been more than cooperative, but there are limits. I don’t intend to be interrogated further at police headquarters. Unless you can give me one good reason why I should do so.”

He couldn’t resist. “Well, you slept with the man who killed your ex-husband.” Some would see that as a love triangle, and a murder that happened because she went after sex with a stranger. That would be one good reason to lie.

Chapter Thirteen

Two hours later on Thursday, after a quick trip home to change into his full sergeant's uniform, Goddard was across town at Memorial Park, standing stiff as a statue, as expected of an ex-marine-officer. Among the mournful dignitaries at the crowded final ceremony for State Senator Albert Towson, were state and federal politicians, including the governor, a U.S. senator, two U.S. representatives, and a former cabinet member. Other expected familiar faces were present—and one that wasn't expected.

Goddard nudged the chief, and now neither was listening to the cleric. They exchanged a quick do-you-see-who-I-see glance. They were looking beyond the casket at Sonny Barner, alive and looking uncomfortable in his Sunday best. Goddard was relieved; he didn't need a second murder.

"Reporters are here," the chief whispered, "so pick him up without tipping them off."

Within the hour, Goddard had changed back into civilian clothes, and had seated himself across the table from Barner in the interrogation room. Moran and the chief watched through the glass in the adjoining room.

Barner was a tall, scrawny character who had never quite caught on to the fundamentals of socializing. It didn't help that his yellowish crooked teeth, big ears, and too-long face made him seem unapproachable. Yet Barner had made it on his own for some fifty years.

He claimed he didn't know anyone was looking for him. "Against the law now for a businessman to travel to Vegas?" His finger pulled at the tight collar of his wrinkled, white dress shirt.

"Business must be good to fly off to Vegas for a few days. You left town in a hurry, didn't you? Didn't change your answering machine. No note on the door. What was the rush?"

"Yeah, the idea just came to me sudden like."

"Where'd you stay?"

"Caesar's Palace."

"Cheaper places than Caesar's Palace. You a big spender? Where'd you get the money?"

"I'm a businessman, I have resources."

"Does one of your resources shoot bullets?"

"I know why I'm here. You're not sure who killed him and you're fishing around." Barner leaned back in the chair. "Forget about me."

"You own any guns?"

"Yeah, a couple of pumps. Want to buy one?"

"Any handguns?"

He locked his hands behind his head. "No, but I got a Uzi SMG I use to plink tin cans around the backyard."

"You're sort of flip with this, Barner. You've done this police routine before haven't you? You ever do any big time?"

"You've already checked my record, you know I'm clean. I just don't like to spend time with cops, no offense." He made a half smirk. "Oh, now I see your problem. You've got the wrong sonafabitch in jail!"

"And you're sitting there laughing because you know he didn't do it. When did you make the plane reservation?"

"Didn't, just walked up to the counter."

"Which airport, what time, when did you come back? We're going to check all this, you know."

"Oh, what day is it now? Let's see, left Saturday evening from Orlando, seven o'clock flight, back last night. Back just in time for the funeral."

"That's nice, back for the funeral. You and the senator, pretty close, huh? Funny, the word around town is you didn't like the guy at all." Goddard made up that one.

"He was okay."

"Maybe you came back for the funeral to be sure he was dead and couldn't talk. When did you last see him?"

"That day, the day I left, I did his apartment. Did it and left about three. Now you're going to be cute and ask if he was alive when I left. Yes, I think he was alive...at least he was talking on the phone."

"How did you get into the building?"

"He buzzed me in. I'm in and out of that building all the time."

"Where were you between three and seven, before you left town?"

"That when he was killed? Got to catch up on the papers. I had a couple other Saturday jobs and then left for the airport."

"I need the names of those jobs. How many customers do you have in Towson's building?"

"Let's see, four regulars, others are call-in's."

"So, any of those people could have buzzed you in."

"Yeah, sure could have but didn't. Towson did."

"No, I mean later." He moved his chair closer. "When you came back later, someone else buzzed you in."

"There was no 'came back later', detective."

"You must see some valuable stuff lying around in some of those homes. Do customers follow you around while you're spraying their place, going through their bedrooms and all?"

"No, they don't and that's why I can't have employees. Can't trust them alone in people's houses. Like I told you, Towson was on the phone while I was spraying."

"Didn't you have to wait for him when he had to go find some cash to pay you?"

"No, I bill him."

"I thought you said he paid you in cash."

"Nice try."

"Where did you get all the money for Vegas?"

"Some I have to bill, damn it. Some pay cash. You gonna turn me in to the IRS?"

"What about Tammy?"

Barner folded his arms across his chest and crossed his legs. For the first time he turned his look away from Goddard. He didn't speak.

"Look at me, Sonny. What about Tammy?"

Barner cleared his throat. "Miss Jerrold is a good customer."

"You ever do her?"

Barner stared sharply at him. His face flushed red.

"Her apartment...you do her apartment?"

Barner's jaw was clenched. He nodded. "Miss Jerrold and me are closer than people think. We're friends, in a way, she likes me."

"Towson was a real lucky bastard to have a young piece like that around whenever he wanted it. You can't blame her. A girl has to do what a girl has to do. Know what I mean? She didn't have any choice. That's what money will do for you. You can take advantage of people, of girls. God knows he was loaded, had more than any one man needed. Well, he won't be putting his hands on her again."

Barner was slowly opening and closing his bony fists. His voice was now noticeably shaky, "She wouldn't be like that with him. She had to put up with Towson. She's better off now."

"Yes, I understand, Sonny, too good for him. He probably didn't even appreciate her, like some guys would. Someone did her a big favor. She's free now. She can spend time with who she really wants. Look at me, Sonny, did you think you'd get lucky?"

Barner was rubbing his hands over his knees and didn't say anything. The detective kept staring at him. He didn't answer at first, just sat there frowning as though he was lost."

"In Vegas...get lucky? How did you pay for the plane ticket? How did you pay for your room in Vegas? Where'd you get the gambling money? We're going to find out everything."

"You're trying to confuse me. I didn't rip him off and I didn't kill him."

"You spotted some money he had around, and you knew a rich guy must have plenty more around the place. You left as you said, went home and got your gun. Someone else buzzed you back in. You shot him and beat it out of town at seven. We're going to put it all together, Sonny. Now's the time to tell us about it."

Barner put his hands in his lap and stared down at the floor. "You twisted it all around. I wasn't thinking all that and I didn't shoot him. Can I go?"

Goddard thought that was enough. He still had some control and didn't want to force Barner into asking for a lawyer.

"I want the job tickets on the two jobs you said you did after Towson."

"They're outside in my truck."

Goddard walked out with him and stood while Barner searched around and found the job tickets for Saturday.

Goddard examined the copies. "Here's the copy for Towson, the next job is around three and the last four-thirty. None are signed by your customers. You could have made these up. Anyway, you'd plenty of time to go back and shoot Towson."

"I left after four-thirty, had to drive to Orlando airport, you know. I don't have no siren."

"I need to look through this truck now, Sonny, to be sure you're in the clear, and then you can go. Okay with you?"

"Don't you need a search warrant to do that?"

"Okay." Goddard held up the job tickets. "I need to make copies of these. Can I give them back to you later?"

Barner nodded and locked the van door.

"I'll see you around, Sonny. Don't start traveling around the country again."

The detective went back inside and joined up with Moran and the chief in the hall.

"Chief, I want a tail on him right now. He's scared enough now to get rid of the gun. If the gun's not in his house, it could be in his van, assuming he's guilty, of course."

"We're shorthanded, Chip. We have to escort all the funeral's V.I.P.'s out of town."

"One man, give me one man. Moran, I need a search warrant for his house and for his van. We'll keep a tail on him right up to the minute we go in. We can't let him ditch that gun."

Moran smirked. "Dumb bastard."

"You're wrong, he's not dumb. Didn't you hear his answers? He was sailing right along until I mentioned Tammy Jerrold, then he fell apart."

"He's dumb enough to commit murder."

"Is he smart enough to get away with it? That's the question. I've no doubt he could plan it and do it. Not smart for him to run away and call attention to himself though. Remember that Moran, if you ever murder someone, don't run, it's a dead giveaway."

"You sure hit a nerve talking about Tammy. How did you know to push his sex button?"

Goddard couldn't mention finding the sexy photo purporting to be Tammy in Barner's house, since he had no warrant to be in there. "He obviously has the hots for Tammy. He turned red when I mentioned her name. That might be enough motive for him to kill Towson. I wanted him to know we're aware of that motive. That should make him extremely nervous. When the guilty get nervous they make

mistakes, such as leaving town and trying to dispose of the weapon. The guy's emotional. Maybe he'd kill for love. Maybe he shot Towson, and the found money was an unexpected bonus. He's just committed a crime, gets scared, finds himself with lots of money, and runs off to hide in Vegas."

"What about his alibi?"

"Right now we don't know if he actually flew anywhere. We're going to check on his trip details. Otherwise, his alibi's not bad. He didn't have much time to go back to Towson's. And he needed a couple of hours to get to the Orlando airport."

"I'll get you the warrant. It'll take a little time, but you'll have it today."

Goddard collected his papers and headed outside to his vehicle. His phone beeped. The chief said, "Thought you'd like this. We're tailing Barner. He's not headed home He's headed for the bridge."

"Stay close. If he stops on the bridge, move in immediately. Don't let him toss the weapon."

After a few minutes, the chief came back on. "He didn't stop. He drove directly to Loraine Dellin's house."

"You're kidding. How about that, is he still there?"

"Just got there. I'll tell you when he leaves."

Goddard swung his unmarked vehicle into traffic and hit the siren. "I'll try and catch him there, catch them together, see how they explain it. Interesting, he's going to see Loraine. He ran straight to her. He had on a suit when he left here, so it's not a service call."

A minute later the chief was on the phone again, "Well, you missed him. He just pulled away from her house."

"Okay, keep on him." Goddard switched off the siren and slowed. Loraine, Loraine, what are you up to? What's the connection between an upscale woman who lives on the barrier island and a scraping-to-get-along bug killer? Has to be money.

Word came from the unit tailing Barner that he was now at his house. Goddard drove there. The officer who had tailed Barner said he'd been inside about ten minutes. Goddard radioed for two blue and whites and went to the door. "Where you been, Sonny?"

"Don't have to talk to you anymore."

"Is that what Mrs. Dellin told you? Did she also tell you I need a search warrant to come inside?"

"I knew that."

"Why did you just run to Mrs. Dellin? Are you tight with her like you are with Tammy? Why were you over there?"

"Came back from Vegas broke. She owes me for my services, hasn't paid in a while. Thought maybe I could collect something."

"Did she pay you?"

"Cried that she didn't have it. Told me to bill her. Jesus, what's she think I've been doing for the last three months? Like I don't need the money and the rich bitch does."

"We're going to search your house and your van, Sonny. A search warrant is on the way, and you'll get a copy. You can give us permission to start the search right now and get these police vehicles away from your house sooner, or we can sit here waiting until more police vehicles with lights flashing bring us the warrant."

Barner nodded to go ahead. For the next hour, Goddard and the uniformed officers searched the house and the van. The only weapons found in the house were two hunting knives and the two old shotguns resting in plain sight in an unlocked closet. In the van, hidden on a tool rack, they found a sawed-off 20-gauge with the standard wooden stock replaced by a custom pistol grip. Ominous. They measured the barrel, and it was legal. Goddard told them to bag it anyway; he wanted Barner's prints.

He noticed the old newspaper clipping with Senator Towson crossed out was no longer stuck on the refrigerator. In the bedroom, the erotic photo purporting to be Tammy Jerrold wasn't in sight. He'd have loved to shuffle through stacks of paper and boot up the computer. However, the search warrant covered only weapons. Goddard called off the search and left with no evidence.

He wondered if Barner was sexually involved with Tammy Jerrold. Sexual selection is full of surprises. The Barner-in-love-with-Tammy part wasn't surprising. In any case, Goddard couldn't visualize her reciprocating, or extending the triangle to include Towson. However, there's no accounting for love. Just consider the men some women end up with, and vice versa.

Perhaps Tammy saw something in Barner that escaped the eye. Perhaps she did indeed pose for him. She definitely turns him on. How far would he go to get her out of Towson's clutches? Would that be enough for him to murder? Oh, yes, absolutely. Sex is a magic word. Just say the word and men will turn red and start stammering—some will reach for a gun.

Chapter Fourteen

“How's a dull looking dude like you attract way cool babes like that?” It was just after noon on Thursday, five days after the murder, and Beau Cobb, the bail bondsman, was talking to Ray through the bars. “My cop buddy told me you had two wicked girls in the visiting room at the same time. Said they weren't total mad ten hotties, but he wouldn't kick either one of them out of bed.”

“Kicks a lot of them out, does he? One is my sister, just so you know before you carry on with your fantasies.”

“Which, the one with the rockin' body, or the stylin' one? The stylin' one came back today. Hey, guess you know they're going to transfer you out to county jail today.”

“County jail? I thought they'd keep me here until the trial.”

“No, this city jail is like the holding tank. You got locked up last Saturday; you're long overdue for transfer to CJ. I don't like to go out there, that's a serious place, you know. Bunch of stinking cave men in crowded rooms with not much supervision.”

Going from this place to some place worse had never occurred to Ray. This terrible place suddenly felt good. The liberal visiting hours here at city jail let his spirit escape. It had made all the difference. All that was ending?

“Here you're sitting around drinking coffee and socializing with city police. Out there you're facing what they call Correctional Officers, who never loosen the grip on their billy clubs.”

“Do you have attorney Jerry Kagan in your directory, Beau? Call him for me, please. I'll pay you.”

Beau smiled, punched up the number, and after a quick look down the hall at the officer reading a newspaper, passed his phone to Ray.

Kagan got on line and explained the city jail was temporary to be near the courthouse for proceedings. Transfer out to the county was routine after a couple of days. He would talk to the judge about a delay.

Beau left. A few minutes later, when the jailer appeared and snapped the cuffs on, Ray assumed that was it, the escort out to county jail. But they headed for the visiting room. This time he remembered her name.

Meg Emerson carried a small plastic bag. "I took up a little collection at the office and bought you a couple of things." She held out a small bag for the officer to inspect, two paperback books and some chocolate covered pretzels

"How great, thanks." Ray held up the books. "The only thing I've had to read in my cell is the label on this jumpsuit. Hope you didn't bring Dostoyevsky."

"No crimes and punishments, just Woody Allen and Dave Barry." Meg noticed the handcuffs and involuntarily shuddered. "Had many visitors?"

"My attorney and my sister."

"That was your sister I passed in here the other day? Pretty. You guys are from Philadelphia, huh. More family up there?"

"Not anymore, folks died in a crash on the expressway. We were grown at the time."

"Sorry about that. Leave anyone behind up there? How's the single situation in Philadelphia?"

"Don't actually know. I was married, and after we settled the divorce, I just sat around feeling sorry for myself. I wanted out of there. Like many people, I always had Florida in the back of my mind. New beginnings, et cetera."

"Perhaps you'll meet someone down here."

"Not likely in here," he joked. She didn't laugh. He pointed to the books. "Very thoughtful but admit it, there was no collection at the office was there?"

"Technically there was, but I was the only contributor."

"I'm fired aren't I?"

Meg grimaced. "Police came to the office. They boxed up files and everything from your desk: company files, personal, everything. The company went ballistic. There was uproar in the office for the rest of the day. You're out."

Ray noticed Sandy coming in. She stood at the door laughing with Sergeant Lewis about something. She came over holding up the morning paper. "Well, Raymond, you have your fifteen minutes of fame. Hi, you're Meg Emerson." She pronounced the name distinctly for his benefit and introduced herself.

Meg said, "Welcome to Florida, I wish the circumstances were different. I'd show you two around. Yes, the paper is doing its best to keep things stirred up, nothing else is happening in this town."

"I'll change that. I'm going to find a couple more suspects. Raymond, I met with your attorney, Jerry Kagan. Probably okay, he's on the list of qualified counsel for capital crimes. An oldie but goodie. I asked him to hire me as his investigator for a dollar a day. That puts me on the defense team, which may or may not mean anything."

"We just talked. He told me they could transfer me out to the county jail at any time. He'll speak to the judge and see if he can get me a few more days here."

Meg said, "I hear it's miserable out there and dangerous. This is jail, out there is prison."

"I didn't realize I had it so good."

Sandy made a sympathetic frown. "You'll be on your own out there, Raymond. I'll be leaving."

Meg said, "So, Sandy, you just drove down. You're on vacation?"

"More or less."

"Sandy, you shouldn't have done this," Ray said. "What'll happen?"

"I'm not willing to lose my job over you, Raymond. Sorry if that sounds blunt. I'll do what I can as quickly as I can. I'm good at this and can accomplish quite a bit while I'm here. Nevertheless, criminal investigations and trials can take years just to get started. You have me for a few more days and that's it. Then I'm gone and my act goes back to Philly."

"Whatever time you can give me I'll appreciate." He knew she owed him nothing, yet here she was.

“I took a lot of crap to move ahead in my job. It’s perfect for a law student. I’m not going to screw it up.”

“I did screw mine up, it was easy.”

Meg said, “No, you didn’t screw up your job. You’re good at what you do and the company liked you.”

“Sandy, I’m going to make this up to you somehow.” He thought back to her as a teenager trapped in juvenile rehab, and he hadn’t lifted a finger to rescue her.

“Yeah, right, if I ever need a kidney I know who not to call.”

She was entitled to the sarcasm. He deserved it. Meg appeared confused at the remark.

“Raymond, I do need to move into your apartment while I’m here. I can’t afford the Inn Towner any longer. You have Internet?”

“Sure, and Kagan should be able get my apartment keys back from the police now. If the police left it all messed up, then hire someone to clean it up. Don’t you do it.”

“Not likely, I get confused operating cleaning apparatus like brooms. Now let me tell you, I asked questions at the Inn Towner. The desk clerk on duty that Saturday morning doesn’t remember Loraine checking in or out. Guests don’t need to go back to the front desk to check out so there’s no record of when she left the room. Two maids remember you being there, ‘Oh, that’s man in paper who killed that man. Was with pretty woman in bathing suit *muy poquito*.’ They said the police had been around, but they don’t talk to police.”

“Did you meet Tammy?”

“Yes. Kagan gave me Tammy and Loraine’s addresses. I talked at length with Tammy in her office. She doesn’t care much for you but otherwise seems okay. If that girl is a pushover, as Loraine told you, then I’m the Queen of England.”

Meg spoke up, “There are rumors of an affair with Towson. However, I’ve never heard any talk about Tammy Jerold being easy. In fact on the contrary, she’s a bit reserved.”

“Loraine, on the other hand, tried to shove me off her front porch when I told her who I was,” Sandy continued. “I was lucky she didn’t eat me alive. Something’s wrong there, Raymond. I can’t believe you got cozy with that nut case.” She quickly put her hand to her mouth and glanced at Meg. “Whoops, sorry, she a friend of yours?”

“I know her from business, that’s all. She can be a pain. Says all brokers are trying to rip her off. Sorry I invited her. Is there any way I can help with all this?”

“That would be great, if you want to,” Sandy said. “So, you deal in securities and financial matters. I guess you have access to credit and financial reports on people?”

“All the time.”

“Then I’m going to get real pushy. Can you pull reports on Loraine, Tammy, Norma Martin, Sonny Barner, Towson, and the Postmaster General? I’m joking about that last one, but you get the idea...everyone connected with the case. Is that too much?”

“Oh, Sandy, I’d like to help, but I don’t dare to give you actual reports on anyone. My securities license mandates strict privacy. What are you after?”

“Financial problems, lawsuits, convictions, and such. I understand your delicate situation. I suppose social security numbers are out. What about birth dates? With a birth date I can go online.”

“Can’t do, but how’s this. I’ll quietly review a few things myself and let you know if anything suspicious pops up. I already have files on everyone you named except Norma and Barner. I’ll get back to you. Give me your number. Must go now. You two have serious things to cover.” Meg said her goodbyes.

Sandy watched her leave. “An impressive woman. Okay, Raymond, where were we? Ah, yes, back to the seductive woman who drives her lovers to disaster. Loraine’s a *femme fatale*, and you’re a convenient doofus.”

“That’s not fair, Sandy, I didn’t want to discuss it while Meg was here, but the woman you’re describing isn’t the one I slept with after that party.”

“Bullshit, men will screw anything that moves and an astonishing variety of things that don’t.”

“Well, she wasn’t just a thing. She was something and a damn attractive something. Excuse me for being human.”

“And you were helplessly ensnared in her bonds of irresistible desire. Next, you’ll tell me she was also a virgin. Get off it. She lifted her skirt, and you charged off to tilt at windmills. Your bizarre sex drive got you in jail and got me down here ruining my life to help you.”

“If I were like that, we’d have had sex again at that motel. There was no second time in spite of her naked body laid out before me like some sexual smorgasbord. Don’t you understand? The melodramatic story that got me charged up came from the sweet Loraine.”

“Have you ever in your life said no to a woman asking for anything?”

“Okay, I’ll admit she conned me, but not back into bed. Although she sure tried. I didn’t know any of the people she named. It all sounded plausible at the time. But yes, I couldn’t wait to race off and make an ass out of myself.”

“Somehow, Raymond, you never quite know what’s going on with women. Women aren’t just tall Girl Scouts. You think you owe every woman something, don’t you. With your quiet childlike charm, if you ever did figure them out you’d be golden. Women like quiet men such as you, they think you’re listening.”

“I don’t care if I understand them. I just want to meet a woman who smiles at me because she means it.”

“Well, don’t get married again before I size up the prospect.”

“Do I detect a slight hint of caring, like you actually give a damn?”

“You’re right. I don’t. That was a joke.”

“Not difficult to screw up choosing a partner. How are you doing, for example?” He was upset and said it without thinking. He immediately wished he could take the words back. Her face flushed, and he knew he had hit the target. “I’m sorry, Sandy, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, you’re right. I’m guilty of screwing up relationships. The difference is I work at them, at least the worthy ones. Most went bad, but I was in there trying. But you, my apathetic sibling, just take up space waiting for someone to come to you. Someone who had better be prepared to call all the relationship shots, because your mind seemingly has more important concerns.”

“Wow. This isn’t really about me, is it? It’s about us. You’re talking about you and me. And my failure to redeem myself with you.”

“I’ll leave sibling redemption to the priests and psychologists.”

“I’m truly sorry, Sandy. I’ll try to change. I’ll try to work on our connection.”

“I don’t care what you do. My concern is getting back to my life in Philly. That means I first must clean up your mess. Where did we leave off?”

“I’m a doofus.”

“Oh yes, Loraine using you. I guess the Barner rape was the angle she thought would set you off. She wanted you to go to Towson’s, to see Norma, and to barge in on Tammy. She wanted you seen all over town.”

“She outsmarted me. If I had called the police at three o’clock, as I originally intended, I’d have been talking to them at the time of murder and would never have been a suspect. I’d be home reading a

book right now, and you'd be in Philly. I don't think Tammy understands all that. Do you think she'd be willing to come here and talk with me?"

"No, I don't. Tammy thinks you're straight out lying. She doesn't think Loraine has anything to do with this. She thinks you fought with Towson and shot him. That's what she told Goddard. She doesn't think much of you. She said it's tragic an accomplished man with such a promising future should have his life cut short because some jerk drifts into town and wipes out years of accomplishments with two little bullets."

"When we met, I felt there was something between us. I'd like to see her again."

"That's understandable, she has that big boobs thing going for her."

"Sandy, please get off the oversexed notion. I'm not like that. You don't know me any better than I know you."

"You think Tammy would come here to jail to see you? Forget about it. She's very upset. You know I don't have all the time in the world for this project of yours. I've a long list and seeing Tammy twice isn't on it. Do yourself a favor and forget about her. She doesn't like us, and you two simply aren't on the same side."

She looked at him sitting there, pathetic in that stupid jumpsuit, with two precious paperbacks and a bag of chocolate covered pretzels tightly gripped in his handcuffed hands. He seemed so fragile. So far, he was dealing with this horrible situation. She wouldn't be surprised if he soon flipped over into depression. She should let up on him. Stop blaming him for trying to help someone.

"Okay, I'll go see her, just to give her your message. Maybe I'll find an excuse to cross paths with Detective Chip Goddard again."

Chapter Fifteen

Being state attorney put a sizeable hammer in Lawrence Moran's hand. His office had no lack of possible targets to hit. Goddard had observed that the merciless Moran used the law to come down hard against minor offenders and unwary letter-of-the-law violators. He noticed Moran seemed to enjoy smashing little bugs with his big hammer. He relished those opportunities where he could penalize the likely innocent on a technicality. Such power made the fight unfair.

Although Goddard had to live with it, he usually didn't have to deal closely with him. Usually Person A shoots Person B, Goddard arrests Person A, a trial is scheduled, and Goddard goes home. The Towson case would be different. It would be complicated, and he didn't like having Moran so involved in the investigative part of it.

Moran wanted a meeting, so Goddard drove back to the station and headed for the chief's office. As he opened the door, he could hear Moran's high-pitched voice criticizing the chief for the lack of progress. Moran accented his complaint with his fist in the air. "Get in here Goddard, my desk is piled high with pink call-back slips from state and national media. I need something to tell them. I could be forced into a news conference at any time."

"You'd love those TV lights and cameras," Goddard said.

"The chief just told me that nothing resulted from the search of Barner's house. Let's go back to Reid. Please assure me we still have him nailed. You know, Tallahassee keeps asking me, if I need any backup for the case. I tell them I have it under control. *Do* I have it under control, Goddard?"

“It’s circumstantial but pretty good. I just talked with Loraine Dellin. She admits to having sex with Reid. He told her she wouldn’t really love him as long as Towson was alive. There’s your love triangle, your threat and your motive. The affair goes on for at least a week. On the morning of the murder, they meet again at a motel. He admits there was a gun there. There’s your means. We know they argued. Later that day Towson is found murdered.”

“And where was Loraine during all this?”

“She admits to being at the motel Saturday morning. The murder had to be between 2:15, the time noted on Barner’s service receipt and six, when he was found. She was seen at the museum at three and at five. The museum’s shift change is at four; she arrived on one guard’s shift and left on another. So she could have left in between. She could have left the museum after three, shot Towson, and came back before five.”

“Is there any way you can make it cornier?” Moran said. “Your triangle theory is all wrong because it’s unexciting. I can’t stand before the national media and tell such a boring little tale of romance gone wrong. It won’t get air time.”

The chief said, “But we’ve got the killer, we just need to nail down some more evidence.”

“We have enough right now to confuse the idiot jurors I get in this town. Even so, I’m not happy because I want to land the big fish behind this plot. Don’t you get it? The victim was a state senator going to be the next Governor of Florida. Someday possibly president. It’s a political assassination. Think big...murder, money, conspiracies, and influence. There’s much more to this affair. And it’s here in Park Beach, right here in my district! And what do you do? You hand me a tidy little love triangle? You’re missing the big picture.”

Goddard knew the state attorney dreamed about this case developing into some notorious national intrigue that would propel him into the U.S. Senate.

“This isn’t an impulsive killing or a crime of passion,” Moran continued. “Towson was an important person. When they bump off big people, there’s always money and power in the mix. Anyone can get himself killed over a boneheaded love triangle and some mixed up sex. Forget *cherchez la femme*. With the big cats, look for the money and power. Find the big connection. There’s something there! Has to be. What do we know about the third woman in the statement, Norma Martin? I hear she’s Latina. I suspected there was a foreign angle to this.”

The chief answered, “In this case, the total of your foreign angle might only be a quiet Cuban-American restaurant nine miles away. Have you eaten out at the Jardin? Rice, beans, all that good stuff. Norma Martin fronts for the owners and runs it. National crime has nothing on her.”

“Not good enough,” Moran snapped. “We know Cuban-American money interests were opposing the election of Towson. Where there’s smoke there’s fire. What does she actually have to say, Goddard? Let me see her statement.”

Goddard realized he had his priorities wrong. Moran had him. He should have talked to her much sooner. “She’s on my list. I haven’t met with her yet.”

“You haven’t met with her yet! Damn it to hell, you’ve been fiddling around with old-lady neighbors and the local exterminator. Meanwhile, the hit man from Philadelphia drops the name of Norma Martin, who fronts for unnamed Cuban interests. How many times would she have to bite you on the ass, before you’d turn around and investigate?”

“She’s next on my list to interview.”

“Slick work, Goddard. Only five days after the murder and already you’re thinking about talking with the principals in the case.”

Goddard knew he had screwed up by not developing secondary suspects. Norma Martin might even have skipped town by now or destroyed evidence. "I was headed out there when you called me back in." That stretched the truth.

"Reid isn't some jealous lover. He was paid to do this," Moran said. "Get out of here and find the big boys who hired him."

Goddard left and headed for the Jardin Café beyond the edge of town. He had taken far too long to contact Norma Martin and wasn't happy with himself about that. He didn't know her connection to all this. He did know she fronted for some corporation. And now, she's had plenty of time to run.

Fortunately, he found her still around. The restaurant wasn't open, so he waited at the back door while a worker went to find Mrs. Martin. She appeared dressed in the customary hostess-style dark dress with a white collar, all covered just now with an oversized apron. In her late fifties, he guessed. Slim, attractive, with a slightly exotic look. She greeted him and motioned toward a booth at the rear of the main dining area. She lit a cigarette as soon as they sat. "Sign says no smoking," he said, to get the conversation started.

"Rank has its privileges."

"So you own this place?" He knew she didn't.

"Lock stock and fish barrel, been at this since I was a little girl."

"Do you know why I'm here?"

"Most likely Senator Towson, it's all over TV. What happened to our quiet little town?"

"How do you know him?"

"He made reservations and brought guests here. Not often, but enough for me to know who he was."

"Where do you live? I couldn't find you in the directory?"

"Been living in my cook's place, nice condo, and she's never there."

"Give me her name. I need some kind of address for you."

"Elena Duarte, on Banyon Street," she said with some hesitation. "But this is really my address. I've an office here, get all my calls and mail here. On nights when I'm exhausted, which are most nights, I even sleep here."

"Where were you last Saturday, the day Towson was killed?"

"Saturday? I would have been grocery shopping and every day back here by four."

"Ever been in Towson's apartment?"

"No!" She nervously crushed her cigarette in the ashtray. "Be right back." She slid out of the booth.

After she disappeared into the kitchen, he picked up her cigarette butt with a napkin and slipped it into his shirt pocket.

Minutes later she returned. She stood with her arms folded across her chest and announced, "I'm too busy to talk with you. I know nothing about any murder. Please don't bother me again."

"Better here, Mrs. Martin, than down at police headquarters." That line was always worth a try.

"As a matter of fact, it *isn't* better here. I can't talk to you anywhere. Please leave."

Back in his vehicle, he flipped open his notebook. He had met a tense Norma Martin and possibly had DNA from her cigarette. She mentioned her cook, Elena Duarte. He brought up the address search on his patrol-car computer, nothing for Elena Duarte. Next, he tried Norma Martin. She was in there and on Banyon Street. Why had she tried to deceive him about living with her cook?

He knew, if some Tampa Cuban-Americans were connected to the murder, Norma Martin would now alert them. And they just might be the link to the bigger plot that Moran suspected and hoped for.

Towson had enemies in the Cuban community. He had publicly opposed amnesty for refugees after the 1980 Mariel boatlift. Also, he opposed legalizing casinos in Florida, and South Florida is sympathetic to the old-time families involved in Havana's casinos before Castro kicked them out.

Goddard felt uncomfortable in this unfamiliar situation. He knew that a small town cop couldn't run around the state checking out money trails and motives. And Moran didn't want to bring in state investigators. Didn't want them butting in, taking over, and taking credit.

So, far, Norma Martin was the only link to a possible Tampa connection. An important link, if DNA from her cigarette puts her in Towson's apartment.

Ray Reid was still the best suspect so far, although he seemed an unlikely professional hit man. Goddard needed more background on him. What did he really do in Philadelphia? It wouldn't hurt to see if his sister could fill in some blanks. Interesting woman. Who was he kidding? He'd just flat out like to take another look at her.

He phoned attorney Jerry Kagan and after brief pleasantries asked for the phone number of Reid's sister. Kagan was surprised with the request, and said he must check with her first to see if she wanted it given out. Goddard told him, "Then just have her meet me at the Coffee Spot on the barrier island. Thirty minutes, no later." Kagan wouldn't promise she'd show up.

Kagan quickly relayed the request to Sandy. Her response was, "Wants to see *me*?" She was in jeans, no time to change. She looked in the rearview mirror...could be better, but she didn't need much daytime makeup anyway.

What was this all about? Was he going to serve a summons or a cease-and-desist order? He wasn't the type to try to hit on her...or was he? For good or for bad she had gotten to Detective Chip Goddard.

Chapter Sixteen

Sandy Reid crossed the Intracoastal Waterway to the barrier island and drove on east to Highway A1A. Goddard had said meet at the Coffee Spot, and she knew about where to find it.

She had driven around the same area when she first arrived in Park Beach. It was late that day. After driving a thousand miles, and getting warmer by the hour, she wanted to see the ocean immediately. She went directly to the beach from I-95 and parked her car in a small beachfront park.

A pleasant onshore breeze caught her hair as she walked over to the water. She walked barefoot in the pale sand along the wavering water's edge, daring the warm hint of tide to catch her feet and slap around her ankles. A carefree moment. She could get used to this place called Florida.

This afternoon, looking for the Coffee Spot, she headed for the beachfront area again. She remembered the arrangement of low-rise condos and beachfront hotels on one side of Ocean Drive, and the boutiques and restaurants facing them. She found the Coffee Spot down a few blocks away from the expensive beachfront hotels.

She liked the retro fifties décor—a neon-light clock above an old fashioned jukebox—like an old-time diner without all the stainless steel. She sat at the counter on a red-topped stool. The waitress was filling her diner-style coffee mug when Goddard came in through the swinging kitchen door directly in front of her.

"I parked in back. Let's move over to that last booth," he said. "I'll sit on the far side."

Sandy nodded and picked up her coffee. "Remember the old movies...never sit with your back to the door and never trust a skirt."

He grinned. "Of course, everything I needed to know I learned from old movies."

A pretty good line, she thought. And she loved the grin. How bad could he be? She raised her coffee mug, "Here's looking at you, kid."

“How do you like Florida, Miss Reid?”

“If they ever had a day like this in Philly, they’d write a song about it.”

Nice smile, smelled good, taller than she remembered. His jaw was slightly large, no, on second thought just right. So far, so good. She had yet to see his eyes. “You going to sit there and watch me through those cop glasses?”

“Sorry.” He took them off.

Now, up close, she got a good look at him. His steel-gray eyes were set a little deep yet nicely spaced. She felt slightly timid looking at him. He was more interesting than she had anticipated, more appealing. She should have changed before meeting him. She wished she came across a little more put together right now facing this guy. “How come you don’t walk and talk like a cop.”

“How do I walk and talk?”

“More like a lifeguard.”

“I was, right here on this beach. Summer before I went off to college. But we’re not here to socialize.”

“I hope not, Detective, because I’m busy with a murder investigation.”

“Call me Chip, and you’re Sandra.”

“Sandy.” She reached across and shook his hand. It was softer than she expected. Her hand felt small.

The waitress was quick with his coffee. He waved the cream away. Sandy said, “You’re a plain black coffee kind of guy.”

“What kind is that?”

“No frills, nothing fancy added. Hold the cream and sugar, baby, take me straight to the caffeine.”

“Am I being judged here?”

“You betcha.”

“You’re an interesting girl. Your mind is always turning, isn’t it?” He blew on the coffee, took a sip, and glanced up at her. “First of all, I’m sorry if I came off overbearing when we first met.”

“I expected it. It’s in the cop manual...raise your voice to keep control. What’s with the parking in back?”

“Huress has been nosing around. I don’t want our cars seen together. Yours stands out like a red jellybean in a bowl of peanuts.”

“Huress?”

“Bobby Huress, my old partner. We rode patrol. He thought we were great buddies, but I just tolerated him. He’s into all that macho crap. The buddy stuff disappeared fast after I passed the detective exam and he flunked. He claims I got special treatment because my dad was once chief. He barely studied, and then said he couldn’t pass because of the burden of wife and kids.”

“He envies you. Why are you telling me this?”

“Probably shouldn’t. I just wanted you to know, if you run into him, he’s not on the case.”

She could tell he was warming up to her. She liked this guy letting down his guard and throwing out some personal information, not afraid of appearing vulnerable. That earned him a couple more points.

“Are you saying there’s a patrol cop running around that you can’t control, and he might try to play detective and approach me?”

“He’s a sergeant now, has a lot of freedom. It’s just a tip. All I’m saying is you’re free to ignore him. Forget I said anything.”

“I’ll spot him if he follows me. What’s he driving?”

“A blue and white, and watch out for his personal vehicle, a red Ford pickup with a large orange and blue ‘Gator Nation’ decal on the back window.”

“Hey, I’ve seen that truck parked outside my apartment, Raymond’s apartment. I saw it and wondered what the hell ‘Gator Nation’ meant. Is that your school?”

“Not mine, I’m Florida State. When did you see his truck?”

“Don’t remember now, but I know I’ve seen it.” Her eyes narrowed as she studied him. “Why was it there? You two better not be running some kind of police game on me.”

“No game. Huress has nothing to do with this case. I’ll look into it.”

“I’m dead serious about getting info to free my brother. This smells like a tag team to me. I really don’t like this! Are you tracking me? I demand to know right now why a cop was parked outside my apartment in his personal vehicle.”

“I know you’re serious. I said I’d look into it.” He paused for another sip and then his voice took on an official tone. “Jerry Kagan told me he hired you as his investigator.”

“That makes a difference?”

“It’s easier for me, if you’re officially on the case. Otherwise, it looks as if I’m just being cozy with the defendant’s sister. Since I can’t question your brother directly without his attorney being present, I don’t want to be accused of tricking his sister into spilling info.”

“Got it. You’re now officially off the hook. If the new investigator for the defense screws up, it’s not your problem.”

“You could really foul up your brother’s defense by talking to me. I want to be certain we understand each other; starting now, consider yourself fair game. I don’t intend to tell you anything about the investigation, and whatever you tell me I’ll definitely use if I can, and will testify to in court.”

“Seems fair to me, what’s your problem?”

He shook his head. “You are a puzzle.”

“The world isn’t ready for the unpuzzled me.”

“Maybe you don’t want anyone to understand you.”

“I haven’t met anyone that can. So, I guess you’ve figured out that you don’t have any choice but to deal with me.” She gave him a nice smile to take the edge off that pronouncement.

He frowned. “So you’re going for our arrangement?”

She continued, “If you’re asking for cooperation, sure I’ll do that. I need to be able to communicate with the opposition. You just have to listen. If you’re on the wrong track, then it might help your investigation. Just stay off my back.”

“Okay, I won’t bother you unless you start acting crazy. I can use some cooperation right now. If I’m reading you correctly, I can make statements like that without you laughing.”

“Keep being honest like that and I won’t laugh.” She felt she was getting somewhere. “You called me here because you need my help.”

“Maybe, don’t know enough about you. Don’t know whether to trust you or not. You said your job in Philadelphia puts you in contact with the police. So, I suppose you know your way around attorneys and judges and courtrooms and cops and even criminals.”

“All of the above.”

“Good, so you’re probably savvy with the dos and don’ts. I phoned the Chief of Detectives in Philadelphia. He said you’re okay.”

“I’m thrilled at the thought.”

“Hey look, don’t let your wisecracks get in the way of our understanding each other. I’m trying to get you pegged. You’ve made it clear I must deal with you, and I’m trying to figure out if I can live with that.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll behave. I have no idea who the Chief of Detectives is, but I’m glad I received no bad reports.”

“That’s better. So, you’re like a semi-pro in this business. Now I see why you hustled down here when your brother had a problem.”

“He didn’t have a problem until he met you. I suppose you’d never ask for help from me, if you thought my brother was guilty, right?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Well, you’ll get absolutely no help from me unless you’re buying this coffee. I have my principles.”

“You’re tough. Okay, I’ll assume you know how to dig for the bits and pieces that could help both of us. To start with, I need to find out about the Jardin Café, something beyond public records, something beyond common knowledge.”

“Ah, the Norma Martin angle, tell me more.”

“Nope.”

She struck a pose with one hand on her hip and stared at him.

“You have to let me be a cop.”

She shrugged and took a notebook from her purse. “It’s owned by MoonGlow Enterprises, a Delaware Partnership.”

“Thanks a lot. Anyone can Google that.”

“Well, they don’t make it easy to dig down to the true owners. I work with a woman at our firm in Philly who specializes in uncovering such information. That is I used to work with her, I might not have a job anymore. Anyway, I’ve already phoned and given her that business name. She’s checking it out. I’ll get back to you.”

“Excellent. May I ask something else of you? I’d prefer you not interview Towson’s seventh floor neighbor, at least not yet.”

She wasn’t aware Towson had a seventh floor neighbor. She bluffed, “Well, I don’t know if I can promise that, why not?”

“She’s old and deaf to start with, Mrs. Crawford. She witnessed people coming and going that day, and I don’t want to get her more confused than she already is. I’m afraid if you talk to her, later she might even identify you as the killer.”

She didn’t laugh. “So, it was a woman she saw?”

“Oh, you’re fast. Come on, I didn’t say that.”

“It was on your mind. Admit it now. You’ve an unidentified woman on your mind, or you wouldn’t have put me in your little joke.”

“Do you read tea leaves too?”

“Yes, but I’m better at men. You realize, of course, that Mrs. Crawford will tell me things she’d never tell you.”

“Perhaps you’re right, but stay away for now. Maybe I can use that angle later.”

“You mean maybe *we* can use that angle later.”

“Don’t get presumptuous, Sandy. We aren’t working this case together. I’ll welcome your input as long as you don’t become a loose cannon. Do you know how far I’m sticking my neck out just talking with you? Moran would love to catch me smiling at you.”

“You’re right. Go do your cop thing. Do I detect a hint of animosity between you and the state attorney?”

“No secret there. He doesn’t much care for me either. Little Bonaparte is a tyrant with far too much power. In their Judicial District, state attorneys have tremendous control over life and liberty. The system is very efficient. Moran simply states what he wants, and the judge gives it to him. No conflicts. And everyone other than the defendant has a nice day.”

“Great, the guy who has a noose around my brother’s neck is a bully and a jerk. I hope you don’t mean he’s crooked?”

“The cold-blooded bastard would ignore evidence, if he believed it would punch his ticket to Washington.” He appeared uncomfortable with the subject. He straightened and pushed away the empty mug. “Do you have anything else you’d like to share with me?”

She had a sexy response to his question that she didn’t dare use. She put a napkin to her mouth to hide her evil smile. She cleared her throat. “I went to the Inn Towner. Loraine was definitely there. The maids said she was lounging around, wearing a thong, and flirting with Raymond. Personally, I find flirting while wearing a thong redundant.”

“She already admitted to me she was there with Reid.”

“Oh, good, but I’ll bet she didn’t admit she wore a thong? What does that tell you? Does that fit in with her explanation for being there? Doesn’t that indicate deviousness on her part?”

“No comment. Were you able to establish when she left the motel?”

“All I know is she left before the noon checkout time. Guess I’ve struck out again with useless information.”

“Keep trying”

“Okay, then tell me something about yourself,” she said. “Why does a nice person like you take a job frightening people and ordering them around?”

“I was about to ask you the same thing.”

“Geez, I’m not that bad.”

“Are all Philadelphia girls as cocky as you?”

“I usually get away with it.”

“Well, in my case it’s in the genes. Dad was a cop, the best, he made police chief.”

“You want to be just like him, right?”

“He’s not around now, killed eight years ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“I was home for mid-semester. He was off duty. It was half-time on TV. I started to go for ice cream, but he said relax he’d go get it. As he parked at the convenience store, he saw a robbery in progress. He radioed for backup. The perp came out too soon. Long story. Shots traded. Dad died on the sidewalk.”

“My God!”

“When he didn’t come back home right away, I figured he got some emergency call, not unusual. I’m lounging around like an idiot cheering for the Dolphins while my father is lying in a parking lot gutter bleeding to death. Later two cops came to the house. I opened the door and they just stood there. Neither one was able to speak, couldn’t get one word out.”

“Ever find the bastard?”

Chip shook his head, “There was a big manhunt with posters all around. We never found him. It shocked the town terribly, as if the citizens were insulted that it happened here. Park Beach changed after that, it was a turning point. As though Park Beach was innocent before, and then afterwards it was nothing special, just another American town where even the police chief wasn’t safe.”

“So, some piece of shit is walking around free.”

“Whenever I have to go to that store, I see blood on the sidewalk.” He pressed his lips together hard and paused for a moment. “It should have been me going for the ice cream.”

“Not your fault. Must have been difficult for your mother.”

“Don’t know if my mother ever knew. She took off years earlier. I didn’t know her. They were never married. She moved on. Dad raised me. Then I went into the Marines. Why am I’m telling you this?”

“Because somehow you figured out, I want to hear it.”

“It’s time to change the subject.”

“After all that you still wanted to be a cop?”

“I wanted to catch all the guys who think they can get away with it. Actually, at first I wanted to shoot them all on sight. Later I softened and decided it was best if I just arrested them, and let the justice system deal with them.”

“You’ll get some of them.” Rough episode to live through, she thought. “Well, you’ve kept your head as far as I can tell. So, you want to follow his example. Are you worried about failing, I mean failing your father?”

“I’m not going to fail him.”

“I know this case is a big deal for you. And you’re risking something by being here with me.”

“It’s nothing if I don’t screw up. If I find all the evidence, and it’s sufficient and rock solid. If a witness doesn’t disappear. If no one else on our side screws up. If the jury convicts. Should I go on? If I do all that, then Moran will have his showy trial and be a United States Senator.”

“And if he does screw up you’ll be blamed.” She waved off a refill on the coffee. “So, you stayed here in Park Beach. You made a life for yourself.”

“It’s nice here. Florida’s east coast is all about the same. Most of these little towns could all use the same postcard, just change the name. A bit prettier and quieter here, lots of trees, water and bridges.”

“How’s your social life? You’re easy-going with females. Where did you pick that up?”

“None of your business. What about you?”

“Yes, Chip, I do have a social life.” A lousy one, but he didn’t need to know that.

“No, I meant what about your family?”

“Don’t have any. Mom and Dad are gone, died in an accident on the Schuylkill Expressway. So, no family.”

“But you’ve a brother here.”

“We live on different planets.”

“Doesn’t he count? Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“I never really got to be his sister.”

“I don’t get you.”

“When we were young. We talked some and I could ask him things and get homework help. And he taught me silly songs. Yet when I got to the age where I might help *him*, he was already off to college.”

“Help him, how?”

“I don’t know, maybe with clothes or how girls think, stuff like that.”

She was silent for a moment, staring at her coffee. Then she leaned closer. “Want to hear something weird? There’s a drop of bad blood between us, and we grew apart. We’ve never been close as adults. Even so, I’m down here risking my job to help him. I’m not even certain I like him. I get the confusing thought that I’m enjoying him being punished, even though I know he didn’t do it.”

“Schadenfreude.”

“Yeah, I’m guilty of sibling gloating.”

“You don’t know for a fact your brother is innocent.”

“He doesn’t fit the profile, Raymond’s much too soft. He’s carried a clean handkerchief in his pocket for twenty years just in case some woman across the room should cry. What evidence do you have against him?”

“Forget it.”

She expected him to clam up to her direct questions. But they were mixing it up and she liked that. Exchanging some personal thoughts also was encouraging. They seemed to have connected instantly. She had opened up with candid feelings, and he had opened up in return. She could build on that. Yet she was aware the connection might not be genuine. It would pay off only if he was playing fair.

They stood and he tossed a couple of bills on the table. He touched her arm as she started to walk away. “Will you give me your number?”

She nudged him with her shoulder. “You show me yours and I’ll show you mine.”

Chapter Seventeen

Sandy drove from the Coffee Spot back to the mainland and located the newspaper building on US 1. She was pleased with the meeting with Chip. She’d need to explain the arrangement to Raymond and Kagan. They weren’t there. She doubted they would understand.

Next, was to cozy up to Linda Call, the local reporter who wrote each day about the murder. Make her open to the possibility of other suspects. The media access would be invaluable. Sandy knew that most reporters imagine themselves Investigative Reporters. Let’s see how Linda Call reacts to the murder suspect’s sister.

In the building lobby, a young woman behind the counter interrupted her classified ad phone-order to motion Sandy up the stairs. The newsroom wasn’t large, wasn’t busy and wasn’t noisy. A glassed-in cubicle with a large desk and a conference table sat empty in the far corner. Low-hanging fluorescent lights hung down over a dozen desks. Three employees were engaged at their computers. One was a woman.

She was leaning back with her feet on the desk and the keyboard in her lap. Papers and folders were disordered around her on the floor. She wore jeans with a lightweight cotton sweater. Attractive but a tad overweight. Dark eyes to die for. She appeared to be in her mid-forties. Sandy thought it a shame to have nice dark-brown hair like that and do just a no-fuss ponytail. Sandy walked over. “Don’t tell me your big newspaper comes out of this little room?”

At first, the woman just glanced over at Sandy, then she turned and held a long look. She straightened and made a broad grin. “Hello to you. Yes, deceptive place, huh? State and national items come in digital and need little editing, mainly to make it fit, if we use it at all. Feature writers work out of their homes now. Advertising has its own office. That leaves a few others and me. That’s the tour. How do you like your little MX-5?”

Sandy grinned. “I’m not wearing my Miata Rally t-shirt, so how did you figure that out?”

“I was at the window when you pulled in. I’m Linda Call.”

“Sandy Reid. How do you know my car?”

“I’m a former auto mechanic masquerading as a reporter. I’ve worked on Miata’s. Know every bolt. Wish I had one myself.”

“Mechanics don’t have nice-looking nails. Yours haven’t touched grease in a long time,” Sandy said. “Working your way through college repairing cars would make a good article.”

“Nothing in my life is that classy. I dropped out of high school...long story. Was a mechanic in Georgia for twenty years, loved it. Just install the correct part with the correct tool, turn the key and stand back, that baby has to run. No jobs in Georgia so I came down here. I got a job here at the paper

selling space. They liked my ad copy and the rest is history. I left out the part about a girlfriend, her boyfriend, a dead dog, and a fire. You just got the short version.”

“So, you know why I’m here?”

“I can guess. You’re either the sister or the wife of the Ray Reid in the clink. No ring, so I’ll go with sister.”

“Correct. He’s guilty by reason of being a stranger. I’m going to put more suspects in the pot and stir it up.”

“That’ll get your name in the paper and your picture on TV. God, you’re the poster girl-next-door if I ever saw one. Love your cute skirt. Grab that chair over there, Sugar. Scoot up close, so I can get a good look at you. I heard you were in town. I phoned Jerry Kagan a couple days ago. He wouldn’t say anything about you and wouldn’t let me talk to your brother. Maybe you can help me. National TV is interested now. So far, I’m on the inside, still I could easily get pushed out.”

“I haven’t seen any TV satellite trucks.”

“They did some videophone and shot some tape at first. Now they’re just standing by. I’ve been feeding the AP, but the boss says not to help any TV reporters.

“I’ve read your pieces; you’re as good as anyone up north. Crime reporting is your thing.”

“I’m okay with small crimes. Big stories are rare around here. I’m probably in over my head. It’s exciting but sad, I knew the senator.” Linda pointed at Sandy’s left hand. “You’re unattached. They don’t have what you’re after in the big city?”

“I had somebody up there, but I’m not looking for anything serious. I’m just a kid didn’t you notice.”

“You’d be astonished at what I notice about you.” She leaned closer. “Tell me, met anyone that interests you down here?”

“No time, and I don’t plan to be around here long.”

“You have other brothers, sisters?”

“No, just Raymond.”

“Too bad. Every girl should have a big sister, someone to take care of her now and then.” She tried to make eye contact with Sandy who looked away. “Anyhow, are you going to let me interview you? My murder copy is getting stale. Got plenty of rumors that I can’t back up.”

“Something for something?”

“Sure, let’s get right to it. What was in your brother’s statement to the police?”

“Geez, you don’t mess around. I can’t divulge that. Too many names, it might prejudice our case somehow.”

“What was your brother doing at the senator’s apartment?”

“Raymond met Towson at a party the week before.”

“Bullshit. Why was he there?”

“He was told someone was in trouble. He went there looking for her. That’s the truth.”

“Who’s her? What sort of trouble? I can’t print half-ass stuff. Does the trouble have anything to do with the murder?”

“Well, Linda, I guess I can’t tell you a whole lot without naming people.”

“So, start naming. I heard there was a fight.”

“No, and not much of an argument either. They were having coffee when Towson decided my brother was there for some sinister reason. When Towson unexpectedly pounded his fist on the counter demanding an explanation, Raymond dropped his cup in surprise. Towson told him to get out. Which he did.”

“Not bad, maybe I can fit that someplace. The mystery to me is why he was there in the first place. What time did he leave?”

“Around noon. You didn’t happen to see the crime scene, did you?”

“As a matter of fact, I did. Fascinating to be standing where an old acquaintance was just murdered. I’d just talked with him earlier that day. What can I tell you? His place was a large three-bedroom and study. He was shot in the master bedroom literally with his pants down, they told me. CSI had already removed his body by the time I got there. I could see blood stains on that gorgeous wood floor. The king-sized bed was unmade with the bedding was on the floor. They let me peek around; the rest of his place was tidy.”

“You wrote that his aide and the maintenance man discovered the body. Since he was shot in late afternoon, doesn’t the unmade bed seem significant to you?”

“You talk like a detective. What do you do in Philadelphia?”

Sandy told her and then asked, “Was he having an affair?”

“I’m sure he had them, but he kept that private. I was just covering his gubernatorial campaign. Maybe I should have been more interested in identifying his bed partners.”

“Maybe you should start digging. Every lover is a possible suspect in my mind. Lovers always quarrel, Linda.”

“If I ever get one, I’ll remember that.”

“I understand the Tampa gambling interests wanted the senator out of the way.”

“Out of the way and dead are two different things.”

“How about his neighbor, Mrs. Crawford? Did you know she saw people coming and going that afternoon? One was a woman.”

“Hey! Now you’re talking.” Linda reached over and patted Sandy’s hand. “Who’s your source?”

“Unnamed police source. But that’s it, I don’t know if she identified the woman.”

“That’s fine, that fits. One cop securing the crime scene told me a woman was seen leaving the building around five. He didn’t have the description except he heard she had a red and blue scarf over her head, as if hiding her face. I’ll bet it was that Mrs. Crawford who told them that. I talked to the M.E., and he says the murderer could be a woman...small weapon, standing back, low angle, and two shots. A man would step in and keep pulling the trigger just to hear those amusing little bangs.”

“But I saw the Coroner’s report. It said he was killed with only one shot.”

“I don’t know about that. CSI told me two shots were fired.”

“If Mrs. Crawford saw a woman, and the M.E. thinks a woman might have done it, then why is my brother in jail? Why don’t you put that question in your paper? If you interview Mrs. Crawford would you let me know what she says?”

“Sure, you gave me the tip.”

“Have you talked to the maintenance man? Did he see anything?”

“He identified your brother to the police. He saw him get on the elevator to leave. He also saw the exterminator around the building later that day, doesn’t remember what time. He noticed nobody else except tenants.”

“What time did he see Ray leave?”

Linda picked up a notebook from the swirl of papers on the floor. “Same time you said, around noon. Now what happened at that party?”

“I’ll tell you on one condition. You absolutely must keep the host’s name out of the paper. She has nothing to do with this.”

“Too late, it’s all over town, Meg Emerson. Who was there besides your brother and Towson? Why did she invite your brother to one of her classy parties anyway? He’s not rich.”

“Meg gave the party for business reasons, and my brother works with her.” Sandy wasn’t going to mention Meg had a personal interest in Raymond. “Tammy Jerrold and Loraine Dellin also were there.”

“Okay, so I imagine Tammy paired up with the senator as usual. Isn’t she a piece of cake?” She did a little shudder. “I heard a rumor Loraine left with your brother. Jumping to the bottom line, and I know you won’t answer this, did they have sex?”

“Yes.”

Linda’s eyes widened. She had expected an evasive response. “Loraine had sex with your brother?”

“Yes.”

“You know that for a fact?”

“For a fact. My brother admitted it to the police.”

“Wow! You know she and Towson were once married.” Linda looked at her closely. “Did *she* admit they had sex?”

“Ah, not sure, I think so. Furthermore, they definitely were seen the day of the murder at a motel. Loraine has admitted that part...unnamed police source.”

“Oh, really!” Linda was then silent for a moment. Her fingers were faintly moving as though already typing out the story. “What we have here is an old-fashioned love triangle, and an excellent motive for murder. We haven’t even talked about the age-difference angle; there’s a whole other headline right there. Wow, it’s times like this I wished I worked for a tabloid. Imagine the trashy stuff I could print about this. Maybe Hollywood will ask me to do the screenplay.”

“Don’t assume too much.”

“Oh, I gotta work all this in somehow. Let’s see, we have a rendezvous at a motel. God, I love this business. Accordingly, Loraine Dellin had sex once, no doubt again at the motel, and doubtless other times we don’t know about, with the man who shot her ex-husband. I wonder how many times I can use the word sex in a single column.”

Sandy abruptly stood. “Allegedly shot, allegedly! Look, sister, if you’ve already decided my brother is guilty, then we’ve nothing to talk about. You’re sitting there being all nice to me, and I started to trust you. What you’re really after is something you can use to show he’s guilty.”

“No, I was just visualizing a sensational headline.” Linda also got up. “Hey, don’t be so touchy. I’m interested only in reporting the truth. You have to admit your brother is up to his ass in this. The sex angle just makes it worse. Regardless of what you say, it’ll look like a love triangle with plenty of motive for your brother to knock off the Senator. National TV will have a field day with all this.”

“And you’re going to make certain they don’t miss a thing!”

“Actually, it’s to my advantage to hold it until I can break the story myself. We’re talking Pulitzer Prize here.”

“I told you not to assume too much. They definitely did not have sex a second time, at the motel or elsewhere. One time only after the party. My brother didn’t want any more to do with her.”

“Why were they at the motel, if not for sex? Something was going on.”

“Can’t divulge that, not yet. I’d like to find out what Loraine did for the rest of that Saturday.”

“Hold on, I think I have it in my notes.” Linda looked down at the files and papers on the floor around her desk, and then thrashed among the papers on her desk. “Here it is. I asked Chief Oehlert if ex-wives aren’t always suspects. Off the record he told me that at the time of the murder she claimed she was at the museum.”

“Okay, so that’s her alibi. I’ll check that out, if you can dig into Mrs. Crawford.”

“What about your brother? Does he have an alibi for the time of the murder?”

“He left at noon.”

“Sandy, give me some credit for chrissake. He could have gone back up there later that afternoon and shot Towson. Does he have an alibi for the rest of the afternoon?”

“He was driving around trying to see people. I’m investigating his alibi.”

“Okay, go ahead and bullshit me. He has no alibi or you’d be screaming it from the rooftops.” She rolled back her chair and smiled. “How about you? Anything you haven’t been doing lately, but would like to? Maybe something I could help you with?”

Sandy gave her a slight frown and stood.

“I’m sorry. I’m not very good at this am I?” Linda stood. “It’s getting late. At least let me buy you a drink. I know a special bar. We can eat there too. You can even dance if you want to.”

“Thanks, Linda, but that’s not me. How about a sandwich and a cup of coffee instead? Someplace we can talk.”

“I’ll settle for that...for the time being. Let’s go, I’m dying to hear about your unnamed police source.” She held the door for Sandy. “We’d better take my pickup. Your car stands out like a Georgia peach in a bushel of Vidalia onions.”

“I’ve heard.”

Linda frowned. “In fact, I think you should hide it. My advice is for you to keep a low profile. Soon the town will take notice of the killer’s sister. They just might direct some of their anger at you.”

“Well then, we better take your pickup. My car is probably rigged for an explosion when I turn the key.”

Linda didn’t smile and that bothered Sandy. Surely, the town’s hostility couldn’t be that serious. It was fortunate this influential reporter talked like a friend and seemed to be coming around to her side. One of her big worries was that the investigation would just drag on and on, and Sandy didn’t have that kind of time.

Linda seemed receptive; maybe right then was the time to take a chance and get things moving. She stopped in the middle of the parking lot and faced Linda. “Look, I can tell you some other things. This is bigger than you think. People you know around town were brought into this. There’s a woman who stands to gain financially from the killing. There’s another person who has been missing since the murder. Trust me, Linda, the investigation is broadening.”

“And you’re the one who’s going to pull it all together. You think you can handle all this stuff by your cute little self?”

“You don’t think I can?”

Linda stared at her for ten seconds and then said, “Sugar, I don’t think there’s anyone who can stop you.”

Chapter Eighteen

That evening, Sandy left Ray’s apartment and walked the three blocks to the corner convenience store for munchies. After the sandwich with Linda, she had worked straight through until after dark doing research with her laptop. Now it was too late to cook even if she had wanted to.

She was pleased with her initial meeting with Linda Call. She had accomplished a crucial part of her purpose. A sympathetic connection with the reporter now seemed possible.

As she came back out of the store, a uniformed cop was standing directly in front leaning against the hood of a red pickup. The truck was large with an oversized bulging grill, an appropriate match for the big and out of shape cop.

“Well, imagine running into you here.” His voice had the smarmy tone of self-importance. “I’m Sergeant Huress, Bobby Huress. I know who you are.”

She remembered Chip’s comment about him. “Bobby Huress, huh? Are you on the Towson case?”

“Well, not officially. I do things for Moran now and then. I want to talk to you.”

“Sure. Too late tonight, though. How about we talk tomorrow?”

“No, it’s important. We could just sit here in my truck for a minute.”

She looked at the sergeant in his uniform, then at his pickup, and then around at the brightly lit parking lot with people going in and out of the store.

“There’s something I can do to help your brother. I’ll explain. It’ll just take a minute.”

He held the truck door open for her. After some hesitation, she slid in.

“Pretty nice huh?” he said.

“What’s that?”

“My truck.” He settled in on the driver’s side. “I understand you want to help your brother, but it’s not as easy as it sounds. To do it all yourself, you’d have to know your way around. You’d have to run around to weird places you’ve never been before. And talk to important lawyers and the police. Face up to all kinds of strangers and be ready with smart answers. It could get real creepy for a young woman. A pretty girl like you shouldn’t be worrying about such stuff.” He chuckled slightly. “I bet all the guys tell you you’re pretty.”

Geez, another man who underestimates her. “Huress, talk about the case, do we have anything to discuss?” She should have trusted her instincts. This was a waste of time.

“Well, I might be able to help you. People listen to me down here. You know what I mean, a sergeant on the police force? No doubt, I could get your brother out immediately, if I wanted to bad enough. It would be up to you. Know what I’m saying? Let me take you somewhere and we can talk.”

“You mean like you could take me to dinner and explain it all.”

“Wasn’t thinking about a dinner, but I know a place.”

“We’re not moving from this spot. You have ten seconds to start talking.”

“Well, I know how to get him released, but I’d have to stick my neck out. Let me be frank with you, Sandy, I won’t do it for nothing. I need to get something from you in return.”

“I wonder what that would be.”

He gave her a crooked smile. “Hey, it would get your brother out.”

“Forget it Bobby, it ain’t gonna happen. And I don’t believe for a second you can get him released.”

“You think you’re the smart one here, but you’re dead wrong. You see, I’ve been doing little jobs for Moran for a long time. Some of them, well, let’s just say he owes me. True, I can’t get the charges dropped, but I sure as hell can get him out on bail, if I put in the word. That is if you’re nice to me.”

“So, if I put out for you, you’ll put in for me? Stop with this brainless proposition, Huress. You’re putting your job on the line here.” She put her hand on the door handle. “I can’t believe you tried this.”

“Tried what? No proposition. You and I met up, and we got interested in each other. Happens all the time. It’s natural. Just something between us and nobody else will ever know. In the morning, it’s like it never happened except you’ve gotten him released. You’ve the power to do that. You might even be saving his life. If you don’t, something bad might happen to him that you could have prevented, and you’re the one to blame.” He took the keys out of his pocket and put them in the ignition. “Come on, let’s go.”

“No!” She glanced around, no other customers were parked or in the store just now.

“I promise you’ll be in control. Whatever you say, that’s it. You say stop, we stop. You say take me home, I take you home. It would be the smart thing to do because you’d be getting your brother out.”

Her hand was still on the door handle. Her choice was to stay inside within his precarious reach and tell the creep off, or to get out now, run and be safe. Her fight or flight response was never in question, but she couldn’t resist putting him down. “You have a wife?”

“A wife?”

“Yes, that person who takes care of your house, cleans the toilet after you, feeds you and the dog? The one who’s home right now giving your kids baths and tucking them in bed?”

His face turned red. “Why you smartmouth little puss.”

“You’ve been stalking me haven’t you? Don’t you realize what you’re doing right now? I can’t believe you’re dumb enough to try this.” She pulled the door lever. “Hey, this door is locked!”

“Well, it sticks sometimes. You see this badge?” He turned his body slightly so she could see it. The movement also exposed the gun on his hip. “I could make a lot of trouble for you and your brother. I hoped it wouldn’t come down to this, but you’re forcing me. Now I know you’re sitting there thinking you’re the one in control of this situation, and you can brush me aside. But there’s something you didn’t consider.”

“I’m saying no to you. Let me out you creep.”

“Listen. You don’t realize this, but they should have transferred your brother out to county jail long ago. Moran has overlooked it, but I keep on top of everything. Gangs of degenerates out there would love to get friendly with your brother just as fast as they can rip off his jumpsuit. After twenty-four hours at County, don’t be shocked if he pleads guilty. And he’ll never forgive you. You could have made it easy for him. Now none of that has to happen. You could be friendly with the nice sergeant here. What’s the big deal? What you’re giving me you’ll never miss anyway. Just relax and go along.”

His slimy words crawled on her skin. She gave a quick look around the cab to spot something for defense: a screwdriver, a ballpoint, anything. His revolver was holstered in plain sight, but it was unlikely she could take it away from him.

“Now you see what you’ve gone and done.” He started rubbing his crotch. “It’s time for you to get busy.” He was breathing heavily now. “It’s dark here, just put your pretty little head down. Do it and your brother will be out walking in the sunshine tomorrow. No one will ever know.” He unzipped his pants and reached for her hand.

“Unlock this door now!”

“Or what? You a black belt or something?”

She couldn’t just sit there; he would just keep coming at her. She had to upset the situation somehow, get him off balance. “Why don’t you give up on me here? Take your fantasies somewhere else and jerk off.”

He swung fast with the back of his right hand. She barely had time to duck. He made a loud grunt as his hand smashed and cracked the rear glass. He grabbed the back of her hair fiercely. He forced her head down. His other hand reached into his open fly. She stretched up and held the horn down with one hand. She jerked his keys out of the ignition with the other. Her fist closed around the mass of keys with the sharp ends jutting out between her clinched knuckles like some bizarre medieval weapon. She was certain she could smash into one of his eyes. Then she would scrape across his face to the other eye. With any luck, she thought, the pain and blood would occupy him enough so she could go for his gun. She hoped it was loaded.

Just then, the truck shook with a sudden bang. They both were jolted forward against the dash.

Sandy heard a familiar voice call out, “You okay in there, Sugar?”

He yanked open his door. He sprang out of the truck. His hand instinctively moved to the butt of his holstered gun. He stood facing Linda Call. She was standing there motionless with her arms folded across her chest and her feet spread wide apart. The bumper on her pickup had ridden over his bumper and smashed into his tailgate. He stared at her with wide eyes, still panting heavily.

Linda pointed to his open pants and laughed. "Go ahead, make my day."

He shifted around awkwardly trying to close his fly, but some material was caught in the zipper. He looked back at Sandy and yelled, "Does Goddard know you're a lesbo? Get the fuck out of my truck before you stink it up!"

Sandy was over at Linda's pickup before she realized his key ring was still tightly gripped in her hand. She heaved the ring of keys as far as she could into the darkness of the adjacent vacant lot.

Chapter Nineteen

The number one task for Sandy the next morning was at the newspaper office. The obnoxious assault by Huress had unsettled her mind. She wanted to be certain she had thanked Linda. In addition, something else about Linda bothered her.

The newsroom was busy and carried a high-level jumble of voices, keyboard clicks, and printer noise. Linda pulled a chair over for her. "You really were shaken last night when I dropped you off. You should have let me come in for a minute."

"Now that I think about it, you're right. We could have had a cup of tea, and you could have talked me down. I was so hyper I couldn't sleep."

"Yes, a horny two-hundred-pounder with a gun can do that."

"Hush up or I'll start shivering again. One of his threats was to see that Raymond was transferred out to the county jail immediately. He's probably taking care of that this morning."

"He might have been acting on orders from Moran."

"Geez, does Moran play like that?"

"I've never liked him, he's a pain in the ass." Linda stared up at the ceiling for a moment. "After I let you out last night, I sat watching you go in and was thinking. You kept thanking me, yet I had the feeling you didn't want me in your apartment because you were worried about me. You know, about me bothering you. I'm sorry, don't answer, bad timing. I shouldn't hit you with that right now."

"No, it's okay. You're right. I felt so vulnerable, I just wanted to go hide under the covers. I was going to take out his eye, if you hadn't shown up when you did. I hate it when I get in those angry moods. You know, I wondered how you happened to show up just at the right time."

"Just dumb luck, I guess. I was headed to the girl bar, and that convenience store is on the way. There was something I wanted to get."

Something wasn't straight about her story. "Linda, did you follow me last night? You came to my rescue at just the perfect time. And you took me straight home after, without me telling you where I lived." She fixed her eyes on Linda.

"Okay, I was following you. Sorry if I misjudged you. The reporter in me. You were just too much when you showed up yesterday, and I became suspicious. I had to find out more about you. After we had that sandwich, we came back here to pick up your car. You zipped out of the lot, and I got the dumb reporter idea to follow you."

Sandy didn't buy it. "I was working in the apartment for a couple of hours before I went out. You just parked out front?"

"For awhile, thinking you were just changing clothes and would head back out. I started to leave when I saw Huress pull up. Then I got interested because maybe he was on the clock, and I'd stumbled onto some investigation. You might say I staked out the cop on the stakeout. Later he followed you to the store. I followed him. He never saw me. I watched you guys from across the street."

"I shouldn't have gotten in with him. I thought I could learn something."

"Most men are either horny or hungry. If you see one not eating, just figure he's got an erection."

Sandy didn't completely believe her story and was upset with herself for trusting Linda too soon. "I suspected he was stalking me."

"Huress has been in trouble before. He used to be Towson's official driver when he was mayor. He was caught filling up his personal vehicles using the city's gas credit card. He offered to pay for the charges and it was all hushed up. Nevertheless, Towson tried to get Huress fired over it."

"Meaning, Huress might have had it in for Towson?"

"Stick that one in the back of your mind"

"I've another suspicion about him. Something about the line he was handing me last night to get me to come across. At first, he was understandably nervous about me being there, yet when he started in with the proposition part, he was too cool. As if he had practiced the routine, and rehearsed the lines. He anticipated my objections and was ready with his response. I think he's done it all before."

"Boys have been using those lines on girls ever since back seats were invented."

"No, I mean he's done it before, there in his truck."

"I don't get you."

"What if that had been an immature girl sitting there shaking, because Huress had just caught her boyfriend stealing a pack of cigarettes. He didn't dream that deal up just for me. Of course, he changed it around to fit my situation. You see, he knew all the right words. He knew the routine because it works and he uses it. A terrified girl couldn't stand up to his threats, badge, and gun. It'd be way easy for him. Suppose he does cruise around looking for victims?"

"That's a serious sex crime, and I wouldn't put it past any male. Even if true, Sandy, you don't need this right now. Hanging Huress for his sexual assault on you would be a full time job. You already have your hands full."

"Damn it! I hate to let another predatory man get away with that shit." She took a deep breath. "I don't know. You're probably right. What do I do? Maybe I should ask Chip what he thinks."

That name definitely got Linda's attention. "Chip, Chip? Oh, my God, the girl's uptight with Detective Chip Goddard. The unnamed police source gets named."

"I didn't mean to say that! Forget that! Please don't get him in trouble, Linda, please. I'll do whatever you want."

"I don't want you to do anything." She laughed. "But I can't go to jail for what I'm thinking."

"You're a sweetheart, I mean...we're buddies?"

"Just buddies."

"You've got a big hug coming. And I'm not uptight with him. Not yet anyway."

"You do know he's got a live-in girlfriend."

Sandy didn't know and didn't want to know. "Not surprising, I suppose."

"That's all you have to say?"

"Look, there's nothing between us. I could care less who he's living with." Then she couldn't resist. "Do you know her?"

"I've met her. Very nice. She's a legal secretary."

She had at least a dozen more questions about Miss Legal Secretary, yet decided to shake it off, at least for the time being. Her phone buzzed. It was Chip. She turned away from Linda to take the call.

He said, "Problem here. I wanted to warn you. Huress saw us at the Coffee Spot yesterday and ran to Moran. Now Moran is in an uproar. He wants to meet with me, the chief, and Huress this afternoon."

"Wait, wait, when did he tattle on you?"

"Yesterday, I just told you."

"What time yesterday?"

"What difference does the time make? Yesterday, I don't know, in the afternoon, just before quitting time."

"So, it was long before yesterday evening. Are you in big trouble over this?"

"Not much. I'll just explain our arrangement, listen to him berate me, and watch Huress gloat. If the case falls apart, they'll bring it up and I'll be blamed."

"Huress won't show up this afternoon."

"You don't understand. You don't know Huress."

"No, you don't understand. I do know Huress. I'm telling you he won't show up with any complaint, and he'll be reluctant to ever mention my name again."

Chip muttered something about a crazy woman. Sandy could picture him shaking his head. "Let me explain. I had a serious encounter with Huress last night." She told him what happened.

She could tell he was steaming, as expected. After a minute, he settled down. "Damn it, Sandy, are you up for all this?"

"I'm not through with him."

"Sandy, if you file charges, the internal investigation of Huress probably won't get beyond the first inquiry. Your chances of any satisfaction are nil."

"So I should forget it?"

"No, I guess not. Go ahead and bring your charges so it gets in his file. However, try to keep it out of the paper."

Chip went on to explain the procedure required a first hearing within forty-eight hours of the accusation. The review panel will consist of the state attorney, the chief and two police officers.

"Do I get to testify, so I can face the bastard?"

"No, your charges must be written, and then sworn to under penalty of perjury. The panel will put their heads together for a split second, and then announce...yada, yada, yada...they're helpless because it's he said-she said. And the matter's closed."

"But I have a witness, Linda saw Huress standing there with his pants open."

"You know Linda is gay?"

"Sure, but she's out."

"They'll completely discount her as a witness. Completely. Think about it. At the very least, she's your biased lesbian friend. At most, she's your biased lesbian lover. You may not care, yet as far as her being your witness, it's as though she was never there."

"What if it just happens to get in the paper?"

"Your brother might suffer from the fallout."

"I don't want to tell him about the incident just yet, but I know he would say go for it." She clicked off with Chip and turned back to Linda. "Now I'm worried about you. I know you'll back me up, yet what does that do to you?"

"Won't affect me because I can't be named, not at first. I hope you understand that part. I'll be happy to write the piece, but I can't control the headline. And it's going to read, 'Suspect's Sister Accuses Local Officer.' The item will state you have a witness. However, if I'm named, then we

become the story. Then the headline would be, 'Reporter and Girlfriend Accuse Local Officer.' It would sell a hellava lot of papers, and it would spin out of control."

"If I don't make it all known, then Huress wins. Another creep gets away with it as though it never happened. Will you please go ahead and write it and be sure his name gets in?"

"Sandy, if I've learned anything about you in the few hours that I've known you, it's that nothing is going to stop you. I already went ahead and wrote it. It's done. Let's go. The editor will read it now."

They walked back to the glassed-in cubicle in the corner and waited while the editor read the printout. "Linda, you mention here that there is an unidentified witness. That's misleading. Change it to an unnamed witness. Otherwise, it's good copy. Are you women certain you know what you're doing? Someone might dig in and want the unnamed witness to be identified. You may think you're out, Linda, but this town doesn't want to hear about it."

He then phoned Chief Oehlert to verify the facts. After a long conversation, he hung up. "I agreed to hold the piece until the chief has a chance to talk with you, Sandy."

Linda frowned. "The downside risk is the additional bad publicity and public outcry against your brother. There's the danger you'll come off as the desperate sister attacking the police in a pathetic grasp at some last straw to free her guilty brother."

That made Sandy think about Moran, all this was perfect for him, exactly what he wanted. And, if Chip was correct, then there was no upside. Nothing would come of her complaint, no advantage. Then she imagined Bobby Huress in the darkness of his pickup. Watching a teenage couple parked. Waiting for the right moment. Knowing he had a sure thing going with his threats, badge, and gun. Succeeding again and again with his slimy routine because no young girl would know how to stop him. "Tell the chief I'm on my way."

"You shouldn't have argued with him," the chief said when Sandy was settled in his office.

"Saying, 'No' isn't arguing. Saying, 'Let me out you creep' isn't arguing."

"If it goes beyond the first hearing, you'll have to testify."

"That'll be the best part."

"I must tell you, it's not unusual for people to get upset with the police for one reason or another, and then try to strike back by making some charge. You know, like a charge of excessive force or what some hysterical woman believed was inappropriate touching."

She bit her tongue and decided it was best not to open up on this guy.

"If you win, Miss Reid, you could ruin his career."

She remained calm. "He ruined his own career. All I ask is that you apply the law. I'm just testifying to the facts of what he did. That's what good citizens do. It's up to the process to determine if he's guilty. The punishment isn't up to me either. Whatever the law calls for, apply it, no more, no less. He ruined his career when he locked that truck door. That's a criminal charge by itself. He ruined it again when he pointed to his badge, and again when he flashed his weapon and said he'd make trouble for me, if I didn't put out. Those are all charges. Then he grabbed me, that's a charge. Then he added another when he unzipped. I may have missed one in there. Are you counting?"

The chief frowned and thumbed through the stapled pages in his hand. "In his statement, Sergeant Huress stated that when he drove up you were hanging out in front of the store. It was getting dark and he didn't like the idea of a young woman being out there alone at night. He was concerned with your safety. Although he was in a hurry to get home and help his kids with some homework before bedtime, he thought he should wait with you."

"What a guy."

“The store clerk remembers you bought chips. Sergeant Huress stated you admired his pickup and asked if you could sit in it. You sat there with your bare legs up on the dash, stuffing chips into your mouth. He said you started making suggestive talk about how cops turned you on, and you got upset when he wouldn’t respond. That’s when he told you to get out.”

“By the way, I was wearing jeans. Did he explain about his unzipped fly? Which Linda Call will corroborate. And how his back window and tailgate got broken? Come on Chief, you don’t believe that crap. Why do you want that piece of shit, excuse me, that scheming sexual predator on your force?”

“To continue...you got out. He was still concerned about you. He waited there until Linda Call pulled up. You skipped over to her pickup, gave her a long kiss, and drove off with her. Why did you get in his truck, if you didn’t want anything to do with him?”

“Every crude word out of his mouth will be in my statement, and you’re not going to like it. Linda did him a favor. If she hadn’t come along when she did, he’d have gone ahead to the next really stupid step and be facing additional criminal charges plus a civil suit from me, and would be missing at least one eye, probably two.”

“Will you try to keep it out of the paper?”

“I’m not here to negotiate with you. Start doing your job. Now give me whatever form I need to make a formal complaint.”

When the item ran in the newspaper, it stated the allegation and identified Huress by name. It clearly identified Sandy as the accuser and sister of the jailed suspect in the Towson murder case. An alleged witness was mentioned but not named.

The item brought forth almost total indifference. Although Bobby Huress most certainly caught hell from his wife, the town ignored it. No reaction, no furor at all except for two phone calls, and one vulgar letter stating it was the sluttish morals of women like Sandy that was ruining the country.

As predicted, the police review panel dropped the charges at the first reading. It was as though the Bobby Huress incident never happened.

Chapter Twenty

It was Friday morning. Tomorrow would mark one week since Goddard was handed the Towson murder case. The more he thought of Sandy Reid, the more he realized he had developed no additional evidence against her brother. She says he’s innocent, yet it sounded as though she didn’t actually know what he’d been up to the last few years.

Goddard felt the investigation had stalled out, no new evidence, and no new suspects. Most likely, that was the reason Moran called a meeting this morning. When he arrived, he was pleased to find a DNA report on his desk left by the CSI team. He scanned the report, smiled and walked to the chief’s office.

There was no indication from his clear desk that the chief was in the middle of a major homicide investigation. He set aside his *Garden Design* magazine. “Chip, did you know Saintpaulias were brought to this country from Africa in the early 1900’s? That’s why we call them African Violets.”

“Thanks, I’ve always wondered about that.” Goddard handed the report to the chief. “We got a hit. DNA from Norma Martin’s cigarette butt matches items in Towson’s bathroom.”

The chief tried to appear interested. “So, the restaurant owner was his lover, and all those rumors are true.”

“So what if she is the lover? Does that help me solve this murder? And she’s married. Hard to believe Towson was that reckless. And where’s her husband? I would need to dig into her background. What’s going on at her restaurant, and possibly in Tampa?”

“Tampa?”

“I’m afraid this might lead there. If it does, I’m out of my league. Cuban-Americans in Tampa can be a tight group. Where would I start?”

“The State of Florida could step in, it has organized crime units and all that high-tech stuff,” the chief offered.

“Yeah, why don’t you suggest to Moran that we turn over this investigation to Tallahassee?”

“Not me.”

“Is he aware of what we found on Linda Call?”

“Not yet. He’s on his way here right now. Before he gets here, Chip, tell me what’s with you and Reid’s sister? She embarrassed the department with her charges, and that item in the paper didn’t help.”

Goddard pointed to the garden magazine. “Like you care?”

“Ah, hell, Moran found out about you meeting her, and I got my ass chewed.”

“Sorry about that, but I’ll listen to anyone with information about this case. I’d rather she talk to me than to the papers.”

“Reid’s attorney will scream bloody murder, if she tells you something that ends up in the trial.”

“She’s been warned. She talks to me at her brother’s risk.”

“She has a thing for cops according to Hures.”

“Get your head out of your ass, Chief. She had no reason to bother with Hures. I think Moran was behind that incident. He probably told Hures to go do what he had to do to get her off our back. Hures, in his own small but horny mind, thought he had a cute little pigeon in his grasp. No, Chief, her story was true.

“I guess you know what you’re doing. Remember, Moran is watching.”

Just then, the door opened, and Moran marched in with a file of papers under his arm. The chief stumbled in mid-sentence to change the subject. “All right Chip, so what about the new reports on Norma Martin and Linda Call.”

Moran set the papers on the desk. “So Goddard, at long last you got a statement from Martin.”

“No, she won’t talk to me. I did get her DNA from a cigarette butt, however.”

“I hope all this isn’t interfering with your sex life. Where’d you get that coffee? Can you answer that question?”

Goddard pointed. “Out there in the squad room, over by the window. Help yourself.” He wasn’t going to jump and get it, which is what Moran had in mind. The chief got up. Moran said, “Cream and sugar. You mentioned Linda Call?”

“I just got this FBI report on her.” Goddard knew that would get a reaction.

Moran was startled. “She’s a suspect? I just gave her an interview.”

Goddard said, “We faxed the prints we found on the wine glasses to the FBI National Database, and got a hit back this morning, they belong to Linda.”

“Don’t tell me she was in his apartment,” Moran moaned, “And don’t tell me the woman’s got a record.”

Goddard didn’t respond immediately, he pretended to check a folder, letting Moran suffer for the longest possible moment. Then he answered, “No record. Her print set was in the civil section of the Integrated System. She submitted routine fingerprints when she applied for a Concealed Weapon Permit some time ago.”

The chief came back and set the coffee in front of Moran who took a sip, frowned, and pushed it away. The chief said, "Not farfetched for a crime reporter to want a weapons permit. She's a Georgia gal, probably uses guns for bookends. Maybe she used one last Saturday."

Goddard corrected him, "She's not from Georgia, as we all thought, but from Tampa. The permit was issued there before she was a crime reporter. Why'd she need a gun in Tampa? Also interesting, her name came up spelled L-y-n-d-a. Now that's Latina. I don't care if she's Cuban-American, but Tampa is the center of the pro-gambling opposition to Towson's election. I want to know what her prints were doing at the crime scene."

"If she was with Towson innocently that afternoon, why didn't she come forward? What's she hiding?" Moran asked.

Goddard hesitated, knowing Moran would explode upon hearing the next statement. "To make matters worse, she showed up at the crime scene while CSI was there."

"What! She was there at the crime scene? That means all of our crime scene evidence is contaminated and could be thrown out. Damn, I'm dead." Moran covered his face with his hands. "Who let her in?"

"CSI," Goddard answered. "Not a good policy, but it happens with reporters. I wasn't there."

"Not an excuse, you weren't there! It's your investigation." Moran was still shaking his head in disbelief.

The chief said, "I hate to mention this, but if she's involved and had access to the crime scene, God knows what else she did up there to cover her tracks."

Moran was livid. "Oh, this is really cute. We know Linda is lying about her past, she might be the murderer, and she might have returned to the murder scene later in her capacity as a reporter, and the CSI might have held her purse while she tidied up the evidence." He stared at the chief expecting an explanation.

"What can I say? Incredibly sloppy crime scene security. I don't know what happened. I'll investigate."

Moran loosened his tie and lowered his head. "God, if any of this shit gets into the trial—"

Goddard said, "If it helps, her prints weren't found on anything in the bathroom, so I don't think his affair is with Linda."

"Linda is gay," the chief said. "I don't think she'd be interested."

"Come on, Chief," Moran said, "if Linda wanted Towson dead her preference wouldn't matter."

"We're closer to the identity of Towson's lover," Goddard said. "A good chance it was Norma Martin."

"What makes you think that?" Moran asked.

"We've a DNA match with the items in the master bath."

"Remember, a match doesn't mean she was up there the day he was killed," the chief said, "and being his lover might have nothing whatever to do with his murder."

Moran said. "That agrees with what my secretary told me; she heard the affair was with Martin. Did her prints match?"

"We don't have her prints on file and no legal way to get them at this point. So we still have unidentified prints at the scene," Goddard said. "And the wine glasses found in the bedroom still have to be explained."

"So, you have wine glasses and an unmade bed. Some woman was up there Saturday," Moran said. "Maybe it was a threesome in that bed: Towson, Norma Martin, and Linda Call, who isn't bad looking by the way. Would Towson go for that?"

"Threesomes don't happen in my town," the chief stated flatly.

“You don’t even know what a threesome is. Anyway, it’s not likely in this case. Linda might have been up there merely interviewing him over a glass of wine. She interviewed me this morning and left her prints on my coffee cup. See what she says, Goddard.”

The chief said, “Therefore, Norma Martin is the lover, at least her personal items were found in his bathroom, and is definitely a suspect. Linda also was definitely up there, but has an excuse. Except she’s not our redneck gal from Georgia but Latina L-y-n-d-a from Tampa. What likely females haven’t we talked about?”

Goddard said, “Tammy Jerold. However, the unidentified prints don’t belong to her. Her prints were available because her real estate license required fingerprinting.”

The chief said, “That leaves Loraine Dellin. No way in hell would Towson have had anything more to do with her. He’d rather die first.” Then he realized what he had said.

Chapter Twenty-one

Six hellish days in jail for Ray seemed like six hellish months, and the worst was yet to come. He was awaiting the inevitable transfer out to the county jail. Strange to be told the city jail was child’s play by comparison. Whenever he heard the clang of the metal door, even late at night, he’d stiffen. They would soon be around to cuff him, put him in a van, and carry him off to an even stranger and uglier world.

Worst of all, he realized, Sandy would be gone.

He knew she needed to go back to Philadelphia. He didn’t blame her. Yet he knew when she left, the investigation would come to a halt. An aggressive defense wasn’t likely without her. They could do whatever they wanted with him.

That Friday morning Sandy and Jerry Kagan were across from him in the visiting room. Kagan spoke first, “I talked to the judge about delaying your transfer out to county. I’ve several motions pending and he’s going to use them as an excuse to delay the transfer as a favor to me. Said he’ll give us five more days. They were supposed to transfer you long ago.”

Sandy said, “I can see you’re on the edge of depression, and I hate to hit you with this right now, but five more days is all I can give you too.”

Ray was expecting that. He nodded and gave her a tight smile, “That’s okay. I appreciate all you’ve done.”

Unexpectedly, in a loud voice she said, “Hey, I’ve got a life in Philly, you know!”

Her defensive tone surprised him. “I understand, it’s fine.”

“I can’t spend my entire life down here straightening out your mess!”

“Of course not, it’s okay, Sandy.”

She shoved her chair back and walked rapidly to the window. She knew she would rather stay and see him out of this terrible ordeal. After a few minutes, Sergeant Lewis noticed and walked over beside her. He asked her something, she nodded she was okay and came back and sat.

“Okay, let’s get on with it.” She pulled out her notebook. “I had a second meeting with Tammy Jerold. She was quite interested in how our investigation was going. She suspects Loraine now but still doesn’t want to see you, Raymond. I got her talking about Towson. She mentioned he was paying Loraine alimony.”

“Alimony? She’s getting alimony?” Ray said.

“Yes, big bucks every month. That’s what she lives on. Towson complained about it according to Tammy. Why then would Loraine kill him? If he’s dead he can’t pay alimony.”

“Damn! We thought we had her big motive, that blows it away,” Ray said. “She wouldn’t kill the goose that lays the golden egg.”

“Not necessarily. Life insurance might indeed be the motive.” Kagan explained. “The certainty of her alimony stopping upon his death provided her with a legal insurable interest. She could then have insured him even though not married. A large life insurance policy on Towson could have been part of the divorce deal. She still could be our suspect.”

Sandy said, “I get it. Lump-sum alimony payable upon death. Life insurance set up by the divorce agreement pays her a large lump sum to make up for the monthly alimony that would normally stop when the ex dies. If she kills him, and gets away with it, she’s instantly an extremely rich woman.”

Kagan continued, “Is she so greedy she’d risk losing guaranteed monthly alimony payments for a possible lump sum, and take the chance of being caught and ending up with zero and in prison?”

“She might take the chance for enough millions!” Ray suggested.

“For some people everything is never enough,” Sandy observed. “How do we find out?”

“Her attorney doesn’t have to tell us without a court order,” Kagan said. “If she makes a claim for millions, however, some insurance investigator will be all over us.”

Sandy said, “We know Loraine definitely directed you to Towson’s apartment on the day of the shooting using that text message. That sounds like a plan. Only the killer would know to put you at the scene the very day Towson would be shot.”

Kagan said, “So, she did it, and she framed Ray for the murder.”

“Let’s not lock that down just yet, Jerry,” she suggested. “Could there be any motive besides insurance?”

“Divorces come with built-in motives, take your pick,” Kagan replied.

“Okay, here’s some other stuff I found out.” Sandy referred to her notebook. “About a year ago, Towson had something special going with some woman who lives in Palm Beach. Supposed to be very hush-hush, yet everyone I asked seemed to know about it. Everyone remembered her name, Elizabeth Montgomery. Same as some old TV actress everyone in the world has heard of except me.”

Kagan said, “That actress was a real dish. Loved her work. I have her on some old videos.”

“Last night I went online with my laptop and checked property records for every county in Florida. Do you know there are sixty-seven freaking counties in this state? I tried Palm Beach County first, of course, and got an immediate hit. I sat there until after midnight searching through the other sixty-six. Anyway, Towson does own a condo in Palm Beach County. I Googled Elizabeth Montgomery, and after seven billion hits on the old actress, I found the name in Palm Beach County. Sure enough that’s her address.”

“Perhaps she’s a little honey he has set up down there,” Ray said. “This Elizabeth Montgomery might be a woman scorned or might have a jealous husband.”

Kagan joined in, “At the very least, we’ve another suspect and more reasonable doubt.”

“I need to dig more into Towson’s life as well,” Sandy said. “See where he pops up in official records. Search for other names. See the court record of the divorce proceeding. Are there children no one knows about? Like that.”

“Jerry, could he actually have made it to the Governor’s Mansion? I heard he had big time opposition,” Ray asked.

“Slam dunk, as good as elected. His opposition was ruthless and well funded, but he definitely would make it. Some Cuban-American big-money interests were pushing to legalize casino gambling in Florida. They’re out already optioning land for casinos and getting politicians lined up. Towson stood

for old Florida and the status quo, anti-growth and all that. The ideal candidate. The campaign would be tough but would be grass roots, John Q. Public against big-money.”

“Be less fuss to shoot a state senator now than assassinate a governor later,” Ray said.

“The link for us there might be Norma Martin,” Sandy said. “Here’s how her story goes so far. She breezed into town a couple of years ago and bought the Jardin Café. The owners weren’t even thinking about selling the place until she came along. The place wasn’t in good shape. They were thrilled when she said how much, and handed them cash. The cover story was she cashed out on a large house up north in a divorce settlement. Everyone assumes she owns that restaurant. I found out she doesn’t. A Delaware Partnership owns it. The partners might well live in Tampa.”

Ray said, “Would the Tampa big-money go so far as to assassinate him?”

“I suppose that could happen here, happens in Miami. Billions are at stake,” Kagan replied. “The pro-casino faction definitely wanted the senator out of the way.”

Sandy’s phone buzzed. Meg Emerson said, “Sandy, I brought up reports on all the principals you named. Here we go. This is all confidential and a violation of every Federal privacy law, so cover my tail please. I found zilch on Norma Martin. Are you certain she actually exists? I’d need her social to check further. Tammy’s fine, owns a couple of small rentals, she’s a saver, no visible problems. Sonny Barner somehow got into financial trouble while he was a toddler, maybe earlier, and hasn’t been out of money trouble since. Don’t buy a used car from him. Loraine Dellin is hurting financially, heavily mortgaged and margined, not yet critical, but she’s been selling off her securities to live. She’s literally eating up her principal. Got all that?”

“You’re the best.” Sandy had another idea. “Two more names popped into my mind. Elizabeth Montgomery, West Palm Beach, and what about Towson’s campaign manager, Tony Hackett?”

“That last one’s easy. Not public yet, but Hackett is about to declare bankruptcy. His creditors have already moved in. Everyone thought he was inside on all the money deals that Towson pulled off, but I guess not. Somehow, he’s ended up broke. Word is he may have moved back to Virginia already. I guess you’ve a reason for asking?”

“The person who finds the body always goes on the suspect list. Thanks, Meg.” Sandy turned back. “Where were we? Ah, I’ll look into the Tampa connection. Detective Goddard also wants me to check on it.”

Kagan was surprised. “What did you just say? You’re doing work for Detective Goddard?”

She enjoyed the moment. “Yes, I made a connection that could be good for us. I had coffee with Detective Chip Goddard. He wants me to tell him whatever I find out, and in return he doesn’t tell me zip. How’s your heart, Jerry? I could hear it pounding over here.”

“Yes, that startled me. Never heard of such a thing, it just isn’t done. As your brother’s attorney, I must advise you of the considerable danger there. Whatever you tell him, even casually, can be used in court. Moreover, you can be put on the stand and made to repeat it.”

Ray jumped in, “And you say I’m crazy!”

“You are crazy.”

“But Sandy, that’s no kind of deal...all his way. He’s the one who arrested me. He’s on the job. He’s using you. Either that or he’s just trying to get you in the sack.”

“Maybe he’s not the sacker, maybe he’s the sackee,” she smiled and went on, “And it’s not all his way. He agreed to listen to what I have to say. Of course, I’m going to feed him only exculpatory information.”

Kagan looked at Ray who nodded that he understood the word. Kagan warned, “Even information favorable to the defense can be twisted around in court. You’re on dangerous ground, young lady.”

“He underestimates me. People have always underestimated me. It’s a neat little swindle I’ve been running all my life. It’s to our advantage with Chip, at least so far. He doesn’t believe he’s disclosing any info. I just get him talking and then read between the lines.”

“Hope you don’t fall, off the high wire,” Kagan said.

“If he has doubts about your guilt right now, wait until I get through with him. Plus, I can run around town without the police on my tail every minute. We exchanged phone numbers. If he calls take a message, okay?”

“Not funny, you’re reckless,” Ray said.

She rested her hand on Kagan’s shoulder. “Jerry, I wanted you to know. I didn’t want you blindsided later by the deal. Chip is okay. Notice I call him Chip now. Did you know some bastard shot his dad at a Stop-n’-Rob? He was police chief, wasn’t even on duty, just going out for ice cream.”

“I know,” Kagan said, “and Chip’s always been straight with me. He isn’t too popular around the station because he moved up to Detective so fast.”

“True, he needs to do a super job on this homicide. The worst thing that could happen to him in his career right now is to screw this up. Was he ever married?”

“Not as far as I know,” Kagan answered. “He’s not a wallflower. He was serious about a woman, the County Appraiser’s daughter, for a while. That was a few years back. An attorney at the courthouse told me his legal secretary now has something going with him.”

“Something going with him,” she repeated under her breath.

“What does the detective’s love life have to do with anything?” Ray wondered aloud.”

“I promise I’ll be careful about what I let him know. At least up until the point where *I* get something going with him. Did I tell you he has perfect eyes?”

“It’s in my notes somewhere.” Ray laughed and relaxed back in his chair; he just realized his invaluable sister might be interested in sticking around for a few more days.

Chapter Twenty-two

She had been in Park Beach five days and Sandy wasn’t pleased with her progress. And Sunday was turning out to be a bad day to get things done. She had some notes to go over with Jerry Kagan, however his law office was closed. Linda would be happy to see her but wasn’t working at the newspaper that day. And Sunday visiting hours at the jail were not until later. She wondered if Chip was snuggled at home with Miss Legal Secretary. After looking through her notes, she decided it was time to check out Norma Martin, the woman who wouldn’t talk to Chip.

She pulled her Miata convertible into the lot behind the Jardin Café just as another woman parked and started walking to the restaurant. The woman was slender yet nicely filled out her peasant blouse and tapered designer jeans. She wore her dark auburn hair pulled back tightly and wrapped with a band; the long bunch at the back bounced around her bare shoulders. Sandy guessed she couldn’t be over forty at the most. Sandy envied the confident way she glided effortlessly over the rough gravel in her stilettos like a fashion model on a runway.

She noticed Sandy and glided over. “We don’t open until five. Love your little red car. I’ve seen it around town.” Then she frowned. “I know where, the police station...you’re police!”

Sandy hesitated only an instant. “No, I’m a reporter. I’m looking for Norma Martin.”

The color faded from the woman's face. She took a step back and studied Sandy. "You're a reporter?" The woman almost shrieked, "How did you find me?" She turned and hurried into the restaurant.

Sandy hit speed dial #1 on her phone. It rang for some time before Goddard answered. "Will you trace a tag for me, Chip?"

"It's Sunday, go read the comics."

She read off the tag from the woman's car. "It's a white Buick Century, tag says Hillsborough County."

There was a long pause and then he said, "Okay, got it. Where did you spot this vehicle?"

"At the Jardin Café."

"You shouldn't be out there." After a minute, "Tag is registered to one Elena Duarte in Tampa. I know she's a cook at the café. No surprise her vehicle would be there. What are you up to?"

"I think it was Norma Martin. I think she's connected to the murder."

"She already told me she lives with Elena Duarte, although I'm not too sure of that. Probably uses her vehicle. What else?"

"I saw her. She acted guilty."

"That's it, she acted guilty? That's nice, she acted guilty. Sandy, you didn't talk to her, did you?"

"I met her in the parking lot. No, I didn't actually talk to her. She thought I was a reporter and came all apart. Give me her address."

"You're not getting it. I don't think our deal is going to work. I need to know what you're doing. And I need to know in advance, before you screw up something. Goodbye."

"Give me a chance, buddy," she said into her dead phone.

She opened her laptop and searched the Internet white pages for Elena Duarte. A phone number in Tampa came up. She punched in the number and got an answering machine with the default male electronic voice saying please leave a message. Sandy sat confused. So, we have a Norma Martin living in Park Beach with this Elena Duarte who doesn't live in Park Beach, and Norma uses Elena's car registered miles away in Tampa. Now she needed to talk to both Norma and this Elena.

She drove back into town and parked in the police station parking lot intending to visit Raymond at the jail. She had just parked when Miss Runway Glider in her white Buick Century pulled in fast and stopped alongside. She motioned for Sandy to come over.

"I followed you," she spoke rapidly with no trace of accent, "please get in so we can talk. I shouldn't be seen with you. I see your car parked here with police cars almost every day. I need help. What's your name?"

"Sandy. Hey, I'm not a reporter and I'm not police."

"You must know the police, you always park here."

"If that's good, I do. If that's bad, I don't," Sandy slid in beside her. "What's wrong?"

"I'm in trouble and my people can't help me. The police are going to arrest me. This is very strange, but you must believe me. Everything was okay until Albert was killed."

"You can say that again," Sandy replied. "Okay, slow down. You called him Albert. You knew him from the restaurant, I suppose."

"No, we would never go to the restaurant together, never. The way it started, they told me he'd be speaking at a street fair one day, so I followed him around. I flirted with him like I was told and it worked. That was the plan. He didn't take the bait immediately, but I know how to get a man interested."

"No kidding."

The woman was excited. “They’ll find some of my things in his apartment. They’ll arrest me. I didn’t kill him. It’s all political and terrible and all screwed up.”

“What plan? Slow down and start at the beginning.”

“I was supposed to meet him and have an affair. I was to leave a trail of evidence so when people checked it out, it would look as if he was having an affair with Norma Martin.

Sandy didn’t get it. “You mentioned *your people*. Who are we talking about here?”

“Some of my Tampa relatives are part of *La Familia*. I don’t understand it all, it’s about politics. Anyway, after his campaign got rolling, all the evidence about him being involved with Norma Martin would come out and embarrass him. She’s married and the scandal would ruin his election. Then I’d disappear, move back to Tampa.”

“In the first place, I don’t think a politician as smart as the senator would get involved with a married woman.”

“He *didn’t* get involved with a married woman, he got involved with me. He checked me out and found I’m not married. But of course, Norma Martin is.”

That stopped Sandy. It took a moment for her to ask slowly, “So, you’re not Norma Martin?”

“She’s my mother. Just turned sixty but looks much younger, so she fit the plan okay. She’s the one who runs the restaurant.”

“So, who are you?”

“Elena Duarte. I’m an accountant from Tampa. They brought me down here just to set up the senator.”

“You’re telling me Towson actually fell for this charade? Who did he think you were?”

“I was myself, Elena Duarte from Tampa. That’s why I checked out okay for him. Why would he suspect anything? He saw my driver’s license, passport, and everything. We took some great trips. He didn’t show me off in public around here, because I’m twenty years younger. Why be common about it, he once said. And if it ever did come out, so what, he was a normal bachelor dating a younger woman, both single, no big deal. Might even gain him some votes. He wasn’t aware that in the meantime, we were spreading the rumor he was seeing a married Norma Martin.”

Sandy understood. “It might work for awhile. Rumors don’t have to be precise. Some would believe it and some wouldn’t; the confusion would be all that was needed. Even so, eventually someone would tip him to the rumors going around.”

“The plan was to keep it going until he figured it out. It only had to work for a month or so. At a critical time, they would drop *both* names like a bomb on the Towson campaign. He’d have two women to explain: was it a mother and daughter thing, or was he only doing the daughter?”

“It would ruin him.” Sandy realized she might not get another chance at getting answers out of this woman. “Did you shoot him?”

“No! Don’t you see my problem?” She stared off into the distance, her mind apparently overtaken by a cloud of memories. She started to cry. “I fell in love with him.” Sandy handed her a tissue. It took a minute before she could stop and speak again, “He was my lover and now he’s dead.” The crying began again.

“But if you loved him, wouldn’t they be afraid you’d come forward and reveal the plot? What could they do?”

“I don’t know. They might kill me or go after my mother.”

“Geez, they play rough. And a dead mistress would be even better. Norma, ah...Elena, this was a scummy deal you were pulling.”

“I know, I know. But I had to. I refused at first. I told them I’d date him but that was it. Truthfully, I haven’t been around that much; I’m a lot of show but not much go. I wasn’t going to do the whole sex

bit with some strange man, even if he was a rich, good-looking bigshot. I'm an accountant, for God's sake. That's when they sent Pirro around to explain how it was going to be."

"Pirro?"

"He's one of the goons that do dirty work for *La Familia*, the strong arm stuff. He said I must become Towson's girlfriend and do what girlfriends do, the whole enchilada. The creep said he'd be glad to help me practice. He said to either screw Towson or screw him."

"The old fate worse than death thing."

"Yes, and I could die. Pirro uses whores. Mom calls it VD but it's HIV. He doesn't care about spreading it. He's the lowest lowlife. One day, in the restaurant kitchen, he started telling this long dirty joke, loud to everyone one in the room, except I was the girl in the joke. He kept putting my name in his filthy joke, as if I was doing all that stuff. I was embarrassed and terrified. Mom overheard him and lost it. She flew into him, slammed him up against the wall, and held this monstrous kitchen knife across his throat. She said, if he ever touches me, she'd cut off his *cojones*. You understand?"

"Got it."

"Crazy men like Pirro don't scare easily. He got mad, said nobody threatens him, and someday he'd do her, while I watched."

"If she gets in his way, why doesn't he just kill her?"

"He doesn't dare to kill anyone unless he's ordered to. He tried to scare her once though. Mom's fourth floor apartment has a tiny balcony. He tried to get her to step out there with him one night. Said he had something to show her down below in the pool. He was just trying to scare her. He wouldn't kill her, at least not when he's sober."

"Yet it's alright if he screws you guys?"

"Not exactly alright, but the family realizes sex happens. It's something else. Not a big thing with them."

It occurred to her that Elena wasn't telling the real story. "So, Mom is saving you from Pirro."

"Yes, to some extent. He's scared of her threat. But he's been after me since the first. Every time he sees me, he corners me and tries to feel me. He puts his awful breath in my face and describes his...you know...his arousal to me. Now he's free to do what he wants."

"Why now?"

"Because the game is over. He knew the plan was important to *La Familia* while Albert was alive. Pirro fooling around with me in the middle of things could mess up everything. So, it was hands off. *La Familia* doesn't need me for the plan now, because Albert's no longer a political threat. They have what they want, and Pirro has a green light with me. If he touches me, I'll get sick. My perfect lover is dead, and I'm running from both Pirro and the police."

She was crying again so Sandy changed the subject, "Do you have a red and blue scarf?"

"Yes I do, silk with red and blue triangles. I got it at Macys years ago. I wear accessory scarves a lot. I suppose you found it, huh? I left it at Albert's with my white leather jacket in the small closet off the master bath. That doesn't mean I was there when he was killed. I have other things there too."

"Were you in his apartment the day he was killed?"

"Am I supposed to answer these questions?"

Sandy reached in her purse. "Here's the card of Detective Goddard. He's a straight shooter and he needs your help. He needs your fingerprints, your DNA, and what you saw and when. All that."

"Sure, and then he arrests me."

Sandy had a momentary guilty thought that she'd rather see this cookie behind bars than her brother. Then it would be a fast trip back to Philly. Still, she had to be honest with her. "The detective

needs your help to catch the real killer. However, if you killed Towson, or were even in his apartment that day, you need to immediately get yourself a lawyer.”

“I just want to go back to my life in Tampa.”

“The police will find you. They have evidence you’ve been in the apartment. And you still must keep Pirro from getting to you and your mom.”

“Maybe I’ll get a gun. Maybe he’ll have an accident.”

“Would you kill Towson, if the family ordered you to?”

“I’d kill myself first. We were lovers.”

“Would you do anything to save your mom from Pirro?”

“Absolutely.”

Sandy decided to be blunt. “Would you carry out an order to kill Towson to keep Pirro from raping your mother?”

Elena hid her face in her hands. “I loved Albert.” She abruptly started her car and vigorously motioned for Sandy to get out.

As Elena drove away, Sandy clinched her fist and jabbed the air. “Score!” she said aloud. She had discovered Towson’s lover. Elena had given her an entire family of new suspects. She had also revealed a motive for murder, and at least one plot to sabotage Towson’s election campaign.

Sandy was on her phone before the white Buick was out of sight. “Chip, can you break for coffee? We need to talk. This will knock your socks off.”

Chapter Twenty-three

Sandy was stopped at a cross-street traffic light, when she saw Detective Goddard in his unmarked car pass across in front, headed for their Coffee Spot meeting. At first, he had begged off. It was Sunday afternoon; he had planned to take the day off. She had insisted, eager to get him moving on the new *La Familia* info. Also, it occurred to her that he should spend as little time at home as possible. Miss Legal Secretary was probably there eager to take dictation, and he should keep his mind on finding Towson’s killer.

The light changed and after two blocks, she caught up and pulled in behind him just as they joined the Sunday beach traffic going over the Intracoastal Bridge. She waved knowing he was watching his rearview mirror.

Just over the crest of the bridge all traffic stopped. Ahead they could see rows of cars backed up for over a mile all the way east to some jam ahead at the A1A intersection near the beach.

She saw him position his portable flashing light on the top of his vehicle. He left the siren off, pulled over on the narrow shoulder, and slowly crept by the stalled traffic. She thought, what the hell, and pulled behind him on the shoulder. As he passed the long line of stopped cars, the occupants could see that close behind the gray Impala with the flashing lights was a top-down red convertible driven by a serious-looking young woman. She had both hands stiffly on the steering wheel and her eyes frozen straight ahead.

Ten minutes later, they pulled in and parked behind the Coffee Spot. They got out, both laughing.

“Fun to be a cop for a minute. You get paid for playing this game? Where can I buy some flashing lights?”

“I was waiting for you to wave to the stalled drivers.”

They walked through the kitchen and headed for the usual back booth. The waitress was only a step behind with their coffee.

As they settled in, Sandy said, "So, Sonny Barner is alive, huh? Well, glad for that. I don't have time to solve two murders. Was he at the apartment before or after Raymond?"

"I'm busy, Sandy. Get on with it. This better be good."

"You'll love it. First, I should tell you Joanna at the office in Philadelphia traced the ownership of the Jardin Café. It's a Delaware corporation owned by Tampa interests linked to crime and drugs, she thinks. What's going on out there?"

"Possibly drugs. What else is there?"

"If this were Philly, I'd guess a front for money laundering. Do you have that down here?"

"You're talking to a small-town cop. What I know about money laundering wouldn't fill that mug there. That's your big news? Some shady corp owns the Jardin. Goodbye, got to go."

"No, listen, you might get a call from Elena Duarte. You know, from the café." Sandy related the conversation with Elena. She didn't mention advising her to get a lawyer.

He was interested and impressed. "So, Norma Martin is tied into what may or may not be a crime family, and very likely a pro-casino force. Furthermore, she's the mother of Elena Duarte. You say Elena claims to be the one who actually had the affair with Towson?"

"You don't believe her?"

"I have my doubts. Without prints or DNA, we can't even put her in his apartment."

"Of course, you can put her in his apartment. She told me she left a white leather jacket and some other clothes up there."

"Why doesn't she just run? Why come to you?"

"For help, she's afraid the police are looking for her. And I just told you Pirro is chasing her. She doesn't know what to do about him."

"Maybe this Pirro was flat out ordered to kill Towson, and Elena's weeping act is to cover it all up."

"Well, she's clever and obviously good at lying. Towson was no dummy and I bet she fooled him. Is she truly frightened, or did they send her to me for some purpose?"

"I don't care about all of the other family stuff she told you...the threats and who wants to screw who. My concern is did she, or one of her Tampa crowd, commit the murder. The election campaign gives her motive, and sleeping with him positively provides opportunity."

"But why assassinate him if they can knock him out of the election with their Norma Martin rumor scheme?"

"Either way this is good, Sandy. Elena would never have talked with me. I would never have found out about that Tampa family angle without getting myself shot. You did it for me. You're good, thank you."

How delicious was that! "Gee, if I wore glasses they would be steamy right now."

"There's something else on this Tampa angle. You'll probably learn about it anyway. Your friend Linda is using an alias. Her real name is Lynda." He spelled it out. "She's Cuban-American from Tampa, not Georgia."

"Oh, God, why did she lie to me about that? What's she hiding? And she's been stalking me, or she did at least once. That's how she was able to show up on cue when Huress came at me. What does she say about it?"

"I've told you too much already."

"Will it foul you up, if I confront her about using an alias?"

"I never told you a thing."

“She lied to me about why she followed me, and she lied to me about her Georgia background. I don’t appreciate that stuff.”

“Time’s up, Sandy, got to run.”

“What’s the rush, you have something you want to attend to at home? Just one more little thing. The M.E. report said Towson dropped right where he was shot. Was there much blood scattered around?” She tried to make the question sound innocent.

“Nice try. So, you read the M.E. report?”

“Sure, the defense has access to it.”

“You know I can’t discuss it, even if I did trust you, which I don’t. We are legal adversaries remember?”

“The prosecution must eventually disclose their evidence to the defense anyway.”

“Not all of it. There are always things we don’t disclose about evidence, alternative suspects, and theories. Anyway, it’s not for the investigating detective to decide. Obviously, I must keep my mouth shut. Sorry, I can’t discuss the murder scene.”

“Then just listen.”

“Sandy, I don’t have time for your games. I know what you’re up to. You’re going to spout off a bunch of theories while you watch my face. Any time I blink or clear my throat you’re going to say, gotcha.”

“No, I was just going to explain why I think you’re making a wrong assumption. I doubt there was sex in that apartment that day in spite of how it looked in the bedroom. I could be more certain, if I knew about the blood spatter.”

“Did Elena tell you no sex?”

“No, Linda told me about the bedding on the floor. Would you care for a woman’s point of view?”

He shook his head.

“Well you’re getting it anyway. I think the murderer staged the messy bedroom after Towson was shot. Otherwise, we’re supposed to believe that after sex, the woman gets dressed and leaves, and he *didn’t* get dressed. I don’t think so. Remember, he was expecting Tony Hackett later. A king bed has a hellava lot of bedding, and they left it on the floor? I don’t think so. If you don’t want to make it, then at least pile everything back up on the bed and stop stepping around it. I’m ruling out afternoon sex, which means the scene was staged.”

“If no sex, then how do you explain the wine glasses?” Chip asked.

She blinked hard. Wine glasses. What wine glasses? Obviously, the detective had slipped up. She had no idea what he was talking about. She took a guess, “You mean in the bedroom?”

He nodded.

“I’m still working on my wine glass theory.”

He went on, “What if he was shot before he had a chance to pick up the bedding?”

“Then there would be blood spatter *on* the bedding. If there’s no blood spatter, then the bed was made up, and the killer pulled the bedding to the floor.”

“Can’t comment. I can tell you it’s a big bedroom, and the shooting wasn’t that close to the bed.”

“There’s *always* microscopic blood spatter. Another thing, was his robe nearby? I mean was it away from the body, on a hook in the bathroom or something, or was it found near his body?”

No comment.

“If his robe wasn’t nearby then I don’t think there was a woman up there. He’d never open the door in his shorts for a woman without his robe.”

“I won’t discuss the crime scene.”

“Okay, so anyway you have my thoughts, no robe the shooter was a man; *if* a robe nearby then could be either man or woman.”

“Maybe there wasn’t sex up there the day of the murder, but we do know he was having an affair.”

“Geez Louise, I’ve already told you the affair was with Elena Duarte! If you have unidentified prints, they’re Elena’s, period. What more do you want me to do, hand you her DNA?”

He saw the smirk on her face and slowly said, “What?”

She opened her purse and took out a small brown paper bag. She held it up high with two fingers, swinging it back and forth like a treat held above a pet. “What’ll you give me for it, handsome?”

He reached for the bag. She pulled it away, out of reach.

“What’s in there?”

“A tissue with her tears on it, and most likely some of my DNA as well. You can put mine among your souvenirs, no extra charge.”

That brought him straight up in the booth. “My God, you’re a genius. Give it to me.”

“What are you going to give me for it, big boy?” She moved it farther away.

He leaned back. “Her DNA might not be on there even if she cried. And, there’s been no chain of custody. It’s not usable as evidence—.”

“And blah, blah, blah, but you’d like to have it just the same, wouldn’t you? But if you don’t, I’ll just wipe up this spot here on the table.” She started to move her cup, enjoying the look on his face.

He lowered the tone of his voice, “No, I want it. Now hand it over. If you withhold—.”

“Oh, shove it, Detective!”

He burst out laughing. “Okay, you win. I owe you.”

She set the bag down in front of him.

He took the bag and stood to leave. “Actually, I enjoy talking with you. I wish we had more time.”

“Like after you convict my brother there’ll be more time for us to talk?”

“No, the circumstances of our first meeting would have had to be different.”

“We’re in a bookstore and I accidentally drop a book. You pick it up and our eyes meet. Your knees go weak, you stagger back helplessly, and knock over a cart of books. With a sheepish look on your face, you realize you’ve forgotten your own name, which doesn’t matter because you’re unable to speak anyway.”

“I’ll wait for the movie,” he replied.

“I’ll go look for a bookstore.”

She could feel the trust building between them. Chip Goddard was getting hooked. It also occurred to her that perhaps she was as well.

Chapter Twenty-four

State Attorney Moran was waiting in the chief’s office when Goddard arrived. The chief was checking days off on his wall calendar. “It’s the start of the second full week on this case, gentlemen.”

“Do you suppose this might be the week we stumble across something important,” Moran said.

Goddard assumed he was the target of the sarcasm. He closed the door and held up some papers.

“Been waiting for this follow-up on a fingerprint report. An interesting development.”

The chief explained to Moran, "Some nine-year-old was rummaging through a dumpster over on Ocean Drive, yesterday afternoon. Found a shiny new box with the picture of a gun on the lid and showed it to his mother. Go ahead and fill us in Chip."

"No gun in the box, but the mother called police anyway, because it looked scary as she put it. We're interested because the box is obviously brand new and once contained a Smithy .38."

"Big deal, an empty box in a dumpster," Moran said.

"The dumpster is behind Tammy Jerrold's place."

"Same caliber as the murder weapon," the chief said. "Either that box once held the murder weapon or it's an amazing coincidence."

"What does this mean?" Moran was thinking aloud. "Found in Tammy's dumpster? She bought a gun and threw the box away? You might not find her prints on it. It will be covered with a hundred prints from the factory, the store, the kid, and his mother."

"Well, that's the surprise in this report. The box was recently wiped clean. We found only four sets of prints. The prints belong to the kid, his mother, our jailed suspect, and Tammy."

"Evidence found without prints is always suspicious," the chief noted.

Goddard continued, "Doesn't make sense for Tammy to buy a gun, wipe the box clean, then touch it again and toss it in her dumpster. If somebody else placed the box conspicuously to be found in Tammy's dumpster, then how did her prints get on it?"

"In any case, the box connects Reid and Tammy." Moran made a low whistle. "Reid told us in his statement Loraine Dellin showed him a gun box containing a small revolver at the motel. Later he went to meet Tammy. But if it's the same box that was at the motel, why didn't we find Loraine's prints on it?"

Goddard answered, "She could have been the one who wiped it clean. Then Reid touched it. Then Tammy touched it."

"Talk to Tammy again," Moran ordered. "See how she explains it. Don't wait, I want her in here now."

"We've already called her, she's on her way," the chief said.

Goddard said, "Also I have new evidence on who Towson was having the affair with."

"You already told me, Norma Martin," Moran said.

"That was because we had her DNA from a cigarette butt, and it matched the DNA found in the bathroom. Now I have her daughter's DNA from a tissue she used and it also matches.

"Of course," the chief said, "the mother-daughter relationship would give us a preliminary match."

Moran said, "So, tell the lab to do deeper DNA probes. Until then, we won't know which of them was up there in the apartment. In fact, both of them could have been up there."

Goddard continued, "The mother is married, sixty-something and spends her life in an apron. Towson would likely go for the daughter, Elena Duarte, who is footloose, twenty years younger, and an absolute knockout."

"And to think, our mastermind here came to that astonishing deduction all by himself," Moran said. "How did you find all this out?"

Goddard didn't want to reveal Sandy as his source. "We have hearsay. Elena Duarte told Sandy Reid that the affair was a campaign dirty trick by Cuban-American gambling interests to embarrass Towson."

"Damn it. I'm the prosecuting attorney. Don't pull that hearsay bullshit on me."

Goddard continued. "What we don't have is any evidence someone intended for the trick to go further and include murder. It's possible the entire affair had nothing to do with the murder."

“The hearsay, Goddard! Go back to the hearsay. How does it happen you know what Elena Duarte told Sandy Reid?”

The chief interrupted, “You don’t want to know.”

“Yes, I do.” Moran stood and faced Goddard. “You got that info from Sandy Reid didn’t you? Let’s hold your lame explanation of why you’re talking to her...probably across the pillow. Just explain how the suspect’s sister finds a possible suspect before you do.”

“Elena Duarte would never have talked to the police,” Goddard said weakly.

“That didn’t answer my question. Did you have anything to do with the sister meeting Elena Duarte, or was that also the sister’s idea?”

“Unfortunately, I had nothing to do with it. Sandy Reid told me hoping I’d give her inside info in return.”

“Did you ever get a statement from the mother?”

“Tried but she wouldn’t talk to me.”

“But you spoke to the daughter.”

“No, haven’t met her,” he hated to admit.

“Damn it! Then how did you obtain the DNA you just told me about? Did the sister get that for you as well?” Moran didn’t wait for an answer. “Goddard, consider yourself on probation as of now. Don’t force me to call in investigators from Tallahassee. We want the sister away from the investigation, and you can’t seem to stop her. What is she, some kind of runaway train?”

“That’s pretty close,” Goddard said.

The chief answered his phone. “Tammy’s waiting at the front desk.”

Moran gathered his papers and started to leave. “Let me know how she explains her prints on the gun box. That’s got to be good. And Goddard, you’re on thin ice.”

Goddard met Tammy at the entrance, and they walked back to the interrogation room. “I’m going to record an interview with you and have it typed up. You can sign it later. Okay?”

“That’s fine, Chip.” She walked slowly, glancing around. “I haven’t been here in this department for years. When I worked for the mayor, I used to run all around this building every day. I remember when they built this dreaded little room. We played around with that two-way mirror over there.”

“Trust me, no one’s on the other side. I’ll leave the door open.” He sat on a chair beside her. He clicked on the recorder and stated the place, date, and names. “This interrogation should be no surprise. Ray Reid and Loraine Dellin put you right in the middle of this mess.”

“Chip, please understand, I loved the senator. You know all he did for me. I was practically his protégée. Most of my business came from his referrals. All that will stop now. I’m sick over his death for a lot of reasons, and a lot less money is one of them.”

“When did you last speak to Al?”

“At the now-infamous party the previous Saturday.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Tammy. However, I need to go back over what you told me about last Saturday.”

“Sure. Saturday is my day to cover the office. I skipped out around noon and met with Reid at the restaurant. When he took off, I had a sandwich and went back to the office. Business is terrible. I didn’t leave the office that afternoon. At six, I was getting ready to leave when the chief phoned me with the shocker. Then Reid phoned me almost immediately. That’s when I phoned 911 with my suspicions, and you picked him up. I told you all this before.”

“Anyone physically see you in your office between three and six?”

“I’m trying to think back. Can’t remember who came in. Lousy alibi, huh?”

“Only the guilty have good alibis. Reid mentioned Norma Martin. Do you know her?”

“I’ve been to her restaurant. I know who she is. I had the listing on that restaurant earlier, but she didn’t buy it through me.”

“Do you own a gun, Tammy?”

She shook her head. “I fired one once. You were in high school, Chip. I was dating a deputy sheriff.”

“What was his name, perhaps I knew him?”

“Carl Richards, I think. Years ago, you wouldn’t know him. He went back up north. Anyway, he got on a kick that I needed to protect myself. We went out to the firing range one day. He had me fire his service revolver, big and heavy. My arm ached for a month and my ears are still ringing.”

“What about Sonny?”

“Sonny...Barner? Reid asked me about him too. Said Loraine allegedly shot him, I think you know that.”

“Are you friends with him?”

“You mean socially? Good grief, haven’t you seen him?”

“When did you last see him?”

“As a matter of fact, he sprayed my apartment this week.”

He picked up the red-striped bag from the table behind him. He opened the clasp and carefully shook out the gun box onto the table. On the cover of the box was a picture of a small revolver resting on an American flag. “Have you ever seen this before?”

“Yes! I threw out that box. Weird. That empty box was stuffed down in a small shopping bag on the floor of my bedroom closet in the middle of all my shoes. I keep saying I’m going to straighten out that shoe mess one of these days. I assumed it was a shoe box in the bag at first, but it’s the wrong shape.”

“What did you do with the gun?”

“Never saw any gun.”

“Why didn’t you call the police?”

“For what? Sure, now that I see that box in a police interrogation room, in an official bag marked ‘Evidence,’ in front of a frowning homicide detective who’s pointing at it, and staring at me, yes, it looks suspicious. But at my apartment, it was just something in an old shopping bag. An empty toy box someone stuck in there at some store thinking it was trash. Look at it, Chip. It’s bright red white and blue with a flag on it, I’m supposed to get excited about that? I shook it to be sure it was empty. I don’t know. I was preoccupied, late for work. It meant nothing to me. I tossed it and forgot all about it.”

“When was this?”

“Let me think...Friday.”

“When is your trash pickup?”

“Tomorrow. I feel so dim-witted now. I goofed didn’t I? It’s important isn’t it? Was the murder weapon in that box?”

“Would you be willing to take a lie detector test?”

“Of course, hook me up, sir.”

“Maybe later, thanks for coming in, Tammy.” He stopped the recorder. “Before you go, I’d like to give you some advice, just old friend to friend. Stop using Sonny Barner for exterminating. In fact, don’t let him in your condo ever again and never be alone with him.”

“Sounds like he’s a suspect.”

“The man is sexually obsessed with you.”

“I’ve dealt with that phenomenon since middle school. I’m accustomed to overactive imaginations, is it more than that?”

“My advice is to keep him out of your place. That’s not official, just my personal suspicion.”

“Okay thanks, and I have my own suspicions about Ray Reid.”

Chapter Twenty-five

After dark on that Monday, Sandy sat in her car behind the Jardin Café waiting for Norma Martin. In truth, she wanted the mother and her daughter, Elena, to be possible suspects. Nothing personal, Sandy actually wanted *everyone* in the world to be a suspect.

When they accuse you of murder, you can't have too many others who are also suspects. They don't have to be first-class suspects or even logical suspects, although that would be even better. They just have to be people somehow connected to the case. Kagan would attempt to get them mentioned in the trial. Then he could talk about them in front of the jury. He probably couldn't make each person appear to be a possible killer, but he could raise some doubts in the jurors' minds. If in doubt, you must acquit.

The first time Sandy drove out to the Jardin Café, she had encountered Elena whose explanation of her affair with Towson was fascinating and perhaps contrived. Was her affair nothing more than a campaign dirty trick against Towson? Or was the affair a setup for an assassination? Sandy wanted to talk with Norma Martin. Maybe she would at least give a hint as to whether Elena had actually been in love with Towson. Sandy would very much like to get her, her daughter, or the family connected somehow to the murder.

Sandy's plan was to light a fuse by mentioning *La Familia*, then wait and see what blows up. That's what she did. And that's what happened. The mother became visibly agitated and screamed for Sandy to wait outside.

Her phone buzzed. It was the law firm in Philadelphia. “Hey, Joanna. You're working late. How's Walde & Walde doing without me?”

“Honey, you've got a big problem up here. Your absence has not gone unnoticed, to put it mildly. Ron is coming all apart. He told me to get you on the phone. Be gentle with him, he's been covering your cute little tail all week. Here he is.”

Her boss came on the line. “Sandy, what are you doing to me? Eberhard didn't miss you until they started discussing two of your field cases at Friday's staff meeting, then it hit the fan. Are you listening?”

“Yes, Ron, go on.” She guessed what was coming.

“He chewed me out. In short, he said you're fired. I stretched things and told him your fieldwork on those cases was complete. I said everything was cool, and you'd be back for this Wednesday's staff meeting. You have to be there or else.”

“Thanks for the cover. I love you guys and my job. I'm not going to give it up, but—.”

“But, nothing! Get your ass back up here by Wednesday, or you'll blow it. Law students from all over the east coast are lined up waiting to replace you, and they'll work for free just for the internship.”

“Ron, I know it's not your problem, but you see my brother is in deep shit. I think I'm doing some good, but it's going to take awhile longer, unless I get a break of some kind.”

“Sandy, you're smarter than this. Pack and leave right now.”

She thought back to when she had started with Walde & Walde as an unpaid intern. They liked her and gave her a paid position. All the lawyers worked at least ten-hour days, and she worked hard to keep up with her field support. It paid off when the firm offered to finance her remaining tuition, so she could

finish her law studies at Penn part time. She'd be on her way. She'd have it made. Her dream was there on the other end of the line, right there in her hand.

"Do you want to keep this job? Yes or no?"

She wanted the job and she would go back. She had to. Yet she was somehow reluctant to say, yes. Not everything was straight in her mind. "I need to sleep on it. I'll phone you in the morning."

She looked at her watch. She'd go back to Raymond's apartment and pack. A few hours of sleep and she'd be ready to head north on I95. If she drove straight through, she'd make the meeting on time. There were two additional awkward situations: Raymond and Chip.

She knew that her brother would accept her leaving without complaint. He was expecting it at anytime. However, visiting hours weren't until tomorrow afternoon. There was no way to see him before she left town.

She wanted to explain how she wished she could stay. Wanted to tell him that she was beginning to like him and hoped they could be friends, and that her leaving had nothing to do with him. That she hoped she had helped and would be in contact from Philly. She could explain it all eventually, yet how much would he believe, if she left without even a goodbye?

Chip was another story. A story that would have a predictable ending. And the ending would start tonight. She punched speed dial #1.

He was in Chief Oehlert's office. "Hi, Sandy, we're working late. What do you want?"

"Get the edge out of your voice, Chip. I have something important to tell you."

"Well, I'll be tied up for most of the night. Call me in the morning, okay?"

"Chip...I'm leaving. This is goodbye."

"What, wait let me step out into the hall. Go on."

"I was just given an ultimatum from my employer. I have one day to get back up there or they'll terminate me. I know my brother appreciates my efforts, yet I don't know if I'm doing any good or not down here."

"He does appreciate you. Don't say I told you, but I think you're making great progress."

"I can't give up that job, Chip."

"I know you have responsibilities up there."

"...and I'm supposed to trade all that for...whatever might happen down here? I don't mean you, Chip. I don't know if I'm the answer to my brother's problems anyway."

"You should do whatever is best for you and your career."

"I'll miss being able to annoy you."

"I'll miss being annoyed. You know, I'd like to call you sometime in Philadelphia."

They both were silent.

Then he said, "This is really a surprise. May I see you now?"

She wondered what it would lead to, if she saw him tonight. She wondered if that was what she really wanted. She hadn't wanted to get too close to Chip while her brother was in jail. But now she was leaving and would be off stage. Chip was the most appealing and solid man she had ever met. She knew him well enough to know they would begin with an embrace this evening and end with a distressing goodbye in the early hours tomorrow. Of course, there would be a brief epilog, she imagined, of subsequent long distance calls and e-mails that would lessen and eventually give way to the daily substance of their separated lives. That would be how it ends.

"Why don't we meet at Raymond's apartment in one hour?" she said with some hesitation. "You know where it is, you tore it apart."

"Okay, one hour it is. Where are you now?"

“The Jardin, I’m in my car in the parking lot. I was checking on Elena’s story. I wanted to know if this was a love thing or a sinister plot. I just saw her mother inside. She said she couldn’t talk inside because someone is always watching her. She told me to go on outside and wait.”

“Her mother? What the hell? Sandy, I want you to drop that part of your digging. Don’t go to see any of that family or even nose around. Drop it right now. Let me handle it. You’re playing with the big boys there.”

“I have no choice but to drop it. It’s all yours now. I just got the ultimatum from my boss. I must give this up now and go home and pack.”

“Good, well get out of there fast! You’re sitting alone in a dark parking lot, out in the sticks in that little plaything you call a car. You’ve probably got the top down.”

Then, over to her left, she heard an engine roar and saw a huge vehicle roll into the lot. It stopped abruptly in the middle of the driveway. The vehicle stayed where it stopped, motionless. She sat there harshly illuminated, targeted in the headlight’s glare, watching for any sign of movement.

Another full minute passed. Then the headlights switched to bright. The phone was still in her hand. In a whisper, “Chip, don’t hang up. I think I have a problem. There’s a huge SUV stopped in the middle of the driveway aimed right at me. The driver isn’t moving. Geez, it looks enormous. Like a tank, big and square with bars going across the front.”

“Sounds like a Hummer. It’s a trap, Sandy. Get out of there!”

“I can’t get out. There’s nowhere to go. He’s blocking the driveway, and I’m at the back of the lot.”

“Start your vehicle now, and buckle your seatbelt!”

Suddenly, she saw the swinging reflection of restaurant lights in the door window as the driver’s door opened. “Now the driver is getting out. He’s tall and skinny, has on a baseball cap. Maybe he’s going into the restaurant. No, Chip, he’s walking right toward me!”

“I used to patrol that area. There’s an old wooden fence across the back of that lot, it’s rotted. Swing around and drive right through it. There’s a road on the other side.”

“What? Drive into a fence on purpose, you’re nuts. No way, not with my baby car!”

His voice was tense, “Is your car running? Is your seatbelt on?”

“Okay, okay, but I’m going to wait, maybe he’s just lost and wants directions.” Then the realization hit her. “My God, that must be Pirro. I’m trapped back here with him.”

“Sandy, I’m telling you, either head for the fence or drive over him.” He shouted, “Get moving and go through the fence. If you don’t hit a post, you should sail right through. Now! Go!”

She stepped on the accelerator and turned hard. The little car started sliding and fishtailed at first, then recovered. The man yelled and started running toward her. Then he turned and ran back to his vehicle. She could see the fence coming up fast. She ducked instinctively. The fence broke with a sharp crackle, followed by a thud and the sickening crack of breaking glass. A web of shattered windshield spread across in front of her. The car was now sliding sideways down a slight slope with the tires spinning in dirt. She realized she still had her foot on the accelerator. She hit the brakes. She felt the car lurch up from the shallow ditch. It slid to a stop with dust swirling around her.

She was in the middle of a dirt road. No streetlights. She could make out lights in a house a block away. Quiet, except she could hear her car still running. One headlight was out. She felt something damp and sticky on her forehead. She twisted around in her seat, looking at her car, expecting shambles. A small plank of wood was on the seat next to her. She threw it out. Otherwise, all appeared normal except for the cracks in the windshield. She felt around for her phone and found it tucked between her legs. “Chip are you there?”

“Thank God, you okay?”

“I’m surprised, the car came through okay. I’m on a back street.”

“I’m in my vehicle now and already halfway there. Which way did you turn after you busted through?”

“Left, I guess.”

“Okay, that’s away from town. Make a U-turn and head back. Stay on that back road. I’ll cut over and meet you. You’ll see my flashing lights coming up right in front of you in a couple of minutes. Then you’ll be safe.”

“Well, don’t hit me, one headlight is out.” Before she could turn, there was a thunderous crash and with a bouncing flash of headlights, the huge vehicle roared down the slope just behind her. She pushed the accelerator pedal hard against the floorboard. The tires spun on the dirt road for a second, then caught. The little car shot ahead down the dark back road.

“He’s on my tail, Chip. And I’m going away from you. I’m heading out into the country. This car could outrun him, if I could see through the windshield.”

“Don’t try to speed on that dirt road, there’s a roadside canal along there. Just try to keep in front of him until I catch up.” He grabbed his microphone, “Dispatch this is David Three. Code three. Request you get an ambulance moving west on Milkrun Road, west of the Jardin Café. Not on the main highway, on Milkrun! I’ll tell you how far west in a minute, just get rolling out here. David Three en route.”

She barreled ahead on the unfamiliar dirt road, trying to see the road with a broken headlight and a cracked windshield. “He’s gaining on me. Real close now. He’s enormous, I’m just a little speck compared to that monster. Feels like searchlights shining down on me. Geez, he bumped me. Again! He keeps hitting me! He’s smashing my trunk. Chip, he’s going to drive right over me!”

Goddard heard her phone go dead. He was now on Milkrun Road. His siren blared as he sped down the dirt road. He strained to see any taillights ahead. He pushed his speed. As he passed behind the restaurant, there was no time to swerve to miss the broken fence boards in the road. He rumbled across them like train tracks.

Ahead now was a low wall of dust. His headlights glared back from the dust cloud like fog, forcing him to slow. He cursed and pounded on the steering wheel with his fist. He strained to stare ahead into the swirling blur, forced to drive much slower now.

Then ahead, there through the dust, he could make out taillights...large lights, high off the ground. Now guided by those taillights he started gaining. Goddard had drag raced on this road in his teens. He knew every bump and curve. Dust or no dust, there was no vehicle made that could out run him on this road.

Then, on the right at the side of road, through the dust he saw a dim light. Peculiar, a light shining up on a tree. No likely landscape decorations in this neighborhood. He had already shot past it. Something made him stop. He braked hard, skidded sideways to a stop. He watched with frustration as the red taillights of the Hummer disappeared ahead into the dust.

Something was wrong. He backed until he was alongside the light. The dust started to clear. He could now see the little red Miata flipped upside down in the canal, cocked at an angle. One headlight shone up out of the water like a beacon. Tires still spinning. Most of the car was under water. He had almost missed it. He reached for the mike. It slipped from his sweaty hand. He grabbed it again. He tried to get his breath. “Dispatch...David Three. Vehicle under water with injuries. Respond five miles west of the Jardin Café on Milkrun Road. I’m on the scene. You’ll see my overheads. Make it fast.”

He moved his car across headed toward the shoulder, so that his headlights now illuminated the canal. He could feel his heart pounding. *Stay calm. Don’t panic. She’ll be all right. You can do this. Just do this one thing.*

Chapter Twenty-six

“She was upside down, head in the mud, her seatbelt holding her under water. Somehow Goddard got her untangled, carried her up on the canal bank, and gave her CPR until the ambulance pulled up.”

“What are you talking about?” It was early, before breakfast. Ray was surprised to see Sergeant Lewis down there, away from his desk in the visiting room.

“Thought you should know.” The sergeant passed the morning paper through the bars. “Not much in the paper. Doesn’t even give her name. Deliberately run off the road. We’re going to catch the guy.”

A small item was circled. “This is Sandy?” Ray read the brief item and started shaking as the situation sank in. “My God, is she okay?”

“Well, yes and no. She’s alive. She came to before they got to the hospital. But her legs are numb. I just came from the hospital but couldn’t see her.”

“What do you mean numb? Can she move them?”

The sergeant hesitated and then shrugged. “Look, I’m not a doctor.”

“She can’t move her legs!” Ray yelled and hit the bars with his hand. “Damn, then it’s her spine.”

“Doctor says too early to tell. They’re running tests. She’s getting good care.”

Ray stumbled backward onto the bunk. He closed his eyes tightly and thought about the circumstances, the danger in which he had put his sister. He never should have called her. She didn’t want to come anyway. They weren’t close and he had forced the situation. Maybe she believed their folks would have wanted it. Now, what kind of remaining life would she go back to?”

“Let me know if I can do anything.” Sergeant Lewis said quietly. He waited a few more minutes and then silently walked away.

They cleared the breakfast away. All Sandy wanted was some tea, a comb, and a mirror. A nurse leaned into the room and said, “Hello world, she’s sitting up now, that’s good. Got a bet going on at the nurse’s station on why an armed cop sat outside your room all night. We’re trying to decide if you’re somebody good or somebody bad.”

“Didn’t know about the guard. Anyway, long story and I don’t remember it all.”

“Well, the cops drank all our coffee. Another cop’s coming your way right now...good lookin’ one. He’s been in and out looking at you, while you were asleep. If you don’t want him let us know, we’ll take him.”

She saw Chip look in tentatively. She motioned him on in.

He said, “Hope you don’t mind.”

“Just don’t look at me. Look at the wall or the floor. I need a shower. What do I say to someone who just saved my life? Thank you sounds laughable.”

“What in hell did you think you were doing out there?”

“No, no, this is where you say, oh my God, Sandy, I’m so glad you’re alive!”

“Your convertible saved you. I wouldn’t have had time to force open a door to get to you. Even then, I had trouble getting your seatbelt off. Your body was pulling against it. The paramedics got you breathing. They figured you were out less than five minutes. That’s very positive according to them. You hit that ditch at high speed and burrowed into the mud. You were lucky.”

“Lucky my buddy was right behind me.” She reached out, took his hand, and squeezed it briefly, before he slowly pulled it away.

“Scared the hell out of me,” he said.

“Hey, I run around Philly at night.”

“I don’t want to hear about reckless in Philadelphia. Not only is Towson’s murderer out there, now we know Pirro is gunning for you. You might also want to look over your shoulder now and then for Huress. You’re mucking around in the gutter where the slime balls are.”

“I don’t mind mixing it up with the bad guys. I stay Teflon clean. Always been that way.”

“You’re not only cocky, you’re reckless. I hope you never meet your match. You know, often the bad guys win. In fact, if you look at the numbers the bad guys usually win. And if they’re caught, they don’t always get convicted.”

“So, I have better odds being the criminal than the victim. You cops should shoot more of them before they get to trial.”

“Not funny. I’m glad you’re not a cop.”

“No joke. I’m not saying shoot all of them, just more of them.”

“Sounds like you’re back to your old lethal self.”

“Not so bad right now. All night they had me strapped to a board and wouldn’t let me move my head or anything until they examined all the pictures. Stiff and sore here and there. They say I have bruises from the seatbelt in some strange places. I’m getting away with just this cut on my forehead...and the legs I guess.

“I asked the doctor about your legs. He couldn’t tell me much. What did he tell you?”

“Said just wait. They still feel numb.” She wanted to change the subject. “Have you seen my car?”

“Yes, I put the remaining pieces in an envelope. You can mail it to your insurance company.”

“That bad, huh? Guess I’ll be on foot until I get a new one.”

“Anything else you need?”

“I don’t want to bother you. It’s not police business.”

“Name it.”

“I need a new phone. Mine is soaking in Florida swamp mud somewhere. I’m lost without it”

“Oh, I forgot, the tow truck driver found it on the canal bank, must have flipped out when you overturned.”

“A miracle...all my precious numbers.”

“It’s downstairs with your clothes, I’ll have it sent up.” He turned toward the door. “I bullied my way in here. They said please just thirty seconds. I guess my time is up.”

“You arranged for a police guard outside my room.”

“Just precautionary. Someone tried to kill you.”

He started to say something else. She guessed it was about her leaving Florida. He walked to the door.

He turned. “Can you describe the guy?”

“It had to be Pirro. Tall and skinny, I couldn’t make out his clothes. Oh, and the baseball cap.”

“I got a good paint sample off your trunk lid. I’ll find the bastard.”

“Might not be a problem. I have a feeling, if I tell Elena Duarte what happened, she’ll tell me exactly where to find him.”

After he left, she reached down and touched each leg, still no feeling. She picked up the mirror, moved her head back and forth slowly, and spoke aloud, “I suppose I’m lucky at that.” Yet, she had to consider that the rest of her life might be quite different than she had always imagined.

The bedside phone rang. She shuffled around and stretched to reach it. “Hi, Miss Reid it’s Sergeant Lewis. Can you talk?”

“Sergeant...Lewis...who?”

“That nice old cop who runs the visiting room at the jail. How ya doing, Philly?”

“Sarge, of course, hey thanks for calling. I feel better just hearing your voice. I really mean that.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll be okay. I just know it. Of course, your car’s a goner.”

“Makes me sick all over again, and I have places to go. Why don’t you assign me a police car with a driver? Make him single and good-looking. I want the lights, the siren, and all that jazz. Be sure it has a good stereo.”

“That’s why I called. You can use your brother’s car.”

“Don’t think so, Sarge, it was impounded.”

“Not exactly, I called over there this morning to see what it would take to get it released. Goddard should have put an Evidence Hold on it, but he didn’t. His team searched the car and went over every inch. All the time there wasn’t even a Hold on it. Just sitting there. I told our man over there you’d be waltzing over to pick it up.”

Waltzing sounded good. “You lifesaver! Why are you doing all this for me?”

“Because I like your style. You remind me of my daughter when she was your age, sassy, not as clever as you. Just as reckless.”

“How’s she doing?”

“She’s mellowed out just fine, and I have grandkids.”

“You have pictures you can show me?”

“Funny you should ask. Okay, Philly...get better. Let me know when you want to get the car released.”

“Thanks, Sarge.”

“Don’t hang up. Here’s your brother. I had him brought up here to the visiting room.”

Raymond got on and started in with his regrets for asking her to come to Florida. She brushed that aside and tried to explain what happened. At first, they just yelled back and forth. Eventually, they calmed down and quietly talked for ten minutes. She didn’t mention the ultimatum from her employer.

Tests and more x-rays filled the afternoon. Busy people in blue scrubs, fussed around, patted her on the shoulder, and told her she’d be just fine. When they wheeled her back to her room, she found an orchid plant from Linda. Sandy would call her later. Another call was more important just then. The law firm in Philadelphia was waiting for her decision.

She phoned Joanna in Philadelphia. A hit and run, she explained without further details. Joanna was aghast and kept pressing for particulars—if it’s not serious then why is she in the hospital? Sandy’s boss got on the phone and told her not to worry about hurrying back to work. The company wanted her to get well, not to worry about the expense. They would hold off any decision regarding her employment.

“Ron, that’s marvelous and I’m overwhelmed, but I’ve already made my decision.” In fact, she had just decided after talking with Raymond. Helping him was unfinished. No way could she leave town with Moran winning and the murderer unknown. Also, there was the matter of Chip.

She told Ron, “I’ve decided to stay here until my brother is safely out on bail. It’s a circumstantial case. It’s entirely possible a confused jury would convict him. I’ll do what I can. Thanks to all you guys for the special consideration. I don’t expect you to hold the job open for me. It may take two weeks or two years. In any case, it’s something I have to do. After that, if the company still wants me...well, we’ll see.”

She awoke late in the afternoon. She tried to pull herself up but was too stiff and sore. She thought about her precious Miata, also crumpled and hurt and beyond all possible healing. Of course, she could buy a new car, but she loved the old one. She wanted it back. They had shared some good adventures and nearly died together. That bastard Pirro tried to bury them both together in that country canal. She would crumple and hurt Pirro, if she got the chance. *La Familia* must be touchy about strangers nosing around, or maybe she was getting too close to the truth.

Pirro would come after her again. She knew that. Even so, the attempt on her life had challenged her and made her angry. He had picked on the wrong girl. She had no intention of waiting around for him to try again. He had to pay.

She buzzed the nurse for help sitting up and asked for the phone. She needed a different kind of help just now. "Hello, Linda, it's Sandy. Thanks for the orchid plant. It's beautiful and you're a sweetheart."

"Sandy! So happy you're okay. I hope Chip catches that bastard. May I come up to see you?"

"Not yet, but I do need a favor."

"Anything."

"Do you own a gun?"

"Anything but that. You're not getting it. The police will protect you from Pirro."

"How did you know his name?"

"Some cop mentioned it, I guess."

"I need the gun for preemptive purposes. What do you have?"

"Preemptive, my ass. Don't even think about that going after him crap. Yes, I have a .38. Do you even know anything about firearms?"

"I've been shown a trick or two. I'm serious, Linda, and I'm not going to argue with you. Do I get your gun or not?"

"The Florida sun has baked your brain. Let me warn you, Sugar, if you go through with this, Chip won't hesitate to arrest you."

"It'll look like self-defense. A cop in Philly showed me exactly how to stage it. They won't even bring charges against me."

"You're talking about murder. It's dangerous, and you could get yourself killed. You know, you won't fool Chip, and you could lose him over this. He hates people who pick up a gun to settle a score. He's says they're not trustworthy. He's likely to write you off in a hurry."

"Linda?"

"You're a dangerous woman, you know it?"

"Linda?"

"Okay, okay, you could get one fast in Florida anyway. But I have to meet with you first and discuss it. And I must be certain that you're off all medications."

Sandy started forming a vague plan. She'd lure Pirro into the open. That part would be easy. He'd underestimate her just like everyone else. He'd macho around, showing off. She'd let him strut for a minute. Then, she'd blow him away. He'd die with a surprised look on his ugly face. She'd do it for Elena and God knows how many other women—past and future.

After the evening meal, and more medication, she felt sleepy. Cloudy thoughts swirled around in her mind. There in her drowsy fog she saw herself going after Pirro. He was standing there beside his huge vehicle. She saw herself taking out the gun and slipping the safety off. Then he got blurry and disappeared. She was drifting and floating. Looking down, she could see the blurry body of a tall, skinny man wearing a baseball cap. He was lying face down in a pond filled with blood, his body kept jerking with spastic movements, in spite of the iron sword piercing his chest and sticking up out of his back.

It was late when she awoke. Dark outside, lights were low, and the hospital was quiet. She became aware that her legs felt tingly as though they were falling asleep. She sat up in bed and rubbed them. She gradually began to realize that she could feel the rubbing. A slight feeling yet it was there, definitely tingling and somewhat stinging. She buzzed for the nurse. When the nurse came in, Sandy had tears on her cheeks. She was laughing and wiggling her toes. She'd never realized how delightful it could be to wiggle your toes.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The next morning Goddard stopped at his desk to pick up his messages and review the overnight Incident Report. A new item was listed: Accident-Fatal. In the space for victim: Abelando Pirro, a name Goddard had already memorized. He asked to see the Police Report. His aide said it was on the chief's desk.

"Chief, we've got an Abelando Pirro dead last night. May I see the report?"

"Only have the prelim, happened late. He fell from a fourth-floor condo balcony over on Banyon. They found his body impaled on the iron fence surrounding the pool. Draped over a sharp metal picket like a dead fish on a hook. M.E. said he probably lived for hours and just bled to death. Hellava way to go. Had been drinking, before he fell. Why, do you know something about it?"

"I can tell you right now, it was murder."

"How do you know? You haven't even seen the report."

"He didn't fall. He was pushed. It's murder." Goddard started flipping through his notes. "Who's getting it?"

"Won't be you, your hands are full."

"It's connected, Chief," he pleaded, "part of my case. That's the address for Norma Martin. He's the bad guy who ran Sandy Reid off the road two nights ago. That was attempted murder. I was searching for him."

"This Pirro death happened on Sergeant Huress' watch," the chief said. "He investigated last night. Said it was a couple of drunken Cuban-Americans. Look at this, he got a nice statement from the girlfriend."

"Of course, it's an absolutely perfect statement. She made it up."

"Huress did okay. I'm keeping him on it."

"He's not a detective, not qualified. Don't do this to me, Chief. This could be important. Damn. At least now I can stop looking for him."

Goddard read the report, then stepped outside the chief's office and called Sandy. "How do you feel this morning?"

"The doctor said my temporary leg numbness was stress and strain related. He had some big name for it. I'm being released this morning."

"Great, I'm very happy for you. And you can relax, Pirro won't bother you again."

"You caught him already? That was fast. But I didn't want him caught. I wanted him dead. Well, don't put him in with my brother."

"He is dead, Sandy. Found below Elena Duarte's balcony. She claims it was an accident. Want to hear her statement?"

"I'm listening."

Chip started reading, ...*We were such good friends. We had quite a few drinks and were making out on the couch, then we danced a little. We were waiting for my mother to come over after the restaurant closed. Then he said he wanted to make Mentiritas, he just had to have Mentiritas. I told him I thought I was out of rum. I said I'd look again. When I came back out of the kitchen, he was gone. I assumed he had gone out to get the rum. That upset me terribly because he was in no condition to drive. I was*

worried about him. I sat down and turned on the TV. Then I heard the sirens and saw all of the lights outside.

“Well, I’ll be damned. You’ll never know just how much trouble she saved me. Give her a medal. She made up that statement. She hated him. Apparently, the story she told me about Pirro was true.” Sandy laughed. “She danced him right off the balcony. She probably pretended he was getting her hot and then pushed the bastard over the railing straight down to hell. Applause please. I hope he died a slow death. I’ll bet she turned up the TV to not hear his moaning down there.”

“I don’t know about you. It’s a crime and, if it were my case, I’d go after her for murder.”

“Wait a minute, when did this happen, last night? Geez Louise! Chip, it was in my dream. She did it for me. Elena heard about my accident and knew immediately who ran me off the road. Pirro might even have bragged about it. Twenty-four hours later, he’s dead. Chip, she killed him for me.”

“That’s a stretch. Maybe Pirro killed Towson, and to cover it up, Elena was told by the family to get rid of him.”

“I doubt that. He was a big danger to her and her mother. The calculating little accountant from Tampa figured out a slick way to write him off. I’ll just keep thinking she had me and some other women in mind.”

“I still want to see you again before you leave.”

“Chip, I’ve decided not to go...at least, not right away.”

“What? Oh, you’re not. You’re not leaving. Oh, that’s good.”

“We should meet for coffee.”

Sandy was discharged mid-morning. Sergeant Lewis picked her up at the emergency entrance in a blue and white and drove her to the police impound lot. He explained he should go along to be sure she had no trouble getting Ray’s car released, and he had something important to tell her.

“Now that you’re okay, I can tell you how close you came. Chip radioed for an ambulance as soon as you told him you were being chased. He didn’t wait to decide anything. That ambulance was screaming down that back road before you even hit the ditch. Those few extra minutes saved you. Your vehicle was upside down, the top half submerged in water. Your head was actually under mud. We don’t understand how it was possible for him to shift your car enough to get that seatbelt undone while he was sinking in mud like quicksand.”

“He told me he had some difficulty getting my seatbelt undone.”

“Yes, the difficulty was he had to lift the car. The tow truck driver didn’t see how it could be done.”

Sergeant Lewis stopped his police vehicle at the impound office and turned to her. “Now I have terrible news for you on another subject. Many guys in the department are coming down hard on Hures for attacking you in his pickup. He blames you for that, for bringing charges, and for putting it all in the newspaper. He never gives up on a grudge. He’ll get back at anyone who’s ever caused him a problem. He’s the type to take revenge on you, Sandy.”

“Thanks, Sarge, that was in the back of my mind. I’ll be careful.”

“No, you’re not getting it. He told his drinking buddy at a bar, he intends to see you laid bare and wasted. Those were his words. I’m telling you, he definitely will come after you. He knows who he’s up against now. And it will be unexpected.”

“Well, I’m not going to hide, and I’m not going to start carrying a gun.” She wasn’t so certain about the second part. She signed for Ray’s car at the pound. They walked together to find the car.

“Here it is.” Lewis compared the number on the windshield to the number on the key tag.

“This can’t be it,” she said, “this is a stupid Ford. Not just a stupid Ford, it’s green! I can’t drive around in a stupid green Ford?”

He laughed. “You could wear a disguise.”

“Yeah, a clown costume.” She got in and slammed the car door shut. The glove compartment flopped open. She reached over and banged it shut hard, and the compartment door broke completely off and fell. She crossed her fingers and turned the key. After three heart-stopping cranks, the car reluctantly groaned to life, more or less. She thanked the sergeant and blew him a kiss.

Her phone buzzed. Attorney Kagan said, “Miss Reid, glad you’re okay. I know you’re close to that reporter, Linda Call. Did you know the police picked her up and brought her to the station? She was seen in the interrogation room with Goddard.”

“So what? She’s probably interviewing him.”

“Definitely the other way around. They brought her in for questioning. They tested her gun. She was at the murder scene.”

“The gun won’t be a match, and I know she was up there with CSI, she told me.”

“No, earlier that day, she was up there with Towson.”

“Oh great, she told me only that she talked to him that day. She didn’t say it like they were face to face.” Sandy thought about other possible lies. It gets worse. I haven’t had a chance to brief you, Jerry. Linda Call isn’t all she seems. She’s Cuban-American and from Tampa. Why bother to lie about that?”

“If she’s connected to the family, then they might have been working against us all along. They would want your brother convicted to cover up whatever is going on.”

“I know, Linda could be a threat, but we could really use her help. If she’s involved then there goes the cooperation with the paper. I’m going to see her now.”

“You need help sooner than you think. I was just informed that your brother is scheduled for transfer out to the county jail tomorrow. Good luck, Miss Reid, and keep your head down.”

Chapter Twenty-eight

Sandy hated the situation. She had to know if Linda was with her or against her. She needed Linda on her side. Having the situation in doubt was impossible. Twenty-four hours were left before Raymond would go from bad to worse.

She needed a shrewd angle fast. Perhaps she could persuade Linda to get some sort of controversial editorial printed that would upset things and delay the transfer. Maybe Linda wouldn’t cooperate. Maybe Linda had something else in mind.

When Sandy entered the newsroom of the Park Beach newspaper Linda gave her a happy wave. “Hi Sugar, look at this.” She pointed to her monitor. “My interview with old Mrs. Crawford.”

“Anything good?”

“She saw a woman leaving the building a little after five that day, but not up close. Crawford was down the block walking her dog.”

“She recognize the woman?”

“She assumed it was ‘that Spanish lady’ because she recognized the scarf. They had met weeks earlier in the elevator, and they had talked about the scarf. Mrs. Crawford remembered the scarf because it had red and blue triangles, just like the pattern on a tablecloth she received as a wedding present sixty years ago.”

Sandy smiled. “Let me guess. And she knew it was five, because she always walks the dog after her favorite TV show is over. Also, she didn’t hear any shots because she’s deaf.”

“Corny but correct. If the world was inhabited with little old ladies, we’d all have an easier time of it.”

“Was the woman wearing the scarf on her head?”

“You mean like hiding her face, I just assumed that. Also, she doesn’t remember what else the woman was wearing. You look different, Sandy. What’s wrong, this whole business getting to you?”

“Linda, you acted surprised when I mentioned Mrs. Crawford to you the other day, yet you must have been aware of her. There are only two apartments on that floor. You’ve been to Towson’s apartment several times.”

“You’re right, a cop at the scene said there was a witness who described the scarf, and I didn’t think about Mrs. Crawford. But yes, I knew Towson from over the years. Sandy, you’re using an accusatory tone, and I think I know why. I must confess I did something very dumb.”

“I don’t want to hear this.”

“No, not that bad. Goddard hauled me in because they found my prints on a wine glass found on Towson’s nightstand.”

“Geez, how does one explain one’s prints at a murder scene?”

“In the middle of the afternoon that day, I went up there and interviewed Towson. I had a glass of wine with him in the study. After we talked, I picked up the glasses and put them in the kitchen by the sink. I left and forgot all about it.”

Clever, very clever, Sandy thought. However, why try to hide it, if that’s what actually happened? “So, how did the glasses find their way onto the nightstands?”

Linda shrugged, she didn’t know.

“You didn’t think having wine with him was important enough to tell the police?”

“No, I didn’t. Why would I think it was significant to have a glass of wine with him in the study? Why on earth would I think someone would move my dirty glass from the kitchen to the bedroom?”

“Actually, the fact you put your dirty glass in the kitchen proves my theory of the bedroom scene being staged. The clever killer saw the dirty glasses and realized that someone’s prints must be on them, and placed them in the bedroom.”

“This is all news to me. I didn’t even know about wine glasses being found on the nightstands.”

Here goes, showdown time. Was she with Sandy or against her? “Linda, have you been following me?”

“No, just that one night when Huress was stalking you. What makes you say that?”

“I have trouble believing you parked outside my apartment for two hours for investigative reporting reasons. Was that the truth?”

Linda waited some time before answering, “God, I feel like I’m back in high school right now. The truth is I kind of got fixated on you.”

“Fixated?”

“Oh, God this is terrible. Sandy, the truth is you’ve just blown me away.” She barely got the words out. She turned and took a deep breath. Her eyes were glistening when she looked back.

Sandy said nothing.

“So now you know. I couldn’t believe it when you first walked in here. You have that big-city look and style. This is a small seaside town, there’s nothing like you between Atlanta and Palm Beach.” She straightened and made an embarrassed laugh. “I have to stop telling you this stuff because, if I go on, I’ll scare the hell out of you, and you’ll run out of here screaming.”

“This *is* upsetting, Linda.”

“The reason I parked outside your apartment for two hours is simple, I did it so I could be close to you. I sat staring up at your window imagining what you were doing. Wondering what you had on. And what I could do to impress you.” She had to pause. “I never expected to have a chance—.”

Linda was trembling. Sandy reached over and patted her arm. “It’s okay you don’t have to go on. Let’s leave it right there.”

“I’m over it now, I’m all better.” Linda laughed.

Sandy could see that she wasn’t. Was her emotional outburst award-winning or sincere? Sandy wanted to think sincere, but she’d been wrong before. Perhaps, this was the time to get things straight. “Linda, you told me you were from Georgia.”

Linda’s head snapped up. She stared hard at Sandy.

“Please tell me it’s not important, Linda. Tell me you’re not hiding anything. Tell me you decided to anglicize your name and lie about Georgia just for the hell of it.”

“I just told you how strongly I feel about you, Sandy. I thought we were friends. What’s with the third degree? You’re looking at me suspiciously. What are you accusing me of? You think I’m in some Cuban gang or something? I can’t handle all this!” She got up and walked to the window.

Sandy followed her. “I just mentioned Georgia. I didn’t say anything about Cubans. Boy, you’re really touchy about something. Calm down Linda. You know you *did* tell me you were from Georgia.”

Linda was steamed. Her voice shook, “My father’s from Georgia, he’s up there now, *okay?* Mom’s Cuban and lives in Tampa. So, I’m half Cuban, *okay?*” Then angrily, “Does that bother you, *Sugar?*”

Sandy jerked backward and her mouth dropped open. “Linda! You just spat out ‘Sugar’ like it was the ugliest word in the world.” She put her hands to her face, turned and hurried toward the stairway.

Linda hesitated for only a moment and then ran after her. “I’m sorry!” She caught her at the top of the stairs and turned her around. “I’m sorry, Sandy. We’re still getting to know each other.” Linda reached out and took Sandy’s hands.

“Be fair, Linda, you put yourself in the middle of all this. I didn’t accuse you of anything. We all know Tampa Cuban-Americans are involved in this. Perhaps innocently, yet the questions are there whether we like it or not.”

“I know. I’m hyper about it. Let’s go back to my desk and talk.”

“Half of Florida is Cuban-American. You can’t be hypersensitive about that.”

“I just thought it would be nice to be a Georgia peach, but that’s not going to happen either.”

“You’re lovely, just the way you are.”

“You don’t understand. I want to meet someone. Not everyone feels the way you do.”

“Tampa has a great history with Cuban-Americans,” Sandy said. “You mean you felt prejudice over there?”

“Not until after I came out. In a club one night, someone said to my date, ‘Hey, Sister, looks like you’re going to get some of that Cube stuff tonight.’ They were joking and didn’t mean to hurt, yet it was said.”

“A crude remark, yet I don’t see ‘Cube’ as a slur. Still, I’m from up north and not in your shoes, so possibly it is. You know, sometimes a thoughtless remark is just a thoughtless remark.”

“I know, and they didn’t say it to be mean. They were just dumb to say it that way. Yet there it was. If you asked me if I was proud to be part Cuban, I’d say sure. But I was a bit different, and I didn’t want to be any different. Consequently, I changed the spelling of my name and moved to Park Beach.”

“But down here you hear jokes about Georgia rednecks, never any about Cuban-Americans.”

“But down here I’m like every other Georgian who’s called a redneck, not something different.”

“You’ll find someone.”

“You don’t just go into a bar and walk out with Miss America.”

“You are special, and your Latin blood gives you an attractive, exotic look. I wish I had your flashing dark eyes.”

Sandy could see it now; she had underestimated Linda’s loneliness. Here was distress beyond what she had imagined. Linda would be willing to change her name and move a thousand miles, a thousand times, if she thought it would bring her the person she wanted. “Miss Right is out there, Linda, and could show up tomorrow.”

“Sure.” Linda gave her a tolerant look. “Let’s get off it.”

“And you made up what you told me about your past, the part about a girlfriend, her boyfriend, a dead dog and a fire?”

“No.” She laughed. “That was real, except it happened in Tampa not Georgia. I was a mechanic for Uncle Luis. Who else is going to hire a teenage girl as a mechanic?”

Sandy still wondered about *La Familia*. “So, the Tampa-Georgia location thing was your only lie to me about your background?”

“Yes, sorry. Remember I didn’t know you back then. You know, you’re right Sandy, everyone underestimates you.”

Sandy was afraid of setting her off again, yet she had to ask, “Linda, what about *La Familia*?”

“Everyone knows it means family. What about it?”

That sounded innocent. Anyway, was it crucial? Was it actually important? Maybe she didn’t want to hear anything that involved Linda in any plot. Maybe Sandy had enough, she didn’t have to solve Towson’s murder, she just has to get Raymond out of it, and go on living. His transfer to the county jail was about to happen, no point in holding any info back now.

“Linda, I’ve got a whole lot of things to tell you.”

Linda was excited. “I’ve things to tell you also, better get comfortable.”

They huddled over notes for two hours and ordered pizza and Coke for lunch. After an additional hour, Sandy hurried out of the Park Beach newspaper building. She had just enough time to get to the jail before the end of visiting hours.

Sandy was waiting in the visiting room when they brought him in. “Raymond, I’ve been in a huddle with Linda at the newspaper office. We leveled and told each other all that we knew.”

“Why don’t you just go back to Philly?”

“Not yet, listen up Raymond. She said the police knew all along that Barner was alive, because he serviced Towson’s apartment after you left. They found insecticide on a piece of that cup you broke. That was one day after Loraine said she shot him. So they knew she was lying, not you.”

“Slow down, what are you talking about? We knew Barner was an exterminator.”

“Yes, but we didn’t know he had serviced Towson’s apartment the afternoon of the shooting. Someone connected with the investigation told Linda that CSI found a shard from a broken cup on the floor. Out of sight on the kitchen floor, covered with insecticide. Apparently, Barner didn’t notice it and sprayed right over it that afternoon. That’s the cup you broke when you were there earlier!”

“So what?” Then he caught the significance. “You mean it was on the floor unnoticed all afternoon. That proves Barner was there after me.”

“Yes. At that time both Barner and Towson were alive. One reason they denied bail was Moran told the judge you were the last person to see the victim alive. No way they could have been certain about that. They learned that Barner saw him alive much later. And they have no evidence that you went back up there. Bastards should have bonded you out immediately, when they found a major piece of their evidence discredited. By now they have their lab reports back finding no blood spatter on your clothes,

so all of their circumstantial bullshit is falling apart. I haven't been so angry since I dropped my phone in a restaurant toilet."

"I'll ask Kagan. Maybe he can inform the judge about this."

"Ask hell! You don't understand, there's more. I dropped a bombshell. I was so mad I told Linda everything...plus a bunch of speculation. When she told me about Barner and the insecticide, I had a meltdown. The paper has it all now: Loraine, Tammy, Norma, and Barner. All the names, the alleged rape, the phony Sonny Barner shooting, everything you said in your statement, and anything we discussed since. Essentially, I discussed the contents of that signed statement you gave Moran. That statement was an official document of the prosecution. I could go to jail for disclosing it. Linda called the editor back in from home. They have their heads together right now deciding how much they can print."

"Okay. I'll tell Jerry Kagan. Moran might be willing to talk bail when he learns a big headline is on its way."

Chapter Twenty-nine

Sunday morning Moran carried the thick newspaper out to his apartment balcony to relax with his coffee. Later he'd watch the game on TV and pop a couple of beers. Then he saw the editorial caption, *Murder Investigation Broadens*.

He studied the editorial. The mood had changed. The editorial page that previously had beaten the drum for a speedy trial had now taken an explicit step toward criticizing the conduct of the investigation, *...the authorities must now assure us that the killer of our beloved senator doesn't escape prosecution because of an inadequate investigation*.

The paper insinuated that the investigation was off track, and even went so far as to suggest that the police might not have the actual killer in custody. The paper intended to dig into it. The newspaper has something new, Moran thought. In less than an hour, he was dressed and having a rare Sunday meeting at police headquarters with the chief and Goddard.

"To start with," Moran explained. "Kagan phoned me Friday and told me to give Reid bail or else. Said he was going back before the judge with new information. I blew him off. Then the newspaper runs this editorial. Something has definitely changed. Do you have Linda Call's home number, Chief? Let's find out what the paper is going to print."

The chief spun his Rolodex, dialed, and handed the phone to Moran. "Larry Moran here. Yes, just fine. Can you give me Monday morning's headline?"

Linda replied, "I know what you're getting at Mr. Moran. You're not on the front page tomorrow, however, your investigation is the subject of a new series of articles. We're putting them together right now with all the names. I'm afraid you won't be pleased."

"How did you find out the names of the subjects you believe to be part of the investigation?"

"Now you know my sources are confidential. Believe me we have it all. We'll be sending it on to the AP wire for national distribution, and TV will pick it up from there. Why don't you give me a statement now giving us your side? You're going to have to sooner or later, you know."

"No, and tell your editor I said the paper better be damn careful about printing a bunch of guesses." His throat was now so tight he could barely force out a polite goodbye. He slammed the phone down. "Damn. How'd they get those names?"

“My guess is the paper has heard all the names from Sandy Reid,” Goddard had to admit. “She might even have talked to TV people.”

“She runs around and somehow everyone is willing to talk and help her,” the chief said.

“She’s in big trouble, if she showed Reid’s statement to the press.” Moran frowned. “What in hell is happening? I never had problems like this before with my cases. The sister, the sister, the little bitch is making my life miserable. Go lean on her, Goddard, and lean hard.”

“I didn’t become a cop to lean on people who aren’t breaking the law.”

“Well, then go make her break some law, and then lean on her. You cops know how to do that stuff. Do you think you can handle that? You’ve done worse, like breaking and entering.”

The chief’s eyes went from Moran to Goddard. “What’s he talking about?”

The detective stared at Moran harshly but didn’t speak. Huress must have seen him enter the Barner house and told Moran.

Moran just shook his head. “And Chief is it true that Reid is still in city jail? Why? What is he, some celebrity? Why did no one inform me? I want him transferred to the county dungeon today.”

“He’s already scheduled for transfer today, or maybe Monday,” the chief answered. “The judge had put a hold it. I thought you knew.”

Moran raised his voice, “Is the judge also a member of the Sandy Reid fan club? Damn it, the whole place is going to hell.”

“Can’t you let Reid bond?” the chief said. “That might pacify the sister, and we could get out in front of this negative story.”

“And replace him in jail with whom?” Moran answered. “We can’t say that all at once we realized the evidence we presented at the hearing wasn’t any good. I’d look like a fool.”

Goddard said, “You got in front of the cameras on day one saying Reid was unquestionably guilty. You left us no wiggle room.”

“That’s enough, Goddard. You were also strutting around, as I recall. The town demanded a suspect, and we needed someone in jail to keep the heat off.”

“You’d keep an innocent man locked up to keep from being uncomfortable?”

“It’s called strategy. So, now you believe Reid is innocent?”

“Okay, leave him in jail. I hope CNN gets your name right.”

“No.” Moran was firm. “Reid stays on the hook until we find a better suspect. What about the Tampa connection, the Cuban-Americans?”

“They had a muscle guy capable of murder. He’s the one who put Sandy Reid in the hospital.”

“I like him already.” Moran snickered. “Maybe we can get him to do it again.”

“But he was crude,” Goddard said, “and the Towson killing required some finesse. Coincidentally, he was murdered last week by Towson’s lover.”

Moran leaned forward. “What’s this?”

“Goddard, stop it,” the chief said. “He wasn’t murdered. We’ve no evidence to support that.”

“Wait, let’s think about that,” Moran said. “The Cubans send the bad guy out to kill Towson. Towson’s lover doesn’t like that, so she kills the bad guy. That would be the Cuban Mafia connection.”

“Who said anything about a Cuban Mafia?” the chief asked.

“No one,” Goddard said. “As of right now, the Cuban-American involvement seems limited to a campaign dirty trick.”

“That’s because you’ve a small unimaginative mind. Get on that Cuban-American angle, Goddard.”

Goddard nodded although he had no idea how to do it. “This is new: I spoke to the insurance investigator for Concord Life, they insured Towson. The investigator needed copies of our reports for the claim. He had information from Towson’s attorney handling the estate.”

The chief broke in, "Most of the money and securities goes into a trust for some charity. Towson owned a condo in Palm Beach, and it goes to a woman friend down there. His place here and most of his personal property goes to his Nebraska brother, although he did make some special bequests to a few individuals. He left some antique dishes to Tammy Jerold. She says give them to charity as well."

"You're boring me. What about the life insurance?"

"Lorraine is the beneficiary. When they divorced, she took out a huge policy on Towson for her support, if the alimony stopped because of his death. The investigator wouldn't say how much the policy would pay. I asked if it's over a million and he said, oh yeah!"

"So, you're saying take another look at Lorraine?"

"She has several million motives," Goddard replied.

The ex-wife of the victim wasn't the big fish that Moran was hoping for; nevertheless, she'd be someone to replace Reid. "What's her alibi?"

Goddard answered, "She was seen at the museum by one guard around three and by a second guard around five. We don't know if she left in between, which happens to be the time of the murder. She had the means. Remember Reid spoke of seeing a gun at the motel."

"We're going in circles here. Reid must have been involved. He ran all over town that day. Either he's a hit man, or Lorraine romanced him into shooting Towson."

"A hit man wouldn't show up at a sophisticated party and get involved with some woman," Goddard explained. "And if Reid is in love, why did he make accusations against Lorraine from the start?"

The chief said, "I still say offer to let Reid out on bail, if the sister agrees to stay out of the investigation and not talk to the media. Then we keep investigating both of them."

Moran was silent for a moment and then slammed his fist on the table. "No! It's not going to be that way. I'm not going into court with some penny-ante tale about a woman who shoots her ex for life insurance. It's corny and it's peanuts. The national media won't even bother to cover it."

"Could be it *is* that simple," Goddard said.

"Reid is perfect." Moran sat back with a self-satisfied smile. "There's enough here to completely confuse the jurors. He'll look pathetic on the stand. The jury pool around here hates him to start with. Should be easy to get a conviction. I've waited too long for a case like this. Keep digging. We're going ahead with Reid."

Goddard was astonished to hear Moran speak so bluntly in front of them. "This has nothing to do with justice. This isn't why I became a cop."

"What about the newspaper disclosures coming out?" the chief asked. "The media will tear us up. The phones will ring, and the TV cameras will be back in town unless we come up with some way to counteract the new speculation."

Moran said, "That smartass sister is going back to the paper and retract everything. She'll tell them she made it all up. They won't dare print anything with that much uncertainty facing them. That will get this case back on track."

"She'll tell you to go to hell," Goddard said, "and if you push her too hard, you're setting fire to dynamite."

"We'll see about that. She's just one little sister."

"One deadly sister," Goddard corrected.

"You don't mean she's armed?"

"I don't know. Is a pit bull armed?"

“I want to see you outside.” The chief started to protest, but Moran motioned him to stay where he was. In the hall Moran demanded, “Go drag that sister out of your bed, and bring her to my office at one o’clock.”

“What are you doing? It’s Sunday.”

“Just do it. Go get her. Don’t tell her what for, make it seem mysterious, ominous. Tell her she isn’t technically under arrest, but she had better show up. However you cops do it. Whatever it takes to unnerve her. I want her to sweat. I want to be face to face with the little bitch who’s out there screwing up my prosecution. That’ll be the end of her interference. You’re going to do this, Goddard, understand?”

“That’s blatant harassment. I won’t be a part of it.”

“I was right about you! I know you’ve been meeting with her. Just can’t keep your hands off that cute little body, huh.”

“I haven’t touched her. I’d never jeopardize the investigation.”

“Word is she’s letting you hit it big time.”

“Go to hell.”

“Huress is telling everyone she was bobbing pretty good in the front seat, before they were interrupted.”

Goddard’s hand struck out and grabbed Moran by the knot in his tie. When he twisted his fist, Moran’s mouth gaped open in a soundless choke, his eyes widened, and his face turned white. Goddard said, “You idiot, in another minute she would have handed Huress his head.” He let Moran go with a hard push against the wall, and walked away.

Moran yelled after him, “Your detective badge is going in the crapper. I hope you saved your uniforms, because your ass is going back in a patrol car.”

Moran’s hands were still shaking, trying to straighten his tie, when the chief came out in the hall. “I just ordered Goddard to bring Sandy Reid to my office, and he refused. That’s insubordination, Chief, and I want him brought up on charges.”

“Okay, but you’ve got to live with him until this thing is over. Call Bobby Huress, he’s off duty, but you can reach him.”

“Huress has gone crazy too. Told me he wants nothing to do with Sandy Reid. Is the police force under your command or not? Since she got here, the whole town is upside down. Get her to my office at one o’clock. Even if you must do it yourself.”

The chief phoned Sergeant Lewis at home. “Sergeant, excuse the Sunday call. I’m told you know how to reach Sandy Reid. Just why you’d know how to reach the suspect’s sister, I don’t understand, but that’s what I’m told.”

“Yeah, I can probably reach her. What do you want her for, Chief?”

“What do I want her for? None of your damn business what I want her for. Don’t question my orders, sergeant. Now find her, and tell her Moran wants her in his conference room at the courthouse at one today. Okay?”

“What does Moran want her for?”

After an audible sigh, the chief begged, “Just do it, sergeant.”

Goddard phoned Sandy as soon as he was away from Moran. “Heads up. You’ve got big trouble.”

“You are working on Sunday, huh. What’s happening?”

“Moran wants you brought to his office today. He wants you to retract everything you’ve told the paper. Don’t try to face him alone. Get Kagan to go with you. Watch your step, he’s tricky.”

She folded her phone just as it rang again. It was Linda.”

“Geez, Linda, is everyone working today? Can’t talk now, I have to meet with Moran.”

“Bad news, Sugar. The paper called a special editorial meeting last night and decided not to print any of your stuff. They’re scared to death of Moran. I’m so sorry.”

“Not anything? I already told Kagan it would all be printed. That fired him up and he threatened Moran on Friday. What about the editorial in today’s paper questioning the investigation?”

“That’s as far as they’re willing to go. I know you were counting on me, Sandy.”

“Then Moran holds a winning hand. He has no pressure to explain anything, and Raymond stays in jail.”

“Maybe not, Moran doesn’t *know* the paper backed down. He phoned me a little while ago and sounded worried. I told him the sky was falling, and everything *was* going to be printed.”

“You told him *what?*”

“Yeah I did it, and I implied he was in deep shit.”

“You lied to a state attorney investigating a homicide? Are you out of your mind! When he finds out, he’ll charge you with obstruction of justice to begin with. He’ll have you jailed or at least fired, and you’ll never work as a reporter in Florida again.”

“Well, there goes my Pulitzer. Guess I’ll move to Tampa and fix cars.”

“Why on earth...?”

“Listen Sandy, you’re in the driver’s seat for a few hours. Moran really believed me. Go make some kind of deal with him, before he finds out that he doesn’t have a lot of new information from the paper to deal with. Unless he checks with the editor right away, you guys have some time.”

“But Linda, in a few days he’ll realize nothing new is coming out in the paper, and he’d simply lock Raymond back up.”

“Wouldn’t he be embarrassed trying to explain why he let him out?”

“That’s true, and this gives Kagan another shot to go before the judge and maintain there was insufficient evidence to deny bail considering the new disclosures. It’s at least a chance to get Raymond out, and it might work. I won’t tell Kagan what we’re doing, so he’ll innocently continue acting as though we do have an advantage. If Moran falls for the bluff, he might negotiate. Linda, you just fell on your sword for me. Do you understand Moran is going to crucify you for lying regardless of how this turns out? Why did you do that?”

“Sugar, you know why.”

Chapter Thirty

By the time Sandy reached the courthouse, the town was full of heavy rain. Park Beach is usually calm and quiet after the church traffic clears. That Sunday it was wet and miserable. The thunder and lightning might come later at her first meeting with Moran. Sandy parked in the police parking lot as usual and hurried across the boulevard to the courthouse, dodging puddles and holding her notebook over her head.

The courthouse appeared closed, but as she walked up the wide splendid steps, a sheriff’s deputy opened the huge door for her. She was expected.

“I’m soaked, any paper towels around?” He produced a roll. “Thanks, I didn’t come to Florida to catch cold.”

“Why didn’t you use the covered parking next to this building?”

“Now you tell me. It’s going to be one of those days.”

He scanned her with a handheld detector and directed her to the third floor offices of the state attorney. She crossed the spacious atrium to the elevators. The only break in the cold silence was the echo of the click of her shoes. The building air conditioning must have been set to cool a large weekday crowd. At that moment, she was not only damp but also surrounded by bone-chilling marble.

She found Moran’s office on the third floor next to the conference room and opened the door. She didn’t see him but heard him call out, “Just take a seat in the conference room, Miss Reid.”

She assumed he wanted this meeting to scare her off. That fit Chip’s description of him as a bully. Yet, if he’s at all rational, there should be some room to negotiate for bail. She needed to show him what he was up against. Show him that continuing with Raymond was not going to work. She would ask that he drop all charges and hope they could at least agree on release on bail. She must come away with a compromise, and do it before he learns the newspaper won’t be printing anything unfavorable.

She sat at the side of the long conference table, rubbing her arms for warmth, and wishing she had brought a sweater. She waited. After twenty minutes, she assumed he was either playing a power game making her wait, or he had discovered the truth. Maybe he was on the phone being told Linda had lied to him, and the sky wasn’t falling.

At two p.m., one hour after the scheduled time, Moran entered. Without an apology or even looking at her he settled in opposite. Taking his time and not yet acknowledging her, he placed a stack of official-looking papers on his left side, a recorder on the other, and a yellow legal pad in front.

“You came all by yourself. I thought Kagan would be with you.” He finally raised his head and took a look at her. “So you’re the clever Sandy Reid. Frankly, I don’t see it.”

“Keep looking.”

He ignored her and pulled the recorder over close in front of him.

She stood and slowly pulled her chair away from the table. She walked over and exchanged her chair for one from the end of the table.

“What are you doing? Sit down. Leave the chairs alone.”

“I noticed your chair is much higher than mine.”

He clicked a button on his recorder. “All right, let’s begin. Good afternoon, Miss Reid.”

She put her handbag on the table beside her, took out her phone, and another small device. She moved them around a bit, played with some buttons, and then announced, “Okay, I’m ready.”

He was grim. “Now what are you doing?”

“I’m recording our conversation.”

“*This* is the official recorder.”

“That’s fine. Yours is the official one. Mine is nothing special.”

“Turn off that recorder. It’s not permitted. You don’t record anything. Do you know to whom you’re speaking? Do you realize I have the full legal and prosecutorial power of the entire state of Florida behind me?”

“Yes.”

“That’s better. Now, do you know why I ordered you here?”

“I’m not certain, Mr. Moran. My hope was we could discuss some compromise regarding bail for my brother.”

He clenched both fists. “Wrong!”

She took his defensive attitude to mean he was still afraid of what the newspaper would print. That was good. If he was just going to play the harassment game, then she saw no point in trying to reason with him. One thing she had learned was you must stand up to a bully. “Then I guess I’m here because your case is falling apart.”

He came up out of his chair, pointed his finger at her, and commanded, "Turn off that recorder!" She didn't move. Her expression was emotionless. He reached down and punched off his recorder. In a sudden movement, he reached across the table, grabbed her small device, and threw it hard against the wall. It shattered and fell to the floor. "That's what you can do with your nothing-special fucking recorder!" He sat back down. "Let me see your phone. Does it record?"

She pushed her phone across the table to him. "Take a look, just a plain-Jane phone, no photos, no tunes, no Internet."

He inspected the phone carefully and slid it back across the table to her. "Now let me see your handbag."

"My handbag is personal property. You've no right to search it...fourth amendment."

"Give me your damn purse!"

She handed it across. He crudely turned it upside down and shook it, spilling everything hard out on the table. He shuffled through it. He pushed the mess back across the table, took a deep breath, and nodded okay. He clicked his recorder to rewind and then restarted. "Good afternoon, Miss Reid. Thank you for coming. Shall we begin?"

"You just smashed my recorder against the wall!"

He turned his head down to speak into his recorder. "What on earth are you talking about, Miss Reid? You're certainly welcome to record this, if you'd like, but I've never seen your recorder."

"You just stood up, reached across, grabbed my recorder from the table in front of me, and threw it against the wall. That loud noise was the sound of my recorder hitting the wall. You used obscene language. Then you dumped the contents of my handbag harshly out onto the table."

Moran's head tilted slightly. He stared at her with narrowed eyes, wondering about what she just said. Then he continued, "We've prepared evidence here that details your interference in a homicide investigation. To start with, there's the matter of your crude attempt to entrap and discredit a fine officer such as Sergeant Huress. Nevertheless, I'm willing to let that go. The more serious violation is that you're interfering with the police and providing misleading and possibly illegal information to the newspaper."

"Oh, you mean my meddling, pestering and aggravating. My work hasn't even started."

He rested one hand on the stack of papers. "These papers will be part of the official record. Reluctantly, I find that as a legal officer of the State of Florida, it's my duty to present this evidence to the judge and bring charges against you."

"I hate to put you to all that bother."

He raised his voice, "And I hate to say you're in a great deal of trouble. I'm afraid the penalties are quite severe."

"You're kidding, right?" She knew negotiating with this jerk would be impossible as long as he was playing his bully game. "That stack of papers there is a phony prop. Wouldn't it be more effective if we worked together on this rather than playing silly power games?"

"You won't think they're so silly when you're standing looking out between bars."

"You're right, I won't. But jail won't shut me up either."

"It might be possible for me to overlook some of these charges. You'd have to retract a few things. That is, correct the record."

"What is it you want me to do?"

He grabbed up one of the top folders, reached across the table and shook it in her face. In a loud voice, "I want you to butt out and cease running around conducting your own damn investigation and giving information to the newspaper."

She smiled. "No, seriously, what do you want me to do?"

That was enough, more than enough. He jumped up and quickly marched around the table to where she sat. She started to stand, but he put his hand firmly on her shoulder and pushed her back down. “Just sit right there. You don’t seem to realize your ass is in the hot seat. Now you listen to me. You’re going back to that newspaper and tell them you made up the whole bunch of bullshit.”

“Mr. Moran, you just got up and walked around to my side of the table. That’s why your voice got louder. Then you touched me forcefully with your hand on my shoulder while you cursed at me.”

“Why do you keep talking in a loud voice like that? You’re not even paying attention to what I’m saying.”

She pushed his hand hard from her shoulder. “Now do what I tell you and everything will be just fine. Walk back around the table and sit back down. I want to explain something.”

He was incensed. “I don’t know what you’re up to, smartass but—.”

“No, no, no. Save all the expletives. Now go sit down.”

She returned his stare. Then he stomped furiously back to his chair and stood breathing heavily with his arms folded across his chest.

She said, “Everything you’ve said the last few minutes was recorded.”

He looked at his recorder. “I can erase the tape. You’ll never get it.”

“No, not your recorder, my phone. It’s been on the entire time. A phone at the other end is receiving my call, and has a recorder attached to it. I’ve recorded everything you’ve said to me from the start. An undercover detective in Philadelphia taught me that trick.”

He looked surprised but recovered quickly. “To start with, I checked your phone and it was off. Even so, it would be illegal! You can’t record a phone conversation in Florida without the permission of all parties. It has no value whatever.”

“But I didn’t record a phone conversation. I recorded you in this room, face to face.”

“Well, finally I meet you, and it turns out you’re not the smart gal everyone thinks you are. Do you know what you’ve just done? You’ve secretly recorded a Florida state attorney! Even the FBI can’t take such an audacious action without a warrant from a judge. You just outsmarted yourself. I now have immediate grounds for your arrest. Something I’ve been wishing for since you arrived in town. Thank you very much, Miss Reid. I believe we’re about through here.”

She just looked peacefully at him.

“So it’s a stupid trick you tried to pull, and it backfired.” He looked over at her phone, then at her, and back to the phone. “Maybe you’re bluffing and didn’t record anything.”

She said nothing.

“Let say you actually did, and I don’t think for a moment that you did. Just hypothetically speaking, what would you do with it?”

“Well, you can’t charge me with secretly recording without entering the recording as evidence. So, we’ll let a jury listen to it. Remember, all of this is still being recorded...all the damns, smartasses, and dumb bitches. You’d need to explain your unprofessional behavior in a court of law, and you’d fall flat on your hypothetical ass.”

The blood faded from his face. He sank into his chair. In a weak voice he muttered, “I was wrought up. You got me agitated, that’s all. I’m not normally like this.” Then he leaned toward her. “Wait a minute. I see it all now, this *is* a trick.”

“You’re right. I was bluffing. I didn’t record a thing.”

He appeared relieved. “Ah, I thought so. I knew you didn’t.”

She continued with a look of amusement.

“I don’t like that smirk on your face. You *did* record it.”

“Now listen up,” she said. “If you persist in taking this confused mess you call a case to trial, we’re going to challenge the arrest. We’re going to challenge the custody without bond and the constitutionality of his detention. We’re going to challenge the inadequate control of the crime scene. All of the evidence you’ve gathered there will be thrown out. All of it. All of your circumstantial crap...thrown out.”

He appeared stunned, his mouth half open.

She continued, “We’re going to challenge the validity and accuracy of every little piece of your so-called evidence. And we’ll find an expert to match every one of your experts. We’re going to make you sweat over every syllable you utter until the jury wonders what the hell you’re doing in a courtroom. In case you’ve missed my point, you have nothing, and you’re going to lose, Moran. Get used to it. I suggest you call Jerry Kagan immediately and start negotiations for my brother’s release. You should drop the charges before the paper starts asking why you arrested him in the first place.”

She gathered her handbag contents from the table and walked to the door. She turned. “Oh, and don’t worry about replacing that old pocket radio you just smashed against the wall believing it to be a recorder. It fell out of Raymond’s stupid glove compartment, it didn’t work anyway.”

He sat there staring at the door for a moment after she left. He then slowly walked back to his office. He’d get back at the bitch. His best bargaining chip now was the power to permit bail. He was not going to drop the charges. Maybe she could bring enough pressure to force him to let her brother out on bail, but he’d still be under arrest. Furthermore, the price would be very high, and part of the price would be she must leave town without saying anything further. If she wants him out then that’s the price. With her out of the way, tying the ribbons on this case against Reid would be easy.

He called Jerry Kagan and told him the state would consider bail, if Reid’s sister agrees to pack up and go back to Philadelphia. No more playing detective. No more talking to the media. Kagan was pleasantly surprised. He’d call Moran back first thing in the morning after consulting with his client.

If Reid agreed, then Moran would see the judge and tell him the state was willing to go along with a motion for pretrial release.

Moran knew that everything must be in place before those damn articles started running in the newspaper.

Chapter Thirty-one

Ray found it difficult to believe events could happen so fast. Sandy was with him in the visiting room, and he was talking to Kagan on her phone.

Kagan was saying, “Not a done deal, but it looks good. They want you out so Sandy will shut up and leave town. For the first time they’re talking bail. Nevertheless, they’ve set it high...a half million. You’d need to put up ten-percent, cash, or collateral. Do you own any real estate? Can you pledge \$50,000?”

“No way. I have some securities worth that much, my life savings. Although, if I borrowed against it, I wouldn’t get the full amount.”

“Part of the deal is you put a muzzle on your sister. She leaves town, and they never hear about her again. That’s a big concession for them considering you’re still the only suspect they have. You’d be free.”

Ray was holding the phone so Sandy could hear. “Free from custody, yet still under arrest,” she said, “and they want me to stop helping you. Then how do we prepare a defense? How do we develop other suspects for reasonable doubt? I’d love to have you out, Raymond, but I don’t like the offer. If he wants me out of town, he’ll have to ship me out in a box.”

“Okay, I understand, and I don’t have the \$50,000 anyway.”

Into the phone she said, “Perhaps there’s room to negotiate. Moran’s shabby conference room get-together with me didn’t go well for him. He was shaking when I left. In fact, this might all be a bluff.”

“Don’t overplay your hand,” Kagan warned. “Don’t try and go for complete dismissal of all charges or something crazy. If you’ve got a state attorney talking bail, you’d better grab it.”

“Sandy, I wasn’t going to tell you this, I’m not doing very well behind bars.”

“No kidding. I’ve watched you deteriorate, you look like a train wreck.”

“It’s more than that. Sometimes I sit on the edge of the bed for an hour as if my brain switched off. Other times, I believe I’m starting to suffocate. Take *any* offer to get me out of custody, and so you can go home. I know you’re clever, and he’s no match for you, but just get me into the open spaces.”

She looked at her pale brother rubbing his cuffed hands...her *innocent* brother. A nervous tic on his right eyelid was fluttering like a trapped bird. She could just accept Moran’s offer, and her brother would be relieved of all of this. Was there anything more important?

“I don’t know how you handle stress as you do. You’re so bold and self-assured,” he said.

“I got that from you.”

“From me?”

“Yes, from watching my big brother as we were growing up.”

“If that were ever true, then I lost it along the way.”

Kagan was yelling into the phone, “They’re waiting for our answer!”

“I don’t like the deal, if I have to leave town, Jerry. Let them sweat another minute,” she said into the phone. “Raymond, do you remember that day you said you were going to drive down to the shore? I was eleven. I asked if I could go along, and your answer floated down to me from the heavens. You said okay. I couldn’t believe it. Just the two of us, me and my big brother driving down the Atlantic City Expressway. I remember every mile.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember that day.”

Kagan yelled, “Hey, are you guys there?”

“You let me pick out the spot on the beach, Raymond. You told me not to go out too far and threw me a towel when I came back. Stuff like that. Oh God, I loved that day. You gave me money, and I walked over by myself to get sodas, I knew you liked Pepsi. We sat sipping our drinks as if on a date. I remember exactly where I was when you called me ‘Sis’ and said I was pretty. That was the happiest day of my life.”

“I’ve always thought you were pretty.”

“Well, isn’t that just grand. Now that makes a total of twice in my life you’ve told me.” She had to look away.

He noticed her brushing her eyes. “Sandy, uh...look. Just go ahead and do this your way. I know you’re doing it for me. I trust you. I can handle county jail, if it comes to that. I might need some medication, but whatever it takes. I’ll handle it.”

She realized that Moran’s offer was reasonable. He would permit bail. That was the number one consideration. However, she didn’t want to agree to leave town, and leave her brother in limbo trusting Moran to maybe find a better suspect. She really didn’t like the fact that he was negotiating only because Linda had lied to him. Linda would soon be found out and was doomed whatever happened.

Or maybe not. Sandy had another thought—another angle. A possible solution to all of this had just occurred to her.

She took the phone and spoke, “Jerry, put Moran on the phone. I want to speak with him directly.”

“Don’t do that. He’s in no mood for you, Sandy. I can promise you that.”

“Put him on anyway.”

Moran came on. “This better be good.”

“We have something to talk about, Mr. Moran. In a few days, some fresh names and alleged incidents will start circulating. You need to avoid being asked a bunch of questions you’d rather not answer. You also need my brother under arrest to placate the public. Okay so far?”

“I’m listening.”

“If you give my brother bail, I’ll quiet down and you’ll regain control.”

“I want you out of town.”

“No, I won’t agree to leave. And as long as he’s locked up, I’ll continue yelling and screaming. We’re not asking you to drop the charges at this time, just free him on bail. You’ll still have a suspect under arrest, and I can settle down and concentrate on helping Jerry Kagan prepare a defense. You won’t be running into me every time you turn around.”

“I’ve already offered bail at a half-million.”

“Too much, we want \$250,000 and I don’t leave town.”

“I see what you’re getting at. However, I’d still have the problem of the new information coming out in the paper.”

“I’ll make that go away.”

“You’ll do what!”

“I’ll contact Linda Call and tell her I’m not willing to stand behind everything I told her, and if the paper prints it, I’ll deny it. Now if you ask the editors, they’re going to deny that they ever intended to print anything, you understand that part?”

“So my only remaining problem is explaining why I’m letting my suspect out of jail.”

“I’m sure you can handle that. You’ve lost interest in him anyway. Just hint that more developments are on the way. I also promise you, Linda will not make an issue of you giving your suspect bail.”

“How can you promise that?”

“Linda and I are very close.”

“I suspected that. Well, it’s interesting. Now, if you don’t hold up your end, I’m going to announce it was all an administrative error, and I’ll slap him back in jail fast.”

“Fair enough.”

“Give me a few minutes to think this over.”

Kagan came back on, “They went off into a big huddle here. It doesn’t look good to me. Moran always has to win. I’ll phone you back.”

Ray sat, put his elbows on the table and held his head looking down. “My stomach can’t take much more of this.”

“While we’re waiting, Raymond, I must ask when did you develop your ‘Knight in Shining Armor’ syndrome? If they hadn’t arrested you, you’d still be out there running around trying to rescue fair maidens; assuming you could recognize who was fair and who was foul. That isn’t how you acted when you were younger. If you had, I might have benefited when I needed you.”

“Maybe guilt about not helping you was somewhere in my subconscious. Perhaps I was trying to save all the damsels in town to compensate for my failure to come to your rescue when you were in rehab and needed me.”

The phone buzzed and Ray jumped for it. It was Kagan.

“I’ll be damned. We got it,” Kagan said. “I don’t believe it. We got it. And only \$250,000 bond! Just pledge twenty-five thousand of stock. Sandy can stay in town. You’ll still be under arrest, but out of custody.”

Ray stood and reached his arms out to Sandy, and then unexpectedly flopped back limply into his chair. Sandy saw him collapse and rushed to his side of the table. Sergeant Lewis was right behind her. His forehead felt cold and sweaty. She held his head between her hands and gently shook him. He slowly opened his eyes. He saw his sister, and made a weak grin. “Oh, got all warm and dizzy there for a moment. Okay now.” It was over, at least this important battle, not the entire war. He’d be away from that jail cell. The possibility of a conviction would still hang over him, but he’d be out of custody.

Kagan immediately phoned Meg Emerson at the brokerage firm. She said sure, they could collateralize Reid’s securities and said to tell him that she was “deliriously happy” and wants to buy him a Martini. Kagan’s next call was to Beau Cobb, the bail bondsman. No problem getting the bond, he said, and wanted to know if Reid had any other sisters.

The next morning the newspaper and TV carried a quote from State Attorney Moran saying exceptional progress in all areas of the investigation now permitted the release of Raymond Reid pending trial, for the proper preparation of a defense.

After breakfast, Detective Goddard appeared outside Ray’s cell and handed his old phone back to him. “Here, sign this receipt. If you skip town, buddy, your sister is in for a hellava lot of trouble.”

“Leave this fine city, I wouldn’t do that. Thanks for the phone.”

“She says for you to call her as soon as you can.”

Touching his own phone once again was like shaking hands with an old friend. He phoned Sandy immediately. She filled him in on what was happening and told him everyone was getting together at the Dockside Tavern tomorrow.

Mid-morning Ray got a call: “Ray, this is Tammy Jerrold. Your sister gave me your number. I just heard the news. I’m so pleased.”

He didn’t understand. Why would she call? “Tammy, I’m surprised you’re calling.”

“I was wrong about you. I see things more clearly now. How soon will you be out?”

He stretched his legs out to rest on the toilet and leaned back on the bunk, feeling incredibly high. “I’ll still be stuck here for a few more hours while they complete the paperwork. Just knowing that I’m getting out makes all the difference. I hope this means the investigation can now focus on the real killer. How do you think the town is taking it?”

“Not well. As it stands right now, if this goes to trial, they’ll convict you. I just got in the office. No one is celebrating here, I can tell you that. I said something about how they shouldn’t rush to judge you, and a couple of my so-called friends came down hard on me. There will be plenty of grumbling about you being released.”

“When I make bail I’ll sneak out the back way.”

“You’re joking, but that’s exactly what you should do. Do you suppose we could get together when you get out, Ray?”

He wasn’t certain he heard correctly. “Are you serious? You’d like that?”

“I’d love it. Your first night out, I’ll cook you dinner. Do you like pasta?”

Of course, he answered yes.

A police officer came over and started unlocking his cell. Ray told Tammy to hold on a second.

The officer said, “The judge wants to see you.”

Ray said, “Tell him I’m busy.”

“Very funny, get on your feet.”

Chapter Thirty-two

Ray Reid made a magnanimous gesture with his hand and told the waitress, “Drinks for everyone, including you, the bartender, and that guy over there at the end of the bar, whoever he is.”

Sandy ordered a beer. Kagan supposed that considering his stomach he’d better just have tonic water. “So that’s Martinis for Tammy and me. Meg?”

Meg hesitated and then said, “Sure, but I can stay for just one. I’m speaking at an investment seminar in Geneva next week and must prepare. Ray, you talked about the magnificent museums in Milan; I need to stop there on the way back. Next time you’ll have to go with me. I can use some help tomorrow on my presentation, if you want to lend a hand, I’d like that.”

“Absolutely, Meg, I’d love it. Tomorrow is the first full day of the rest of my freedom.”

“If you’re free tonight we could talk about it,” Meg added.

“Oh, sorry, I already have plans tonight. Tammy is fixing me dinner.” He felt a sharp kick under the table. He knew it was Sandy. He added, “But...I’d really like to get together and spend time with you tomorrow, I’ll call you.”

Sandy said, “We all need to thank you, Meg. You were very helpful and you stood by Raymond from that first dark day.”

When she saw Linda come in, Sandy got up and walked over. In a low voice she asked, “What happened, Linda, do you still have a job?”

“Yes, and thanks to you, I’ll probably keep it. Moran phoned my editor and informed him of Ray’s release. Moran still didn’t realize the paper never intended to print any of your material anyway. The editor just said fine, unaware I’d lied to Moran that it *would* be printed.”

“Let’s hope the real killer is caught before he wises up and your lie becomes an issue. I broke my rule against dating cops. Chip’s taking me to dinner tomorrow night; out of town where we won’t be bothered. How sweet is that? I need to buy a little black dress somewhere.”

“Oh my God, *you* in a little black dress. Why don’t you just hit him with a sledge hammer and save the money?”

“I’ll let you know if we start sharing a toothbrush.”

Everyone scooted around the table to make room for Linda. “Hey guys, you won’t believe why I’m late,” she said. “The paper got a call from a girl who read about Sandy accusing Huress of assault. The girl hid the clipping in her drawer and kept looking at it, because some cop in a red pickup pulled the same routine on her and succeeded. He told her he knew where she lived and to keep quiet, or he’d come around for seconds. After that, she avoided being seen in public, and got the shakes whenever she saw a cop car or a red pickup. Every day when she looked at the clipping the whole nightmare would come back. Eventually, she got up the nerve to phone the paper. She’s embarrassed, but wants to bring charges like the woman in the paper did.”

“The slimy bastard, how old is she?” Sandy asked.

“Eighteen now but underage when it happened. Here’s the kicker. She has a classmate who said it happened to her too. My boss is meeting with both parents tonight. The paper will pay for their attorneys.”

“Let’s hope those were the only incidents,” Meg said. “That means Huress is done for. Sandy, it took nerve for you to come forward with that accusation.”

“I’ll get my chance to slice him up from the witness stand after all.”

Kagan said, "Your testimony...the testimony of an adult...will tie the ribbons on the entire case. He'll go to prison."

"I hope that's the end of it," Sandy said. "He'll come out of prison tagged a sexual offender. If he ever comes near me again, he'll go back to jail."

Meg said, "So, Sandy, I guess you're eager to get back to Philadelphia."

"Yes, I'm flying back tomorrow—."

Ray said, "Well, I can't thank you enough. I'm going to miss you." He reached across the table for her hand and held it for a moment. "I'll come visit you, if it's all right. And if the charges against me ever get dismissed."

"...you didn't let me finish. And then I'm driving back here so I can give my new brother a ride in my new convertible." She locked eyes with Raymond. "I want to spend some time with him. We've lots of catching up to do, now that I'm a sister again."

Ray was delighted. "Why don't you look for a law school down here? Consider your tuition paid; you borrow the money, and I'll make the payments."

"I want to give proper notice up there and clean up some loose ends. Like a certain guy who has to move out or take over my lease. He won't be happy. Anyway, it'll take awhile to have my new MX-5 delivered. I'll need an apartment down here. I can't afford much."

"Rents are high," Tammy said. "My place has two bedrooms. If necessary you can stay with me until I find a nice place for you."

"Sorry to spoil your merriment here, but you're talking as if the show's over." Kagan was serious. "Ray remains under arrest, and unless the real killer gets caught, the possibility remains we still might have to go to trial. Things can easily go wrong in a murder trial."

"I know, and I'll get back on it when I return. Not to worry," Sandy said. "Chip will get the bad guy. He and I have an idea who the killer is."

"Our thanks to you, Jerry. You were right in there and did all you were supposed to do," Ray said.

"If they drop the charges, then I think I'll keep my office open for a few more years," Kagan said. "I've been feeling better lately. The phone has started ringing again. I was invited to speak at a Rotary Club luncheon, how about that? Sandy, I have an unused desk, if you want some work, or just need somewhere to spread out and study for the bar exam. I could use the help, and you're definitely welcome."

An hour later, the drinks were finished, and the chatter quieted. Meg and Kagan left. As Tammy and Ray were leaving Sandy said, "Come in quietly tonight, Raymond, and remember I've got your bedroom. You've got the couch."

"I can't wait to sleep on my old couch."

"And I don't do breakfast." Then Sandy stood and said, "Linda, let's go check out that special bar of yours for a couple of hours, I want to watch you dance."

"Let's go. I might hook up with Miss Right. You're not the only Coca Cola in the desert, you know. Do my dark eyes really flash?"

Chapter Thirty-three

Ray sat back and breathed the sweet air of freedom. He watched the Florida scenery flash by, and dreamed it would always be like this. That morning he had left a sweaty orange jumpsuit and some

meaningless papers behind in a smelly jail cell, and now a beautiful woman was swiftly driving him to her barrier island condo apartment. From the ridiculous to the sublime in mere moments. He owned the earth and the sky. He'd settle for much less, in fact, he'd settle for zero as long as he was free.

Locked in jail had given him time to think. Acquaintances would no longer just come and go in his life. He'd be alert to the possibility of new friends. And perhaps one of his new friends would call him, if needed someday, even at four a.m.

After ushering him into her apartment, Tammy said, "I need to get out of these clothes. Make yourself at home." She disappeared into the bedroom.

From her small kitchen, he walked across the dining space to the adjoining living room area with sliding glass doors. The balcony was just large enough for a small table and two lounge chairs, but it had an unobstructed ocean view. Her place was modest, informal, and nicely decorated. A comfortable place to live, he thought.

She called from the bedroom, "You can do the wine. The bottle I want is on the counter. Opener is somewhere."

He opened the wine and found two glasses. "This view is great," he yelled back.

"The value is in the view. I couldn't afford to buy it at today's prices. I should sell it straight away before they squeeze in another building in front of the ocean."

She came out wearing what he would always remember as perfect: a pink-flowered silk top with matching pants. Not sheer, yet close fitting enough for him to suspect she wore nothing underneath. Her remarkable body was definitely liberated under there.

She shuffled through some CDs. "Classical guitar okay?"

They walked out on the balcony. They sipped their wine, listened to Villa-Lobos, and looked out at the waves. The contrast between this scene and jail was wider than the ocean that stretched out until it met the sky.

There was a half-hour of daylight left. The air was warm. The ocean breeze playfully tugged at her hair and pressed her lounging outfit so tightly against her body it appeared she wore only a silky layer of paint. Instinctively he stared.

She slowly turned to put the light wind at her back. "It must feel great being out from behind bars. You and your sister have worked hard. How's your defense going? Is there anything I can do?"

She had interrupted his image of her posed there like a poetic goddess heroically facing the ocean naked, with the taut nipples of her breasts boldly aimed at the horizon. One of the wonders of the universe.

"Jail isn't on my mind just now. I don't want to be reminded of it tonight." He politely changed the subject. "It appears you've been in Park Beach quite a while."

"Has to be fifteen years or so. I remember it was an election year, and Towson was running for mayor. I was clerking in a department store. I was young and idealistic and got interested in his campaign. He was so tall and distinguished looking. That year was the first I'd ever voted, even though I was twenty-something. I remember a lot of excitement as there was also a Presidential election that year."

"Who was running for president?"

"Good question, let's see, fifteen years ago who was running? You know I don't remember. You're the history expert, you tell me," she laughed.

"So, the wide-eyed young girl joins his campaign and ends up working for him?"

"Well, there's a story in that. The salad's already done. Let me start the pasta, and I'll tell you."

He followed her into the kitchen.

She fussed around with the kitchenware, and then began, “I was at the election night gathering of all the campaign workers at the Legion Hall. As word of the victory spread, well-wishers poured in from the street. Air conditioning couldn’t begin to handle the overflowing mob plus the TV lights. The hall was hot and we were exhausted. It had been a long day. I took off my painful shoes, and they got kicked over, I didn’t know where. I remember I was soaked, trying to keep my damp stringy hair out of my eyes and sipping on a beer. Looking as I did, I kept ducking to avoid all the cameras.”

She watched the boiling water and gave stir to something in a small saucepan. “I’m skipping the garlic tonight.” In between her cookery, their eyes would reconnect.

“A special time for you.” He wondered if she could feel his eyes on her body whenever she looked away.

She went on with the dinner preparations. “I was running on adrenaline, and couldn’t have been happier. An hour later, the cameras were gone, and the crowd thinned. Tony Hackett, his campaign manager, came over as I hunted for my other shoe. He said Mayor Towson wanted to meet me. Tony obviously enjoyed saying ‘The Mayor.’ I told him no way. I was a mess. I needed to freshen up, which was impossible there. Tony said just come on the mayor is waiting. I asked if the mayor was thanking all the block workers. No, he was alone and asking for me by name.” In time, she finished in the kitchen. They moved to the dining table.

He refilled the wine glasses, and she proposed a toast to “new relationships.” Ray was all in favor of new relationships—could she mean them?

“I had never formally met him, and I never dreamed he knew I existed. So, there I was in my bare feet carrying one shoe and following Tony to some room in the back. He introduced me to the great man. When Al noticed I wasn’t wearing any shoes, he reached down and slipped off both of his own shoes. Wasn’t that sweet? I’m standing there sweating, straggly hair hanging down, looking like a barefooted third-world refugee, and he takes off his shoes.”

“Very classy. What did he want?” His eyes wandered around her hair and her warm blue eyes. He decided that he liked her a lot.

“Two weeks earlier, our precinct captain had failed to show up for a get-out-the-vote canvass. We volunteers started to disperse so I stood up and told them we could do it without a leader. I fumbled through it.”

“Actually, you became the leader.”

“Somehow, Al heard about it and wanted to thank me. He offered me a job at City Hall. He was mayor for eight years, and I was his personal assistant. I started selling real estate part time.”

“You must have been pretty close to him. I heard about the disposition of his estate.”

“A complete surprise. His attorney called me to his office. He said Al had changed his will recently, and left me those Chinese dishes and that rare Chinese trader’s catalog that he told you about. I wouldn’t know what to do with them. I’ll give them to charity unless you want them. You’re the only person I know that understands what they are. I know you’ll appreciate them.”

“That’s far too generous. I could never accept them. They are extremely valuable and you must be very careful about disposing of those items. You’d be making a big mistake by causally giving them to charity. Promise me you’ll not take any action until you talk with an appraiser. I’ve a friend at Sotheby’s in New York.”

“I’m sure they’re very nice, but I’ve no use for them. She reached across and closed her hand over his. “You want coffee now or shall we stick with the wine?”

“I had coffee in jail. Let’s stick with the wine.”

She stood by the sink while he cleared the sorbet dishes from the table and handed them to her. She turned and gave him a quick, light kiss on the lips. “You know, you’re very nice, Ray. I’m certain that you’re innocent. I hope everything works out for you.”

He wondered what would happen, if he just pulled her to him and kissed those lips hard. What he actually did was mutter, “Thanks.”

They moved with their wine glasses to the couch and sat side by side.

He was aware that an unexpected degree of closeness with Tammy had begun. Although he had no particular expectation, he did know that he wanted to spend more time with this woman. He had detected a value and an attraction to her that went beyond her physical beauty.

He would need to move carefully. Let things progress naturally. If a friendship developed out of this, then it would be worth it. He hoped the evening had gone pleasantly for her. He would wait a day or so. Not appear too anxious. Then ask her out to dinner. Would she accept? That would be the mighty test of whether she wanted to see him again. He didn’t dare dream of what might happen after that.

Then he noticed Tammy had moved closer to him on the couch.

She reached over and rested her hand on his thigh, and said, “Now just because I made you dinner, I don’t want you to feel obligated to sleep with me.”

Chapter Thirty-four

When Ray nervously phoned Loraine Dellin the next day, he was surprised she didn’t hang up. In fact, she agreed to meet with him provided it was at some public place. He wanted some answers about why she had trapped him. He didn’t know why she agreed.

They met in the parking lot of the public library. She backed into a parking space but didn’t get out, sat there with the window down and the engine running. Ray leaned over at her window. “There’s a bench over there, we could sit and talk.”

She didn’t budge. “This is fine, under the circumstances.”

“Yes, the circumstances being you’re ready to speed out of here as soon as I try to reach in there and grab you by the throat.”

“Is that what we’re going to talk about, retaliation? Just don’t make any sudden moves. I’m not joking about that.”

“What, you have that little Smithy Wesson next to you there in the car? Little risky carrying around the murder weapon, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t murder anyone. However, I know who did. That’s why I agreed to meet you. I wanted to tell you. I figured I owed you that much.”

“You owe me plenty, and I know you’re not here to help me. Okay, let’s have it, if you didn’t do it, who did?”

“Norma Martin. Did you know Martin is a Hispanic name? She’s actually Cuban.”

“Cuban-American, and runs a Cuban café. Some secret.”

“Don’t you get it? Everyone knew Al was having an affair. Well, she’s the one. He thought he could handle being involved with her. But she had him all sexed up so the whole tribe could rob him blind. You sleep with one of them, and the entire family climbs into bed with you. That’s the way they operate.”

“Where are you getting this nonsense?”

“Al was into some big Tampa real estate deal with her not knowing her family was setting him up. The deal went bad and he broke off with her. The family was afraid he’d reveal their secrets, so she killed him. She was actually seen leaving his apartment the day of the murder.”

“Lorraine, you’re mixing up pieces of several different rumors. Who’s your source on all this?”

“I can’t tell you who. You might be wearing a wire.”

“Me? No, are you? Don’t forget which of us is the suspect. You’re the one flitting around uncharged. You’re the one causing all the trouble, and for some reason the police are afraid to come after you.”

“Prominent citizen trumps irrelevant stranger every time.”

“You were quite the actress putting on that oversexed and helpless routine at the motel.”

She relaxed, unhooked her seatbelt, leaned back, and smiled, “You went for it. Show a man some skin and his brains slide down into his pants.” She changed to a slow, mocking voice, “Isn’t my little bikini just the cutest thing you’ve ever seen? You do like to look at me, don’t you?” Then back to normal, “Thank God I had to wear it only once. You’re a regular Boy Scout aren’t you, running around like that?”

“Pretty dumb of me, huh, trying to help a bunch of strangers.”

“You and one other guy at the party were the type I was looking for, horny and gullible. I was working both of you. I figured one of you would catch fire.”

“What fun! And I was the winning stooge. The loser is happily going on with his life somewhere.”

She looked directly at him. “You didn’t seem to mind.”

“No, I didn’t at the time. I paid an incredibly high price for that piece of sex, wasn’t worth five seconds of my freedom.”

“You surprised me when you turned me down at the motel. The bikini was to get you going, and when I took it all off, you were supposed to go all stupid. I overestimated your horniness. I expected I’d have to screw you again to keep you properly motivated. You know, make you think there would be regular sex, if you kept doing what I wanted. But you didn’t require it, thank God. You just charged off like Don Quixote to right the wrongs of the world.”

“You must have known *when* Towson would be murdered, and you got me to his place at the proper time. I was the stranger with only some cockamamie explanation for being there. Supposed to appear that in my delusional mind I was in a love triangle.”

“He was such a sick pup, your Honor. He imagined that with Senator Towson out of the way he’d have me all to himself.”

“Sex is merely a weapon for you, isn’t it?”

“I’m over seventy. No man is going to do anything for me without some manner of sex.”

He believed that was the first honest statement of her feelings he had heard from her. “That’s not true,” he said. “You’re just afraid to find out.”

“I’m getting what I want my way.”

“You tried to get my fingerprints on that gun box in the motel room, didn’t you? How did that box end up in Tammy’s closet?”

“Now, wasn’t I clever? I caught Barner going through some things in my bedroom when he was there exterminating months ago. I told him to never come back. When I failed to get your prints on the box, I called him. I bluffed him saying I knew he’d been pilfering things from customer’s homes. He begged me not to turn him in. It would ruin his business. I told him I needed a favor. Such an ignorant man.”

“You blackmailed him into leaving that small shopping bag in Tammy’s closet when he serviced her place the next time. Naturally she would look through it and get her prints on the gun box.”

“Yes, apparently he found time in between smelling her panties.”

“Why did you bring Tammy into it anyway?”

“Two reasons, the first is strategic. If you’d just gone to see Towson and left, no one would know you’d been there. I couldn’t count on you leaving fingerprints. I couldn’t even count on him letting you in. My plan needed Tammy. I knew you’d find her and tell her you’d gone to Towson’s. Then she’d give evidence you were at the crime scene.”

“And the other reason?”

“Embarrassment, the date-rape thing. I wanted to link her forever with Barner, start people talking about a sex scandal, dream girl carrying on with the repulsive town creep. The rumor would ruin her. No brains or breeding yet she sailed through life because Al wanted to keep her magical boobs within reach.”

“They were lovers?”

“Of course they were lovers. He’s a man isn’t he? She turned him against me with all her jiggling around.”

“You just admitted you planned to murder him.”

“I admit I was thinking about it. Norma Martin saved me the trouble.”

“That’s too wild. You’re telling me you planned this whole scheme, then Norma Martin conveniently came by that afternoon and shot him for you?”

“Lucky me.” She shrugged. “And the town won’t be laughing at me anymore. They were saying the Mensa babe wasn’t smart enough to hold her man. He had millions and they thought I would end up with only a piddling monthly alimony. They thought the good life was over for me. Did you see the faces on the town bitches at the party, when I left with you? Half hated me, half were cheering me on. And all knew they would be home in bed with their snoring pot-bellied old man while I was merrily getting laid by the eager young guy.”

“This isn’t just about jealousy and revenge. You’re hurting for money and you stand to gain big bucks out of his death. Furthermore, I’m going to prove you did it.”

She was definitely annoyed at that. Ray jumped back as she abruptly pulled away.

A fascinating confirmation of his suspicions, and he needed to hear it to clear his mind. However, it wasn’t recorded so it would do no good toward her prosecution. He’d give Sandy the details. She wanted everyone together that night to discuss all that was known.

And Sandy has a proclamation...says she knows who the killer is.

Chapter Thirty-five

“Just give me the rest of my money and I’ll get out of here.” Sonny Barner felt awkward sitting on the white-cushioned porch chair across the table from the woman. Sitting like socializing, he thought. Like the dumb bitch actually wanted him in her house one second longer than necessary. Why have him sit anyway? Couldn’t she see his dirty coveralls?

“Stink kinda bad today, Mrs. Dellin. You know, the chemicals.” Why talking nice to her anyway, like she cares what shit he gets into.

“You smell to high heaven, and you’ve been drinking.”

“Had to crawl around under some guy’s house to treat scorpions. Got special stuff that I use. Dumb guy said he’d been throwing old boards into his crawlspace for years. Said you never know when you

might need a piece of lumber. Okay by me if he wants to breed scorpions under his house, and then pay me to kill them.” Barner thought that was sort of funny, but she didn’t even smile. When she hands him the money she can go fuck herself.

“Did you carry any of them in here, in your cuffs, in your shoes?”

Should tell her tough shit if he did. Hold off until the cash is in his hand. Feeling good about things. Stopped on the way over here and had a couple shots and beer. Anybody would need something under his belt to face this woman. Would really celebrate later. Stop at Discount and buy a case of Daniels. Can buy it by the case now. Go home spread that pretty green paper all over the floor: twenties, fifties, lots of hundreds. Flip them up in the air, if I want.

“The money...Mrs. Dellin.” Should call her by her first name, she can’t stop him. Call her Loraine like she’s nothing special, see how that grabs her. Loraine, I’m sitting on your white fucking cushion, Loraine. What’s she gonna do, tell him to bring the senator back to life? She’s the one has to play nice now.

“I’ve got your money. Do you have my gun?”

He put his palms on his cheeks, pretending to act surprised. “The gun?”

“Don’t play with me, Sonny. You know the deal. I want that gun back. No gun, no money.”

He knew what she’s thinking, knows that gun ties her in. Maybe he’ll just keep it for insurance. Let her worry about the gun turning up someday, and then needing to give him more money, or else explain it to the police. Physical stuff like a gun is good, not a bunch of words. Just keep that little .38 she bought, the one out of the gun box she had him plant in Tammy’s closet. Hold it over her head. Who’s the dumb one now, rich bitch? Get on your knees and beg. Get more money out of her. She’s getting millions anyway. Feeling good now.

She said, “You know that gun must be destroyed.”

“Maybe I got rid of it already.”

“Not good enough. I want to *see* it destroyed. If you don’t have that gun, buster, you just blew ten thousand dollars. I don’t know what you think you’re pulling, but you better consider whether it’s worth ten thousand.”

She was serious. He frowned. Okay. He reached in his pocket and came out with the gun pointed directly at her head.

“Idiot!” She reached across with both hands and grabbed the gun, pointed the muzzle away and pulled it from his hand. She flipped open the cylinder. “Chambers are empty, where are the bullet casings, Sonny? I gave you the gun with five bullets and told you to leave the spent casings in the cylinder.”

“Forgot that part, thought I was supposed to throw them away.”

“You know those little casings can carry fingerprints? Did you think of that? I wiped each cartridge before I loaded the gun. Where are they? Are you sure they won’t be found?”

“Look lady, I took them out. I didn’t set them down on the floor in the middle of his apartment.” Stupid woman.

“How many did you fire?”

“Couple.”

“Police said he was killed with one shot.”

“Maybe it was only one.”

“How could you not know? Not advanced math. You started with five. How many did you use on Al and how many were left?”

Talking to him like he’s some child. He’ll get even with the bitch. “Well, guess I was nervous, you know confused. Don’t remember.”

“What did he do when you pointed the gun at him?”

“Don’t want to talk about details, okay? He’s dead ain’t he?” She wanted the senator dead. So he’s dead. Why doesn’t she just shut up? “What, you writing a book?”

“You’re right, it’s done. We each got what we wanted.” She pushed her chair back and stood. She put the gun in the pocket of her short terrycloth robe. “Okay, Sonny, celebration time. What’ll you have?”

“My money.”

“No problem, my friend. Now we’re square.”

He watched her get up and walk across the porch to the kitchen. She opened a cabinet and took out a bottle of Chivas, pinched two small glasses in her fingers and brought them back to the table. He looked at the bottle and up at her. Without a word, she walked back into the kitchen, opened the freezer, and removed a Ziploc bag. Carried it back and set it in front of him.

“Ten thousand in that bag.” She poured two drinks. “Drink up, Sonny. It’s your big payday.”

He pulled the bag close to him and took his drink in one large gulp. First time he’d ever seen her smile, grinning like a little girl.

“Count it out. Life is good.” She refilled his glass.

He didn’t know if there was some fancy way to count out ten thousand dollars. He wiped his hands on his pants and pulled his chair up closer. They were all hundreds. He slowly counted to ten and stopped. That would be one thousand. He moved those bills to the side and counted to ten again. He made ten piles. Was that right? Yeah, that seemed right. He took a deep breath and leaned back in the patio chair.

He reached over and emptied his glass. Easy money, he said to himself. He put the bills back in the bag and stuffed it deep into his coverall pocket. “Yeah, life is good.”

She walked back over behind the kitchen counter. She slipped the revolver out of her pocket and held it out of sight below the counter. “What did you do with the first ten thousand, Sonny?” She opened the counter drawer. The bullets were there at the front. She plugged them into the cylinder and quietly snapped it shut. “You didn’t buy a new truck or something useless such as that.” She put the gun back in her pocket. She came back to the table and topped off his drink.

He shifted in the chair. “Been looking at them.”

“Should stay away from new truck dealers. Not call attention to yourself. I hope the first money isn’t in your house.”

“Remember police got the damn warrant and searched my house. Every little thing I owned throwed out on the floor. Every room, everything, out on the floor, then they walk away like hey not their problem. You hear any shit about ten grand being found at my place?”

“Nasty mouth. Well, I told you to bury it. Bury it and don’t go near it for six months. Did you bury it?”

“It’s safe.” None of her damn business where it is. Now shut up woman. “I’m leaving, Mrs. Dellin. Don’t think I’ll be doing bugs for you anymore either. Think we should stay away from each other.” Not all of that came out clearly, but he knew she understood.

“What’s your hurry? Finish your drink.”

He drank it and stood, his hand feeling around some before he found the back of the chair to lean on.

“Stick around. I’m going in the pool now. Why don’t you join me for a moonlight swim? You know what skinny dipping means?”

He made a small nervous laugh. What the hell she talking about, like she’s really gonna get naked in the pool with him. That *would* be something.

“After I’ll make us some coffee, you shouldn’t be driving.”

“Naw, drunk a lot more than this and always got home.” He helped himself to one more drink just to show the dumb woman. Doesn’t want to hang around there, got big money in his pocket, knows just who to find and where to find her. He’ll say how much and this time the flashy woman won’t laugh at him and say, ‘More than you got, shithead.’ Let’s see how fast she spreads ‘em now.

He watched Loraine kick off her shoes. She tossed off her headband, and her long red hair fell free. Then she stared right at him while she untied her robe letting it hang loose in front. It flashed open as she turned and walked out onto the pool deck. In the light from the porch, he could see her shake off the robe.

Sonafabitch, just took her damn robe off pretty as you please, with me standing right here. Bare back too, no bra. Must have been walking around here talking all that time, jugs just hanging loose under there. Look at that little white skirt. Never realized her ass stuck out cute like that. Maybe call to her, she’ll turn around and put on a show.

“Mrs. Dellin?” His voice was weak.

“Come on,” she said, without turning. “Bring the bottle if you want.”

He stumbled out after her. Yeah, she wants me over there, gonna let me see those babies. Walk right up to her with her damn titties sticking right out. Sonafabitch, I’ve been all the way to Vegas never seen nothing like this.

Over at the edge of the pool now, in the shadows. Look, she’s grinning at me. Damn woman wants to mess around. Better than some damn porn. Wiggling around in that tiny skirt. That gonna come off too? Take it off, woman. Ten thousand dollars, to see what you got under there. He say that out loud? Not sure. Just kidding lady. Yeah, the ten thousand. He patted his pocket. Where’s she now...bending over...titties hanging down...saying something about clothes...can’t see. Titties...money...dumb woman. On the grass...coveralls stuck...can’t help you...get them off...can’t get up...can’t walk—.

When Barner hit the water, he came out of the darkness. But it wasn’t right. Something heavy. Get off woman. Heavy clamped tight on his back. Bare legs locked around. Two hands tearing at his hair pushing down. Don’t! Don’t! Can’t breathe. Head held under. Stop! Head pushed down, again and again. Stop it. Can’t shake her off. Choking. Get head up. Damn woman, strong, doesn’t stop...clamped on...just keeps going and going. Please, please....

Darkness...nothing.

Loraine swam to the ladder and climbed out. She found her robe and took the gun out—a bit of insurance in case he came at her, but she hadn’t needed it at all. He was weaker than she had expected, still had put up a lot of fight for a drunk. She stood watching his floating naked body. No movement. He was dead. Just the way she planned. Give some booze, show him some bare skin, and he folded.

She took the Ziploc bag of money out of his coveralls and arranged his clothes as though he had undressed for a sneaky midnight swim. Taking off his stinking shoes and socks was worse than getting him out of his baggy underwear. What a filthy person to touch, to undress. She’d have to drain and clean the pool as soon as the accident investigators were through. Always something.

She picked up her robe and hurried inside, she needed a shower to wash away the stench. When she was drying off after the long shower, the thought returned—he had touched her body. She had clamped onto his naked back like a leech with her legs locked under him, her hands clutching his dirty hair. He had squirmed and his body rubbed against her, and he had grabbed her legs with his grubby hands trying to get free. That man’s hands on her bare legs. Yuck. It nauseated her to think about it. The tragedy of this whole affair was the necessity of touching him. She shuttered. She sat down quickly until the wave of sickness passed. She stepped back in and washed her hair and body a second time.

Then down in the kitchen, wrapped in her robe, she made a Martini and went to her favorite overstuffed-leather chair in the study.

Still early, before nine. Tired already. Need to think about talking to the police in the morning. *I went to bed after the eleven o'clock news, Officer, and it was quiet then. He must have snuck over here after a night of drinking. I've chased him out of my pool before. I must have slept through the whole thing. This morning I saw his van here and looked around. Sorry I wasn't awake to help him. I feel guilty, I might have saved him if I'd only known. To think it happened right here in my pool. Tragic isn't it. Such a nice man. He wasn't very old was he? Is there anything I can do? Did he have a family?*

She needed to celebrate. She went to the kitchen and made a second Martini. When she had settled back down in her familiar chair, she made a silent toast to her plan. Her getting-rich-off-Al plan. It had worked. She had felt no touch of remorse when at last she heard the news he was dead.

Al had brought it on himself. Everything he had done to her over the years, she was back at him now. She was back at him for giving her only the house, the car, the stocks, and that piddling amount of monthly alimony. Since he made it big after the divorce, why shouldn't she have more? She took him back to court, but Al had the bigshot lawyers and the judge in his pocket.

Her plan needed Ray Reid or someone just as simple. Couldn't just send the exterminator out to shoot Al. That's no plan, they would zero in on him immediately. She didn't want the police hunting all over for a suspect and somehow blundering onto the truth. Give them someone, hand them Ray Reid. Steer him to Al's apartment, and he'll make an ass out of himself because he doesn't know what to say, what to believe. Plus he thinks she's lying naked somewhere waiting for him. The incompetent police, as expected, went for the stranger in town.

She had to give Sonny Barner credit. He pulled it off. She thought it brainless to fly off to Vegas the same day he shoots Al. Fortunately the police didn't make too much of it. People like him are always in trouble with the law and are smart enough to hold together if questioned. Other than that, he was just another worthless human being as far as she could tell.

At first, she was concerned about the deal. First, she offered him five up front and five after he kills Al. He said he'd have to think about it. Started in with excuses and talked about the complications. Wouldn't be as easy as she was saying, and on and on. Wanted more. She needed him; so okay, twenty thousand total, ten down and ten after he kills Al. That sounded good to him.

Now she had just saved herself the second ten thousand and eliminated the one person who could bring her down. A man like him doesn't deserve to have that kind of money. What do people like that need money for anyway? There's nothing to buy in this little town. They don't know how to use it properly. They spend it on their junk. Barner would have blown through all the money in no time, and then be back for more. Well, he won't now, and now there was one less foul-smelling man in the world.

Then a thought startled her and she sat up straight. The money, where was it? Did she put it back in the freezer? She hurried to the kitchen to check. Yes, it's in there. But oh my God, the revolver was on the counter where she placed it while putting the money away.

Had she forgotten anything else? The porch, what about the porch? She went out on the porch. She could still smell Barner. She switched on the overhead fan. That man would stink up the whole house, if she let him.

The Chivas and the two empty glasses still sat in the middle of the table. Careless, damn careless. In addition, she spotted her headband and shoes near the door, where she had tossed them, when she went out to the pool.

All that incriminating evidence was sitting out because she was in a rush to go upstairs and wash him off her. If someone had walked to the back of the house, the gun on the counter and the glasses on the table could have been seen through the glass doors. That gave her a chill. Damn! Little things can

trip you up, some little overlooked thing. Even so, she was still okay, she was sure no one had been around. She got out the Lysol and wiped down the table and chairs. Then wet mopped the porch floor with Lysol. Disgusting, the things she must go through to get her money.

Keep thinking, his prints are on the glass and possibly still on the gun. She washed the glasses. She carefully wiped the gun and the Ziploc bag of money. No prints or DNA could survive Lysol. Did he touch the Chivas bottle? She couldn't remember. She washed that too. She stood thinking, had she overlooked anything else? She'd check again in the morning. She locked the doors and went to bed.

She slept through untroubled. Then it was light outside. She walked to the end of the upstairs hall, pushed aside the curtain, and looked down on the backyard. The pool appeared empty. The body would now be on the bottom. The sooner she calls the police the better.

She went downstairs. Everything appeared okay. She took out the money. How does she explain why she's holding ten thousand dollars? Cash is never necessary these days. She took the gun out of the drawer. Must find a better place for this until she can toss it in the river.

She'd have preferred to toss the gun and hide the money before the police came, but didn't dare to leave the house. How would she explain backing out past his van, and not reporting a body in her pool? Wait until the police leave, there will be time. She put the money and the gun in the upstairs safe. No reason for police to search the house because of an accidental drowning. She'd have their asses on a plate, if they tried, take it to the Supreme Court.

Ready to phone? Recheck everything first. She walked through the house just to be certain. Upstairs was of no concern, but she scrutinized the appearance anyway. Leave the bed unmade, as though too upset to do anything after finding the body. Check the study. Check the kitchen. Check the porch.

The porch worried her. Even one partial fingerprint would demand an explanation. She got the Lysol out and wiped down the table and chairs again. She turned on the overhead fan to dissipate the disinfectant's odor.

She stood at the porch door and surveyed the pool scene. His clothes appeared okay, strewn around as if he undressed in a hurry. She couldn't see the bottom of the pool from the porch. She wanted to walk out to the pool to be certain the body was there. Of course, it would be there. Light dew covered the patio and walkway. If she walked to the pool, she would leave footprints, would that be plausible? Yes, that fits. Her story was she awoke in the morning and was surprised to see his van in her driveway; she had spotted the clothing and walked out to the pool.

So then, she did walk out. There on the bottom was his naked ugly body that would already be decomposing in *her* pool, of all places. Disgusting. Damn him anyway.

When she noticed his van parked at the side of the house, she had another thought. Where are his keys? She hadn't thought about the keys. Need she worry? Did he bring them in the house? Would the police find them in the house? Tried to think, did he have them at the table? No, didn't think so, she would have found them when she cleaned.

Must think about her story, where would his keys be, if he came to the house in the dark to sneak a swim. Possibly in his truck. She walked to his truck in the driveway. Couldn't clearly see the ignition switch and mustn't touch the door handle. Keys must be in his coveralls. She didn't dare disturb the clothing again, might leave some small clue. Yes, the keys had to be his pocket. That's okay, that's logical. Anything else?

Okay, show time. How emotional should she seem to the police? Not emotional at all, she decided. She had no emotional involvement in his life or death, she barely knew the man. Perhaps Chip Goddard would respond, he seemed easy to deal with.

Get it over with. She punched 911.

At that moment, her plan started going downhill. Then it crashed. Then it burned.

Two police units were already there when Detective Goddard arrived and carefully walked around the house and the grounds. He asked her a few questions and told her to stay inside the house with the officer. Said he had to leave but would be right back. Loraine was furious. She had shopping to do.

He went out to the officers waiting by the pool, told them to treat the entire house and grounds as a crime scene. He told them to just stand there and keep their mouths shut. He called for CSI and left. He didn't return for almost two hours. He returned with a search warrant.

Later he left with the gun, the money, and Loraine Dellin in handcuffs.

The following week her new attorney from West Palm Beach stated he was confident that when all the facts were known his client would be completely exonerated.

He explained that guns are routinely kept in safes so the presence of a gun was irrelevant. Further, his client had recently sold twenty thousand of securities and obtained cash. She had already spent ten thousand on sundry items, and the ten thousand dollars cash found in her safe in the Ziploc bag was simply mad money and insignificant for a woman of her means.

The attorney also stated that CSI had failed to find any of the victim's prints or DNA in the house.

However, her attorney responded with "No comment" when asked how traces of Pyrethroid, a powerful scorpion killer used by professionals, that was on the victim's coveralls, was also detected on the money inside a Ziploc bag in the bedroom safe.

Chapter Thirty-six

Ray was already at the downtown café when Tammy came in. She waved, walked directly to him, and kissed him full on the lips before sliding into the booth opposite him. "Aren't Chip and Sandy supposed to meet us here?" She waited a moment before making a questioning smile, because he hadn't spoken. He was just staring at her; thoughts of their night together still filled his mind.

He remembered falling asleep facing her, their knees touching and her hand under his cheek. Later in a dreamy twist of awareness, he sensed her warm body away from him and moving about in the room. He felt cold and tried to wake. Pieces of darkness were shifting around like a blurry puzzle. He was lying naked on his hard cell bunk. His stiff jumpsuit was crumpled under his head for a harsh pillow. He was cold and couldn't move. Some enormous man in a uniform was standing over him and pointing. He heard the sharp metal clang of the jail cell door.

And then, her bare total softness returned, she was warm. He felt her reach out and touch him, and her softness enveloped him, and he passed back into bliss with only a fading image of the jail cell.

He remembered awakening in the unfamiliar bedroom wondering if it was true where he was, and true what had happened between them. She was on her side facing him with her breasts showing over the top of the sheet. She saw that he was awake, smiled, and stretched out a perfect leg toward him. Then she raised the corner of the sheet like a theater curtain, to offer him her lovely body again. For him, there was nothing else anywhere.

That was two nights ago. After last night's talk with Sandy, the incredible happening with Tammy would be remembered sadly.

He heard Tammy's voice ordering iced tea. He blinked hard and saw her across the booth table. The waitress was hovering.

"Oh yes, iced tea is fine," he said.

“Turned out really wild the other night, didn’t it?” She puckered her lips and fluttered her eyelashes like a silent screen star.

He had to laugh. “You’re a devil.” He would never kiss those lips again.

“Well, you know where I live.” She reached over and squeezed his hand.

He couldn’t say what he needed to say with her touching him. He gently took his hand away. To cover the awkward moment he reached for a napkin. “Chip had some sort of call, and Sandy is packing for Philly. They’ll be along.”

“Did you see the paper, Ray? Thank heaven the long Park Beach nightmare is over. Imagine Loraine paying Sonny Barner to kill Al, and then drowning him to cover it up.”

“Well, Loraine hasn’t confessed, and all the evidence isn’t in yet.”

“I never cared much for her. Of course, I’m certainly shocked she’d do it. I’m so happy for you, Ray. Now they must drop the charges.”

He wished she wasn’t smiling. He wasn’t certain he could go through with it, if she was smiling. “Sandy and I had a long talk with Chip last night. He was confused about an old boyfriend of yours, the sheriff’s deputy you dated. You told him the guy’s name was Carl Richards.” It helped to talk down to the table and not directly at her.

“I don’t remember what I told Chip.”

“Well, that’s what was recorded. He went looking for him, and found him working in Georgia. Except his name wasn’t Carl Richards, it was Chet Richman. Chip thought for a minute you were trying to mislead him.”

“Richards, Richman, potato, potahto. How many dates have I had since high school?”

“I know what you mean. I have a couple of old girlfriends I wish I could forget. Anyway, Richman is now a deputy in Macon. He said he once bought you a Smith and Wesson .38 revolver for protection for your birthday. Do you still have it?”

She appeared surprised at being asked. “He’s wrong, must have been some other girl. I never had such a gun.”

“That’s the same caliber used to shoot Towson. Some coincidence, huh.”

“What are you getting at? The police found the murder weapon in Loraine’s safe. I have nothing to do with that gun.”

“Wrong. Ballistics proved the fatal shot didn’t come from Loraine’s gun. The police haven’t released that information.”

“Then Barner must have used a different gun. You’re acting strange, Ray. What’s all this have to do with me?”

“At dinner you mentioned I was a history expert. Where did you pick that up? And how I was knowledgeable about Chinese porcelain, and therefore I’d appreciate your giving it to me. How did you know Towson and I talked about those cups?”

“I guess I read it in the paper.”

“No, that detail wasn’t released either. How did you know that Towson and I talked about that rare Chinese trader’s directory, the catalog as you called it? Only Towson could have known we discussed that.”

“You must have told me, Ray.”

“No, you and I have never discussed the cups or the directory, and I never mentioned any of that to the police. In fact, I’d forgotten about the directory until you remarked about it the other night at dinner.”

“Ray, stop it! What’s going on here? Obviously, somebody mentioned those things to me. So what?”

“As I was leaving his apartment, Towson told me he was going to phone you and he did, in spite of your denial. That’s when he told you about the cups, the directory, and my knowledge of history.”

“Yes, he did phone me after you left his place. He just warned me about you that’s all. He didn’t know what you were up to. That’s all there is to it.”

“Why didn’t you tell the police he phoned? It would show he was alive after I left. Why didn’t you tell the police about the message I left on your answering machine, when I was first trying to reach you? Those things would have supported my improbable story?”

“Sorry, Ray. Thinking back on it now you’re right, I definitely should have. At that time, I believed you were guilty and they had you. I wasn’t on your side then. I didn’t think it important. What difference does it make now?”

“You told Chip you hadn’t spoken to Towson since the party. You said you’d never been given a gun. Those were more lies, weren’t they?”

“I don’t like you talking like this. Barner shot Al. They have the murder case all wrapped up.”

Then Ray set the trap that Sandy had suggested. “You said you didn’t leave your office until six, yet they have a witness that went to your office around five, found it closed and left after waiting for over an hour.”

“I was showing a property.”

He gave her a sad look and slowly shook his head.

She closed her eyes tightly and grimaced. “There isn’t actually such a witness is there?”

“No,” he said in a low voice.

“That wasn’t very nice, Ray.”

“Sorry. I can guess the rest of it. You acted very quickly that day. You had the idea of killing Towson already in your mind. But you didn’t know when. You didn’t have a plan. Then I showed up. Al had already told you on the phone that we had been arguing. The pieces of your plan fell into place. The perfect fall guy had fallen into your lap. You realized the day for action had arrived. The perfect time to go ahead with what had been on your mind. You then told me to wait a few hours before reporting Loraine, so I’d be out running around with plenty of time to have gone back and shot him.”

“This can’t be happening, Ray. Since our wonderful night together, I’ve thought about nothing except the two of us. I have everything planned in my mind...the rest of our lives together.” She put her palms to her cheeks and looked down at the table. “You’re tearing my dream all apart. I can’t believe you’re saying these things and doing this to me, to us.”

“I can’t believe I’m doing it either, and I might not have the story completely correct. My guess is you didn’t carry the gun around. You had time to go home, pick it up, and go to his apartment. He let you in, of course, with no problem. You shot him and went back to the office. Then you phoned the police and told them about the stranger in town.”

“This is crazy.” Her eyes were now moist.

“Why did you do it, Tammy? Such a great man that had done so much for you, that you owed so much.”

Her eyes flared. “Not as great as people believed. For one thing, he cheated me on a land deal. Last year he had inside information from some spy in Tallahassee that the D.O.T. was going to put in an additional access ramp to I95. He and his cronies bought up the land around there before the word got out. His involvement had to stay hidden. So, I fronted for him. They resold the land to the state for a huge profit. I was supposed to get a share. He gave me a token amount. The land deal was worth millions. I was counting on big money. The payoff for those years of putting up with him. It would have set me up.”

“You wouldn’t kill anybody over money.”

“I was pretty for him every day for years. Every morning getting ready because I was going to see *him*. Years of exercise and skipping desserts. I tried slitted skirts, short skirts, and no skirts. Once I wore inappropriate shorts to a lawn party. Dressing for a party once, I tried on a braless see-through. I didn’t dare leave my home wearing it. Then, Miss Babalou, or whatever her name is, does her cha-cha, and his genitals go up in smoke. She was twenty years younger, and he kept her hidden to avoid negative campaign talk. Hell, he could have had me, I was twenty years younger, and there would have been no talk. Everyone already assumed we were a couple. I haven’t seen her, but other women he’s dated all looked like boys standing next to me.”

“There’s no explanation for attraction.” Inadequate, but he said it. Sandy had told him to keep her talking.

“One time they were someplace they weren’t supposed to be. I never did find out the details. He phoned me in the middle of the night very nervous, something had gone wrong. He said if reporters checked, I was to say he was with me overnight. No one would be surprised at that; it was the perfect affair cover up. Good old Tammy, she’s always there. Move her around like a piece of furniture. Dust her off when you need her. Look right through her when you don’t.”

“He took your loyalty and gave you none of his personal self in return,” Ray said.

“About four months ago, we were leaving his office, and he picked up my keys off the table by mistake. He held them out. Instead of taking them, I took his hand, folded his fingers around my keys, and held his fist in both of my hands. Don’t know where I got the nerve to do that. I looked up at him and told him my apartment key was there in his hand, and why didn’t he keep it just in case. He said, in case of what? I said well, maybe some night when you’re lonely and feel like, you know, being with someone friendly, having someone who likes you, someone you can trust, someone safe.”

“What did he do?”

“All he had to do was squeeze my hand, or make a tiny smile. At that moment, I was his. I’d have stripped naked for him right there, and he wouldn’t have noticed. All I wanted was a damn smile or at least a sugarcoated rejection. Couldn’t he at least have said that he understood? You know what he did? He laughed. He laughed at me. He thought it was a joke. Just as though it was beyond belief that the two of us could be intimate. Preposterous, I suppose, that he could be sexually attracted to me. I was so embarrassed I wanted to crawl under the rug. I spent that night crying and pounding on my pillow, beating myself. Why did I do it? How could I have said that, how stupid he must think I am, what on earth was I thinking? How could I ever face him again? Then I became angry and pounded on the pillow again, but now it was him. I was pounding on him. I hated him.”

“Understandable.” He knew she had never told anyone, and she had to get it all out, although this was absolutely the wrong time.

“I was angry and afraid. Afraid I’d never be a part of his personal life. I’d never win him over. All those years, all those meetings, and all those parties. See how handsome he is in that tuxedo. Look at that lucky girl on his arm. Their tongues would wag. Hundreds of rumors. Wish I had a dime for every person who was absolutely positively certain that we were having sex. Look, those two are leaving the party together again...ho, ho, ho. Sometimes I felt like standing up and yelling, ‘Attention, everybody, I have an announcement to make. We’re not a couple. We don’t have sex. I’m just for show.’ I’d lie in bed fantasizing he was touching me, but his fingers never did.”

“You went with him to Meg’s party.”

“No, I lied about that. He called Meg and told her he was coming alone. She was nice, phoned me immediately, and said of course I was invited. I knew then I was out. He was serious about her. About a month ago, I got a call from a real estate friend in Tampa who said Al and some young woman were shopping for condos and had made an offer. I knew he was setting her up in a love nest. I swore to

myself the deal was never going to go through. Go to hell, Al Towson and take your Latina hottie with you.”

“You wanted him dead.”

“Just a hateful thought in the back of my mind. Then that day, he phoned and said he argued with you. You showed up with your crazy story. Fate was telling me I had my opportunity.”

“Your vague idea of seeing Towson dead became clear.”

“I went home, got the gun, and went to his apartment thinking I’d never have the nerve to use it. I started in with all my protests.”

“What did he say?”

“He said we could talk later, he had to go out. In other words, he was too busy for me. I said no, we would talk now. Why couldn’t he have just smiled and taken me in his arms? It would not have been too late. None of this would have had to happen. You know what he did? He laughed at me. He told me I was being silly. He laughed like that time when I made a fool of myself offering him my keys. It was that same laugh. That set me off. I lost it. I took the gun out, closed my eyes, and tried not to think about what I was doing.”

“After he buzzed you into the building, he had plenty of time to put something on before answering his door. Why did you want him found dead in his underwear? To humiliate him, the dignified man found dead with his pants off?”

“To make it look like an affair. He had on his Kaftan when he opened the door. I made him take it off, as if a husband or boyfriend had surprised the lovers. I wanted to call attention to the affair: wine glasses, unmade bed and caught undressed. I wanted a scandal. A scandal that would be a permanent footnote to his life. And I wanted confusion to divert attention from me. Maybe even get her arrested. They can’t prove any of this.”

“So it was you who Mrs. Crawford saw leaving the building not the lover.”

“I was heading for the elevator when she opened her door and came into the hall with her dog. I had to get away from there fast. My God, he was on the floor bleeding. So I went back in and found the scarf to put around my head. She was down the block a little when I left, I didn’t know whether she saw me.”

“After I was jailed you relaxed, no one suspected you. You thought you could handle all your police friends. Then Sandy showed up. You didn’t expect someone so sharp to start digging in on my behalf. So, you cozied up to me and invited me overnight, figuring you’d better get on the inside of our investigation to find out what we knew.”

“You’re mostly correct. I was attracted to you when we first met at the restaurant, until you came out with that crazy story. When I asked you up for dinner, I didn’t intend to sleep with you. I thought I’d find out about your defense, and then you’d leave. Yet during the evening, I fell in love with you, Ray, and then I didn’t want you to leave. That was love happening in my bed, I’m not an actress. I opened up to you as never before. That night my dream of a life with you started.” Her eyes were glistening. “You don’t have to tell anyone.”

He was too angry at that moment to consider whether he had fallen in love with her. The relationship that had started beautifully was instantly laid to waste when Sandy told him Tammy was the killer. “Tammy, you put me in jail and would have left me there. I not only lost my freedom I could have been tried, convicted and executed.”

“I was depressed, my life seemed so hopeless. Everything seemed upside down. I wouldn’t have done it, if I had known how you really are. I never expected to find someone like you. We could still have a great life together. This doesn’t have to mess up everything. They think Barner did it. They arrested Loraine. It’s over. You and I can live with this since we love each other. We’ll go away somewhere. We can do it. I’m not really a bad person. You don’t have to say anything.”

“We met too late, Tammy.” He slowly shook his head and pointed up behind the booth. “That little black ball up there on that ledge is a camera. Our conversation has been videotaped.”

She froze. Her eyes went wide and her mouth opened. Then she frowned, her eyes narrowed and her face got red. She stared fiercely at him and through her clenched teeth mumbled, “You knew I loved you. I said as much to you, and I certainly showed you how much the other night. And you used that love to trick me.”

She was correct. She was here confessing because she loved and trusted him. Neither of them would ever forget that. Yet, she was guilty and he was innocent. She had put his life at risk, and this deception was necessary to get out of jeopardy. He realized that he was rejecting her just as Towson had rejected her for years.

She stared down at their hands clasped tightly together. “My bastard, my sweet loving bastard, at long last I’ve found you...and it's too late. Why couldn’t it have been you that I met fifteen years ago?” “Even a month ago would have changed everything,” he replied.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Ray and Tammy were still sitting there motionless when Chip and Sandy entered the café. From the doorway, Sandy saw them and called out, “Hey!” After a second look she quickly put both hands over her mouth and stopped right where she was. “My God, she did confess.”

A uniformed officer came in behind them and told Chip the videotaping was successful: they got the whole confession. Chip told him, “Good, Mirandize her and put her in my unit. You know who she is, don’t you? She’s a friend. Take it slow and go easy with the cuffs. Stay with her and don’t let anyone bother her. I’ll be out in a minute.”

Ray gave Tammy an awkward goodbye and walked over to Sandy and Chip. “I was on the wrong track. I believed it was Loraine right up until we all met last night. You were correct Sandy. When I confronted her with everything we discussed, she confessed. How did you zero in on Tammy?”

“It bothered me when she told me that she thought Loraine was the killer, while at the same time was telling Chip you were guilty. But I first became suspicious when she told me that it was a shame for a great life to be snuffed out with a couple of bullets...the irony of two little bullets wiping out years of accomplishments. The way she said it I knew she didn't realize he was killed with only one bullet. She believed it was two because she knew she had fired two. She didn’t know one missed and was found in the wall.”

“We didn’t release that detail,” Chip said.

“But that wasn’t conclusive. In my mind, she gave herself away when she first met you in the restaurant,” Sandy continued. “One minute she’s threatening to sue you, if you go to the police, and then she unexpectedly stopped being hostile. That’s when she realized you fit perfectly into the murder plan that had been on her mind.”

“First, she screamed don’t go to the police, then a minute later, she said it was okay, just wait a few hours. She needed me out running around at the time of the murder, and she needed time to shoot Towson and get back to her office.”

“All that plus the lies and inconsistencies you confronted her with today. Those things were just hints not proof, but they tipped me off. Now it’s up to Chip to nail down the proof.”

“We needed to search her place,” Chip said. “This videotape is mostly circumstantial, but it gives us enough to get a search warrant.”

“She no doubt burned that silk scarf with the blue and red triangles,” Sandy said. “Any chance blood splattered on the suit she was wearing? Although I guess she’d have it cleaned.”

“We sometimes contact a suspect’s dry cleaner. They tend to remember bloodstains. More likely, she’d burn it if she noticed it. We’ll scope her entire closet, including the soles of all shoes. We know someone stepped in his blood spatter.”

“Remember when I was first arrested, and you tested my hands for gunshot residue?”

“It would be long gone from her hands.”

“That’s not what I’m getting at. Does GSR cling to cloth for a long time?”

“It can, yet it brushes off and washes off.”

“Well, when I first met Tammy in the restaurant at noon on the day of the murder, she had one of those large satchel handbags. I remember because it was next to her on the table, and I was thinking how well coordinated she was. I remember light brown because it matched her suit. As I recall, it was suede. Would gunshot residue stick to suede?”

“Like Florida bugs to a windshield.”

“Look for that suede bag when you search her place. I’m guessing after shooting Towson, she put the gun in that handbag, because that’s what she was carrying that day. You won’t find the gun in there, but I’ll bet you’ll find gunshot residue.”

“If she put the recently fired gun in her purse, the lab will find residue and traces of firearm oil,” Chip explained. “They’ll do a Trace Metal Test, use infrared photography and a microscopic examination. They can match it with the residue found at the murder scene. I’m arresting her right now. We’re dropping all charges against you.”

“My nightmare ends.”

Sandy said, “A good attorney will say it’s not first degree, that she didn’t go there to shoot him, they got in an argument. Her attorney will make it sound like a lover’s quarrel, passion of the moment. She might try to plea out to manslaughter?”

“She won’t get to keep those Chinese porcelain dishes she inherited when Towson’s brother finds out they’re worth a half-million dollars,” Ray said.

“Seriously, that much?” Sandy asked.

“Easily. He had several complete settings plus the historical directory. Towson, apparently, wanted to take care of Tammy should he die. He wanted to make her a wealthy woman to thank her for all the years she helped him. Instead, she goes to jail because he broke her heart. Meanwhile, Loraine has replaced me in jail, arrested for drowning Barner.”

“Loraine is a real culprit here,” Sandy said. “Her greed set off the whole chain of events, starting with framing you for the murder.”

“She still thinks Barner was the murderer, so she’s expecting to be charged with conspiracy to commit murder, as well,” Chip said. “We think she paid Barner a lot of cash up front to kill Towson. He just pocketed the money with no intention of doing anything. Let her yell. What could she do? So, when Towson *was* shot, Loraine naturally assumed he did it. Barner figured what the hell, tells her yeah he did it. And goes to her place for the payoff.”

Sandy said, “So, Barner was in Vegas spending the down payment, and was overjoyed when he heard about the murder. The target he had no intention of shooting had been shot. He came back pretending he had finished the murder contract, and to get the rest of the money from her. And get it before the police caught the real killer. Don’t you love it?”

Chip said, "So, she drowns him thinking she's covering up her part in Towson's murder, but she had no part in Towson's murder. Furthermore, she believed the gun she was trying so hard to conceal was the murder weapon, but it had no relevance."

"So, bug guy outsmarts Mensa Babe. Can you nail her for drowning him?" Ray asked.

"Murder by drowning is one of the toughest homicides to prove," Chip said. "We have motive, but only circumstantial evidence. She's hired Gerald White, the whiz Palm Beach lawyer. Remember he got that rich Neilson kid off a couple of years ago. The senator's no-good nephew who they charged with rape, DUI and leaving the scene of the accident that killed his date. Moran can't compete with him."

"So, Chip, you think Loraine will still get the big life insurance payoff on Towson?" Ray asked.

"Sure. The insurance company will try to hold things up, but I don't see how the conspiracy charge can be proven with Barner dead."

"Here's the big twist," Sandy explained, "Moran was indeed faced with the murder of a very important public figure. He was so focused on making it into a big national crime he overlooked a simple small-town killing for unrequited love. He'll get a conviction on Tammy. She'll face some years behind bars. Nevertheless, her trial will be small potatoes compared to Loraine's."

"What do you mean?" Ray asked.

"Loraine's trial will be a huge national sensation. It will be a circus. Think about it: you have sex, a seventy-year-old beauty in a thong, millions in insurance money, conspiracy, and a murder-for-hire scheme. Plus, one additional murder by drowning thrown in at no extra charge. Seriously, the media will go wild."

"They'll call it the Granny-Thong Caper," Ray said. "I might write a book."

Sandy continued, "The hotshot lawyer, Gerald White, will get a couple million of Loraine's insurance money, and she'll be acquitted. From then on, Moran will be known as the second-rate who can't cut it in the big time."

"So Moran will get the big sensational crime case he's always wanted. Except he'll be on the losing end," Chip said. "Big toad Moran will never get out of his small pond."

Ray said, "So heartsick Tammy goes to jail. Greedy Loraine murders and ends up free and very wealthy. And I learn a lesson about minding my own business."

Sandy winked at him. "Well, now that I know you I like the way you are. Don't change too much. Actually, I thought the granny-sex was kind of cute. Although, by my count you've slept with two murderers. You might try cutting back on that."

"No one else could have done what you did, digging in, setting up relationships with Chip and Linda, getting in people's faces and negotiating. You made things happen. Without you, I'd still be in jail at the mercy of little Bonaparte. You're going to be one deadly lawyer. I owe you for all this and still owe you for way back when, Sandy."

"Call me Sis. We were different people back then, just a couple of kids. All is forgiven. It's lonely out there. I think I came down here because subconsciously I wanted some family in my life."

"I glad you're my sister." Ray stepped toward her and reached out his hand. She took his hand and quickly pulled him to her. She gave him a light kiss on the cheek and locked her arms around him.

He was surprised and speechless. After a moment he was able to say, "You saved me, Sis."

"Well, sisters do nice things like that," she said. She released him, and when she looked up, he saw that her cheeks were wet.

He needed a moment and then said, "And I'm getting smarter about women, Sis. Meg Emerson invited me over for dinner tonight. I think she likes me."

Sandy rolled her eyes, "No kidding, you really think so?"

“She wants to talk about us being partners and starting a retirement plan consulting firm. She’s a whiz at sales, and I know the paperwork end.”

Sandy shook her head. “Raymond, we need to talk. Meg doesn’t want to think about business tonight. Trust me on this. Don’t take a ledger book, take a bottle of wine.”

Chip’s gaze was fixed on her while she was talking with her brother; he couldn’t look away. In truth, he didn’t want her out of his sight. Everything seemed better to him since she came to town. What was that all about? “I made a lot of mistakes,” was all he could think of to say. “You saved my tail several times. I’d be back on uniformed patrol if not for you.”

“Nonsense, your dad would be proud of you.”

“With all this wrapped up,” he said, “this town’s going to be quiet and dull.”

“Doesn’t have to be,” she said.

The End

About the Author: Rod Hoisington has a background in business and education and lives in Florida where he devotes full-time to his compulsion to dig into the souls and lives of fictional characters and write worthwhile mystery stories about them.

One Deadly Sister is the first novel in the exciting Sandy Reid mystery series. Followed by **The Price of Candy**, **Such Wicked Friends**, and **Chasing Suspect Three**.

The Price of Candy

Four Star Mystery Novel Rating

An old acquaintance interrupts Sandy Reid’s law studies and gets her seriously involved in unraveling the mystery of a body on a Florida beach. Sandy uncovers the identity of the prominent Congressman who gave the beautiful hitchhiker a ride to Florida and confronts him. Now that the naked body has been discovered, he risks having his misdirected passion exposed and his reputation and prosperous way of life devastated.

The almost-too-clever young law student must solve the mystery surrounding the unidentified dead woman on the beach, unscramble a related child kidnapping that the mother won’t report, and clear herself of a murder charge that threatens to destroy her dream of becoming a lawyer. Along the way, she discovers she has fallen victim to a sensuous passion of her own.

This fast-paced murder mystery is the sequel to *One Deadly Sister*, and the second in the mystery series with Sandy Reid the sassy protagonist and amateur sleuth.

Such Wicked Friends

Four Star Mystery Novel Rating

Sandy Reid stumbles over a potential client—shot between the eyes. She believes the murdered woman is asking her to find the killer. How else to explain the mysterious spot of blood Sandy later

discovers on her own hand? Then a friend kills himself. Or was it a second murder cleverly disguised as suicide? Now with two people dead, Sandy can't resist getting involved and is drawn into a plot that stretches out to national ramifications. At the last moment, she discovers her gutsy scheme to entrap the killer is more dangerous than expected and must play out exactly right for her to get out alive. The third book in this fast-paced mystery series.

Chasing Suspect Three

Four Star Mystery Novel Rating

Clients don't just hire her, they turn her loose.

Sandy Reid is back and the assertive young criminal defense attorney finally lands her first big murder case. As she digs in and begins to destroy the state attorney's case, she is convinced her client is lying. Is she rushing to save an innocent woman, or helping a killer get away with murder?

She faces a client who seems innocent of shooting her husband until she opens her mouth, the client's mysterious boyfriend who has no past and is unquestionably shady yet doesn't cast a shadow, and the victim's sister whose fashionable façade hides a layer of predatory sex. The sister also happens to be a former girlfriend of Sandy's lover and wants him back in her life. And they all have a reason to lie.

Sandy finds herself questioning her lover's faithfulness at the same time she's deciding whether to go too far with an FBI agent with movie-star looks who won't take no for an answer. Her gutsy search for the killer leads her away from her quiet Florida ocean side town and down to the tropical palms along Biscayne Bay, and the steamy streets of Miami that are dark with something more than the night.

In the end, Sandy discovers that not everything is as it seems. This fast-paced murder mystery is the fourth in the exciting mystery series with Sandy Reid the sassy and irrepressible protagonist.

The Price of Candy excerpt

The second in the Sandy Reid mystery series

Beyond the solid screen of sea grapes that lined Highway A1A, and down a gentle sea oat covered slope, lay an isolated patch of sandy beach warmed that late afternoon by one of the celebrated southerly breezes that enhance Florida in November. Only the murmur of the ocean disturbed the quietness. On that secluded beach, cast in the slanted shadows of the sunset, were two men and a woman. The two men were alive.

One was a sturdy younger man, scarcely thirty. He wore a *Miami Dolphin's* sweatshirt and slouched with his thumbs hooked in the pockets of his faded jeans. The other man was dressed precisely for business except fine sand had scattered across his well-shined *Testoni* shoes. He walked away from the body, put both hands to his head, and walked back. He took off his tailored suit coat and covered the face and upper body of the woman on her back in the sand. Her orange bikini bottom and bare legs remained exposed below his coat.

The younger man knelt beside the body and started to lift the coat. "She really dead?"

“Don’t move that. Don’t look under there!”

“I’m not looking at *her*. Looking at her body. She’s not in there anymore. Gone, like up in smoke or whatever happens.” He raised the coat and made an unhurried consideration of the body.

“You’re looking at her.”

“Ask her if she cares. Don’t often get a free peek like this, you know. I’ll just close her eyes so she’s not staring back at me.” The younger man passed his hand over her face and the woman’s hushed hazel eyes closed easily.

“How’d you know that?”

“That’s what they do in the movies. Read someplace where some people believe if the eyes are left open, the dead will look around and spot someone to take with them.”

“Keep your hands off her.” The other man reached down and readjusted the coat to cover as much of the face and upper body as possible.

“Who knows what the dead are capable of? This one’s doing a good job messing with your head.”

“Don’t touch her again, okay?”

“Why, she your wife?”

The man shook his head. “I...I think I’m going to be sick.” He pulled the knot of his silk necktie loose, tilted his head back, and took in a deep breath.

“Girlfriend, huh? Lucky man...at least up until now. She’s definitely from another world. You rich guys get all the goodies.”

“I don’t think about things in that way.”

“You don’t think about money at all. Like you don’t think about that fancy car parked up there. Just ask for the best or pick what you want. Like you picked which girl you wanted. Of course, now you can’t bear to look at her. Guess you’ll just have to pick another.”

“I don’t need to justify anything to you.”

“Yeah, the rich never have to justify.” He made a wide grin. “Your money won’t help when you try to explain to your wife how you happen to know Miss Universe here and why her top is off. You’re shaking already.”

The other man stiffened. “Her top came off when I put my arms around her from the back, you know, that Heimlich maneuver, squeezing her to stop her choking.” He combed his fingers through his thin brown hair.

“If you say so. When I first looked down you were behind her with your arms around her. I saw her top fall off and her boobs bouncing around. You bet I remember that part.”

“I couldn’t get the damn thing back on.”

“Must’ve been fun trying to stuff ten pounds in a five pound bag.”

“Do you have to talk about her like that? It’s not decent. She deserves our respect. She was a nice girl.”

“You knelt down beside her with your head down for a long time. What was that?”

“Just thinking.”

“Just crying over her is more like it. Okay, I guess you tried to save her. Don’t know how you screwed up the Heimlich. Any dork can do it.”

“I’ve never thought about learning such things. Things where I must actually touch people. There’s always someone around to do it. Of course I regret it. Someone trained might have saved her.”

“You drove here together. I saw you.”

“You saw us? Oh...I didn’t realize that. She’s sort of a friend.” He wiped his palms on the front of his trousers.

“I hope my friends do a better job, if I choke.”

“She needed a ride, that’s all...she needed a ride.”

“A ride to the beach? That what you’re saying?”

The man folded his arms across his chest and didn’t answer.

“I stood up there at the top of that knoll and watched you. Funny, when she got out of your car and started changing into that bikini, it looked like you were trying to peek at her. You’ve never seen your girlfriend naked? She moved to the other side like she didn’t want you to watch her undress. She didn’t notice I had pulled in. I’m the one who got the show.”

“So she was modest. Stop saying things.”

“Modest then, won’t bother her a bit anybody looks at her now.”

“But it bothers me. You shouldn’t speak of her in that manner. It’s not...honorable. Just keep my coat over her.” He folded and unfolded his arms again. “You know I tried to help her. You know I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Relax, it’s an accident. Like you say, she choked herself to death. Crazy way to die.”

The older man said, “My phone’s in the car—.”

“I’ve already phoned the police. Told them send along an ambulance.”

“Oh, you already called them? That’s good...I guess.” He turned away from the body and rubbed the back of his neck. “They’re not going to believe me...they’re not going to believe me.”

“You’re really sweating this, aren’t you?”

“Of course I’m shaken. A person just died before my eyes. Her dead body is lying there.”

“I suppose you’ve got big deal friends, a big deal job, a big deal reputation.”

“You don’t know the half of it. You wouldn’t believe the fallout there’s going to be about this.” He tilted his head back and closed his eyes tightly.

“So take off.”

“What?”

“Go...leave. You’ve got nothing to do with this, it happened like you said. She happened to be on the beach. You happened to be on the beach. You tried to help her. That’s the way it was, wasn’t it?”

“I guess.”

“So, go. Get out of here. You don’t have to get involved. I’ll look after her. Things like this happen all the time.”

“I don’t think I should leave her. Should I go? I don’t think I should.”

“No sweat. Nothing else you can do here. Get moving the police will be here any second.”

“Then you’ll be in trouble.”

“No, they know me. I live around here. I take care of some things around here. Nothing bad happened. There’s been no crime. The M.E. will find she died of choking. Case closed.

“The medical examiner?”

“Yeah, like on TV. Now come on we’ll walk up to your car. You leave and I’ll wait up there for the police.”

“I should take my coat.” He reached back and picked it up off the body. He paused to look down at her. *Freddy, you always want things nice and neat.* Good lord, he thought, does it end this way?

“She should have something over her,” he said. “I don’t have a blanket in my car. Do you?”

The younger man shook his head.

They reached the top of the sandy knoll and could now hear the occasional hum of vehicles going by on A1A beyond the screen of foliage. The older man stopped abruptly and pointed. “Is that your SUV parked there? Wait a minute, I saw it at that truck stop up in Jacksonville. You’re lying. You’re not from around here. You pulled out right behind us on 95.”

“Not me, buddy. I’ve been here all day. Haven’t been out of town in a month. Now you should get out of here.”

“I was certain it was your white SUV that followed us.”

“You’re saying you gave Miss Universe a ride down here from Jax so she could go to the beach?”

The nervous man didn’t answer.

“Stop talking and go.”

“I can’t leave. I won’t do it.” He wondered just how much he owed her anyway. He could stay and identify himself to the police. That wouldn’t bring her back and might destroy him. Certainly he didn’t owe her that much. “I don’t know. Will she be okay? Nothing’s going to happen to her?”

“Nothing’s going to happen to her. I’ll keep an eye on her. Now leave.”

“Well, I guess it’s all right, since the police are on the way. I truly appreciate your doing this for me. So, you’ll stay up here and wait up here until they come, okay?”

“Sure.”

End of excerpt from *The Price of Candy* The second book in the series.