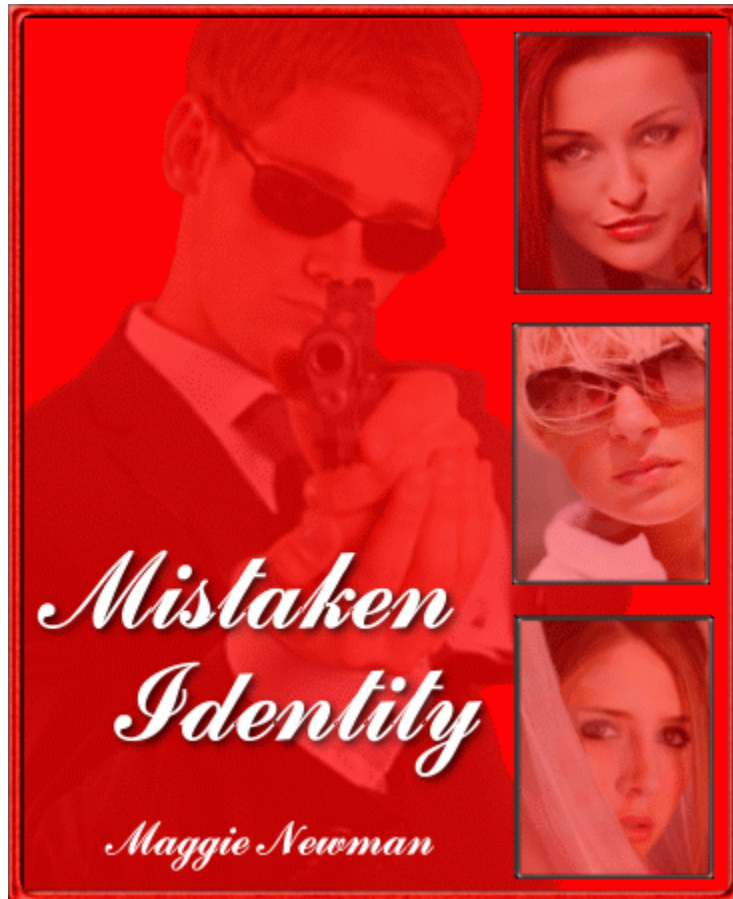


Mistaken Identity

By Maggie Newman



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Published in Digital Format 2009

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For my beloved grandmother...
who taught me how to laugh at the pain
... and never lose hope.

Those who quit their proper character to assume what does not belong to them are for the greater part ignorant of both the character they leave and of the character they assume.

...*Burke*

PROLOGUE

-1-

Sheriff Halloran moved closer to the embankment. Weathered boots firmly planted, he peered over the edge of a two-hundred-foot drop. He could see the masked face of Doug Grant, senior member of the two-man search and rescue team, directly below him.

Fighting back nausea, Halloran cupped sweaty palms to his mouth. "Any bodies?"

Doug's head motioned up and down.

"How many?"

Doug wagged his index finger and immediately ducked back below the icy surface. From Halloran's vantage point, Doug was nothing more than a blurry ripple on a vast spread of slow moving water.

Eight months from now, Spring thaw would transform the North Fork of the Flathead River into a white-capped, bone-crunching roller coaster ride. An irresistible magnet for all those thrill seeking, out-of-their-mind rafters who showed up each and every year. And sometimes, for those ill prepared to battle Mother Nature at her peak, a watery grave.

Twelve victims in the forty-some-odd years Halloran lived in Montana. Including this one... an unlucky thirteen.

"Therapy must be working for you."

Halloran jumped straight back, colliding with his young deputy.

"Damn you, Mahoney!"

"Sorry. Thought you heard me." Mahoney leaned over, scanning the water below. "Any victims?"

"One. So far."

"Male or female?"

Halloran wondered that himself. "Don't know yet."

"Hmmm...." Mahoney examined the gravel shoulder. "No recent tire tracks."

“No reason there should be.”

“I just thought...”

Halloran shook his head, focusing his gaze on a rock formation on the opposite cliff. Anything to avoid looking down again. “Is Ryan Mosley on call?”

“No. Mountain Towing.”

“Good. The last thing we need...”

The whine of a Cummins diesel gave Halloran an excuse to move away from the embankment. As soon as the truck rounded the last curve, Halloran’s optimism vanished.

“Shit.”

Even from a distance, he could clearly see MOSLEY TOWING & REPAIR stenciled on the bug shield.

Yet another dark smear on an already miserable day.

Halloran went to the driver’s side, greeting his former Little League pitcher with feign cheerfulness. “Hey, Ryan. I was expecting someone from Mountain Towing.”

“That new driver they hired? Blew the motor in their semi rig. The only truck available is the old International. That piece of shit couldn’t pull a Volkswagen out of a mud puddle.” Ryan dropped his five-foot-ten frame onto the gravel. “What’ve we got?”

Halloran was busy re-arranging small rocks with the toe of his boot. “Late model Ford pickup.”

Ryan looked to where Mahoney was standing, the urge to simply climb back in his truck and drive away challenging his need to know.

“Is it Corey’s?”

Halloran lifted his eyes. “I believe so.” When Ryan started to walk away, Halloran grabbed his arm. “They also found one victim. We’re not sure who.”

Ryan mowed a calloused hand through his hair. At the edge of the embankment, he helped Mahoney assist Doug onto level ground.

“Ok, Doug. Give it to me straight.”

“It’s a Ford. That’s all I can tell you.”

Ryan persisted. “Three-quarter-ton Ranger? Two-tone brown?”

“As murky as that water is, everything down there looks brown.”

Ryan considered the reply lame. “Corey’s name is on the license plate. You can’t tell me you didn’t notice.”

“Look, Ryan. The hole that truck is wedged in doesn’t give much room for serious inspection.”

“At least tell me if the body is male or female.”

The few seconds it took Doug to reply seemed eternal. “Definitely male.”

Ryan sprinted to his truck, sidestepped Halloran to access the cab, shuddered when a comforting hand pressed against his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Ryan. I never wanted it to turn out like this.”

“Yeah. Ain’t life grand.”

Halloran settled back against the hood of his cruiser, his mind barely conscious of the detached activity surrounding him. Ryan maneuvering the tow truck into position. Mahoney attempting to direct Ryan in his rearview mirror, then jumping off to one side when he realized he was more target than flagman. Doug stowing his diving gear in the cargo area of his Blazer and then returning to the embankment just as Ryan lowered the tow hook to his partner.

“A little more slack, Ryan. Yeah, that’s good.”

Mahoney’s voice... “Ok, boys. Let’s get that puppy up here.”

Desperate for a cigarette, Halloran lifted his eyes to a cerulean sky. One body so far. *Definitely male*. Another wave of nausea clenched his gut. Corey Mosley would soon be released from his watery grave.

But where the hell was Sarah?

-2-

The sound of gears turning brought Halloran’s focus back to the tow truck. Loops of one-inch braided steel snaked across a case-hardened shaft. Once taut, the stretched cable began to vibrate, like some crudely plucked guitar string.

Reluctant, Halloran positioned himself between Doug and Mahoney, staring down at the water with mixed emotion. Maybe it wasn't even Corey's truck. There had to be dozens (possibly hundreds) of two-tone brown Ford pickups in Flathead County. The odds were lowered the moment a familiar bumper broke the surface.

Glued to it, a black and white sticker which read EAT MY DUST. Halloran clamped his lower jaw. The fact that it was mounted upside down (Corey was sufficiently tanked that day) left no doubt whatsoever. Do not pass go. Do not collect two-hundred bucks. Case closed.

"Looks like Sarah is history," Mahoney commented when the passenger side became visible.

The door, having been ripped from its hinges, left an ominous gaping hole, three years of sludge oozing from the floorboard. Halloran dug his fingertips into both palms. Corey was still in the driver's seat, hands clenched to the wheel, apparently having fought for control right to the bitter end.

And Sarah? Swept away like some bizarre piece of human driftwood.

Envisioning her innocent body being dragged through rushing water, then bludgeoned against one merciless rock after another, Halloran silently prayed she was already dead (or, at the very least, unconscious) on impact. Loving her the way he had, he couldn't bring himself to imagine anything less.

Doug's partner tossed his fins to Doug and hoisted himself over the embankment. "Remind me to bring my four-wheeler next time. A mountain goat I'm not."

Doug thumbed the crippled Ford. "Four-wheel drive didn't help Corey, did it? Poor bastard probably screamed all the way down."

Concerned Ryan might have heard, Halloran's line of vision shifted to the right. Ryan's movements were efficient (somewhat automated, in fact), as though his task of securing his latest tow was commonplace. If not for the body perched behind the wheel like some expectant race-car driver, it would have been. Fifty percent of Ryan's yearly tow business came from drunks who believed a four-wheel-drive lever gave them license to go where no man had gone before. And Corey Mosley topped the list.

Long live the King.

"Better call dispatch. Have them locate Randolph."

"I already did," Mahoney responded flatly. "He's not happy about giving up his only fishing day this month."

Halloran shook his head as he moved toward the tow truck. "No doubt we've all got places we'd rather be." Then, to Ryan, "Are you okay?"

"I'll feel a whole lot better once I get Corey out of there."

"We can't do anything until Randolph gets here."

"Tell me you're kidding."

"The body has to be..."

"The body? As in corpse? You're talking about my kid brother for Christ's sake!"

Halloran's back stiffened. "You're not the only one who's suffering."

"Can we at least put a blanket over him?"

The arrival of Randolph's mud-splattered van prevented any response. Still sporting his canvas fishing vest and fly-hook decorated cap, and visibly annoyed by the inconvenience, Randolph stretched to his feet and sauntered onto the scene with slow, deliberate stealth.

"Say... Ryan? Mind giving the van motor a look see? I think one of the plug wires might be bad. Damn thing kept cutting out on me all the way up here."

Randolph's eyes never left Halloran's face. The moment Ryan entered his van, Randolph's attention shifted to Corey.

Halloran positioned himself on the opposite side. "Didn't Gus put all new wires on the van last week?"

Randolph's eyebrows shot up. "Would you rather Ryan was standing where you are right now?"

"Right. He has enough to deal with." After a pause, "Well, what do you think?"

"Oh, he's dead all right."

"Nice to see this excursion hasn't compromised your sense of humor."

"You might want to take a stroll. What I'm about to do isn't exactly pleasant."

The moment Randolph took hold of Corey's left thumb, Halloran propelled himself away from the truck. Dry twigs being snapped in half. That was the sound Halloran would recall. And when he was wrenched from a recurring nightmare in years to come, it wouldn't be the sound of Corey's fingers being broken that awakened him but his own blood-chilling scream as he drove off a two-hundred-foot-high precipice.

-3-

Halloran eased back on the accelerator. Following the tow truck was a bad idea. A dozen slow-going miles face to face with Corey's pickup, void of occupant but sinister nonetheless.

"Sarah must have gotten washed down river," Mahoney said absently, managing to crawl inside Halloran's head. "Not much chance of ever finding the body."

Halloran removed a non-filter Camel from his breast pocket, one of three he bummed from Randolph.

"I thought you quit."

"I did." Halloran took a moment to light up, several more to savor the first drag. Then, his voice laced with reflection, "Sarah was terrified of water."

"Terrified? Really?"

Halloran nodded, recalling an earlier memory. "She was barely ten the summer her mother enrolled her in swimming class. I'll never forget the look on that kid's face when I tried to coax her into the pool." Halloran shoved the Camel to his lips with an unsteady hand. "Terrified, yet oddly determined. I wound up reserving the pool privately for the next two weeks. Eventually, she gained confidence. But she never really became what you would consider an accomplished swimmer."

"That explains it."

"Explains what?"

"High school. Senior class picnic at Lion's Lake. A bunch of us guys built a raft out of oil drums and peeler posts. Intended to anchor it midway between the north and south sides. The gals we were dating at the time thought it would be a kick to ride the raft during its maiden voyage. That is, everyone except Sarah. She said boarding anything built by a crew three sheets to wind was like buying a ticket on the Titanic. Naturally, Corey took it personally. Told her if she didn't go along, she could take his class ring and shove it. When that didn't work, he practically dragged her onto the raft." Mahoney turned his head toward the side

window. “We all laughed, thinking the struggle she put up was an act. You know, her way of getting in one last shot at Corey’s ego.”

“How did Sarah react after the raft was anchored?”

“Refused to budge. Just sat there hugging her knees while everyone else dove in and out. Corey threatened to toss her a couple of times, but never did. I guess he didn’t want to look like more of an ass than he was.”

“I can’t believe Sarah managed to swim back to shore.”

Mahoney turned back toward Halloran. “That’s just it. She wouldn’t even try. Bud Sawyer and I finally had to retrieve her in his canoe. Corey was so bent out of shape he drove off and left her. The next time I saw Sarah she was sporting a healthy bruise on her left cheek. Said she walked into a door.”

Halloran cringed. He had always assumed the physical abuse began after they were married. He viewed the crumpled grill of Corey’s pickup, tried to summon contempt, shifted to an official mode instead.

Incredibly, in spite of extensive front-end damage, all four mud-and-snows were still inflated. And considering Corey’s ability to drive expertly under any given circumstance, there was no logical explanation for his demise. Not unless you were willing to rule out accidental.

“Hard to believe Corey lost control,” Mahoney stated, once again reading Halloran’s thoughts.

Halloran tossed the butt out the window in disgust. “Is that a professional observation?”

“Well. He certainly wasn’t trying to commit suicide.” Mahoney’s eyes shifted to the driver’s seat. “You think maybe Corey was playing chicken? Trying to scare Sarah?”

“And what? Got a little too close to the edge? Caused Sarah to grab hold of the wheel?”

Mahoney shrugged. “Wouldn’t be the first time. Only now the pickup gets bogged down in the soft gravel. Winds up being yanked over the edge.”

“I suppose.”

Mahoney followed Halloran’s gaze. The front bumper of the Ford was twisted, leering at them in a secretive grin.

“You don’t think it was an accident, do you?”

Halloran glanced in the rearview mirror. “Ask me that after I’ve examined the truck.” He eased the cruiser onto the shoulder and waved Randolph ahead. Relief came the moment he could no longer see the Ford. Even so, he allowed Ryan and Randolph several seconds lead before continuing on to Columbia Falls.

By the time they reached the impound yard, Ryan had already lowered the pickup to the ground. Halloran went to the cab, made a superficial search, paused. A tape was lodged into the cassette player. Prompted by morbid curiosity, he pried it loose with his pocket knife, wound up throwing it to the floorboard with renewed contempt. While the Ford was making its rapid descent, George Strait was offering up tunes for lovers.

“Find anything?” Mahoney asked from behind.

“No.”

Mahoney eyed the discarded tape, said nothing.

“Why don’t you go on home? Give Sandy and the girls that Sunday barbeque you promised.”

“Sounds good. You’re welcome to join us.”

Halloran shook his head. “Seems my appetite is slightly impaired. Besides, duty calls. Paperwork up the ass on this one.”

“The girls would love another chance to beat you at Scrabble.”

“Some other time.”

“Come on. You can do the paperwork first thing tomorrow.”

“I said no.” Halloran quickly adjusted his tone. “Look, Roger. I just need to be alone right now. Understand?”

Mahoney nodded, went to his car, hesitated. “If you change your mind...”

“I won’t.”

Halloran viewed his departure with certain envy. At least Mahoney had a family to go home to. Eleanore, best friend and devoted wife, had died of cancer two years ago. Ironically, one year to the day Sarah disappeared. Yet another hole in his heart.

In his office, Halloran removed the necessary forms from his desk drawer. He filled in most of the information with detached emotion, jotted down several official remarks concerning today's events, and then paused, the tip of his pen resting against the desktop.

Sarah.

It seemed so final, putting facts down on paper. And doing so certainly wouldn't absolve the guilt.

Halloran closed his eyes. Why hadn't he just stopped Corey when he had the chance? What better excuse to call off the wedding than finding him coming out of a Kalispell motel room with another woman?

Enraged, Halloran had slammed Corey against the bed of his pickup (ironically, what became his future temporary coffin) and threatened him to within an inch of his life. Corey's heartfelt promise to never do it again was convincing. A week later, Halloran managed to give the blushing bride away as promised, helpless to do otherwise.

How do you convince a young woman who has the capacity to love unconditionally that the man she plans to spend the rest of her life with is no higher up the food chain than common vermin? Looking back, Halloran was certain he could have found a way. Sarah would still be very much alive.

Dear sweet Sarah.

Halloran lowered his head on his arms and wept.

* * *

CRYSTAL BENNETT

The banquet hall was filled to capacity. Thousand-dollar-a-plate diners, kept waiting for over an hour while a harried emcee struggled to correct an electronically challenged PA system, were for the most part restless and ill-tempered. The fact that this same emcee chose to begin the delayed proceedings with an amateur comedy routine merely heightened the mood.

"...so the first farmer says: 'Aw, just let it go. I couldn't plow that fast anyway.'"

Idle conversation droned on uninterrupted.

Howie Ballard, a squat, balding real estate broker who might have felt more at ease in a room filled with hungry jackals, tapped the microphone.

"Is this thing even on?"

A fresh supply of feedback caused the entire crowd to fall silent, three-hundred-and-seventy pairs of eyes glued to the perpetrator with renewed disdain. Having inadvertently captured their undivided attention, Howie quickly donned his reading glasses.

"Distinguished ladies and gentlemen. First, let me thank each and every one of you for coming tonight. Your generosity in supporting our inner-city programs is overwhelming to say the least."

Another outbreak of unrest brought Howie's sweaty palms into the air.

"Please...if I can just have your attention..."

"Cut to the chase," a man's voice called out.

"Right! Bring on the dancing girls!" another contributed.

Howie nervously shed his glasses, tucked them into his breast pocket along with his notes, cleared his throat one last time. "Most of you already know our guest of honor. For those who may not, let me simply say Crystal Bennett has been nothing short of an angel since she arrived in Phoenix. During the past year or so, she has been instrumental in the refurbishment of at least a half dozen urban housing complexes. A most impressive display of commitment and heartfelt compassion."

Verbal waves of discontent flowed from front to back. Aware he had once again lost their limited attention span, Howie raised a gold-plated plaque above his head, a sacrificial token.

"It is with great pride that we award this year's humanitarian honor to Miss Crystal Bennett. Crystal, will you come up here, please?"

Sporadic hand clapping had begun even before Howie motioned the table directly in front of the podium. When the twenty-six-year-old honored guest rose from her seat, applause heightened to a thunderous ovation.

"Give 'em hell, Crystal!"

Her journey to center stage was accompanied by several appreciative wolf whistles.

Crystal accepted the plaque, bending slightly in order to place a red lip imprint on Howie's bald spot.

Laughter Howie was previously incapable of soliciting came freely. Embarrassed, he quickly abandoned the spotlight, selfishly denying the crowd further ammunition. Amid the safety of darkness, he watched in awe as Crystal Bennett took control of an otherwise uncontrollable crowd.

"It's an honor to be here."

Barely spoken above a whisper, her words echoed throughout the hall, throaty, confident. A sculptured smile remained frozen on her lips. First while dinner guests regained their seats, continuing during a lengthy picture taking interval, cameras from every conceivable location targeting pulses of blue light. Finally, Crystal lifted a gloved hand. Breathless calm prevailed, expectant faces riveted to the podium.

"Considering the enthusiasm of your support, I feel somewhat negligent subjecting you to this long-winded speech." She brandished several index cards, tipped her head toward the table she had just vacated. "But since my fiancé stayed up half the night writing it, I feel compelled to place the final decision with his conscience."

Howie no sooner motioned a stage hand when all sixteen chandeliers responded. In a sheepish attempt to conceal his whereabouts, Allen Sanderson glanced about the room, his eyes inquisitively innocent behind bronze-rimmed glasses.

"Don't be shy, Allen," Crystal goaded. "Stand up and let folks have a look at you. After all..."

Crystal paused, her eyes drawn to the rear doors. A young man had entered the room, his faded blue jeans and baseball cap causing negative reactions throughout. He glanced to either side and then quickly positioned himself against the oak paneled wall to his left.

Tuxedo clad security guards quickly descended, prepared to eliminate the problem with Swat team efficiency. The intruder denied their spoken request, became somewhat combative when one of the more aggressive rent-a-cops placed a firm hand on his shoulder.

Shoving turned into a minor scuffle before the young man was forcibly subdued. With their captor in tow, four equally determined men barged through the double doors and out into the hall.

Anxious to kill the house lights, and unable to capture the stage hand's attention by waving his arms, Howie had sprinted to the opposite wing. He shoved the worker out of the way, then mistakenly shut down the entire system by throwing the main switch.

"Nice going, Einstein," a voice sneered alongside Howie's ear. "Any more tricks up your sleeve?"

Consumed by darkness, Crystal took hold of the microphone stand. Her lips had formed a tight thin line, her increased heart rate a drum roll inside her head. She closed her eyes, concentrating on the feel of smooth chrome beneath her moist palm. Then she began a silent count. Ninety-nine...ninety-eight...ninety-seven...

Within seconds, the stage hand corrected the problem, bathing Crystal in a cone of light. She was still holding the microphone, her posture no longer rigid, her green eyes somewhat mischievous. "If you didn't want recognition, Darling, you should have just said so."

Relieved laughter throughout.

Crystal tossed back a flow of red hair. "Well, now. I suppose anything would sound boring at this point." She ripped the index cards in half, smiled. "For the sake of everyone's comfort, let me simply say, Thank you."

The moment Howie returned to the vacated podium, random booing and hissing began to replace applause. Refusing to be further intimidated, he jabbed his middle finger at the crowd, bowed formally, and then casually slipped into the darkness. He sauntered past the control panel with a wave of his hand.

"What are you waiting for, *Einstein*? The show's over. Turn the damn house lights back on."

* * *

Crystal peeled off her arm-length gloves, tapped the elevator button several times in an attempt to speed its arrival. Directly behind her, tipped back against

the opposite wall, Ryan Mosley looked on. The bill of his cap was tugged low, shielding narrowed eyes.

"God, I'm glad that's over!" Crystal shifted her weight to the other foot. "These damn shoes are killing me."

In a hushed voice, Allen said, "Let's not make a scene, okay?"

"Heaven forbid!"

"I mean it, Crystal. You promised."

"I told you I'd suffer through, and I did. What more do you want?"

Crystal pressed the down button several more times. "Where the hell is the damn elevator?"

Allen turned his head to the side. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Why? Do I appear sickly?"

"A little flushed perhaps."

"I'm overwhelmed."

"Right. Not often one receives a standing ovation. Especially from an entire room filled with upper echelon."

"Is that what they were? Sounded more like strip-joint hecklers."

Allen cast a discerning eye down the front of her red sequin gown, strapless, sculpted. "Dressed this way, I'd say you asked for it. I kept expecting to hear Gypsy Rose Lee's runway music."

"Now there's a touch I wish I had thought of. Oh well. Maybe next year."

Allen followed her into an empty car, then guided her off to one side in order to allow several late-comers to crowd in. Amid the sea of professionally styled hairdos, one baseball cap.

The woman poised beside Crystal tilted an aging head to one side. "I must say. You really outdid yourself tonight. If I'm not mistaken, Marilyn Monroe wore a similar gown in *Some Like It Hot*."

Allen braced for impact. Crystal simply smiled.

"Actually, Clair, you're half right. It was worn by Tony Curtis."

Clair's escort (a man younger than her son would have been had he not died of crib death), craned his muscular neck. The impending cat fight was inevitable.

"Interesting dye job," Clair tried again. "Was matching the color of your dress intentional?"

"What's wrong, Clair? Too risqué for you and your puritan friends?"

"The women I grew up with merely have better taste."

Crystal's smile deepened. "Most of the women you grew up with are dead."

The elevator doors slid open. Crystal and Allen were halfway across the hotel lobby before Clair realized she and her pubescent escort were the only remaining occupants.

"Can you believe the nerve of that woman?" Clair whined, cautiously placing a satin toe across the threshold. Aware Crystal's departure was being scrutinized with blatant approval, Clair took hold of her companion's arm, long painted fingernails dimpling the fabric of his tuxedo.

"Apparently, the money I've been paying you all these months doesn't cover loyalty."

"I wasn't aware loyalty carried a visual clause."

Clair motioned toward the young man exiting the front entrance. "Now that's exactly the sort of individual I picture a woman like Crystal with."

"Really? Perhaps I should have objected when you gave all my baseball caps to Goodwill.."

* * *

Propped against Allen's shoulder in the limousine, Crystal quickly relinquished spike heels. A long-winded sigh prompted Allen to brush a lock of hair from her forehead.

"Tired?"

"Exhausted. I don't think I got more than two hours sleep."

Allen immediately recalled the thrashing throughout the previous night. "What gives?"

Crystal leaned forward in order to access the bar compartment. "It's not the first time I've had trouble sleeping." After brief deliberation, Crystal chose Scotch over champagne.

"No thanks. I've had my quota."

"This one's mine." Crystal settled back against virgin leather upholstery with a groan.

Allen examined her award before placing it on the seat. "You should be grateful, you know."

"Really?"

Allen nodded. "Along with the prestige, you now have a greater ability to compete."

"And why is that?"

"This award might not mean much to you, but the truth is, it lends considerable credence to your design status."

"If I was a man that thought would never have entered your mind."

"Sorry. I momentarily forgot who I was talking to."

Having once again been responsible for lowering the emotional barometer of their surroundings, Allen changed his mind about taking a drink. He splashed Scotch over ice, cast a concerned glance when Crystal held out an empty glass.

"That man tonight? The one in the baseball cap? Do you know him?"

Had they been sitting farther apart, Allen might never have experienced the slight stiffening of her back.

"Why do you ask?"

"You appeared somewhat shaken when he entered the banquet hall."

"Did I?"

Allen tipped his head. "I was beginning to think that armor shell you call skin wasn't penetrable."

Crystal emptied her glass a second time before responding. "As usual, you're trying to build a mountain out of an ant hill. I was merely annoyed that his

unexpected entrance interrupted my rhythm. Not to mention the clothes he was wearing. Hard to believe he made it past the doorman, let alone reached the seventh floor."

"Which leads me to my ultimate concern. What was he doing there in the first place?"

"Good grief, Allen. Isn't it obvious? The man simply walked through the wrong door."

"Then why did he give the security guards such a hard time?"

Crystal drew a weary breath as she slipped on her shoes. "Okay. You want a believable scenario? How's this? He's one of the degenerates who benefited from my vast philanthropic endeavors and merely wanted to thank me in person."

"Fine. Resort to sarcasm."

When the limousine glided to a stop in front of their hotel, Crystal snatched the Dewar's bottle.

"What are you doing?"

"Do we have anything that even resembles Scotch in the apartment?"

"You know we don't."

"Well. There you go."

* * *

Half a block away, a '68 Firebird sat idling alongside the curb, its headlamps extinguished. Ryan Mosley, impatient, continued to drum his fingers on the padded dash. Until the rear door of the limo swung open.

He watched with intent interest as Crystal stepped out onto the sidewalk and breeze past the doorman without acknowledgement, took casual note of Allen's demeanor as he hurriedly attempted to catch up.

The moment the limo pulled away, the Firebird took its place. Ryan glared past the open passenger window, past the glass entrance of the hotel, witnessed Crystal and Allen entering the express elevator.

Humanitarian of the year? Who the hell did she think she was fooling?

The doors of the elevator slid shut.

"Well, Ms. Bennett. Looks like your social status is about to be compromised."

Focused on Crystal's departure, Ryan was unaware the doorman had approached his car.

"Better move it, Bud. This ain't no parking zone." Ignored, the doorman leaned in closer. "What are you? Deaf? I said move it!"

The Firebird sped from the curb, then negotiated the first corner with rear tires smoking. With nothing more tangible than a fleeting glimpse of an out-of-state license plate, the doorman returned to his post shaking his head.

"Foreign sickos. Ought to be a goddamn law!"

In Glendale, the Firebird pulled into a Motel 6 parking space. Ryan sat there for several minutes.

Locating her had been a whole lot easier than he expected. Getting her off somewhere alone would prove much more difficult. But he hadn't come all this way to fail. Corey's death had to be vindicated. And one way or another, it would be.

He entered his second-floor room, thought about then immediately dismissed the idea of calling her apartment. He turned on the TV, pressed mute, and then sat on an overly firm mattress staring at a silent screen.

Apparently, she hadn't made the connection. Granted, there was that awkward moment when she seemed a bit confused. But not from recognition. Ryan was certain of that. After all, they hadn't seen each other in some time, not since he moved to Alaska six years ago. Other than an occasional phone call (including the one from his mother informing him Corey and Sarah had disappeared), Ryan had become somewhat of a stranger.

And vice versa. Beyond appearance, the only similarity between Crystal and Sarah was their last name. Bennett. Bennington. Hardly coincidental.

Ryan removed his cowboy boots, peeled back the bed covers, eyed the telephone yet again. Tomorrow. No sense spooking her prematurely. Besides, a personal confrontation would prove far more satisfying. Lying down, he tapped the mute button, scanned through the channels with feign interest.

One thing was certain. When he and Sarah finally did come face to face, there damn sure wouldn't be a roomful of socialites standing in his way.

* * *

With martini pitcher and two glasses in hand, Randy Adler joined Clair on the couch nearest the bar. The one facing it, a fifteenth-century King something or other, was merely for show. He poured them each a drink, gave her leg a comforting pat.

"Crystal Bennett isn't quite the threat you seem to think."

"She stole Allen from me, didn't she?"

"I wasn't aware your relationship ever surpassed friendship."

Clair dismissed Randy's astute observation with a wave of her free hand, relieving her glass of half its content at the same time. "Things are not always what they seem."

"Are we still talking about Allen Sanderson?"

Clair finished off the remaining liquid, barely waited for Randy to refill the glass before shoving it back to her lips. "You know what really ticks me off? The fact that she shows up out of nowhere and then virtually captures this entire city as her own. What in God's name gives her the right to move amongst us like she's some kind of royalty? Who the hell is she?"

"Easy, Clair. Jealousy doesn't become you."

Clair's steely blue eyes narrowed. "Don't tell me you're taken in by her as well?" Randy's noncommittal shrug prompted an unflattering grunt. "Don't be deceived by her smashing good looks. I know a wolf in sheep's clothing when I see one."

"That designer gown? Sheep's clothing?"

Clair's second barnyard grunt dispelled whatever erotic fantasy Randy was about to partake. Instead, he found himself scrutinizing a cosmetically altered profile. Whatever vast financial resource Clair used in the past was an act of futility. Biologically speaking, she was too far gone to compete with younger, more vibrant women. Women like Crystal Bennett. But Randy suspected Clair was painfully aware of that fact long before Crystal entered the scene.

He removed his jacket, placed it on the back of the couch, stretched out with his head on her lap. "You never told me what you think of my new hair cut."

"I'm not sure." Clair passed her palm across the smooth brown surface. "It's so short, I can't even run my fingers through it."

"You don't think it creates a more distinguished look? Someone worthy of your lofty presence?"

As usual, Clair missed the sarcasm. A satisfied smile creased her lips, the first since leaving the banquet hall. "You always manage to say just the right thing."

"It's a gift."

"Speaking of gifts, have you given any more thought to moving in with me?"

Randy cringed inwardly. He knew time (not to mention his limited savings) was running out. Choosing to ignore both had forced him into a decision he was not prepared to face. Give in to Clair's wishes or find another source of income. Neither was currently acceptable. And his candid remark concerning Crystal's gown hadn't helped.

Randy placed his hand against her cheek. "Have I told you how extraordinarily beautiful you look tonight?" Clair flushed beneath his touch.

"I believe you adequately expressed the sentiment during our journey to the award banquet. With a wink, "I certainly wouldn't object to a repeat performance."

Obediently, Randy knelt at her feet. He maneuvered the pleated skirt above her hips, hesitating long enough to determine the whereabouts of her missing silk panties before pressing his face between her legs. Amid his usual robotic movements, Randy envisioned the reaction of some unsuspecting limousine service employee. Better still, Clair's thorough humiliation should the employee choose to return the item in person.

He wasn't even aware Clair had climaxed. Not until she dug her fingernails into his shoulders, begging him to stop.

Randy's eyes came back into focus. He crawled onto the couch, pulled her down beside him. "Sorry, Love. I just got caught up in the moment."

"It's wonderful knowing you love pleasing me." She nestled her cheek contentedly against his shoulder. "That's why I plan to keep you around a long time. A very... very... long..."

Certain she had dozed off, Randy attempted a silent escape. His movement prompted an unhappy mewling sound. Randy winced. Was there no end to her farm animal impressions?

"You never answered my question."

Whatever stay of execution Randy assumed he had purchased instantly dissolved. Had Clair been in a position to see his face, she would have been appalled by the repulsed expression.

"I've got another month left on my lease," he said, resigned to his fate, yet forcing his voice to remain light-hearted. "I won't bother to renew it."

Triumphant she had once again gotten her way, Clair relaxed. "You won't be sorry."

Randy stared at a ten-foot-high ceiling, absently counting acoustic tiles over and over. When Clair finally began to snore, he cautiously slid from her grasp. He stood up, a final glance at her face as he retrieved his jacket. His stomach did a slow roll. Mouth gaped, makeup smeared, her true age of fifty-nine stripped clean. Throughout their six-month relationship he frequently told himself Clair's money was sufficient compensation. It wasn't.

Rather than hail a cab, Randy opted to walk the eight blocks to his apartment, black tuxedo jacket slung over his shoulder, leather soles slapping against meticulously brushed concrete. Sidewalks in the old Cleveland neighborhood were cracked, permanently stained by assorted debris from over-turned garbage cans. Drug dealers and whores huddled in doorways. And skeletons of stripped cars lay scattered along equally indigent curbs.

Here, the sidewalks were virtually spotless. Fruit-laden orange trees complimented both sides of the street. And only uniformed sentries were allowed occupancy beneath awning-covered alcoves.

A security vehicle rolled slowly by. Randy nodded to the driver and received a friendly wave. Back home, it would have been a police cruiser. And more than likely, the officer would have checked Randy's ID as routine procedure.

Midway, Randy paused in front of Puerto East, one of three hotels Allen Sanderson currently owned. Not only was it the first building Crystal re-designed, the five-month-long construction schedule cemented the very relationship Clair envied beyond admission.

"How's it going, Fred?"

The doorman tipped his cap. "Slick as can be, Randy. What brings you out this late?"

"I just needed a breath of fresh air."

Randy's upward gaze solicited a chuckle.

"Still got the hots for Miss Bennett I see."

Randy smiled as he moved toward the entrance. "Don't we all?"

"She certainly stopped my old pumper a time or two."

"What time do you get off shift?"

Fred shoved a gold braided cuff away from his watch. "About twenty minutes. Will you be in the lounge that long?"

"And then some. We can swap war stories."

Randy expected the lounge to be deserted. Instead, several tables positioned against the far wall were occupied. He sat down at the bar, nodded to the man in a three-piece suit three stools away. Almost immediately a Gin-and-Tonic materialized.

"Thanks, Roy."

The bartender folded bouncer like arms on the padded rest. "What's with the monkey suit? I thought your days with the escort service were history?"

"Crystal Bennett's award banquet."

"Ah! One more opportunity for Clair to display her boy toy."

Randy moved his head from side to side. "I swear, Roy, if I don't find a way to come up with some decent cash...and soon..."

"What about that magazine layout? What was it? Hanes underwear? I thought it was a done deal."

"Stan Darcy snagged that one."

"Darcy? That fag's hung like a ten-year-old."

Randy shook his head again. "Never thought I'd see the day when I'd regret being well-endowed. That five grand they paid him was exactly the amount needed to renew my lease." Randy turned toward the sound of chairs scraping ceramic tile. "Looks like your private party is leaving."

"College boys. Drunk when they came in. Been here over an hour suckin' on one lousy pitcher of beer."

Randy watched them stagger out the door in a huddled mass. When he swiveled

back around and glanced in the bar mirror, the man in the three-piece suit lowered his eyes.

"Why don't you just ask Clair for the money?" Roy suggested. "She's always been generous in the past."

"Not five-thousand worth. She'd want to know what it was for."

"So?"

Randy displayed a pinched expression. "She wants me to move in with her."

Roy whistled through his teeth. "Man. Talk about a rock and a hard place. What are you going to do?" The question was accompanied by the ringing of a phone. "Hang on a sec." Roy rushed to the opposite end of the bar, snatched the handset from the wall. "Lounge. Roy speaking. Hey, Baby. How's it going?"

Randy focused on the bar mirror. "What are you going to do?" As usual, his reflection had no reply. He closed his eyes (Excedrin headache number forty-one coming on strong), opened them after several seconds only to find his mirror image was not alone. It was sharing space with the man in the three-piece suit.

"I couldn't help but hear your conversation."

Randy spun around to face him. "Which one?" The emotionless orbs which had averted scrutiny a few minutes ago were now blanketed by dark lenses.

"The one regarding your lack of funds."

"Do you make a habit of eavesdropping on private conversations?"

"Only when it suits my need."

"And what might that be?"

Randy was handed a folded bar napkin.

"If you're interested in making twice the amount you require, you can find me at that address." The man started to walk away, paused. "Don't take too long to decide. The offer is only good for one week."

Fred entered the lounge just as the man was leaving. He sidled up beside Randy, tossed his uniform cap on the bar. "Better close your mouth, Randy. It's fly season."

"Ever seen that guy before?"

"The suit? Yeah. He's been coming in here the past two, three nights."

"What kind of guy wears sunglasses after dark?"

Fred chuckled. "A vampire?"

Randy pocketed the paper napkin. "Hey, Roy! If you're through talking dirty to your old lady, Fred needs a cold one." He downed the remainder of his drink in one swallow and then slapped his palm on the bar. "And get me another one. I've got some serious thinking to do."

* * *

Mahoney straddled the chair in front of Halloran's desk. "You wanted to see me, Chief?"

Halloran looked up from his paperwork with disdain. "Chief?"

"Sorry. Sheriff."

"Sorry doesn't seem to cut it. That's the third time in as many weeks."

"Right." Personally, Mahoney didn't see the objection. It was certainly more tolerable than the pet name Eleanor had given him. Teddy Bear. The nickname might accurately describe Halloran's beefy hulk and generally easy-going manner, but none of the men in the department had nerve enough to verbalize the handle in Halloran's presence. Not even Mahoney.

At fifty-seven, the sheriff of Flathead County sixteen years running had boyish good looks and a crop of wavy brown hair. But he was also a force to be reckoned with. Three inches shorter, and packing considerably less weight, Mahoney oftentimes felt dwarfed by his superior's size and stature.

"What did you want to see me about?" Mahoney asked again. Halloran took time to light a cigarette before tilting his chair back on two legs. Aging oak creaked with the additional strain. "I don't suppose you've seen Ryan Mosley around lately."

Mahoney shook his head, eyeing the ceramic ash tray on the desk. A gift from Sarah, lovingly hand-painted in seventh-grade art class, now brimming with cigarette butts. "Dispatch tried contacting him a few nights ago, when that semi jackknifed in the canyon. All they got was his recorder. Outgoing message referred callers to Mountain Towing in Whitefish."

"The only time he ever does that is hunting season."

"Maybe he just needed to get away. The way his dad broke down at Corey's funeral? I'd certainly want a time out after that."

"What about Jack Olson?"

"What about him?"

"Would he know Ryan's whereabouts?"

"He might. Assuming he even knows Ryan is gone."

"Don't they shoot pool twice a week?"

"Past tense. Jack's new girlfriend has him on a tight leash."

Halloran checked his watch. "You should be able to reach Jack at the car lot. Or is his latest career past tense as well?"

Mahoney hopped off the chair. "Nope. Talking little old ladies into high priced used cars is custom made. He actually gets paid to shovel that bullshit he's famous for."

Mahoney returned in less than five minutes.

"Jack wasn't there?"

"He was there all right," Mahoney said, resuming his former seat. "Said Ryan planned to be gone at least a couple of weeks. Destination unknown."

"That much I didn't need Jack's confirmation. Business or pleasure?"

"Claimed it was a little of both."

"You're sure he doesn't know where to reach Ryan?"

"Hey. You think he's going to tell me if he does?"

Halloran nodded, wondering if he should call Jack himself. Apparently, Mahoney was still taking heat for dating a cheerleader Jack had designs on in high school.

Mahoney eyed the paperwork at Halloran's fingertips. "Anything new on Corey's accident?"

"It just doesn't wash. Nothing mechanical wrong with the front end. No flat tire. Brake lines in tact. We know he was drinking heavily, but hell, Corey was a damn good driver, drunk or not."

"I know. Two twelve-packs and he still appeared sober as a judge. At least when he was driving. It wasn't until he slid from behind the wheel that it hit him. Boom! Flat on his face."

"So what caused him to drive off a two-hundred-foot embankment? On a road, I might add, he was capable of maneuvering blindfolded?"

"I guess we'll never know."

Halloran slammed his fist down on the desk, scattering paperwork and causing Mahoney to jump from his chair. "I have to know!" he shouted. Then, in a softer, almost desperate tone, "I have to know."

"Because of Sarah."

Halloran nodded slowly. "I can't stop wondering if she's still alive."

"Can't? Or won't?" Mahoney shoved the paperwork back in place. "Do you honestly believe anyone could have survived that fall?"

"What if she was thrown clear? What if she wasn't even in the truck...? It's not like we found her purse or anything."

Mahoney shrugged. "It got washed away." After a slight hesitation, "Just like her body."

"Never to be found?"

"The night Corey and Sarah disappeared, flood waters were depositing thirty-foot trees into Flathead Lake. And it wouldn't be the first time a body escaped recovery. Remember Joe Richter?"

"The man was drunk on his ass, ice-fishing in thirty below. The hole he cut with his chain saw was big enough for a car to fall through. Besides, he was weighted down with steel-cleated boots and six layers of insulated clothing. He probably sank straight down like a rock, with a thirty-four-pound McCulloch as a permanent anchor."

"I'm just saying it's plausible. You have to accept the fact that Sarah might never be found."

Halloran's eyes dropped to his desk. "Maybe I'm just reaching for straws..."

"Is that what Ryan is? A straw?"

"I don't know. He seemed overly anxious to me. As though he couldn't wait to go

somewhere. Even before Corey's funeral."

"You think he's on to something?"

Halloran poked another cigarette between his lips. "Like I said, I'm reaching for straws."

"I don't understand why you just don't ask his dad where he is."

"Have you seen Terry lately? Ninety pounds of gaunt flesh."

"What if I paid a social visit?"

Halloran thought about it a moment. "Yeah. He always considered you family. Might even lift his spirits."

"I'll head over there as soon as my shift ends," Mahoney offered.

"Better shed the uniform. His mind isn't half as debilitated as his body."

Halloran waited until the door closed before striking a match. Instead of lighting his cigarette, he held the flame at arm's length. Staring at the orange glow, his mind's eye conjured a different light. A 15-watt bulb attached to the headboard of Eleanor's hospital bed. *Promise me you'll quit smoking.* The last words she spoke. The moment Halloran told her he would, Eleanor smiled and slipped peacefully away.

It had been a game throughout their marriage. Eleanor making him promise. Halloran crossing his fingers behind his back each time she did. Currently, he blew out the match and tossed it into the ash tray along with the cigarette.

Standing at the window, he watched a young couple moving along the sidewalk, holding hands. At first glance (the long, flowing blonde hair, the broad, open-mouthed smile), the girl strikingly resembled Sarah. Halloran felt a familiar tug at his heart. When they came closer, he realized the girl was shorter, heavier, her collective features not nearly as beautiful. Or angelic. Halloran swiped angrily at his tears. Why the hell couldn't he just let it go? He spun back around, collapsed onto his chair, hurriedly lit the discarded cigarette.

He needed proof Sarah was dead. Any thoughts to the contrary would remain locked in the deepest region of his brain. And the key? Halloran was willing to bet his life savings it was in another man's possession.

Ryan Anthony Mosley.

* * *

Allen draped his arm across an abandoned pillow. Squinting, he managed to bring the battery-operated wall clock into focus. Twelve noon. No wonder Crystal was already out of bed.

He stretched to a sitting position, retrieved his glasses from the nightstand, and then padded into the living room clad only in pajama bottoms. He expected Crystal to be in her studio, well-absorbed in her latest design project. Turn condemned housing into modern, affordable apartments. Instead, she was sitting on the couch, clutching an ice pack to her forehead, wearing nothing more than Allen's matching pajama top.

"Hangover, Dear?"

Crystal followed him into the kitchen, accepted her third cup of black coffee with a wrinkling of her nose. "Now I remember why I loath alcohol."

Allen added a half teaspoon of sugar to his cup before perching on one of three stools in an area Crystal referred to as the breakfast nook. Since they opted for the balcony on cooler days, and the formal dining area just inside double sets of French doors when the thermometer rose to intolerable heights, Allen considered breakfast nook a bizarre description. They had never once eaten there.

When Crystal sat beside him cradling her cup between shaky palms, Allen shook his head. "It's no wonder you can't work. You polished off half a bottle of Scotch."

"You helped." Her tone was somewhat defensive even though she knew he was right. Design plans in this condition would be torture. So much for her one-week deadline.

Allen placed his thumb and index finger close to her face. "I had one little nightcap. You hogged the rest of the bottle like a mother grizzly protecting her young."

"Please...let's not even talk about it." Abandoning her cup, Crystal placed both hands over her face.

"Just out of curiosity, what was the occasion?"

"I don't need an occasion. I just get stupid once every five years or so."

Allen wasn't appeased. "Was it that man last night?"

"What man?"

"You know damn well what man."

"Come on, Allen. Not that again."

"Well...was it?"

"What's with you? Some guy wanders into the banquet room by mistake and you immediately start building a federal case."

"I just thought..."

Crystal shoved her cup aside and stood up. "Don't think, Allen. It doesn't become you."

Hurricane Crystal cut a direct path to the bedroom, slamming the door hard enough to rattle both coffee mugs. Within seconds, Allen heard water running in the shower. He got up, refilled his cup, carried it out onto the balcony. A brownish haze engulfed the heart of the city. Instead of rising from the ashes like the infamous bird it was named for, Phoenix seemed to be sinking deeper. In a day or so, strong southeasterly winds would move the smog aside, but for now, the entire vista was surrounded in a sluggish funk. Ordinarily, he could escape Crystal's wrath by simply working at his brokerage firm. Today, asthma sufferers beware.

Gazing out over the city, Allen allowed his mind to travel over the "AC" period. After Crystal. The most satisfying few months of his life. And the most frustrating. He couldn't imagine living without her. Even on days like this, when her cutting edge was honed to perfection, his love was unconditional. And perhaps that brought him to the heart of the matter. Crystal's feelings were far from reciprocal.

The sound of the bathroom door opening and closing, then the bedroom, and finally, padded footsteps drawing near, caused Allen to wince. It would take more than a shower to diminish the ill winds of Crystal's temper.

"Sorry about the outburst, Darling." She came up behind and kissed the nape of his neck, arms circling his midsection. "It must have been the Scotch talking."

Hardened nipples pressed against his back prompted a choice of diplomacy. "No harm done," he said, swiveling his stool a quarter turn. Wet strands of long wavy hair had saturated the front of her robe, transforming silk fabric into a second, transparent skin.

"Forgive me?"

"Of course." Eyes closed, glasses removed, he placed his head against her shoulder. "You smell good." A trembling hand passed lightly across her left breast, gained confidence when it was not immediately rebuffed, then carefully

peeled back a layer of damp fabric. His lips had no sooner found her nipple when it was wrenched away.

"Some other time, Darling. Right now I have work to do."

Allen watched her hasty retreat, flinched when the studio door at the end of the hall slammed shut. The small wooden sign posted on its surface said it all.

Look But Don't Touch!!!

The attack came without warning. Allen rushed across the living room and into his den. He clawed his inhaler from the top drawer of his desk, shoved it into his mouth, dropped to the padded seat of his swivel chair with the first medicinal blast in weeks. He considered then rejected a second dose. Instead, he turned on his computer (his lifeline to the outside world whenever air quality plummeted), placing the inhaler within easy reach alongside the keyboard. Just in case.

For several minutes, he merely stared at a blank screen. Finally, he typed one short paragraph. When he spoke the words aloud, it sounded like something from a personal diary. He immediately erased everything except the last line.

Is Crystal frigid or what?

Hard to believe there was actually a time when he was flattered Crystal wouldn't sleep with him. A refreshing change, considering most of the women he dated were more than willing to offer themselves sacrificially. Crystal, on the other hand, kept him at bay for several months. Allen was impressed. Old-fashioned as well as beautiful.

And now? On those rare occasions when she climaxed (assuming, of course, the orgasms were genuine), Allen still felt inadequate. She was impossible to please. In and out of bed.

Thoroughly frustrated (and refusing to be restricted by poor air quality), Allen switched off his computer. Dressed in sweat shorts and T-shirt, and having chosen the comfort of worn-out Adidas to expensive running shoes Crystal bought him, he left the apartment without telling her. More than likely, she wouldn't appreciate being disturbed. Even more likely, the probability she didn't care one way or the other.

Ten minutes into his run, breathing passages severely restricted, he adjusted to a condensed version. He cut a diagonal path through the park he usually circumvented, and then retraced his route at a brisk walk. Two blocks from the hotel, he stopped short. Not twenty yards ahead, a familiar royal blue baseball cap. Before Allen could react, he was struck from behind.

"Get the hell out of my way!"

A bony fist was thrust in front of his face. Attached to it, a hunched-over woman attached to a shopping bag on wheels.

"Sorry."

"Think you own the damn sidewalk?"

"Guess not."

"You're damn right you don't! Lived here sixty years and look what I have to put up with!" Shaking her head, and mumbling expletives a sailor would have been proud of, the woman veered her cart off to one side and waddled away.

Allen followed a safe distance behind, searching the oncoming crowd. His speculative mind ran the gauntlet from pervert to ex-boyfriend to...

What? Current lover? Allen removed his glasses long enough to wipe them on his shirt. Peering through cleaner lenses, he managed to catch sight of the hat once again. He broke into a run, certain the man was about to enter Puerta East.

Narrowly escaping yet another collision with the shopping cart lady by side stepping at the last possible moment, he charged through the front doors into the lobby. Taking a moment to catch his breath, he scanned the few occupants. Not one baseball cap. Convinced he was experiencing a severe case of paranoia, he resisted the temptation of glancing through the glass door of the lounge on his way by.

He stalked toward the elevators, boarded an empty car, turned, looked toward the reception desk just as the clerk was being handed something. And the man handing it to him had on a bright blue ball cap. Allen slapped the emergency stop button. He counted to five, tapped the lobby button, continued counting to fifteen before the doors finally reopened.

Once again, the cap was nowhere to be seen. Allen ran out onto the sidewalk, whipped his head back and forth like a spectator viewing a tennis match, went back inside. This time, the lounge was not only suspect, it demanded access.

Other than the bartender and a man wearing a gray three-piece suit, the room was empty. Both had turned their heads when Allen barged through the door.

"Something wrong, Mr. Sanderson?"

Allen countered the bartender's concerned look with one of apology. "Uh...no, Jerry. Nothing's wrong."

Anxious to discuss the matter with Crystal, Allen returned to the elevator. If, in fact, the man was someone Crystal did not know, hotel security would be alerted. If the man showed up again, he would be forcibly detained. As Allen's dear departed mother was fond of saying, better safe than sorry.

He entered the apartment, heard low-volume concerto music emanating from the studio, realized his concern would have to wait. On the balcony he leaned over the railing. Movement below was blurry, even with prescription lenses. He would require high-powered binoculars to locate something as precise as a specific ball cap. And then what? Scale the side of the building like Spider Man? Comic strip hero he was not. Though his impending discussion with Crystal might well warrant super-human skills. Granted, the fact that the man showed up at the banquet hall and the hotel were far from coincidental. But that didn't mean Crystal was willing to talk about it. More than likely, a confrontation would incite her usual defense, escalate to denial, and finally, anger that Allen brought the matter to her attention in the first place.

When the doorbell rang, Allen blundered across the living room with deliberate intent. To hell with hotel security. If this man had such audacity as to come to the apartment, he deserved to be dealt with directly. Prepared for a confrontation less intimidating than one involving Crystal, Allen yanked his umbrella from its holder and threw open the door.

"Mr. Sanderson?"

Allen tucked the umbrella behind his back. "Yes? What is it?"

Having taken two steps back, the bewildered hotel employee pitched forward with outstretched hand. "Message for Miss Bennett."

* * *

Ryan entered the hotel lounge, borrowed pen and paper from the bartender, went to the reception desk just as Allen was entering the elevator the first time. He impressed upon the clerk the importance of hand delivering the message, went directly back to the lounge and into the men's room. By the time he relieved himself, the elevator car carrying Allen to the penthouse had reached its destination.

He deliberately chose a table near the door, one which afforded him an unobstructed view of the elevators. Other than the brief seconds it took to get a light draft from the bar, he did not relinquish his seat, not in the entire hour he was kept waiting. The time factor involved was inconvenient, irritating, but productive nonetheless. It gave him time to anticipate Crystal's appearance. Better still, prepare for it. If she was alone...

He could see himself tapping her on the shoulder, her slow-motion turn, and finally, her surprised look, fear and recognition coming together at the same time. They would go somewhere they could be alone, somewhere they could talk freely. Eventually she would confess everything, tears of regret staining her cheeks. And then...

He rose from his chair, expecting her to exit the open elevator car. Instead, an elderly woman appeared, a brass-capped wooden cane assisting her tedious journey across the lobby floor. He dropped back in his seat, watching as the doorman met the woman halfway, and then, holding onto a fragile arm, guided her out onto the sidewalk.

Ryan glared at closed elevator doors, silently cursing them. She had to have gotten the message by now. He took a sip of warm beer, then another. Less agitated, he resumed thoughts of how she would react, certain his wait was almost over.

* * *

Allen took a deep breath before barely rapping his knuckles on the studio door. Waiting to give Crystal the message hadn't made the task any more palatable.

"What is it?"

He opened the door several inches. The robe she had been wearing the last time he saw her had been exchanged for jeans and sweatshirt.

"This note came for you."

"Must not be too important." Crystal shifted her gaze long enough to check her watch. "The doorbell rang almost an hour ago."

"I didn't think you wanted to be disturbed."

Crystal slapped her pencil down on the drafting table. "So why are you?" She frantically erased a two-inch square, brushed the crumbs away with disgust. "Are you going to tell me, or just stand there like an idiot?"

Allen jabbed the piece of paper toward her. "Here."

"For God's sake, Allen. Just tell me what the damn thing says."

"Brighton wants you to bring the design plans to his office."

Crystal's eyebrows shot upward. "Now?"

"ASAP. Underlined twice."

"Great. I haven't even finished the preliminary sketches."

"How many are there?" Allen asked, stretching his neck to see.

Crystal bumped her stool out of her way and began rolling a single sheet she had been working on. "This is it."

"That's all you've gotten done?"

"It's not like I can whip these things out on an assembly line. It takes time."

"More the reason to get computerized. Do you have any idea what kind of graphics they're capable of these days?"

Crystal pushed past him and into the hall. "I told you before. I have no intention of sitting at a keyboard all day."

"It's the only way to compete," Allen continued, following her into the living room.

After a brief visual search, Crystal began probing the couch cushions. "Where the hell are my car keys?"

"Lisa might have placed them on the bedroom dresser next to mine."

"If I told that maid once, I've told her a hundred times. Leave my damn keys on the coffee table!"

Crystal returned from the bedroom with purse in hand, her hair still secured in a ponytail, her clothes unchanged."

"Did you find them?"

Crystal shook her head as she moved toward the front door.

"You're going out looking like that?" Ignored, Allen closed the gap between them. "Should I call you a cab?"

"It's already on its way."

Allen's bewildered expression brought a wry grin to Crystal's lips. "Believe it or not, there are some things I can handle without your assistance."

* * *

Ryan began to consider the possibility she wasn't even coming. What if she contacted Brighton, found he hadn't summoned her? Would she call the reception desk? Or worse, hotel security?

Convinced his ploy was about to turn on him, he left the lounge. He shunned his face to the security guard standing near the front entrance, dodged several fast-moving vehicles in order to access his own on the opposite side of the street, and then, sitting behind the wheel, glared at the hotel entry with open contempt.

Using the urban project's director to lure Crystal from her apartment seemed like the perfect plan. Phil Brighton rented office space in Tempe, in a neighborhood more associated with the financially deprived people he was assisting than the ones footing the bill. A neighborhood where blue jeans and baseball caps went unnoticed.

Ryan sat there a few minutes longer, his line of vision traveling from the front entrance to the penthouse and back again. Aware he could not simply will Crystal's arrival, he turned the key in the ignition. He negotiated a U-turn compliments of an arriving taxicab, drove slowly past the hotel with one final look of anticipation, and then immediately veered to the right-hand curb. He watched her in his rearview mirror, somewhat amused by her choice of clothing. If not for Miss Clairol, an adequate form of camouflage.

He waited until the cab was well on its way before merging with heavy midday traffic, kept pace with at least one other vehicle between them by carefully computing precision timed stoplights. When the taxi reached its destination, he tucked the Firebird in a curbside parking space. Heart pounding, mouth dry, he mounted the concrete steps of Brighton's office building two at a time.

The moment Crystal reached for the front door knob, a calloused hand fell upon her shoulder.

* * *

One three minute phone conversation. That's all it took to blow the lid off an otherwise peaceful day.

Federal Agent Wesley Harper unlocked his desk, removed a large brown envelope from the bottom drawer, positioned it on the blotter. The word CONFIDENTIAL, stamped in red ink, mocked him.

Not one casualty in the twelve years he was involved with the Witness Protection Program. Not one breach in security. Of course, previous relocations followed a strict course of events. Get the bad guy behind bars and then erase the witness who put him there. In this particular case, reverse strategy.

Harper leaned back in his chair, staring down at the envelope with pinched brow. From day one he had been uncomfortable with his decision. Then, as months passed without incident, he began to relax, certain the entire matter would come to a satisfactory conclusion. Today's phone call shocked him back to reality.

Just like her former identity, Crystal Bennett was no longer safe. Her whereabouts now compromised by an over-zealous civilian, the agency was forced to move her again.

The first time wasn't a problem. She had gone willingly, anxious to begin anew. Harper seriously doubted she would be as accommodating this go round. More importantly, the woman who entered the program had been reluctant to call attention to herself. Over the past several months she had become careless, feeling somewhat invincible blanketed in wealth and social power. Each contributed to her impending downfall. Both would incite mule-like resistance to any suggestion of change. It was Harper's ill fortune to convince her otherwise.

He repositioned himself to access the intercom. "Rose? Get me the list of southwest operatives. And book me the next available flight to Phoenix."

While he waited, Harper leafed through the pages of Crystal's file, more to combat his anxiety than familiarize himself with its content. Most of the eighty some odd pages were compiled during the two years since he was first assigned the case, careful documentation etched in his memory bank like Holy scriptures.

He no sooner returned the pages to the envelope when the door opened. Rose Porter, a woman who entered the agency under J. Edgar Hoover, adjusted her bifocals en route to his desk.

"I took the liberty of trimming the list," she stated, handing him a single sheet of paper.

Harper took note of his flight number and departure scribbled across the top. "This doesn't give me much time."

"It's that or wait another four hours." She stood there, nodding her affirmation each time he crossed off one of the six names, then shrugged when he indicated the two remaining. "Either one is acceptable."

Rather than randomly choose, Harper asked for their files. "Might as well do it the right way."

She returned in less than five minutes. "Anything else?"

"Call my wife. Ask her to pack the usual."

"You haven't eaten all day. Shall I arrange to have something sent over?"

Harper checked his watch. "Just have Cora throw a ham on rye in my suitcase. And some chips. I can chow down on the way to the airport."

He spent the next fifteen minutes trying to determine the best operative for the job. As Rose suggested, either man was acceptable. Aware his indecision was wasting precious time, he tossed one of the files into his briefcase along with the confidential envelope, snatched his suit jacket and vest from the coat rack alongside the door, and then offered Rose a solicitous look as he passed her desk.

"I know...I know..."

Thanks to a driver well accustomed to circumventing heavy traffic, Harper reached the boarding area with six minutes to spare. Once he was comfortably seated in first class, Scotch-and-Soda in hand, he allowed his mind to drift from Crystal Bennett the case file to Crystal Bennett the woman.

The thought of seeing her again both troubled and excited him. Mentally and physically. An entire volume of Freudian behavior, wrapped in shiny sensuality and tied with a hair-trigger ribbon. A dangerous yet tempting package of high-volume explosive.

So why not send a U.S. Marshall instead? Someone better equipped to handle this type of situation?

Harper immediately reprimanded himself for cowardice. He was more than capable of dealing with the likes of Crystal Bennett. Besides, the plane had already begun its journey down the runway.

Harper rolled his eyes toward the window. The fact that he was in love with Crystal presented a much more complicated dilemma. Objectivity.

* * *

They stood toe-to-toe, several seconds spent studying one another's face. Ryan broke the silence.

"We need to talk."

"I'm late for an appointment." Crystal turned away from him, was immediately spun back around.

"You don't have an appointment."

Crystal shrugged his hand from her arm. "What are you talking about?"

"I sent the message. It was the only way I could think of to get you alone." When Crystal abandoned the concrete stoop, Ryan broad jumped all four steps, positioning himself between her and the street. "Don't even think about it."

Crystal looked beyond his left shoulder. At the cross street, seated on the block retaining wall, several teenage boys. Certain she was in no immediate danger, she met Ryan's determined gaze. "What exactly do you want?"

"For starters, how about your side of the story?"

"What story is that?"

Ryan received a blank stare. He removed his baseball cap, scratched his head, snugged it back in place. "You act like you don't even know me."

"Of course I do. You're the idiot who crashed the awards banquet."

"I'm Ryan...Ryan Mosley. Corey's brother?"

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"You honestly don't remember?"

The teenage boys had relinquished the wall and were moving along the sidewalk. The group divided, three of them passing behind Ryan, the other two slowing down to take a good look at Crystal.

"Nice ass."

"You know what I would do with an ass like that?"

"Maybe you can show the nice lady."

Ryan tugged Crystal to his side. "Why don't you boys run along home?"

From behind him, "Oooh. Look at this. We got a genuine fuckin' hero here. Better say your prayers, amigo."

With one arm secured behind his back, Ryan dropped to one knee.

"Not so tough now, are you pretty boy?"

Crystal scanned both sides of the street. Not one passerby. When she returned her gaze, Ryan was holding a knife blade at the boy's throat.

"Your turn to say a prayer."

"Hey man. We were just havin' some fun."

Ryan shoved him away, addressed each of the others using the knife as a pointer. "Anyone else care for an attitude adjustment?"

A collective shaking of heads.

"Good. Now get the hell out of here!"

Ryan waited until they were well on their way before turning back to Crystal.

"Maybe we should take this someplace private."

Crystal eyed a six-inch stainless blade. "You've got to be kidding."

Ryan looked down at his hand. "Oh. Sorry." He raised his pant leg, returned the knife to his boot sheath.

"Apparently talking isn't the only thing you had in mind."

Ryan's eyes widened. "You think I came here intending to harm you?"

"Didn't you?"

"Of course not. I just need to know the truth about my brother."

"So we're back to square one."

"Come on, Sarah. Talk to me. Tell me what really happened that night."

"Sarah? That explains it. You have me confused with' someone else."

Scrutinizing familiar features, Ryan re-evaluated the situation. "If you're really serious — if this isn't just some act — there's only one feasible explanation. Amnesia."

Crystal shook her head. "Let me assure you, not only is my memory intact, it's reinforced by total recall."

Her taxi, scheduled to return in ten minutes, came to a sliding halt.

Crystal grinned as she stepped off the curb. "Talk about timing." She hopped in the back seat with her hand on the arm rest, intending to quickly shut the door. Ryan had taken hold of the handle.

"This isn't over."

"As far as I'm concerned it is." To the driver, "Get me out of here. Now!"

The man nodded, stomping his foot on the accelerator. The door, wrenched from Ryan's grasp, slammed shut.

Ryan stood there until the cab was out of sight. Returning to his car, he took one last look over his shoulder.

"This isn't over, Sarah. Not by a long shot."

* * *

Agent Doyle viewed the entire confrontation through a 44mm scope. When the taxi drove away, he briefly considered the ramification of following the Firebird instead. He repositioned the lens, adjusted it in an attempt to read the license plate, caught nothing more than a blur of red paint in the cross hairs.

He placed the scope on the seat, wormed a stick of gum from his shirt pocket. He slowly peeled the wrapper, tossed it to the passenger side carpet where it joined several others. An additional player. Just what he didn't need right now. Especially someone he knew nothing about.

Returning to Puerta East, he went directly to the lounge, saw that the same bartender was on duty.

"Hey, Jerry. I thought your shift ended at four."

A light draft was pulled and then placed on the bar.

"Roy's home in bed. I'm just waiting for our relief man to get here."

Doyle handed him a ten, told him to keep the change. "Roy seemed pretty healthy last night."

"If you knew his nympho girlfriend you'd understand. Bedridden takes on a whole new meaning."

Doyle ran his finger along the rim of his glass. "That guy that was in here earlier today? The one with the blue baseball cap? Do you know him?"

"Never saw him before. Why? Did he look familiar?"

"A little."

"That was my reaction when I first saw him. What do you say? Steve McQueen with dark hair?"

Doyle shrugged. "Could be."

"Yeah. That's what I'm thinking."

Jerry grabbed a damp towel from below the counter, began wiping his way down the length of the bar, paused when he was opposite the table where two unescorted women were seated.

"So. What do you lovely ladies do for a living?"

Doyle thought, If you have to ask, you sure as hell aren't man enough to handle the ride.

He tuned out the ensuing repartee, focused on what really mattered. Thanks to a Steve McQueen look-a-like, his first opportunity to catch Crystal alone went sour. Had it worked out the way he intended when he first followed her, Bennett would be on her way to Miami instead of tucked away in some inaccessible penthouse apartment.

Doyle removed his gum, pressed it to the bottom edge of the bar, took out a fresh stick.

Harper was already on his way. The only thing left to do was wait until he arrived. And hope Randy Adler was hungry enough to accept the dangling ten-thousand-dollar carrot.

Before Harper made Crystal Bennett disappear.

* * *

The sun had barely slid up over the horizon when Crystal parked her Ferrari behind the horse barn.

Wearing designer jeans and a form-fitting silk blouse, its ends tied in a loose knot just below her breasts, she planted black leather boots onto sandy soil. She stood there several minutes, her eyes viewing a scene of desert cactus and creosote bushes, her mind envisioning yet another.

The riding stable frequented in her youth was surrounded by towering leaf-burdened trees, and rich grass-covered earth damp with early morning dew. Experiencing an unfamiliar stab of melancholy, Crystal made her way to the front of the barn.

The sight of a sleek, sixteen-hand buckskin brought an instant smile. "How's he feeling today, Ross?" Crystal slid one hand down a velvet neck, offering a sugar cube with the other.

"Frisky as usual, Miss Bennett." He finished tightening the cinch, removed leather reins from the hitching rail and handed them over. "How long will you be gone?"

Crystal jabbed the toe of her boot into the stirrup. "On a day like this? I might never come back."

Anxious, the gelding began pawing the ground. Crystal held him back the first fifty yards, and then, after experiencing a few seconds of spirited crow-hops, released him into a steady lope.

The soothing rhythm of hooves meeting hard-packed ground brought welcome solitude. She was a child again, long silken hair whipping her cheeks, eyes wet from the sting of crisp mountain air. She pressed her knees together, urging the gelding on. Faster and faster they sped, the city, the ills of civilization left behind.

Destination? A place where childhood dreams could still come true. More importantly, a sanctuary where threats did not exist.

The gelding lowered his head, nostrils flared, exhilarated grunts of breath timed to the beat of his hooves. In the breeze, the combined fragrance of cactus blooms and sweat-stained leather. Crystal tipped her own head as well, drawing mouthfuls of air through parted lips. Somewhere just ahead, freedom.

Off to her right, another rider was fast approaching from the south.

Crystal eased back on the reins in order to negotiate a lesser traveled right-hand path, spotted the small cloud of dust, attempted to change the gelding's course in mid stride. He lost his rhythm, stumbled, brushed his nose to the ground as if performing a circus bow. Crystal pitched back in the saddle, allowing him to regain his balance. Upright, he spun to the left, carrying out the last command given. Too late to escape the intruder.

"Good morning!"

Crystal ignored the greeting.

"Mind if I tag along?"

Again, no response.

Randy Adler maneuvered a blood-bay thoroughbred alongside. "What's your

hurry?"

Crystal veered the buckskin off the trail and cut between several bushes, forcing Randy to fall back.

Within seconds, he was beside her again. "Might as well accept the inevitable," he said, patting his mount's neck. "Pepper here used to be a race horse."

"Apparently, becoming Clair Morgan's plaything has numbed your sensibility."

"Speaking of playthings, where's the ever-watchful fiancé?"

"Allen hates horses." Then, spoken with emphasis, "Besides, I prefer riding alone."

Randy shifted his gaze to the front of her blouse. Both nipples were clearly defined against moist fabric, summoning an erection he could not easily attain with Clair.

"Take a good hard look. It's the last one you'll get today." She spurred the buckskin into a run, outdistancing Randy the first quarter mile only to be overtaken again.

He cut in front of her, brought both horses to a halt, then dropped to the ground. "I told you it was a waste of time," he said, securing her reins.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"You know, it wouldn't hurt to come down off the ivory tower once in a while."

Crystal swung her leg over the saddle horn and slid down beside him. "I thought lonely old women were more your speed."

"They are. I just need a change of scenery now and then."

Horses in tow, they began walking side by side.

"I'm surprised Clair let you out of her sight. What did you do? Sedate her?"

"Actually I find it more effective to simply bind her ankles and wrists whenever I choose to roam."

"Sounds like something Clair would enjoy more if you were there."

Randy grimaced. "Thanks. That particular image is going to cost me several nights' sleep."

"So you're only in it for the money."

"Can't con another con artist."

Crystal came to an abrupt stop. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You can't tell me you're really in love with a dishrag like Allen."

Crystal resumed their walk. "Unlike that burned-out hag of yours, Allen has several redeeming qualities."

"Right. And they're all prefaced with a dollar sign."

"I don't need Allen's money."

"Well, he can't be very good in bed. Nerds have too many emotional hang-ups." Randy turned his head. "No comment?"

"It's none of your business."

"There you go again. Right back to that ivory tower." Crystal's attempt to remount was thwarted by a determined grasp on her wrist. "I'm guessing I'm not the only one who needs a change of scenery."

Turned completely around, Crystal glared with open contempt. "You're a presumptuous ass, you know that?" When he kissed her, his tongue desperately seeking hers, she pulled back and slapped his face. She hopped in the saddle, spun the buckskin around, and then headed toward the barn at a dead run.

"Was it something I said?"

By the time Randy caught up, Crystal was climbing into the Ferrari. He grabbed hold of the door handle just in time. "Hey. Don't be angry. I was merely swept away by your extraordinary beauty."

"Give me a break, Randy." She finished buckling her seat belt, freeing the door from his grasp at the same time.

"I'm serious," he said, placing his left hand over his heart. "You take my breath away."

Crystal began to laugh. "If this is your idea of a turn-on, you need to reconsider your approach. It's lousy."

"Tell you what. Let me buy you lunch. It'll give you the opportunity to suggest improvements to my so-called approach."

Crystal shook her head. "I'll say one thing. You're persistent."

"Does that mean we're on?"

"One condition. I'll buy my own lunch. I wouldn't want you to compromise your sterling reputation."

Randy went to the opposite door, realized Crystal had repositioned herself, quickly returned to the driver's side. "I'll bet this baby can really perform," he said, rubbing both hands on the steering wheel.

"Knock yourself out."

Once they were clear of the barn, Randy looked over with a grin. "Hang on, sweetheart. You're about to take the ride of your life."

* * *

Allen was having lunch with a client when Randy and Crystal entered the Puerta South dining room. With his back to the doorway, he might never have noticed them if his client hadn't been staring so intently. Allen pivoted his chair just as they were being seated at a table near the window. He resumed his former position, misinterpreted his client's scowl, indicated Crystal with a toss of his head.

"Crystal Bennett. This year's humanitarian. You might have seen her picture in the paper recently."

"Striking young woman."

Allen cleared his throat. "Yes...very."

"That young man she's with. Do you know him?"

Allen poked his glasses farther back on his nose. Know him? Oh, certainly. Makes his living as a paid escort. And by the way, that's my fiancé...

"Mr. Sanderson? Are you all right? You look a little pale."

"What? Oh...yes. I'm fine."

"I was asking if you happen to know the man she's with."

"Not personally. Why?"

The client shrugged. "It's not really important. Now, shall we get back to business?"

* * *

Mahoney was sitting at Halloran's desk when he entered.

"Rehearsing for my job?"

Mahoney relinquished his position, moved to the front of the desk.

"You won't believe the phone call I just got. I mean, *you* just got."

Halloran eased into the chair Mahoney had vacated. "I take it back. Apparently, you're already doing my job."

"It was Ryan."

"Where is he?"

"Phoenix, Arizona."

"What the hell is he doing there?"

"Beats me."

Halloran tucked a cigarette at the corner of his mouth. He patted down both breast pockets, offered a nod of thanks when Mahoney tossed him a pack of matches. Once the cigarette was lit, Halloran examined the matchbook cover.

"This is the last place Corey was seen alive. I thought you said it was a waste of time."

"I figured it couldn't hurt to check, you know, since you're so hell bent on finding out what happened that night."

When Mahoney refused the matches, Halloran tucked them in his shirt pocket. "Did you come up with anything?"

"Same old same old. Corey tied one on. Sarah threw the usual hissy fit."

"They argued?"

Mahoney nodded, straddled the extra chair. "I ran into Jack while I was there. Turns out he was in the bar that night."

"And?"

"Jack claims Sarah was good and angry. Actually took a swing at Corey when he cozied up to some other gal."

"That doesn't sound like Sarah."

"Hey. There's only so much abuse a person can take, you know?"

"Did Sarah and Corey leave together?"

"Jack's a little hazy on that note. Sarah did exit the front door ahead of Corey, but how much time passed before Corey left isn't quite clear."

"So no one actually saw them drive away?"

"Nope. When they didn't come back into the bar, Jack just assumed they headed home."

Halloran took several drags from his cigarette. "What did Ryan have to say?"

"Wanted to know if Sarah's body had been found."

"He called long distance for that?"

"Yeah, but that's not the strange part. When I told him we still hadn't found her, he seemed, I don't know, relieved."

"As if there was no reason we should have located her?"

"Something like that."

"You think Ryan had enough time to check out Corey's truck before you and I reached the impound yard?"

"I suppose so. Why?"

"Just a hunch. Did you find out where Ryan was staying?"

"I asked, but he wouldn't say."

Halloran reflected on several possibilities. "Who's that detective you met in Great Falls last year?"

"The one from Tucson?"

Halloran nodded.

"Let's see. Bill something. Bill... Bill... Ames, I think. I've got his phone number at the house. Said if I ever made it down his way I should look him up."

"Call him. See if he can locate Ryan."

"Tomorrow soon enough?"

"Today, Roger. ASAP."

Mahoney headed for the door.

"And Roger?"

"Yeah, Chief? I mean, Sheriff?"

"Don't ever use my desk again."

* * *

Over coffee, Randy commented on Crystal's riding ability. "And here I always assumed you were a city gal."

"One has nothing to do with the other. You're a damn good rider and you hail from Cleveland."

"I wasn't aware you knew so much about me. I'm flattered."

"Don't be. I'm merely repeating something Clair mentioned when the two of you first got together. You know, the usual chitchat regarding her latest acquisition." Randy leaned over with interest. "What sort of chitchat?"

"Basically, the fact that you were the best lover she ever had."

"Did you believe her?"

"Absolutely. But then, considering the source, anything with male genitals would suffice."

Randy's lips formed a wry grin. "I guess I had that one coming."

"Just out of curiosity, why do you waste your time on old women? I get the impression you've got a lot more going for you than looks."

"Three reasons. Money, money, and money."

Crystal settled back in her chair. "There's a great deal more to life than that."

"Yeah? Like what? A nagging wife and two-point-six snot-nosed kids?"

"When you put it that way, I'd say you're better off being a gold digger."

"What about you?"

Crystal's first instinct was to lie, to report that she was too wrapped up in her career to entertain having a family. Instead, she told him the truth. "I'm selfish, just like you."

"I suppose studying architecture was pretty demanding. Not much time for social endeavors."

Crystal fingered the lip of her coffee cup. "Actually, I majored in psychology. Kind of a tribute to my father's belief I was the perfect candidate for counseling troubled souls."

"You didn't agree?"

Crystal shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think I ever really decided one way or the other."

"I'm sure your dad is just as pleased with your chosen career."

"I have no way of knowing that either. He died when I was just a kid."

Randy reached over and took her hand. "Sorry."

"It was a long time ago," she said, slipping from his grasp. "Life goes on."

"Psychology major to major designer. Quite the transition."

"It didn't happen overnight. Life managed to drag me in all sorts of directions." Then, with direct eye contact, "One not so different from your expertise."

Randy's eyebrows shot up. "You're kidding, right?"

"Did I shock you?"

"Not entirely. But I'm sure some of Allen's country club cronies might be."

"Like Clair Morgan?"

"Definitely Clair Morgan."

After a pause, Randy asked why she became engaged.

"I guess I was seeking some sort of security. The kind my father used to provide."

"You don't intend to marry him, do you?"

Again, Crystal chose the truth. "No. It wouldn't be fair to either one of us."

"What would it take to make you happy?"

"You mean fireworks flashing, stars shooting through the sky kind of happiness?"

Randy nodded.

"I'm not sure. I guess it would start with freedom. Complete, unadulterated freedom. No deadlines to meet, no one asking where you've been all day. No commitment whatsoever."

"When you find it, let me know. I'd give just about anything to rid myself of Clair's shackles."

"Then do it. Just walk away."

Randy emitted a slight grunt. "Believe me, I would if I could. Clair has this insatiable appetite, capable of consuming everything in her path."

"That's pretty much the way Allen described her."

"Trust me, running for one's life is the only viable alternative."

"So what's stopping you?"

"Diminished financial capability. If I don't gather the funds needed to renew my lease, I'm forced to move in with Clair. And that's something I wouldn't wish for my worse enemy."

Crystal sighed wearily. "I guess we all have to make compromises, no matter how distasteful they might be."

"Speaking from personal experience?"

"I've done my share of groveling."

Randy spent several seconds evaluating her remark. "You know, Crystal, if our lives were somehow different, less complicated, we might actually become friends."

"You think so?"

"We're very much alike, you and I. Kindred spirits if you will."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"Really? There isn't a degree of role-playing in your life as well?"

"Haven't you heard? I'm the classic bitch. B.I.T.C.H. Right down to the core. No acting required."

"A superficial analogy which merely confirms my belief. Never, never judge a book by its cover."

"Now there's a cliché that could access several chapters of soul-searching ."

"Yours or mine?"

"One in the same. We're kindred spirits, remember?"

"Fine. Give it your best shot."

Crystal rose to her feet, smiled. "That's the thing about being a former psychology major. I'm much more insightful when my subjects are horizontal."

* * *

Allen first thought he must be hallucinating. Faded blue jeans, western shirt, scuffed cowboy boots. And a royal blue baseball cap.

He and his client had left the dining room shortly after Crystal arrived. They parted company in front of the hotel, the client offering a quick handshake before crossing four lanes of noon hour traffic, Allen remaining on the sidewalk after handing the valet attendant his ticket. He watched the green sedan carry his client to the first stoplight, shifted his line of vision when it passed the intersection heading north. A lone figure, characteristic details distorted by rising heat, moved purposefully along the concrete walk.

Allen squinted both eyes, assured himself it was in fact the same man, stepped in front of him when he reached the hotel entrance. He raised his arm, a border guard halting a vehicle for inspection.

"Why are you following my fiancé?"

"It's personal."

Allen mirrored Ryan's sidestep.

"What are you? An obsessed fan or something?"

"Hardly. I'm her brother-in-law."

"Crystal doesn't have a sister," Allen said, drawing the more logical conclusion.

"My brother's wife."

Allen shook his head. "That's not possible. Crystal's never been married."

"You're absolutely sure about that?"

"Well...no. I mean, she doesn't talk much about her past."

"No doubt."

Allen's Porsche eased to the curb. The attendant hopped out, narrowed his eyes at Ryan as he came around the front of the car.

"Should I call security, Mr. Sanderson?"

"That won't be necessary. Will it?"

Ryan shrugged. "That depends."

"On what?"

"Whether or not you're interested in hearing the truth about your bride-to-be."

Allen handed the attendant a twenty-dollar-bill. "I'd prefer Miss Bennett doesn't know about this." He motioned Ryan to the passenger door. "Get in."

Ryan watched the attendant enter the hotel. Confiding in Allen Sanderson, or anyone else for that matter, wasn't part of the plan. Isn't that why he left Montana under a veil of secrecy? What better way to deal with Sarah's betrayal than one on one?

"Are you coming or not?"

Ryan pivoted his head. Allen was poised halfway, one foot in the driver's compartment, the other still on pavement awkwardly supporting his bent-over stance.

Ryan moved to the passenger side, took one last look at the hotel entrance before climbing in.

"I hope you have a strong heart. The facts I'm about to reveal about the woman you know as Crystal Bennett are far from flattering."

"Believe me. There's nothing you could say that would alter my opinion of her." Ryan flashed a knowing grin. "We'll see about that, won't we?"

* * *

Randy propped himself on one elbow.

"I thought I was supposed to give *you* the ride of your life."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

Randy brushed aside the satin sheet. He traced a line from her neck down between her legs and back again. "I had no idea it could be this good."

"It's late. I really should go."

Randy flopped back against the pillows, memorizing her movements as she plucked each piece of clothing from the floor and put it on.

"When will I see you again?"

Crystal paused in the doorway. "I thought you understood. This was a one-shot deal."

Still naked, Randy followed her to the front door. "You can't do this. Not after what just happened."

"What happened, Randy, was a random nooner between friends."

"You're wrong. It was more than that. It was...it was..."

Crystal stepped out into the hall. "Exactly."

Randy fell against the closed door, listening to her departing footsteps, then the sound of the elevator making its descent. He walked back to the bedroom and collapsed on the mattress. How could she do this? How could she make him feel so much and then simply walk away? He turned his face to the pillow that had cradled her head. He could still smell her perfume. And the feel of her cool soft skin lingered on his palms. He wiped them on the sheet, flopped over on his back. She had used him, plain and simple.

The way you use Clair?

Randy clarified his observation. It wasn't the same. He wasn't using Clair. He was servicing her. Slowly, anger gave way to laughter. It came in short fits at first, then finally uncontrolled hysteria. It stopped as suddenly as a light being switched off.

He moved off the bed, snatched his pants from the floor, wrenched his wallet from the back pocket. The bar napkin.

If you want to make twice what you need...

He could renew his lease and still have enough leeway to find a new benefactor. Someone less repulsive than Clair. And possibly even more generous.

As he began to dress, his euphoria was clouded by one simple question. What kind of job pays ten grand?

* * *

Sonny Delano fingered the strand of braided gold around his neck. "Have you found her?"

A short, muscular man (casually clad in khakis, white polo shirt, and white loafers) closed the statement door behind him. "Yes."

Sonny turned from the porthole, leveling black Sicilian eyes. "Where is she, Rocko?"

"Phoenix."

"When can I expect delivery?"

"It might take a while."

"And why is that?" The words were spoken casually, as though the two men were sharing idle, everyday conversation. The eyes held the true intent.

"Harper showed up."

"Remove him." Again, conversational inflection.

Rocko thought to object, turned to leave instead.

"Rocko...?"

A large, fleshy hand clenched the door knob.

"...get the job done."

* * *

Allen drove aimlessly for over two hours. The story told to him not only lacked credibility, it screamed of sheer fabrication.

"Mr. Mosley. You said you had facts to reveal. So far all I've heard is speculation."

Allen had pulled in behind Ryan's Firebird, shut down the engine after several seconds of indecisiveness.

"Okay. Maybe I don't have hard evidence. But you have to admit, it's the only logical scenario."

Allen cast astonished eyes toward his companion. "What? That Crystal killed your brother with deliberate forethought? Sorry. I'm not buying it."

"I'm telling you. There's no way Sarah could have survived that fall. And that means only one thing. She wasn't in the truck to begin with."

"That's another thing. What makes you so sure Crystal and Sarah are the same person? They say everyone has a twin..."

"Sarah was ten the first time I laid eyes on her. I can still see her sitting on my parents' couch, legs dangling, hair tied in a pony tail with a pink ribbon, hands folded demurely on her lap. So angelic it took my breath away."

"What has that got to do with anything?"

"Nothing, I suppose. Or maybe everything. See, here's this beautiful little angel, so sweet, so innocent. I'm supposed to be meeting this friend of mine, Jack, to go shoot some pool, and I'm late, but I can't bring myself to leave just yet. I have to talk to her. I mean, I *have* to. I ask if she's waiting for Corey. Stupid question, since he's the only kid her age living in my parents' house, but I had to say something. Anyway, she bats these long lashes and gives me a look. Not some mischievous little ten-year-old look, but a full-blown seductive once over. Like down inside this innocent girl is a mature, sexy, willful woman. One that knows exactly what she's doing."

Allen shifted his weight. "I still don't see the connection."

Ryan matched his stony gaze. "You've seen that look, haven't you?"

"In several women I've known. It's a natural sensuality."

"How many ten-year-old girls know how to use it?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Well, I do."

"And that's what you're basing your belief on? Sarah possessed a woman's sensuality, ergo Crystal and she are one in the same?"

"Look, I don't care if you think I'm one brick shy of a load. I know who Crystal really is. And whether she admits it or not, I'm going to see that she pays for Corey's death."

Ryan had no sooner thrown open the door when Allen latched onto his left arm.

"Wait. What do you intend to do?"

"I'm not sure. I guess it hinges on how Sarah...Crystal...reacts to all of this."

"Have you considered the possibility she has amnesia? That she really doesn't know who you are?"

"It's crossed my mind. But just barely."

Allen thought about it a moment. "What would it take to get you to drop this whole thing?"

"What?"

Allen cleared his throat. "I said, what would it take for you to forget this? To leave Crystal alone?"

"You think this is a scheme to extort money?"

"I'll write you a check. Leave the amount blank. Six figures should do it, don't you think?"

Ryan had slid to the curb shaking his head. "I feel sorry for you. Your whole world is crashing down around you and all you can think about is buying your way out."

Allen watched Ryan drive away, started to do the same, got out and walked across the street instead. He went to the dining room, saw that Crystal had already left, turned and walked back to his car.

In the apartment, he sat down at his computer. Immediately, the last words he typed came to mind.

Is Crystal frigid or what?

Allen closed his eyes. When he opened them again, four different words appeared.

Is Crystal a killer?

Allen blinked several times. The screen was still blank, the words merely in his mind. He reached for his inhaler. He didn't want to think about Crystal — not the possibility she wasn't who she said she was or the overly friendly lunch she shared with Randy. And he certainly didn't want to think about what she might be doing at this very moment.

He went to her studio. The plans were lying on the drafting table, still neatly rolled from the day before. He returned to the den, glared at the blue screen, daring it to say something. No hidden messages. He took a deep breath, accessed his downtown office files, diminished further thoughts of Crystal by creating an investment package for his latest client.

He was still sitting there when Crystal finally came home.

* * *

Crystal pounded her fist on the dash. "Dammit, Wes! You can't do this to me again!"

Harper stared past the windshield of his rental car. Other than a father and son launching a miniature schooner onto the manmade lake, the park was deserted. Even so, Harper insisted the windows remain closed.

"Be reasonable, Crystal. It's not like you have an alternative."

"Oh, trust me. I've got plenty of alternatives. You're the one in a bind."

Harper turned to look at her. Her face was flushed, the only visible sign of her anger. She was still in riding attire, hands folded demurely on her lap. She appeared to be watching the father and son, but Harper suspected her mind was in a much more complicated place and time.

"This whole thing will be over in six months. A year, tops."

"That's what you said two years ago. And here we are, right back where we started."

"Look, I know this has been rough on you..."

"Spare me another sermon, Wes. You can't begin to imagine what it's been like."

Several minutes of silence allowed private thoughts. Harper recalling the time he and Crystal spent sequestered in a government sanctioned hotel suite. Crystal trying to imagine what it would be like to start her life over again.

She touched his arm, unaware of the slight tremor it solicited.

"What's the worse that could happen?"

"Truthfully?" Harper fixated on the tiny sailboat as it moved farther away, gliding gracefully across its mock ocean. "You could be killed."

"In some respects, I'm already dead."

Harper repositioned his gaze, his eyes moist. "I swear to God, Crystal, I'd give my right arm to make this whole mess disappear."

"Hey. Don't go soft on me now." She combed the hair alongside his ear with her fingertips. "I need you."

"Don't make me beg, Crystal. I couldn't bare it if anything happened to you." Crystal flopped back against the passenger door. "What do you want from me? For the past three years I've been trapped in someone else's body. A cage with no door. If I run now, who's to say it's going to be the last time?"

"It will be. I promise."

Crystal shook her head, her smile condescending. "We both know that's one promise you can't possibly keep."

"Have I ever let you down before?"

Crystal untied her ponytail ribbon and shook her hair down around her shoulders. "It doesn't matter. I can't keep doing this. It's reached the point where I need to show my real face."

"You will. As soon as Sonny Delano is no longer a threat."

"So until then your advice to me is that I remain in hiding. Come on, Wes. I thought you were my friend."

Harper watched the sailboat make a slick u-turn, responding to the remote the boy held in his hand. "I am your friend. That's why I'm here."

"Then don't ask me to start over. Find some other way."

"There *is* no other way."

Crystal's voice came back throaty, forceful. "You could kill Sonny."

Harper viewed her profile. She was staring straight ahead, her face chiseled in stone.

"I'm sure there are dozens of men who would crawl through fire to do your bidding. I'm not one of them."

Crystal's eyes found his. "Are you sure about that?" She quickly unbuttoned her blouse, cradled one of her breasts with her palm. "I know how much you want me."

He reached over, tugged the fabric back in place. "You never quit, do you?"

"Never know when you might change your mind."

"Nothing's different since we last spoke. The rules are the same."

"Your rules suck. They always have." She buttoned her blouse, cast her gaze toward the father and son. "With Sonny gone, I'd have no reason to stay in hiding."

"You can't possibly be that naive. The organization would still see you as a threat."

Crystal moved over and placed her head on his shoulder. "It's not the mob I'm afraid of. It's losing my true identity."

Harper draped his arm around her shoulders. "What am I going to do with you, girl?"

"Take me away, Wes," she said softly, her eyes on the sailboat. "Take me far, far away."

Harper drew in his breath. The time they spent together, when Crystal was first placed in protective custody, had been the most difficult. And the most tempting. Confined with someone like Crystal day and night could wear down any man's defenses. And Harper was no exception. But they had never slept together. Close, but no cigar. Somehow, he had found the strength to resist. Currently, he wasn't sure he wanted to.

"You need to make a decision, Crystal. And soon."

Still holding on to her, he started the engine with his left hand, dropped the gear lever in reverse, and then backed slowly out of the parking space.

For several miles, Crystal remained beside him, comforted by his touch. Eventually, she slid across the seat and stared out the passenger window, not really seeing.

At Harper's motel, he asked her again.

"I'll think about it, Wes. Really I will."

"There might not be time to think about it. Sonny might already know where you are."

.Crystal nodded, walked over to her Ferrari, gave him a quick wave and a smile before driving off.

Harper remained in his car. It sounded so easy. Remove Sonny and Crystal could go on about her life. Sure, one of Delano's men might seek retribution, someone like Rocko, but even that possibility was minimal. The natural order would dictate replacing their leader as quickly as possible, not scattering about on some wild goose chase. Sooner or later, Crystal Bennett would be forgotten. And free of government protection as well.

Harper shook his head. Was he playing by the rules? Or merely using them to benefit his own desires? Granted, he had no intention of running off with Crystal Bennett (or whatever other identity she might assume), but accepting the fact that she no longer needed him...

Finally, Harper went to his room. Standing at the door, he paused. He removed his .38, ducked inside. In shooter's stance, he pivoted his arm from one side of the room to the other. Nothing. Then the bathroom door swung open.

Harper leveled his gun chest high.

* * *

Clair dialed the number with trembling hand. When Allen answered, she almost hung up the phone. Almost.

"Clair. Hang on a second. I just need to save this prospectus I've been working on."

Clair began tapping a rose-colored fingernail on the arm of her chair.

"Okay. All set. What can I do for you? Another donation for the homeless shelter perhaps?"

"Well, yes, that would be lovely, of course."

"Consider it done."

"Allen. What I called about...what I wanted to ask you is...well, of a personal nature."

Allen removed his glasses, placed them alongside the keyboard next to his inhaler. "I'm listening."

"It seems Randy and Crystal had lunch together. Today. At one of your hotels. Puerta South?"

"What about it?"

"You knew?"

"Yes."

"Oh. I see."

The ensuing silence prompted Allen's impatience.

"Is that it?"

"Actually, it's not."

"Get to the point, Clair."

Clair rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "Pardon me for trying to be sensitive."

"Since when?"

"Fine. Why don't I just lay it out for you? According to a friend, Crystal was behaving, oh, how shall I put this? Seductive."

"In a crowded dining room in broad daylight? Is your friend severely nearsighted or simply addled?"

"No need to be insulting. I'm merely trying to keep you informed."

"Did it ever occur to you I might not care to hear this?"

"Always the turtle, eh Allen?"

"Now who's being insulting?"

"Look. I'm not trying to start anything. I just want your assurance that today's event won't repeat itself."

Allen closed his eyes. If Clair knew how little control he had over Crystal's comings and goings, she would never have placed the call in the first place. "What is it you expect me to do? Confine Crystal to her room?"

"I'm merely suggesting you talk to her. Make her understand that this kind of behavior sheds uncomplimentary light on everyone involved."

"Specifically, you."

"You're not the least bit concerned? About where they are right now? For Heaven's sake, Allen, lunch ended hours ago."

Allen placed his hand over his inhaler. "What are you suggesting, Clair? That Crystal and Randy are sharing a bed in some no-tell motel?"

"She's not at home, is she?"

"As a matter of fact, she just walked in."

"Talk to her, Allen. Put her on a goddamn leash if you have to!"

The phone went dead.

"Who was that?" Crystal asked from the open doorway.

"Clair Morgan."

"Oh."

Allen followed her to the couch. "Where have you been?"

"Riding. Can't you tell?"

Allen removed the boot from her outstretched leg, placed it on the floor beneath the coffee table.

"All day? It was still dark when you left."

"I had some errands to run." Crystal plopped her right boot on his lap. Allen put it next to the other.

"You never mentioned how your meeting with Brighton turned out."

"Fine. Likes what I'm doing so far. Blah, blah."

"Did you ask him why he wanted to see the plans at such an early stage?"

"There were some changes that needed to be made. He wanted to make sure it was handled before I got too far along."

"How considerate."

"Is something wrong?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"You seem a little testy. Asthma acting up?"

"A little." After a brief silence, "Clair told me you had lunch with Randy Adler today."

"So that's it."

"That's what?"

"The old hag laid this big concern all over you."

"Not really. Though I must admit, I never realized you and Randy were anything more than passing acquaintance."

"I run into him at the stable now and then."

"Is this the first time he's bought you lunch?"

"Actually, it was the other way around. I paid the bill."

"That's it? Just lunch?"

Crystal's head pivoted, her eyes glazed. "What's your point?"

Allen shrugged his indifference. "Just curious."

"Curious, my ass. If you think I'm cheating, why don't you just come out and ask?"

"Are you?"

Crystal's laugh was bittersweet. "Oh, you bet. After lunch, we checked into a sleazy motel and engaged in mad, passionate, elicited sex. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Her outburst left Allen unprepared. And defenseless. "I'm sorry. It's just that after that guy in the baseball cap showed up here..."

Crystal moved to the edge of the couch. "What do you mean he showed up here?"

"Well, not here exactly. He was in the lobby. I thought it was much too coincidental, him being at the banquet hall *and* your hotel."

"For Christ's sake, Allen. You think I've got men stashed all over this city?" She got up, moved to the kitchen. "What's going on inside your head?"

Allen straddled a stool at the breakfast nook. "That's not what I meant."

Crystal poured herself some coffee, brandished the pot. "You want some?"

Allen shook his head. He didn't want coffee. He merely wanted Crystal to say something — anything — that would put an end to his suspicions.

"I need to know, Crystal. Have you ever seen that man before?"

Seeing the look of misery on Allen's face removed some of the wind from her defensive sails.

"What purpose would I have in lying to you?"

"Then you really don't know who he is?"

"No. I really don't."

Crystal came around to his side of the counter.

"Look Allen. For all I know he's some demented fan with a fatal attraction complex. Where Randy is concerned, we shared an innocent meal in a public dining room. Okay?"

"I'm sorry," he said again, his voice weak. "It's just that I love you so damn much. I don't want to lose you."

Crystal set her cup down, placing her palms on either side of his face. "You're not going to lose me." When he didn't respond to her kiss, she spread his legs with her knee and kissed him again.

Allen remained motionless. They had played this game too many times before.

"Not in the mood?"

She stepped back, shrugged her blouse from her shoulders, then quickly shed her jeans. Standing before him naked, she said, "We can do this in the bedroom if you prefer."

Allen still didn't react.

On her knees, she unzipped his pants. Allen grabbed her wrist.

"I don't think..."

Crystal smiled up at him. "I told you. Don't think. It doesn't become you."

* * *

Doyle, poised in the bathroom doorway, casually zipped his fly.

"Jees, Harper. Put that thing away before you hurt someone."

Harper slid the .38 into his shoulder harness, mentally evaluating the operative he chose. Agent Pearse Doyle. The kind of man who operated most efficiently with minimal or no supervision. Whether or not that particular trait should be considered an asset was currently being reconsidered.

"Have you made contact?"

"We did lunch."

"And?"

"And what? It's a start."

Doyle indicated the open door, waited until Harper kicked it shut before crossing the bathroom threshold.

"What sort of guy is Sanderson?"

"You want my personal opinion?"

Harper didn't respond.

"He's not what I expected, that's for sure. Reminds me of Clark Kent. Mild

mannered. Soft spoken. Doesn't have a clue what's going on. Probably just as well. He doesn't have a Superman outfit under his suit."

Doyle perched on the edge of the mattress. Harper took the upholstered chair alongside.

"Don't let your guard down. The quiet ones are usually the most troublesome."

Doyle peeled open a stick of spearmint gum, folded it against the roof of his mouth.

"If I'm going to spend more time with him, we'll need something more substantial than bogus investments."

"What about personal activities?"

"He jogs occasionally, but there's no way of knowing when."

"I understand he plays tennis."

Doyle nodded. "Standing doubles every Wednesday."

"With Crystal?"

"Not that I know of. His partners vary, though. Last week it was some old broad named Clair Morgan."

"Anything else?"

"Not in the way of sports. He's more the nerd computer type." Doyle narrowed his eyes. "Don't you already have all this?"

"Sanderson is a weak link. I'm simply covering all the bases."

"By withholding key information?"

"Such as?"

"Primarily, the connection between Crystal Bennett and a Miami crime boss."

Harper leaned in close. "Sonny Delano is no longer your concern."

"So the fact that I spent six years stroking his organization is purely coincidental?"

"I admit, it did factor into choosing you for the job."

"But not when it came to briefing me."

"No."

"Look, Harper. I'm well aware you prefer playing it close to the vest. But this time, it's my neck we're talking about. I need to know why Crystal is so important. Why she's still a threat to Sonny."

Harper's eyebrows came up. "Apparently I'm not the only one withholding information. Two and a half years since you were transferred from Miami yet you're current regarding the DA's case."

"I don't like surprises. Which brings us back to my initial concern. Why is Crystal Bennett a target?"

"Doyle. I'm only going to say this once. Your job is to see that Allen Sanderson doesn't become the source by which Delano reaches the target. Understood?"

Direct eye contact lasted several seconds.

Doyle went to the door, hesitated. "I hope to hell you know what you're doing."

"Trust me. Since I've been handling the case, no one's gotten anywhere near Crystal."

Doyle snapped his gum. "Then why are we even here?"

Harper stared after him. On a personal level, he didn't much care for Doyle. He was arrogant, opinionated, too self-absorbed to ever consider being a team player. And why should he? The better part of his sixteen-year career was spent playing the role of Invisible Agent. Few federal employees had ever worked with him, let alone seen his face. But wasn't that the main reason Doyle was considered valuable? The fact that he could function within the guise of anonymity? Adversely, the fact that he was known to Sonny Delano, that Sonny considered him trustworthy, could also be an advantage.

A shadow of doubt swept across Harper's face. No. Best for all concerned if Doyle remained in the dark. At least regarding Sonny's obsession with Crystal. More precisely, Karen Bannister.

Harper went to his car, removed his briefcase from the trunk, went back inside. Crystal needed to be relocated, formulating a new identity as soon as possible crucial to her protection.

The hard part was convincing her it was the right thing to do.

* * *

Detective Ames called Mahoney at his home. He informed him that, yes, they had located Ryan Mosley. Should they arrange to have him picked up? Mahoney thanked Ames, told him 'no', that wouldn't be necessary.

"I can ask Phoenix Metro to keep an eye on him if you like."

Again, Mahoney's response was negative. He hung up the phone, called Halloran. "You sound groggy. Did I wake you?"

Halloran used the remote to turn the volume down on his twelve-inch Sony. "I was watching a movie. I must have dozed off."

"Bill Ames just called. Ryan is staying at a Motel 6 located on..."

"Hang on, hang on. I need to write this down."

The sound of bed springs, paper rustling.

"Okay. Go ahead."

Halloran scribbled the information on last week's edition of the Hungry Horse News.

"What's the area code?"

"602."

"How much does Ames know? I mean, about why we're asking?"

"Just that Ryan needed to be questioned in a case we're working on."

"You didn't mention Sarah's name?"

"No. Should I?"

A long pause.

"Sheriff. You don't really believe she's still alive, do you?"

"What do you think?"

"Truthfully? We should be dragging Flathead Lake. Not chasing ghosts all over Arizona."

"Tell that to Ryan Mosley."

Halloran held the receiver down, waited several seconds, pressed 0. "You can dial that number direct," a monotone voice advised.

"Be a dear, won't you? Both my hands are in a cast."

Halloran dropped his gaze to the newspaper. Airport Expansion Approved. Beneath the headline, in small print: Gold Rush Boom In Tourism Anticipated.

Halloran grimaced. Once upon a time the word tourism meant camera-toting visitors to Glacier Park every summer. Now, compliments of legalized gambling and over-zealous California developers, Flathead County had been transformed into some avant-garde Mecca for wealth and privilege. Bad enough Ted Turner bought up half the goddamn state of Montana with the idea that buffalo meat could be it's primary export. Did they have to start bringing Disneyland gawkers in by the jet load?

"I'm sorry, sir. Your party doesn't answer. Perhaps we can try again later."

"Yes. Why don't we?"

Halloran checked his watch. 8:30. Ryan wasn't much of a night owl. Early to bed, Early to rise, Makes a man healthy...

Halloran stifled a yawn, pressed the remote volume. With any luck he could stay awake long enough to place a second call.

Static crackling over dead air waves brought Halloran to a sitting position. 3:15. He slid off the bed, padded barefoot into the kitchen, drank milk straight from the carton, returned to the bedroom. This time he dialed the number himself.

"Room 214."

"I'll need the name of the occupant. Security reasons."

"Ryan Mosley."

A moment of silence.

"Yes. Mosley, Ryan. Hang on."

Several more moments.

"All I'm getting is a busy signal."

Halloran hung up, tried again five minutes later, received the same result.

"Can you just deliver a message?"

"I'll leave a note for the day clerk."

"I mean now."

"Sir. Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"It's important that I speak with Mr. Ryan directly."

"Then I suggest you call back at a decent hour."

Halloran rolled his eyes. This guy was a prime candidate for AT&T. He hung up after leaving his name and number, set the alarm for six a.m., and then stretched out on top of the covers.

He was still awake when the buzzer sounded.

* * *

Ryan went to the office first thing, paid for another week's stay.

The day clerk filled out a receipt, handed it to him. "Mosley, huh? I think there's a couple of phone messages." He sorted through the debris beneath the counter, nodded. "Here they are. Both from the same guy. Halloran. Area code 406."

"When did he call?"

"Three-thirty AM. Then again at six-o-five."

Ryan took the slips of paper, tucked them in his pants pocket. "I must have knocked the receiver off the hook while I was asleep. Why didn't you come and get me?"

"I was late this morning, else I would have. Now, Toby, he's a whole different story. Wouldn't deliver a message if someone's life depended on it."

Ryan went back to his room long enough to call Crystal's apartment. On previous attempts Allen answered. Ryan had simply hung up. This time, a hauntingly familiar voice responded. Ryan hung up on her as well. The fact that she herself took the call indicated Allen's absence. At least, Ryan hoped that was the case.

Standing at her door, he took a deep breath. He pressed the buzzer, waited,

pressed it again. He considered the possibility she might have left (heavy, rush-hour traffic cost him an extra twenty minutes), rang the bell several more times. He was just about to turn away when the door flew open.

"What the hell is so impor... Good God. Not you again."

"We need to talk."

"What do I have to do to get rid of you?"

"Simple. Confess your sins."

"I'm knee deep in design plans. Can't this wait?"

"No. It can't."

Crystal motioned him inside.

"I'd offer you some coffee but I don't anticipate you'll be here that long." Ryan surveyed lavish furnishings with a critical eye. "Not bad for a gal from Montana."

Crystal plopped down on the couch, watching Ryan wander the room.

"Sit down, Mr. Mosley. The Lifestyles tour doesn't begin for at least an hour."

Ryan settled for one of two matching chairs opposite her. He studied her face, shook his head grinning. "You know, at first I thought you were just putting on one hell of an act. Dress-up was always a favorite game of yours."

"I wouldn't know."

"Perhaps not. I mean, being in that kind of accident must have been rather traumatic. Assuming, of course, you were even in the vehicle."

"Mr. Mosley. I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Really?" Ryan assumed Allen would have told her by now. "Shall I start from the beginning? Refresh your memory, as it were? Or perhaps you would prefer the sordid details of my brother's recovery? His body, that is."

Crystal's expression remained passive.

Ryan leaned forward, hands clasped between his knees. "How did you do it? How did you manage to get out before the truck hit the water? You were always athletic, but even a stunt man would have suffered some kind of injury."

Something that might have required medical attention. No? Then I have to assume my original idea. You weren't in the truck. You pushed it over the embankment. Heartless. Cold-blooded." Ryan narrowed his eyes. "Did you watch, Sarah? Did you stand there while Corey plummeted to his death?" He got up, moved about the room, came back. "What did you feel, Sarah? Relief? Euphoria that you were finally free of Corey's abuse?"

Crystal reached for the phone. "I'm calling security. You're obviously deranged."

Ryan dove onto the couch. He yanked the handset away and slammed it back into the cradle. His hands positioned at either side of her shoulders, he lowered his face toward hers.

"I don't know what kind of sick game you're playing, but I came here to get the truth and that's exactly what I intend to do. You got that?" The last three words were hissed through clenched teeth.

"This isn't a game. My name is Crystal Bennett. I've never been to Montana and other than you, I don't know anyone named Mosley."

Ryan backed away from the couch.

"I did some checking. Up until two years ago, there was no Crystal Bennett. How do you explain that?"

"I don't have to explain anything to you. Nor do I care to."

"How about the cops? Do you suppose they could solicit your cooperation?"

"Involving them would be a grave mistake on your part."

"Is that a threat?"

"Consider it strong advice."

"Look. I just want the truth. Was my brother's death an accident or not?"

"How can I respond to something I know nothing about?"

"As Crystal Bennett you can't. But Sarah can."

Crystal threw her hands in the air. "Then go find Sarah!"

Ryan thought it over. "How much money can you get your hands on?"

"That's what this is all about? Extortion?"

Ryan shook his head. "I used the last of my cash to pay for my motel room. I'd rather not send home for more."

"This is great! You want me to finance my own harassment!"

"I merely need time to assist your memory."

"So now you're convinced I've got amnesia."

"Let's just say I prefer it over the possibility you're a damn good actor."

"How much?"

"A thousand dollars." It was spoken in jest. He expected her to object.

"I'll get my checkbook."

He watched her move down the hall, astonished, somewhat disappointed. He wanted desperately to believe Sarah was innocent. That Corey's death was indeed accidental. Why then would Crystal feel compelled to pay so readily? Didn't she realize it was a joke? That this whole stinking affair was a big stinking joke? Problem was, the punch line wasn't a bit funny.

Crystal returned momentarily, holding a mauve-colored check.

"I could add another zero. Provided you're willing to walk away."

Ryan took the check, doubled it, stuffed it into his back pocket. "I can't do that."

"How long will this dance continue?"

Ryan shrugged. "As long as it takes for me to get what I came for."

Crystal ushered him to the door. In the hallway, he turned to face her one last time.

"I'll call you in a couple of days. Who knows? With a little soul-searching your memory might suddenly become crystal clear. If you'll excuse the pun."

Crystal slammed the door in his face.

If Ryan Mosley found her this easily, how long before Sonny Delano was standing on her doorstep?

* * *

Allen smiled across the desk at his client.

"When will your family be joining you, Mr. Richards?"

"If you don't mind, I'd feel more comfortable on a first name basis. Mr. Richards is my father's name."

Allen's smile widened. "All right. Ron."

"My wife merely plans to stay in Cleveland long enough to handle escrow. Another week I suppose."

"Have you found a house here yet?"

"Actually, I wanted to wait until Susan arrived. We always make major purchasing decisions jointly. Besides, her taste is far superior to my own." With a wink, "Of course, I'd never tell her that."

"How many children?"

"Three boys. One on the way. Hopefully, a girl this time."

"It must be difficult. Being away from them."

"You can't begin to imagine. But the thing that gets to me the most is being deprived of my wife's gourmet cooking."

Allen swallowed the bait.

"Why don't you join me and my fiancé for dinner? Of course, the meal , will be compliments of the hotel chef, but enjoyable nonetheless."

"Sounds wonderful. Is tonight too presumptuous?"

"I'm sure tonight would be fine."

"No kidding? If I carted a guest home on such short notice, Susan would have my head on the chopping block."

Allen summoned a reassuring grin. He had never brought a client home, not once in the ten months he and Crystal lived together. The fact that Ron Richards would place Crystal in Randy's company upon meeting her seemed insignificant. Currently, Allen was more concerned how Crystal would receive Ron Richards.

"Perhaps I should call her."

Allen mouthed a silent prayer as he picked up the phone.

* * *

Doyle punched in Harper's number from the underground parking garage. Static prevailed.

"... think...damn government...afford better equipment."

"I didn't quite get that."

Doyle stomped the accelerator pedal, shot out of the garage entrance between two other vehicles. The one behind sounded its horn.

"Blow it out your ear, asshole!"

"What was that?"

"Forget it."

"Are we on for tonight?"

"With a slight variation. I'm having dinner at their apartment."

"You were supposed to take Allen out somewhere.

"The man insisted. What was I going to do? Disappoint Clark Kent?"

"I don't like it."

"Look at it this way. You'll have plenty of time to wire Allen's office building. And don't forget the executive bathroom. Or should I say board room since that's where all the real deals are made."

"Careful, Doyle. You almost cracked a joke."

"Yeah. I'm turning into a real Seinfeld." Doyle crossed two lanes in order to make a right-hand turn, received another horn blast. "Can I assume Crystal knows about Ron Richards?"

"I hadn't planned on the two of you ever crossing paths."

"Shit happens."

"What time is dinner?"

"Seven-ish."

"I'll talk to her. Let her know you're on our side."

"Right. The good guys."

He hung up, immediately placed another call.

"Hey. Rocko. How's it going?"

"You tell me."

"There's a few kinks that need ironing."

"Kinks. Great. Do I need to tell you how impatient Sonny is?"

"No, but you could tell me why."

"Why what?"

"Why Sonny wants Crystal Bennett hand delivered."

"Since when do you care about particulars?"

"Since Sonny offered half a mill. Since fellow agent Wesley Harper is involved. Want me to continue?"

"Why don't I just put Sonny on the phone? You can ask him yourself."

"Maybe I won't have to. Just maybe I'll figure it out on my own. I'm having dinner with her this very evening."

"You're out of your mind, Doyle. If Sonny ever found out you were playing games..."

"No games, Rocko. I'm dead serious."

"How much longer is this going to take?"

"Couple of days."

A long pause.

"Just do it. The sooner Sonny gets what he wants, the sooner the rest of us can sleep nights."

"Relax, Rocko. Harper has but one life to give for his country."

In his motel room, Doyle drew the curtains over the window. He knelt down beside the bed, removed a flat metal box from beneath the mattress, checked

the monitoring equipment. Satisfied everything was in order, he transferred several listening devices to his briefcase, shoved the box back in place.

A long hot shower, then a brief nap. The knock on the door came between the two.

Doyle secured a monogrammed towel around his waist, relinquished his gun from the holster on his way across the room, peered through the crack between two layers of drapery.

Randy Adler, impeccably groomed in charcoal slacks and a white silk shirt, was about to knock a second time.

Doyle lowered his gun. If everything went according to plan (and why shouldn't it?), he would be relaxing on a St. Thomas beach this same time next week.

* * *

Allen's astonished expression said it all.

"I can't believe you're actually cooking!"

Crystal smiled across the island butcher block. "I can, you know."

"I just thought you'd be upset. You know, bringing a guest here when you're trying to get work done."

Crystal finished dicing the celery, started on the tomatoes. "I needed a break. Besides, I figured I owed you one. Being such a bitch these past few days."

"I never said that."

"Of course not. You're too much the gentleman."

"What are you making?"

"This part is a rice casserole. An old family recipe handed down by my grandmother."

Allen snatched a piece of celery, popped it in his mouth. "You've never really talked about your family. Your childhood."

"No? Probably because its so mundane."

"You grew up in Syracuse, right?"

Crystal nodded. "Grew up. Attended college. Set out for parts unknown."

"Like where?"

Crystal shrugged. "Lots of places. I always wanted to travel. Not overseas like some of my friends. I wanted to explore the States. Well, with the exception of Hawaii and Alaska. I never really considered them an option since they weren't attached."

"Did you? Explore the States, I mean?"

Crystal scraped all the diced pieces into a large frying pan, moved to the stove. "Why this sudden interest in my adventurous past?"

"I'm just curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat."

"Is that what I am to you? A household pet?"

Crystal turned her head. "Come on, Allen. Don't go getting sensitive on me. It was just an expression. A bad one, I admit, but innocent nonetheless."

Allen searched her eyes. The contacts which made them so Irish green were a whim she said, something to compliment the new hair color she said. Were they truly window dressing? Or something more sinister?

Allen snagged another piece of celery from the pan, turned and walked out of the room.

Crystal plucked the phone from the wall, tapped out the number from memory. "Hi. It's me."

Harper turned on the speaker and continued shaving. "What's up?"

"This Doyle character. Is there anything I should know about him?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Allen's acting kind of weird."

"How so?"

"He started asking me questions. Places I went when I was younger. Personal stuff."

"What's weird about that? The man simply wants to know things about the woman he's going to marry."

"We're not getting married. Not if I agree to relocate."

"He doesn't know that."

"Well. I just thought it was strange. Him bringing this up now. He's never asked before."

"If you're suggesting Doyle might have said something, forget it. The man is a vault."

"How do I handle it tonight?"

Harper toweled his face dry, carried the cellular into the other room. "Like you would anyone else you were meeting for the first time."

"Will I like him?"

"He's a government agent."

"So are you."

Harper grinned. "No. You won't like him."

"Good. That means you're still special."

"That's me. Special Agent Wesley Harper."

"Gotta go. My vegetables are burning."

"You're cooking? My God, life as we know it is forever doomed."

"Good-bye special agent Wesley Harper."

Crystal removed the pan from the flame, added the contents to the cooked brown rice, placed the Pyrex dish in the oven alongside the basting pan. She lifted the lid long enough to check on two six-pound chickens stuffed with raisin dressing, began wiping off the butcher block, paused.

Agent Pearse Doyle.

No. You won't like him.

Crystal frowned. Another Thomas Mason perhaps? Hard to believe the FBI would spawn yet another agent who viewed women as subhuman. Then again, why consider the possibility at all? Harper would never hand pick someone mirroring Mason's Neanderthal characteristics. Besides, Mason based his

opinion on a character named Karen Bannister. A character Mason personally created in order to infiltrate Sonny Delano territory. That woman no longer existed.

Of course, if Harper had his way, Crystal Bennett would soon be history as well.

She shrugged off the thought, finished cleaning the butcher block. She offered the surrounding surfaces a critical eye before moving into the living room. For now, "cleaning house" meant a bottle of Pledge and a soft rag. Whether or not the same terminology would mean total disruption of her life still hadn't been decided.

Or had it?

* * *

Clair sat in her car across from the motel.

She watched Randy go inside, scanned the other vehicles. Crystal's Ferrari wasn't there. She got out, went directly to the motel office, slipped the clerk a hundred-dollar-bill to leave her alone with his registration cards. Then she returned to her car. And waited.

The room was assigned to one Ronald P. Richards. Cleveland. Randy's home town, but not his real name. And why not simply use his own apartment? Clair knew where it was, but she had never been there. Mainly because Randy had never once invited her. He suggested on several occasions it was off limits, that he needed some modicum of privacy. For what, Clair had no idea. Unless, of course, he was seeing someone else.

Like Crystal Bennett?

Prepared for a long wait, Clair was visibly surprised when Randy re-emerged after fifteen minutes. If he was having an affair, he certainly wasn't making the most of his time. Rather than follow him, she decided to confront the other woman. If it did turn out to be Crystal...

Clair raised her hand to knock, heard someone talking, lowered it to her side. A man's voice? She placed her ear to the door. The pause and speak cadence suggested he was on the phone. Clair moved to the window. Peering through the curtain gap with one eye she could see him sitting on the bed. Naked except for the towel draped around his midsection. Late thirties, closely cropped blond hair, athletic looking.

Her eye shifted to the open bathroom. Small enough to see the shower stall, the sink, the toilet. Clearly unoccupied. Clair returned her gaze just as the man

ended his call. She stepped cautiously away from the window and then scurried across the street like a burglar making his getaway.

She had driven less than a block when the laughter surfaced. Tears began streaming down her cheeks, forcing her to veer back to the curb. She miscalculated the distance, jumped the right front tire up over the sidewalk.

Gut-wrenching laughter persisted. That towel-wearing hard body was Randy's lover? Sure, Clair had heard rumors about paid escorts having alternative lifestyles. But Randy Adler? Mr. Stud himself?

The hens at the club would have a field day if they knew. Old Clair Morgan. Picked herself a real winner this time. That thought alone brought Clair's laughter to a halt. She dabbed both eyes with a tissue, checked her makeup in the rearview. This was one tidbit too embarrassing to admit. Clair grinned at herself. Of course, teasing Randy about it was just too good to resist.

Fighting off yet another case of giggles, Clair maneuvered the Lincoln back down onto the pavement. Next stop, the nearest mall. She would buy something special for Randy. Prove how much he meant to her. And then, after she told him he could keep his apartment, it would be his turn to do something special. Some unique area of her apartment they had never tried before. Like the garden tub in the master bath.

Clair smiled. Those imported bath beads she ordered last year were finally going to get a workout.

* * *

Randy trudged down the hall with lead shoes.

Five grand in his pocket. Another five when the job was done. He should be dancing on air, not entering Clair's apartment like a man facing the gas chamber.

He used his personal pass card, called out to her. "Where are you my little dove? Come out, come out, wherever you are!" To his own ears he said, "You shriveled sack of skin."

He checked each of the seven rooms, saving the bedroom for last. It wouldn't be the first time he found her lying in wait, sprawled on the bed like some ancient ruin, fleshy arms extended, painted lips parted with anticipation.

Randy paused in the open doorway. Draped across the bedspread were two aqua-blue items, price tags removed but positioned alongside. Even when Clair wrapped gifts, the tags were somewhere in the box. A not-so-subtle way of demonstrating her extravagance.

Randy shed his slacks and shirt, thought about keeping his briefs, took them off as well. They were replaced with a butt-string bikini. Randy puckered both sets of cheeks. Perhaps he should cram something up Clair's butt. See how she liked it. He picked up the matching hip-length robe, slipped it on, examined himself in the dresser mirror.

"Great. Now you really look like a male prostitute."

He walked out of the room, realized he was still wearing socks, removed them while crossing the living room floor. He tossed them in the direction of the couch, eyed the champagne bucket on the marble coffee table with further disgust. A bottle chilling nicely, two long-stem glasses. No doubt reward for his impending daily performance.

In the restaurant size kitchen, he snagged a Heineken, opening it on his way back. The cap landed near one of his socks. He flopped down on the couch, took a healthy sip, tucked the bottle between his legs. His penis, already flaccid, diminished even further. Not that it mattered much. Crystal Bennett couldn't activate a blood flow at this point. Randy leaned his head back. Crystal.

Eight months he had lusted after her. And for what? One lousy poke? What should he care about delivering her to some psycho in Florida? And even if he did, it was too late to turn back. He had taken the money. Half of it, anyway. If he didn't follow through, if he didn't help Dave Will Suffice (That's what the man said when Randy asked. "Dave will suffice."), Randy could be found in the dessert with a bullet to the brain. Just like those Greyhounds a while back. And all they did was lose their edge on the race track.

Randy blew air through his lips. Business as usual.

That was the other thing Dave Will Suffice said. No change in normal routine. So what the hell was normal about Clair Morgan and her ever-popular barnyard noises?

The apartment door flew open.

"Oh, good. You're here."

Clair sailed over to the couch, immediately scrutinized his attire.

"That color is spectacular, don't you think? It almost matches your eyes."

She seized the beer bottle, placed it on the coffee table.

"Well? Stand up."

Randy did.

"Now. Turn around."

Randy did.

"Oooh. I like that."

"Is the show over? Or shall I perform some ballet routines?"

"Be nice or I won't share my surprise."

"Something other than these neat duds? Be still my heart."

Clair headed toward the bedroom. "Give me a minute to change."

Randy cringed. Change into what?

"I'll be waiting with bated breath."

Randy finished his beer, got another, no sooner returned to the couch when Clair glided ghostlike out of the bedroom.

"What do you think?" She turned in place, arms suspended at her sides. "As long as I was getting something for you, I thought, what the hay, might as well indulge myself a little."

Randy guzzled half his beer. Coupled with her chosen movements, the effect of white negligee against paste white skin was downright nauseating.

"What can I say, Clair? You look absolutely stunning."

She motioned him to her with a witch's finger.

"Ready for your surprise?"

"That depends. Does it involve relinquishing this jock strap?"

Clair extended both arms. "Pick one."

Randy touched her left fist, caused her to frown, tapped the right.

"My gift to you," she said, opening her palm. "Go ahead. Take it."

Randy unfolded the receipt.

"I don't understand."

"Your lease. I renewed it for you. Well, I couldn't sign the papers. You have to do that."

"I don't get it."

Clair led him back to the couch. "Darling, Sweetheart. You don't have to pretend with me. I know now why you so desperately wanted to keep your apartment."

"You do?"

Clair handed over the champagne bottle. "I already loosened the cork. The last time we celebrated, it cost me a Ming vase."

Randy filled both glasses. "You were saying..."

"Oh, right. Your apartment. I don't want you to feel the least bit uncomfortable. After all, this is the nineties. What kind of modern-age woman would I be to judge you harshly simply because you're gay?"

Randy choked, spewed champagne into the air.

"What?"

"Don't be embarrassed. It's fine with me. Really. The only thing I ask is that you spend two or three nights a week here. Now that's fair, don't you think?"

Randy traded his champagne glass for the beer bottle. "Did someone tell you I was gay?"

Clair began to giggle. "Honestly, I feel so foolish admitting this, but I actually thought you were sleeping with Crystal Bennett. Can you believe that?"

"And now you don't?"

"Of course not. Not after following you today."

Randy took a firm grip on the bottle. "You followed me."

"Now, Darling. Don't be angry with me. I was so certain you were cheating. I just had to know the truth." Her words rushed on. "When I saw you go into that motel, I panicked. I went to the office and checked the registration cards. Then, after you left, I walked over to the room. I was so distraught, I actually intended to confront your lover." The giggles resumed. "When I realized it was a man... well, you can imagine my surprise. Anyway, I felt so guilty, and of course relieved that

you weren't seeing Crystal, I felt as though I needed to make it up to you. Hence, the receipt. Five-thousand dollars. Paid in your name."

Randy was staring down, the receipt wadded in his left hand.

"Now you're angry with me."

"No. I'm not angry." Actually, he hadn't heard anything she said beyond the part about checking the registration cards. "It was a loving gesture. Really it was."

"This isn't how I planned tonight at all. It was going to be so special... it was going to be..."

Randy kissed her cheek. "Now, now. Don't start crying. You'll smear your make-up."

"Say you forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive."

"Here. Let me make it up to you." She rubbed between his legs, failed to bring about the desired result, got down on her knees.

"Clair. You don't have to do this."

She stared at him with doe-like eyes. "But I want to."

Randy eased her back onto the couch. "Tell you what. How about a nice hot bath first? Something to relax both of us."

Clair beamed. "I swear you can read my mind. That's exactly what I had in mind."

"See that? Tonight is going to be special after all."

When Randy remained seated, she said, "Aren't you coming?"

"As soon as I finish my beer."

He sat there idly peeling back the label.

I went to the office and checked the registration cards.

Randy pictured it in his mind. Name: Dave Will Suffice. Occupation: Vampire. Address: The darkest regions of Hell.

When he could no longer hear water running, he got up and went into the master

bath. Clair was submerged in a mountain of suds, straw-covered head tilted back against the edge of the tub, eyes closed.

"I'm waiting."

Randy rubbed his chin. "Mind if I shave first?"

"How sweet of you. Of course I don't mind."

Standing at the 'his' vanity, the one closest to the tub, Randy removed his electric shaver from the bottom drawer. He plugged it in, kept a watchful eye on Clair in the mirror as he edged toward her.

Realizing he was close enough to touch, Clair raised her arm over her head.

"What are you doing back there?"

Randy quickly sidestepped, took aim. Clair turned her head just as the shaver left his hand.

"Darling...?"

Randy left the room.

The journey to his apartment came no where near Puerta East. He circumvented the park, drove two extra blocks before turning south, drove an added mile before turning back.

His speedometer never exceeded twenty-five. Speed at this point was unnecessary. He had taken every precaution. Clair's hair dryer, wiped clean of fingerprints, became the source of electrocution. The Remington, along with several other personal grooming aids, was now stowed in the trunk of his car. Including the aqua-blue outfit and corresponding price tags.

Randy parked three blocks away. He walked purposefully toward his apartment building, head down, hands jammed in his pants pockets. Today was chock full of irony. Five-thousand dollars worth. He shook his head, muttering self-inflicted profanity. Even if he got away with killing Clair, he was still headed straight to Hell.

And beckoning him through the gates would be Dave Will Suffice. Resident vampire.

* * *

Ryan had no sooner entered his motel room when the phone rang.

He threw himself on the bed face down, slapped the receiver off the hook.

"It's your dime. Shoot." A familiar booming voice immediately deflated his cocky attitude. "Hey, Sheriff. How are you doing?"

"I should ask you the same question. Running off like a thief in the night."

Ryan repositioned himself against the headboard. "I just needed some time alone."

"You were never a good liar, Ryan. That was Corey's expertise."

"How did you find me?"

"Does it matter?"

"No. Not really."

A heavy-hearted sigh bridged fifteen-hundred miles of phone cable. "Ryan. I'm only going to ask this one time. Do you know where Sarah is?"

"What kind of question is that? We both know she's dead."

"Do we?"

Ryan chose partial admission.

"Okay. I found a laminated bus schedule tucked in the fold of Corey's pickup seat. I decided to follow up on it."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"What? Get your hopes up? You know how crazy you get when it comes to Sarah."

"She was like a daughter to me."

"Ever since her dad died, she was your daughter."

"I have to know, Ryan. Is she alive?"

Ryan pictured the angelic ten-year-old sitting on his parents' couch. Sweet, innocent. Instantly, the vision became another. Crystal poised on the French provincial in her penthouse. Cold, impersonal, chock full of resentment.

"I think it's safe to say that Sarah Bennington Mosley is dead."

"That bus schedule. It meant nothing?"

"It wasn't even current three years ago."

"So what was it doing in Corey's truck?"

"Corey was somewhat of a slob, remember? I'm guessing the schedule belonged to the prior owner."

This time, the lie was accepted.

"When are you coming home?"

"I'm not sure. I'm thinking about turning the whole excursion into a mini vacation."

"Don't be gone too long. Your father needs you."

"How's Terry doing?"

"Good days and bad."

"Do me a favor? Call him, tell him I'm okay?"

"Wouldn't it be better to talk to him yourself?"

"You saw what happened at the funeral. Corey was his only son."

"That's not fair, Ryan. Didn't he adopt you when he married your mother? Didn't he attend all your Little League games?"

Ryan drew in his breath. "He loves me. I know that. But..."

"But what?"

"It's not the same. I'm not blood related."

"Neither was Sarah. But that didn't make her any less important to me. Do you have any idea what it's going to be like? Knowing I'll never see her again?"

Ryan cast his eyes to the ceiling. It would be so easy to tell him the truth. But hadn't he already? The woman they all knew and loved was gone. How could he possibly tell Halloran that a calculating bitch named Crystal Bennett had taken her place?

"Just call Terry this one time. Hearing my voice will only stir up painful emotions."

Once Halloran agreed, Ryan said his good-by. He removed Crystal's check from his wallet, stared at it for several minutes.

I could add another zero. Provided you're willing to walk away.

Was Crystal really that naive? Or Sarah? One or the other had to pay for Corey's death. But not with money. And three years' wait was long enough.

Ryan hopped off the bed, headed for the door. To hell with giving Crystal a couple of days. The moment of reckoning was long overdue.

* * *

Ron Richards, aka Doyle Pierce, aka Dave Will Suffice, shoved his chair back, patted his stomach.

They were still seated at the formal dining table, chatting over after-dinner drinks.

"That was some meal, Crystal. And I thought Susan was a good cook."

"Thanks. I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"Can I help clean up?" So far, the only rooms that hadn't been bugged were the kitchen and Crystal's studio.

"Absolutely not. Why don't you and Allen retire to the balcony?"

"What do you say, Ron? Care for some fresh air?"

"Sounds good to me. Cleveland nights are a bit chilly. Even this time of..."

The French door was drawn shut. Crystal began stacking china plates, her line of vision alternating between the balcony and the table. Harper was right. She didn't much care for this man. And he did remind her of Thomas Morgan, FBI agent extraordinaire. Granted, Doyle wasn't quite as abrasive, but full-of-himself annoying nonetheless. And posing as Ron Richards only served to enhance the quality. Especially that feign warmth in his voice. It almost sounded like... Like what? Someone else she knew? Someone from the past she couldn't quite put a face to?

Crystal moved to the opposite side of the table, stood with her back to the door.

"...so I just decided it was time to get out. Move my family to some place safe."

"Apparently you haven't been watching the news. Phoenix ranks in the top three cities when it comes to crime ratio."

"I was thinking more in lines of rural locations. You know, maybe a five-acre mini ranch. The boys are already making a list of animals they'd like to have. Including a horse or two."

"I have a friend in real estate. Howie Ballard. If anyone can find you suitable accommodations, he can."

Crystal moved into the kitchen. She made several trips back and forth, filled the dishwasher, turned it on. She thought of joining the men, decided she had had enough of Ron Richards for one night, went to her studio instead. She no sooner laid out a fresh sheet of paper when the doorbell sounded. A few seconds later, it rang again.

"Dammit!"

She charged back up the hall and across the living room, a quick glance toward the balcony before opening the door. The men were both leaned against the railing with their backs turned.

The last person Crystal expected to see was Ryan Mosley. "Are you out of your mind? We have a dinner guest!" She stepped across the threshold, closed the door softly behind her.

"Nice to know our earlier meeting didn't affect your appetite."

"What do you want?"

"I thought we already covered that. Alzheimer setting in?"

"I'm referring to right now. You said you would contact me in a couple of days."

"I changed my mind. I want this whole thing resolved."

Crystal drew a controlled breath, exhaled slowly. "I can't very well discuss it tonight. Where are you staying?"

Ryan gave her the address and room number. "Can you remember that?"

Crystal's eyes glazed with hatred. "I'll be there at ten sharp. Now get the hell out of here."

Ryan used the sole of his boot to prevent the door from closing. "Don't be late."

Crystal shoved the door hard enough to move his foot with it. She went back to the studio, came face to face with Doyle.

"What are you doing in here?"

"Actually, I was looking for Allen's den. He said there was some paperwork he wanted Ron Richards to see."

Crystal scanned the room, brought her eyes back to his. "Where's Allen?"

"Had to use the little boy's room." Doyle motioned toward the drafting table. "Damn good work considering there's no formal training behind it."

"Thanks. You have no idea what your stamp of approval means to me."

Doyle grinned. "Isn't play-acting a kick?"

"It might be. If my life wasn't hanging in the balance."

"Not to worry. Harper has it covered. Provided his personal feelings don't get in the way." Doyle brushed the hair away from her shoulder. "I, on the other hand, could care less about this pretty neck of yours. I'm merely doing my job."
"Get out."

The self-serving grin remained on Doyle's face.

"One piece of advice. You might want to keep your relationship with Harper strictly professional. At this point, any diversion could prove fatal."

"Is that a fact?"

Doyle nodded. "For either one of you."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Do that." He left the room still grinning.

Crystal spotted something on the floor, bent down, picked it up. A spearmint gum wrapper. Nothing sinister about that. She held onto it for several seconds, then chucked it in the waste basket, reminding herself whose side Doyle was on. She certainly didn't have to like the man to trust him. Did she?

Crystal tried desperately to summon the will to work. An hour and a half accomplished nothing more than a few random sketches. Doodles, actually. Disgusted, she wadded the sheet of paper, tossed it alongside the gum wrapper.

What difference did it make? It wasn't even likely she would have an opportunity to complete the project, not with Harper's alternative hanging over her head. And certainly not with Ryan Mosley applying pressure.

Crystal picked up the phone and dialed Harper's private number.

"There's something we need to discuss."

Harper was propped up in bed, trying to determine which of three identities were best suited to Crystal's needs.

Tiffany Moore was a fashion designer in San Diego. The occupation was first rate. It afforded Crystal a second opportunity to work at home. The location wasn't first rate. Too close to her current proximity.

Sally Rednick was a Chicago waitress. Least acceptable. Not only did Sonny Delano have strong connections in the windy city, Crystal would never agree to such commonplace employment.

The third choice fit all criteria. Roberta Halsted, executive assistant for an exporting firm in Seattle. It would put Crystal at the farthest point from Miami, Sonny's home base. And the high five-figure salary would afford Crystal at least some of the luxuries she was accustomed to.

Harper placed the file on the mattress alongside him.

"Is something wrong?"

"I'd rather not talk about it on the phone. Can we meet tomorrow morning? Nine o'clock, your motel?"

"Too risky." *And way too tempting.* "How about the park?"

"Great. We can take a walk around the lake. It's not quite as romantic as the beach we..."

"Have you given any more thought to relocating?"

"Is there an alternative? Because if there is, I'd love to hear it."

"No. No alternative."

A long, silent pause.

"Okay. I'll see you in the morning. Don't be late."

The words which caused her annoyance with Ryan now brought a smile to Crystal's face.

"I don't suppose you could use some company right now?"

"Do you have any idea how inviting that sounds?"

"Tell me. Better yet, show me. I can be there in ten minutes."

"Sleep, Crystal. That's the only thing I need right now."

"What are you wearing?"

"What?"

"What are you wearing?"

"Reading glasses."

"That's it? Nothing else?"

"I'm in bed. Which is exactly where you should be."

"Close. I'm lying on the couch in my studio."

"Let me guess. Naked as a jaybird."

"Wrong. Remember that negligee? The one I was wearing when I came to your hotel room?"

"That was two years ago."

"Black lace. Floor length. So sheer you could see my tan lines. Jog your memory any?"

"Good night, Crystal."

"Sweet dreams. Special Agent Harper."

Crystal stripped off everything but her panties, stretched out on the studio couch with the afghan throw tucked under her chin.

Starting over. That's what a new identity would mean. The last time hadn't been difficult. She looked forward to it, in fact. But the past two years had been the closest thing to reality in a long, long time. And throwing it all away seemed incomprehensible.

She closed her eyes, allowing her mind to wander backward. Beyond Crystal Bennett. Beyond the deal Thomas Mason put on the table, the one which put her in the hands of Sonny Delano. Farther and farther back. Prior to her assuming any other identity.

A time of innocence.

* * *

Doyle was in the booth farthest to the rear. He sat facing the door, a full glass of beer on the table still untouched.

Crystal Bennett was a jigsaw puzzle. And the piece that was still missing was most critical. Doyle mentally positioned each of the others, trying to summon some sort of order. Sonny Delano wanted her, so much so that he was willing to pay any amount. Harper merely wanted her safe. Not only because she was key to the government's case against Delano, but the fact that Harper allowed himself to become personally involved. Finally, the guy in the baseball cap. More than likely, no more significant than a household fly in late autumn. One good swat...

The fact that Doyle was certain he had seen Crystal somewhere before was significant. Another place. Another time. But where and when? Doyle had spent the entire evening studying her movements, her speech. And when he was standing mere inches away from her, the feeling of déjà vu was strong enough to reach out and touch. Even so, he left the apartment still wondering.

Doyle sipped warm beer, winced, positioned the glass precisely back over the moist ring. He shoved a stick of gum in his mouth, balled the wrapper, and then tossed it to the floor as he watched a man in his mid twenties enter the front door. He was no sooner seated at the bar when Doyle shifted his gaze toward the plate window overlooking the street.

A young woman was poised there, her hands cupped to the glass as she peered inside. Long blonde hair, deep blue eyes, her surgically endowed breasts enhanced by her bent-over position and a tight-fitting, low slung dress.

Karen Bannister. The name merely slid into place. And so did Doyle's missing piece.

The blonde joined the young man at the bar, grinned when she saw the intense look on Doyle's face. "Nice tits, huh? Cost Joey here six large ones. But worth every cent, don't you think?" She cupped them with her palms, gave them an upward thrust. The denim fabric gave way, allowing the left one to spring free.

"Woops."

The boyfriend quickly draped his windbreaker over her chest. "For Chrissake! You're acting like a two-bit whore!"

Still smiling at Doyle, she pushed the jacket aside and shoved the breast back in place. "There. Good as new."

"Sorry mister. She's had a little too much to drink."

Instantly, the back of his head was palmed.

"Hey! Don't go apologizing for me. I'm not the one who can't get it up half the time!"

Doyle got up, slapped a fifty-dollar-bill on the bar. "Here, Joey. Buy yourself a decent piece of ass."

As he walked away, the blonde said, "That won't even get him a good blow job."

Doyle shook his head as he crossed the street to his motel. Typical ball-buster. He entered the room, went directly to the bed. He removed the metal box, and then adjusted the wireless earpiece and the volume control at the same time. He moved into the bathroom just as Crystal was placing a call.

...something we need to talk about.

Doyle stood motionless in front of the toilet, penis in hand.

...meet tomorrow morning? Nine o'clock, your motel?

Harper: Too risky. How about the park?

Great. We can take a walk...

The remainder of Crystal's remark was accompanied by the sound of Doyle pissing in the bowl. He zipped up, listened to the balance of their conversation standing at the foot of the bed, waited a few seconds longer before removing the earpiece.

Tomorrow morning. Nine o'clock.

Now that the puzzle was in tact, the missing jigsaw piece in its proper place, time was even more the enemy. How long before Crystal made a similar connection? Or had she already? Is that why she arranged to meet with Harper?

No. Doyle would have sensed it in her voice. He was certain of that.

He stretched out on the bed, dropped his head on the pillow. Karen Bannister. The one person who could verify Delano's illegal operations. And maybe — if the DA happened to ask just the right question — Doyle could be facing criminal

charges as well. Given the choice, he would prefer to deliver the goods in a body bag. Unfortunately, the half-million-dollar contract held one very specific clause: Merchandise must reach Miami in A-1 condition.

Doyle draped his forearm across his eyes. Two-and-a-half years ago he was riding the crest of a very lucrative wave, one that crashed on desert shores the day he was exiled to Phoenix, Arizona.

Or maybe it crashed the moment Karen Bannister took her first breath of air...

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