

Bernard Veale

READ MY LIPS



A Freddie Huntsman
i n v e s t i g a t i o n

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READ MY LIPS

By
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Publisher Information

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Chapter One

As a child at the age of eight I suffered from sudden and severe sensor neural hearing loss and for five years I was totally deaf until I was seen by a surgeon who rectified my problem and now I can hear perfectly.

What five years of living in total silence did for me was that I am able to use sign language easily and that I learned to read lips with a much better than average facility. It also taught me to observe things around me so that instead of idly chatting to people I became accustomed to watching them from a distance and assessing what I could find out about each subject of my interest.

I would venture to say that losing one of my senses honed the others inasmuch as my sight, touch, taste and smell were enhanced so that even today these senses are superior to those of any one else of my acquaintance.

Apart from these abilities I am a normal person not far from the average and certainly no more intelligent than any other 'B' student I encountered during my education. I am not particularly well-built since I was never greatly interested in physical activities, having been shunned by my peers during my deaf period and thereby excluded from communal games at my schools and in my neighbourhood.

As for my presentation, you might expect to see a slightly underweight man, five foot and eleven inches tall with light brown hair, grey eyes and a slender, straight nose. I am told I have a pleasant face that is totally forgettable the minute I walk away. I have had this opinion confirmed by reading the lips of those I have watched from a distance.

I had never planned to become an investigator. In fact, I had a vague idea that I might become a computer programmer since I enjoyed spending time pottering on my machine and had even written one or two programs that could have had commercial value if I had ever tried to market them.

I had graduated in the crowd and with my father and mother gone in a motor accident; I was still not planning to go to college until I knew how long the insurance money would last me once I was living on my own.

I was sitting in a diner sipping a cup of sub-standard coffee and running through the job opportunities in the local newspaper and discovering that no job offered me what I felt I was worth. My eye was caught by a rather spectacular-looking blonde that wafted by and inserted herself into the furthest booth where a macho-type man was already sitting and munching his way through a large hamburger.

As you might have guessed I had already discovered girls although none yet had discovered me. This one was truly worth discovering, at least for a person whose tastes ran to big bosoms, tiny waists and tantalizing hindquarters.

I did not try to tear my eyes away so naturally I saw what they were saying to each other.

He said. "Did you get the kid?" They were speaking quietly because no sound reached me.

She said. "Sure, I told you I would. Bronson has the money. When are you going to send him the ransom note?"

He. "Not yet, let 'em stew for a bit."

She. "If you don't contact him, he might bring in the police. You've got to call him and let him know it's a kidnap and he must not bring in the Feds or the cops or it is curtains for the kid."

"He can't call the police for at least twenty four hours and from what you said the kid often stays out all night."

"That's so; but by Murphy's Law this will be the first time he decides to get worried."

"We can take the chance, Gertie. I want him to feel that the money is nothing compared to his beloved kid."

"If you knew more about this one, Spike, you wouldn't say that. This is a Grade A brat. I kinda think that Bronson might even pay for us to keep the kid."

They closed up when the waitress came around to take the blonde's order.

I watched them as the blonde chewed her way through a toasted cheese sandwich. They did not say very much while they were eating and what they did say was lost in the chewing process.

I folded my newspaper and went outside to the first thing I had bought with the insurance money. It was a three year-old car in good condition. It was a dusty blue Ford just like every other car on the freeway. I had really wanted something with style and a multitude of horses but this car came up at the right price and its gas-economy was a shining example to America. The stylish horse-herd model really did not suit my personality according to the salesman and on reflection I had to agree that I would not enhance my personality with it, at least not to the point where gorgeous or, for that matter, any sort of women would want to ride in it.

I sat in my unremarkable transport and waited until the blonde and her companion came out. They were talking about groceries and what the kid would or would not eat.

"I really don't give a shit what we feed the little hop-head." Spike assured her. "That kid has seen you and knows both you and me, so after we get the money we will just have to cream the brat."

"Why? I thought that we were going to South America."

"Sure we are going to South America. I don't trust the *Feds* *not* to find us if we stick around."

"Then why kill the little jerk? Why not let the kid go once we are on our way?"

By that time they had passed me and even I cannot read lips through the back of a head.

I backed out of my parking bay and drove slowly in the direction they were going. I watched them walk up to a bright red, stylish car that made my transport look like a single-horse buggy.

I did not bother with penis-envy, I had transport and buxom-blondie envy in a big way.

With the traffic congesting the city roads I was able to get near to them and follow them closely until they took an exit to the seediest

part of downtown. I had to fall back then but the bright red car was easy to spot ahead of me and I saw it drive into an abandoned warehouse. At least I presumed it was abandoned because the windows were all broken and there were no lights shining inside.

I parked around the next bend and walked back to take a closer look. The sleek red car was parked in a motor grease-stained loading bay and its occupants had presumably entered the unlit building.

I did not have long to wait before they both returned.

"Get in the car, Gertie. Bud, can look after the kid. You and me are gonna work on the ransom note."

"We coulda done that with Bud. Why do I gotta get in the car?"

"I don't want Bud knowing how much we are gonna ask for the kid. I told him his cut is a hundred large. He thinks that is a third."

"So how much are you gonna ask?"

"Two million."

"Wow, you think big!"

"That's not the only thing about me that is big, baby."

"Hey! You said that you understood that Bud is my guy!"

"No, I said that I understood that Bud *was* your guy. You gotta make up your mind fast baby. It's me and South America or Bud and a lifetime in the joint."

"Why ain't...isn't Bud coming with us to South America?"

"Somebody has got to take the fall and Bud is elected."

"Why? If we can get away before the cops know about it, why can't Bud?"

"The cops have gotta have something to chase after otherwise they start looking for us. You don't think that Bud will keep quiet about us once they grab him, do you?"

"Bud, wouldn't tell them nothing. He loves me."

"Dream on, Sugar-Buns! Bud will do like every guy that has ever been caught by the cops. He will spill the beans in exchange for a shorter sentence. We gotta be long gone by then."

"How do you know that I won't tell all of this to Bud?"

"So you love the guy enough to die with him?"

"Of course not!"

"Then what is the problem? Did you choose who you are with, me or him?"

"You promise me you won't put a bullet into Bud and I'll go with you."

"Baby, I already told you: Bud's gonna be the fall-guy. You and me are gonna hit the road as soon as we pick up the dough. That is why I asked you to get your passport fixed up. You did that didn't you?"

"Sure I did that. I showed it to you."

They got into the car and I followed them out to a motel just outside of town.

I saw Gertie take out a key and insert it into a door but Spike grabbed her and steered her to the room next door.

"You agreed to our deal Gertie and now you gonna have to seal it with a little of what you got and I want." Spike told her as he led her into his room.

I was not sure of what to do next. I knew where the victim was and I knew the child was only guarded by one man. Spike and Gertie would be otherwise occupied for an hour or two.

I flipped a mental coin and it came up in favor of the police.

I drove to the central precinct and waited in line to speak to the desk sergeant.

He looked me up and down and said. "How can I help you, kid?"

Kid? I was twenty and headed for twenty one: an emancipated minor.

I forced down my ire and stepped up to the desk.

"I would like to report a kidnapping, sir."

"Kidnapping? What someone take your teddy bear?" What sort of a civil servant was this? He was anything but civil.

"No sir," I said a lot more patiently than I felt. "This is a kid that has been kidnapped. He is being held in an old warehouse downtown."

"Just go up those stairs there, son. Tell your story to one of the detectives." He said dismissively. "Next!"

I climbed the stairs fuming all the while. How would these clowns behave in a real emergency? Hey, this was a real emergency. That kid was due to be bumped off after the ransom money was collected.

I found the detective office with one sleepy-looking man sitting in a hard wooden chair with his feet up on the desk and resting on a pile of official forms. There were many other desks around but all were empty.

“Excuse me sir. I am here to report a kidnapping.”

“Oh yeah? Who has been kidnapped?” The detective said without any overt enthusiasm. He did not sit up.

“All I know is that it is a kid and the father’s name is Bronson.”

“Bronson? You know who that is kid?” Now he sat up.

“No but I gather that he can afford a two million dollar ransom so I’m guessing he is pretty rich.”

“Ha! Ha! That’s good! Bronson rich! Sure he is rich. He is the mayor, kid. Don’t you know anything?”

“I know that his son has been kidnapped and that you are here making weak jokes about him.”

“Don’t get smart with me, kid! What makes you think that Bronson’s son has been kidnapped?”

“I saw two of the kidnappers talking about it and I followed them to a deserted warehouse downtown where they are keeping the kid.”

“Okay, just sit down over there and write out what you heard. I’m going to call Mayor Bronson and find out what has happened to his son. After that you can tell me how you got close enough to two kidnappers to hear what they were saying without them knowing that you were there.” He was dialing as he said this.

“Detective Goodings here, from Central Precinct, may I speak to the mayor please?”

I continued scribbling out my story while Goodings drummed his fingers on his desk.

“Mayor Bronson, sir, I have a kid here at the precinct he says he has news relating to the kidnap of your son.”

There was a fair amount of speaking on the other end that I could not hear and Detective Goodings started apologizing and almost kow-towing to the handset.

“Listen you little jerk!” he said when he put down the telephone, even though I topped him by at least four inches. “The Mayor is hopping mad about this. He says that his son is right there at the mayoral residence with him. He just had him picked up from school. Get the hell out of here and stop wasting my time.”

Yeah, I was wasting his valuable sitting-at-his-desk-with-his-feet-up time.

I left with my feathers decidedly ruffled. Names are difficult to pick up while lip-reading unless they are common names but I was certain in my own mind that the name I saw spoken was Bronson.

I went down to my car and sat in it for a while as I tried to piece together what had happened. I visualized the name Bronson being said and it came up the same. Spike and Gertie had definitely talked of Bronson and his kid.

Then it came to me, maybe they had grabbed the wrong kid. That was even worse because it meant that no one would pay a ransom and that poor kid would be killed because he could identify the kidnappers. If the police would not help then I would have to do something about it myself.

I drove home and rummaged around the garage until I found an old wooden baseball bat that my father had bought for me when he still had some hope that I would turn out to be another Babe Ruth. It was behind just about everything stacked up in back of the garage but after having a heavy cardboard box collapse onto my head I finally unearthed it and put it in my car. My father had also owned an automatic pistol but I had never taken the shooting lessons he planned to give me so I left it in the safe in the main bedroom.

I drove back to the warehouse and was pleased to see that Spike’s enviable car was not parked in the loading bay. I mounted the enormous concrete step up to the loading gate and saw that the small door set into the large gate was ajar.

I stepped through the door into the interior gloom of the unlit warehouse and heard the sound of music coming from the mezzanine level of the huge empty hall. There were stairs leading up to the mezzanine level but they were constructed of metal and they clanged with every step I took upon them. I slipped off my trainers and carried them in my left hand because the right was clutching the baseball bat. My socks made little noise upon the steps and I hurriedly mounted to the mezzanine level.

"Hey! Is that you, Spike?" Someone that I assumed to be Bud called out. I ducked into a small glassed-in office just as a man stepped out onto the metal balcony.

The man was enormous. He must have weighed at least two hundred and fifty pounds and none of it was fat.

He glanced down the stairs and saw nothing but instead of returning from whence he had come, he walked toward the glassed-in office where I was hiding.

For a moment I was in a panic. How could I deal with this man-mountain?

He pushed open the door to the cubby-hole office. There was nowhere to hide and he filled the doorway, completely blocking it, so in desperation I threw my trainers at his head as hard as I could. The body of the shoe struck him in his left eye and the laces lashed across his face so that the plastic end-pieces hit his opened right eye like a whiplash. For that moment he was blind and so I hit him as hard as I could with the baseball bat. He went down like a felled Redwood tree.

I had the presence of mind to rifle through his pockets where I found a pistol and a bunch of keys. I took both of them.

I scuttled through the door leading off the metal balcony and found a short hallway with four doors but only one had a light shining in it and bad music playing loudly from within.

I peered in cautiously. At the far end was a cage or at least it was a caged-off portion of the room. It was just big enough for a small truckle bed with a side-table.

Lying on the bed was a small figure in jeans and a baggy shirt. The face was turned toward the wall and the figure did not stir as I fumbled through the keys for the one that fitted the lock on the cage door.

When I eventually got the cage door opened, I shook the kid's shoulder but still he did not stir. I could not wait for him to wake up because mountain-man might do so first. So I heaved him up and threw him over my shoulder and staggered to the metal stairs.

To my intense relief the mountain was lying on its back and snoring softly.

I clattered down the steps, careless of noise, while the weight on my shoulder became increasingly burdensome. Outside it was pitch-dark, there were no streetlights down this end of town. I fumbled my way down the rutted street and around the corner where I had parked my car out of sight of the warehouse.

I propped my burden on the hood of my car while I unlocked it and opened the rear door. I shoved the kid onto the back seat.

My sense of relief as I drove away from the warehouse was intense and I discovered that I was in a bath of sweat.

I drove home very carefully. I did not want to give any cops a reason to stop me.

Chapter Two

My home had belonged to my grandfather. He had lived in it until he died shortly after my parents. I think that the accident that killed my mother also killed him because he took it much worse than he had taken the death of my grandmother. In any event, he left me the fully-paid house and a few thousand dollars in savings after his funeral had been paid for.

My parent's house had been mortgaged so when they died, the house had been sold off by the bank and I had moved in with Gramps.

It wasn't the best of neighbourhoods. It was completely a blue-collar area but the neighbours were warm, friendly and nosy. Here the street lights worked and neighbours were sitting on their front porches drinking beer and calling to one another and the passers-by.

Fortunately for me, mine was one of the few houses with a garage in back. My grandfather had built it because he had loved working on his car and it was that same car that my mother had borrowed for the fatal trip.

I drove into the garage and closed the semi-automatic door before I opened the inner door to the kitchen and carried the unconscious kid into the house and laid him on my bed. He hadn't awoken during all these goings-on so I left him and returned to the kitchen where I made coffee and a large baloney sandwich before setting up in front of my grandfather's old TV.

I fell asleep watching polar bears floating on ever-diminishing ice-floes and woke up when someone poked me in the ribs and said: "Who the hell are you?"

I opened my eyes and massaged my stiff neck.

"I'm Frederick Huntsman. Who are you?"

The kid looked frail and wane. "I'm Des Bronson. Where am I?"

"You are at my place. Is your dad the mayor?"

"Yeah, he is so what of it?"

"How come when I told him that his son had been kidnapped he said that his son was right there with him?"

"Sure, that was my little brother Daniel. Dad watches him real close. He's got asthma."

"Okay but why didn't he think of you?"

"Me? Why would he? I'm not his son."

"But you said...."

"Never mind about all that crap now! I need a shower. Where is it?" the kid said irritably.

"Er, through there." I pointed to the bathroom.

"I'd like some of that coffee if you would heat it before I get out."

"Oh, sure," I said weakly beginning to understand what Gertie had meant by 'a Grade A brat'.

I heard the toilet flush and then the shower began and hardly started before there was an ear-splitting scream.

I rushed into the bathroom, the door had never locked. Gramps lost the key years ago. I pulled back the plastic shower curtain and there cowering in the corner was a small but very shapely teen-aged girl.

"You're a girl!" I said accusingly.

"Of course I'm a girl you jerk! Close the fucking curtain!"

I closed the curtain promptly. "Why did you scream?"

"That damned water became flaming hot. I think I burned my butt."

"Yeah, I guess I should have warned you. It does that. You have to fine-tune it. I got tired of doing that and I take baths instead."

"Thanks for telling me. What the hell am I doing in your house anyway?"

"You were kidnapped by three people: Spike, Gertie and Bud. You were being held in a warehouse and they were going to ask your father for two million dollars to release you, only they had no intention of releasing you. They were going to kill you after they got the money because you had seen them."

"Not just seen them, I buy my weed from them."

"Just weed?"

"Well, coke every now and again when I feel like it."

"How old are you?"

"I'm almost seventeen."

"You don't look that old."

"So I'm petite, can I help that? Hey, tell me something. How did you know everything about Spike, Gertie and Bud? How did you know what they intended to do? Were you in with them?"

"I was in the booth behind them and I overheard them. They didn't know I was there and I wasn't going to tell them."

"Okay," she said. "I can understand that. Hand me that towel over there." She stuck a hand out from behind the curtain.

"Hey, that's my towel. I'll get you a clean one."

"Just hand me the towel. I don't need a clean one."

I handed it to her and watched her silhouette through the translucent plastic curtain.

"Have you got a clean tee-shirt you can lend me?"

I went to my bedroom and broke open the Chinese laundry parcel to pull out a clean white tee-shirt. I took it back to her. She was combing her wet hair with my comb.

"Can I use your toothbrush?"

"My toothbrush? Hell no!"

"If I asked you to kiss me, would you do it?" She asked pertly. She was definitely pretty now that she was a girl.

"I guess so." I said in wonderment.

"Good! Then you won't mind me using your toothbrush since that is much the same thing as kissing." She grabbed it and squeezed some of my toothpaste onto it.

I watched her as she vigorously brushed her teeth with the damp towel wrapped around her slender body and tucked in above her breasts. She looked as appealing as any man of my age could imagine in his frequent dreams.

"It's okay Freddie. You can put your eyes back into your head and return to the couch in front of the TV. I think that I can manage from here."

I brewed a new pot of coffee while I waited and eventually she appeared looking clean and shiny in her over-sized tee-shirt that exposed one shoulder and her well-used jeans and trainers.

"That coffee smells good! Pour me a cup."

"For someone who has just been saved from kidnappers who were planning to kill her, you are very bossy and not at all grateful." I said, having carefully rehearsed the speech while I had made the coffee.

"Sorry, Freddie, I really need the coffee but seriously, I *am* grateful. All I remember of the whole thing was that I went to Dirty Gertie for some weed and she offered me a cup of coffee while she went to collect it. She doesn't keep the junk in her apartment. I drank the coffee and the next thing I know is that I wake up in your house. It didn't feel all that life-threatening. But I *do* believe what you tell me. It sounds exactly like something that Barforth Crawley would think up."

"Barforth Crawley? Who is that?"

"With a name like Barforth people kept calling him 'Barf' so he declared his name to be Spike and even shot a man once for calling him 'Barf'. He could have gone to prison for that but he told the guy that he would shoot him through the eye if he testified against him and the guy suddenly changed his story to 'accident while cleaning a gun'."

"How is it that you know so much about him?"

"I lost my virginity to him."

"What? Were you crazy?"

"No, just high on coke."

I felt quite upset that she told me that. I felt somehow soiled and I had even let her use my toothbrush.

She drained her coffee mug and said. "Okay, you can take me home now."

I was inclined to want to get rid of her so I took her out to my car and drove her to the mayoral residence.

It was a very large house and a butler received us at the front door.

“Good morning, Miss Desdemona.” He said as I delivered her to the door. Desdemona?

I guess that was where the ‘Des’ came from but I think that she was using the wrong part of her name.

I took the opportunity to duck away since Desdemona marched straight in expecting me to follow her like a little puppy. The butler closed the door on me so I had a clear run back to my car and was out of there before the gates had time to close.

I drove back home thinking of what I should make myself for breakfast and I was not aware that I was being followed. I parked outside my house and went in through the front door.

Inside the kitchen I was boiling myself a couple of eggs when the front doorbell rang. It was a little bit early for visitors but in this neighbourhood it could be someone wanting to borrow some sugar for breakfast. I went to the door and opened it wide and found myself confronted by three people: Spike, Gertie and Bud.

I tried to slam the door but Spike blocked it with his foot while Bud barged in and Gertie followed.

“You just cost us three hundred thousand dollars, kid! Now how are you going to make that up to us?” Spike asked menacingly.

“The police will be out looking for you.” I said shakily. “Kidnapping is a Federal offence.”

“There hasn’t been a kidnapping, kid. The Bronson kid is back home and she never woke up once while we had her. All she can claim is that she drank some coffee and passed out. No ransom demands were ever made. You are gonna help us get her back unless you want me to turn you over to Fortescue de Beer. He is mighty upset with what you did to him.”

“Fortescue de Beer?” I asked hesitantly.

“Bud de Beer, to you I guess. Maybe he should work on your shins with a baseball bat. You won’t walk too well after that. What do you say?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“All you gotta do is bring little Miss Bronson to us and then you can walk away with your shins intact.”

"How am I going to do that? She doesn't know me except that I took her home. She doesn't even know that she was kidnapped."

"That little bitch?" Dirty Gertie said vituperatively. "She knows exactly what is going on."

Spike waved all objections aside.

"That's your problem, kid. Oh, and don't go getting all clever on us and running off to the cops. That happens and I come after you with a gun. You don't get broken shinbones, you get permanently dead! Get it?"

"Yes, okay, I get it. Where do I bring her?"

"The warehouse will do. Bud will wait there until she arrives. You got until tomorrow to fix everything you fucked up, you understand? The Bronson kid is in our hands by noon tomorrow or we come looking for you again and we don't make nice no more, comprende?"

"Yes, yes, sir! I understand." I was prepared to deliver the whole Bronson family to them at that moment, so terrified was I of being hurt.

They all trooped out after Spike and went out to his shiny red car.

"Bud, you still seeing double?" I saw Spike say to him.

"Yeah, Spike and my head hurts." Bud responded.

"You better go to the hospital and have your head examined. Gertie can take you after she drops me off. Gertie, I'll watch the Bronson house until you get back from the hospital. If this kid doesn't get anything going I'll cream him and then we can try something else. We can still save this whole thing because either kid will do, it is just that Desdemona is easier to get to."

I went to the telephone and called the mayor's house.

"May I speak to Desdemona, please?"

"Please hold the line, sir, I will put you through." There were a few clicks and then Des came on the line.

"Hi, Freddie. Where did you get to?"

"How did you know it was me?"

"My other friends use my cell number. This line is taped for security reasons."

"Oh hell! I wanted to tell you things about the three people we talked of at my house."

"No problem," she said. "Call me back on this number." She gave me her number.

I called her immediately.

"I had a visit from the Three Stooges." I told her. "They threatened to break my legs and/or kill me. I have to deliver you to them at the warehouse where I found you. If I call the police, I'm dead, but on the other hand I think that I am scheduled to be creamed anyway. They said that they do not mind whom they take either you or your brother will do."

"I think that I had better fill my Daddy in on this."

"Wait a moment, he will bring in the police, won't he?"

"He is more likely to call in the FBI. That's my Daddy, he always goes straight to the top."

"He sounds a little like Spike: *he* always goes straight to killing."

"Well, we are both in the same boat. He talks about kidnapping but he is going to kill me in the end." Des said pragmatically. "While I am talking to Daddy, you had better come over. I'll tell the butler to bring you up."

I ran out to the front and jumped into my car and tore up the road doing at least twenty miles an hour in sixty seconds.

I spotted the red car parked at an intersection where it could be used to observe the comings and goings from the Bronson mansion.

The butler welcomed me as an old friend and conducted me into the upper reaches of the building where I was shown into a completely self-contained apartment into which I could have fitted my entire house and still had room for a tennis court.

Desdemona was sitting in a sunken lounge wearing a cat suit and talking animatedly on her cell phone.

"Yes, absolutely amazing! And they intend to kill me after they get the money so tell the others to stay away from them. They are not nice people. We will have to find ourselves a better class of

dealer.”

I walked around admiring the view from the apartment while Des finished off her call to her friend. I saw two men meeting on the lawn below. They both had walkie-talkies and I watched them talk.

“The mayor says that there is a full alert on his entire household. Some thugs tried to kidnap his daughter but a young kid rescued her. The kidnappers are going to try again. I don’t know how the hell the mayor knows this but he says that they are three drug dealers and they have access to all the kids at the Arcadian Academy for Girls.”

“Is that where the mayor’s daughter goes to school?”

“Yeah, she used to but she graduated. The son by his second wife goes to a Catholic school for boys. According to the mayoral drivers, the bitch always was that the schools were on opposite sides of town.”

“How many agents are they putting on this case?”

“It is just us two. The cops know who the perpetrators are so they are watching out for them. Apparently the kid that rescued the daughter can finger them for the attempted kidnapping.”

“Aw shit! That means we will have to ride herd on him too.”

Desdemona put down her cell phone and called to me.

“Now it is your turn to stay with me, Freddie. You can’t go back home or Spike’ll get you.”

“Hell, you could have warned me. I didn’t bring anything with me.”

“Anything you need Wilkinson can get for you.” She assured me.

“Who is Wilkinson?”

“He is the butler. He used to be a men’s outfitter. Daddy uses him all the time. Just show him what you are already wearing and he will get you exactly the right outfit for any occasion.”

“I can’t afford that, Des. Can’t he arrange to pick up my stuff from my house?”

“Who said you had to pay for it? Wilkinson will put it on our account. We owe you for what you did for me. I have a spare room

in my apartment. You can stay there.”

She led me to a bedroom that could have been a ballroom. At least, it was bigger than many a nightclub dance floor that I have seen.

“There, you have your own bathroom and the water won’t scald you in the shower. It is temperature controlled. You just set the level you want before you get in.”

“Gee, that’s amazing. They don’t have anything like that where I come from.”

“Yes,” she said dryly. “I know. I am going downstairs to speak with my Daddy. Make yourself comfortable and if there is anything you want, call the desk and ask for it.”

I wandered around the room and found everything from nail scissors to the latest magazines. There was a wet-bar filled with all the booze I knew about as well as several bottles of stuff I had never heard of.

There was a knock on my door and Wilkinson entered.

He said nothing at first. He looked me up and down and made some notes on a pad. Then he asked if he might have my trainers for a short while. He took them away and returned them in ten minutes. “Thank you sir.” He said before he left.

I switched on the TV panel that seemed to fill the spot on the wall at the foot of the bed. I left the sound off since I do not need it much and switched on the radio to soft and soothing music.

I was still sitting stretched out on the bed and watching an overly dramatic movie when the door opened without a preliminary knock and Desdemona threw herself onto the bed and made herself comfortable alongside me.

“Daddy says that threatening to kill you is a crime and Spike can be jailed for it.”

“Before he is jailed he will make sure that it is no longer a threat but a fact. It will not comfort me much that he will serve a longer sentence for murder than he would have for threats.”

“Don’t worry, Daddy will take care of it. Did you find everything you wanted up here in the room?”

"I would like to get my laptop computer. I find it less boring than TV."

"Oh there is a laptop in that closet over there. It's on the internal network and you can get to the internet through it."

"Really? That's fantastic. I can download my backups from my offsite storage. How long will I have to hole up here?"

"Daddy says we will discuss that at dinner tonight. Dress is always formal for dinner and we assemble at seven thirty for dinner at eight."

"I do not have any formal clothing, Des."

"Wilkinson is taking care of that, Freddie. Just relax until he brings you his purchases."

"Okay, I guess I'll start downloading my files into the computer."

"Don't be a dope, Freddie. That can wait until later. Let's fool around."

"What?" I asked quite started at her matter-of-fact attitude.

"Don't you want to fool around with me?"

"That depends on exactly what you mean by that."

"You know: sex!"

"Hell Desdemona, you are underage!" I protested.

"I am not! And anyway even if I was, I lost my virginity ages ago. You would only be number thirty or forty in the queue."

"That won't help me when you father has me thrown into jail for statutory rape."

"Oh Daddy won't do that. He knows about all my affairs."

"So you are saying that he approves?"

"No, he does not. He is always saying that I make the worst choices when it comes to boys but he knows he cannot control me so all he does is make sure that I have regular medical check-ups and take my pill during the month."

"Why do you stay on this self-destructive path, Des? You are a very attractive girl. You could be going out with some very decent guys."

"What's the point, Freddie? I'm too young to get married but I still have urges and besides it is fun."

"I don't think that I want to be guilty of contributing to the delinquency of a minor, Des." I did not believe her age claim, I judged her to be fifteen but she was very petite and so there was room for doubt.

"Okay!" she said with a shrug. "How about kissing? You can't object to that, can you?"

"Kissing is okay." I said cautiously, wondering what she had up her sleeve to surrender so quickly.

"Okay then, let's kiss. That's also very nice." She said demurely.

I leaned back to look at her and she must have taken it as a surrender on my part for she rolled over onto me and lay full length on my body while her lips reached up to mine.

I kissed her hesitantly and then my body began to supply urges of its own. I do not know where it would have all ended if there had not been a knock on the door.

I rolled Desdemona off me and sat up, calling out: "Come in!"

Wilkinson entered laden with parcels.

"Your clothing has arrived, sir." He said in a solemn and imperturbable voice.

"Thank you, Wilkinson." Des said sharply. "Just leave them by the closet."

Wilkinson gave her a searching look and withdrew.

"He knows what we were doing, Des." I told her.

"Of course he does but I'll bet he was surprised not to find us naked."

"Why? Has he caught you out before?" I asked as I edged off the bed.

"*In flagrante delicto!*" She laughed happily. "That's Latin for being caught in the act."

I stood up and then turned suddenly to hide an embarrassing protuberance. I walked over to the parcels and began to tear them open.

"Leave those Freddie! Come back here and finish kissing me properly."

"No, Desdemona, I don't think that I can do that. I am afraid that I was brought up with inconvenient little things called scruples. They prevent me from doing things that I know I will regret later."

She sat up. "Freddie, you are a spoil-sport! Most guys are eager to have fun. What's the matter? Are you gay?"

"No, I am not gay! I like girls as much as the next guy but I believe that you have to draw the line somewhere."

"Ah! A line-drawer! I've come across boys like you before but mainly they are religious nuts who think that God gave us the ability to enjoy our bodies and then forbade us to use them."

"No he didn't! He told us to use them but only with our chosen mates."

"So you are a religious nut!"

"No I am not but I do have scruples and I do believe in God."

"Wow, Freddie, you really mean it, don't you?" She looked quite amazed.

"Look Des, you believe that anything goes and that there are no rules except don't get caught. You take drugs, you drink, you have sex with boys you hardly know. You are extremely lucky that the worst thing that has happened to you so far is being kidnapped and that could have ended a lot worse for you than it did. You need to grow up and learn some self-control."

"Gee, Freddie, I'm sorry. I just wanted you to like me."

"Des, I do like you. You don't have to throw yourself at me for me to like you. Just be cool. We are friends and I hope that we stay that way."

There was another knock on the door. I called "Come in!"

Wilkinson entered once more.

"Sir, I have come to help you dress." He announced

"Dress? But I know how to dress, Wilkinson." I told him.

"Does sir know how to tie a bow-tie?" Wilkinson enquired gently.

"Er, no, I have only ever used a clip-on." I confessed.

"Very well, sir, if Miss Desdemona will excuse us I will show you how to put everything together."

Chapter Three

After Des had left the room, looking rather pouty, Wilkinson laid out the dinner suit he had acquired for me.

"If I may say so, sir, I believe that you will be a good influence upon Miss Desdemona."

"Wilkinson, were you listening in at the door?" I asked as I realized that the timing of his knock had been pretty near perfect.

"I confess that I was, sir. Miss Desdemona tends to bring home some very unsatisfactory characters and I try to keep an eye on her wild ways. Her father has always been too concerned with his own life and career to worry much about her. She started out trying to attract his attention by her wild behaviour but soon she advanced to doing sexual things to get males to like her. I am not a psychiatrist but I believe it is all aimed at her father. If you would be so kind as to pull down the tail of your dress shirt before you pull on the trousers you will get a much smoother result. Please lift your chin while I tie on the bow-tie. Slip your arms into the jacket as I hold it. There! Are the shoes comfortable? Excellent, you look as good as an English gentleman."

I looked at myself in the full length mirror and I had to agree. I looked amazingly elegant. The dark clothing looked exceptionally well on my slim figure.

I descended the stairs to find an open-mouthed Desdemona watching me from the foot of the flight. Des looked very well herself. She was in a red satin gown and was wearing her short black hair under a tiara with drop earrings all of which appeared to be genuine diamonds. Her irises looked as large as pennies and for a moment I wondered if she had taken drugs but she looked too dazzling to be anything but a young flower about to open from the bud.

"Gee, Freddie, you sure clean up well." She said appreciatively.

"You look dazzling, Des. Skirts suit you." I told her.

She took my arm and steered me into the dining room.

“Daddy, this is my friend Frederick Huntsman. Freddie this is my father Bradford Bronson, the mayor.”

“I am delighted to meet you Mr Huntsman. I would like to thank you for saving my daughter’s life; a most gallant and brave thing to do. May I present my wife, Mrs Julietta Bronson? Frederick Huntsman, my dear, Desdemona’s rescuer.”

Julietta Bronson was a strikingly beautiful woman with large green eyes and auburn hair. She had all the physical attributes that Dirty Gertie had displayed but in exactly the right proportions thereby offering a much classier presentation.

We told each other how delighted we were to meet each other and then she buried her face in her martini glass. I began to realize that the lady was plastered.

The meal commenced very well with the mayor making most of the running.

“What profession do you intend to follow, Mr Huntsman?” He asked as he reached for his own wineglass.

“I have been thinking of becoming a computer programmer, sir. I have written one or two programs that could have a commercial potential.”

“Ah, surely not, Mr Huntsman? You have displayed such ability and resourcefulness in rescuing my daughter that I feel you would be wasted outside of the investigation and security fields. I could certainly put a good deal of business your way. Why don’t you consider it?”

“Thank you, sir, for the suggestion. I will most certainly consider it most especially if you would put business my way.”

“I have a security firm in my portfolio. If you wish I could refer you to them.”

“You are most kind, sir but if I do go in that direction I believe that I shall gravitate to the investigation side and I would prefer to be my own boss.”

“Your own boss? Why for one so young that is a very brave move but then we have already commented upon your undoubted bravery.”

"You are too kind, sir. Mrs Bronson, may I pass you the creamed spinach? It really is delicious."

"Mr Huntsman please do not concern yourself over Mrs Bronson. She is on a diet. She does not get that beautiful figure without cost."

I found her diet most interesting consisting, as it did, almost entirely of dry martinis.

All this while, Desdemona had been sitting silent and demure opposite me. She had been playing footsie with me which I tolerated as a harmless enough pastime.

"Daddy, apart from saving me from being killed, Freddie also saved you two million dollars in ransom money. Don't you think that you should show him greater appreciation than merely putting some business his way?"

"You are quite right, my child. Mr Huntsman, to start you on your career as an investigator, I propose to pay you a fee of twenty thousand dollars for services rendered."

"Actually Daddy, the fee was going to be thirty thousand dollars." Desdemona pointed out sweetly and not at all truthfully as it turned out.

"It was? Oh my apologies, as Desdemona says, the fee will be thirty thousand dollars."

"You are most generous sir. I assure you that I did what I did without any thought of a reward."

"This is not a reward, Mr Huntsman. This is a fee for professional services rendered." Mayor Bronson said firmly.

The meal was better than any I had eaten in my life. Few hotels could have competed with it. As we rose from the table, Desdemona took my arm once more and we all moved into the library where there was a comforting fire in the fireplace and sherry or cognac to be sipped. I could be wrong but I believe that Mrs Bronson had both.

After an hour of general conversation, Mrs Bronson decided to retire and as she could not very well navigate the stairs unaided, Mayor Bronson retired with her.

“That was quite embarrassing.” Desdemona said as they left the room.

“Your mother did not seem altogether well.” I said diplomatically.

“Oh please! The woman was plastered and she is not my mother. She is my step-mother and half my father’s age.”

“Do you not like her?” I enquired.

“Oh she’s okay but she married my father for his money and I guess she has discovered that money isn’t everything. Now she is more in love with the bottle than she is with herself.”

“How does your father deal with it?”

“Not very well, as usual he is too busy for anything but his work. He is aiming for governor as his next step on his way to the presidency. He married her because he wanted a trophy wife to stand next to him on the podium and look up at him adoringly. Julietta does that pretty well as long as he keeps her off the sauce whenever he is due to make a speech. The rest of the time he leaves her alone at home and boredom drives her to drink.”

“Were your parents divorced?” I asked her.

“No, mother committed suicide. Daddy maintains that it was an accidental overdose of sleeping pills but I happen to know that he destroyed the suicide note before anyone else saw it.”

“How could you know that?”

“I was eight years old but not stupid. I saw him pick up the note and read it. Wilkinson came in saw what had happened. He was the one that called the paramedics. My father pushed the note into his pocket and I saw him burn it later. The paramedics battled with mother for three-quarters of an hour before they pronounced her dead.”

“How did that affect you?”

“At the time I remember feeling glad that now Daddy had no one but me. I was certain that it meant he would pay more attention to me but it didn’t. Wilkinson is the only person, until you came along, that has cared a fuck about me.”

“Didn’t you miss your mother?”

"I never saw her that much to miss her. Julietta fills her time with drinking, mother filled her time with campaigning for father and charity work."

"So why did she kill herself if she was fully occupied?"

"I don't know. Father never let it get out that she committed suicide. He said that she had been overworking and was having difficulty sleeping. He suggested that she had woken up in the course of the night and had sleepily taken a second dose of pills. They slept in separate rooms and he had been out all night working on his mayoral acceptance speech with his assistant."

"His assistant?"

"Yes: Julietta, she was his personal secretary and assistant."

"Why did she stop assisting him?"

"I think that she didn't work that hard just to be an assistant for the rest of her life. She quit work immediately they were married."

After a few minutes Desdemona said: "I think that I had better go to bed before I give away *all* the family secrets."

I stayed staring at the fire for a while before I rose and went up to my room.

I found a pair of brand new pajamas lying on my pillow and the covers had been turned down just as they do in hotels. I went around to the far side of the bed and there on the floor was a pair of kid leather slippers in my size. That Wilkinson thought of everything.

I changed into my pajamas and slippers and went into the bathroom to clean my teeth. There was a new toothbrush, still in the wrapper and every conceivable cream or lotion that a metro-person could want.

When I had finished in the bathroom I turned on the TV and watched an action movie until the flimsiness of the plot bored me and I switched off the light and went to sleep.

I do not know what brought me awake. I pushed my hand under my pillow where I had stored the pistol I had taken from Fortesque de Beer, also known as Bud. I had no idea how to use it but at least I knew how to point it.

In the darkness I felt the covers on the far side of the double bed being pulled back and I thought: Oh no! Not Des again!

She cuddled up to me and started kissing my neck. I pushed her away rather roughly and switched on the bedside light.

You could have bowled me over with a soap bubble: it was Mrs Julietta Bronson! Only then did I realize that the strong smell of booze was not from the wine and cognac that I had quaffed during the evening but from the very naked and surprisingly enticing person of Desdemona's step-mother.

"Mrs Bronson!" I said in a voice several pitches higher than I would have liked it to be. "What are you doing here?" My first thought was that she had gone to the bathroom and in her less-than-sober state had mistaken my door for hers.

"Kiss me and hold me." She demanded ignoring my restraining hand which had ended up on her breast somehow.

"Mrs Bronson I am Frederick Huntsman. I am not your husband."

"Husband? He doesn't care for me. He does touch me or hold me anymore. I am a woman, aren't I? I am desirable, aren't I?"

I did not know what to say but I did know what to do. I pressed the serving bell.

"Mrs Bronson, you have lost your way. Let me guide you back to your room. You need some sleep." I said soothingly.

She began to cry. "No-one wants me anymore! There was a time when I had to fight off the wolves that surrounded me now not even over-sexed young men will have me. I am useless. My husband thinks that I am a liability to him. He even thinks that it is my fault that our son has asthma. He says it does not run in his family! Where does it run in mine? Frederick please, take pity on me! Hug me, hold me and, if you wish, have your way with me. I just want someone to want me again." This speech took a long time to deliver due to the sobs and sniffles that interspersed the words.

To my great relief Wilkinson entered without knocking. He carried a large revolver in his hand. "Ah! Is that what the trouble is?" He said with a note of relief. "With criminals threatening to come

after you, sir, one cannot take chances.”

He laid down the revolver on the far bedside table and strode into my bathroom, returning with a bathrobe which he expertly pulled onto an unresisting Julietta. Then he scooped her out of the bed and carried her away.

A few minutes later he returned to collect his revolver.

“I regret that you have had to tolerate such a high degree of harassment in this household, sir. Mrs Bronson needs to go to a clinic to dry out but the master will not hear of it until his bid for the governorship is concluded. He fears that it might damage his ratings. Both the ladies in the house need urgent psychiatric counseling. I would deem it a favor if you could lend your weight to my argument. Your influence might help considerably particularly with Miss Desdemona.”

“I will do my best to throw my little influence behind yours, Wilkinson. You are clearly the glue that holds this household together.”

After he had departed I switched off my light and the next thing I remember is Wilkinson, drawing my curtains and opening the blinds.

“Breakfast is being served, sir. I believe that the master wishes to talk to you before he leaves for his office.”

“Wilkinson, how did the first Mrs Bronson write letters?”

“Oh Mrs Delice was an inveterate letter-writer, sir. She wrote in a beautiful elegant hand to her many friends. She was known for it.”

I showered, shaved and dressed in a hurry. While I had been in the shower Wilkinson had laid out new clothing for me and although it was not my usual casual sloppy style, I did not want to offend him so I donned them and was surprised to see how good I looked in them.

I went down to the breakfast room where Mayor Bronson and his two children were already eating.

“Good morning sir. Good morning Desdemona and good morning Daniel. I hope that you are all well?”

They all assured me that they were.

"Mr Huntsman, I would deem it a great favor if you were to accompany Daniel to his school and pick him up afterwards. Agent Carswell will be with you as will Arthur the driver. Daniel does not like Carswell and is refusing to go with him. He gets so upset in the company of people he does not trust that it tends to precipitate an asthma attack."

"I am happy to do it, sir, but Daniel doesn't know me. This is the first time we have met."

"Ah, but Desdemona has told him all about you and how you rescued her. You are now his hero and he asked for you specifically."

Desdemona hooked her leg around mine under the table.

After breakfast, I went out to the limousine with Daniel. As we were approaching I saw Agent Carswell say to Arthur the driver. "Is that Huntsman the investigator? Why, he is just a kid. How did he get in so good with the Mayor?"

"I dunno, Agent, even old Wilkinson thinks that the sun shines outta him."

Daniel and I got into the rear of the limousine while Agent Carswell sat in front with Arthur. The partition was up so Daniel and I were to all intents and purposes in private but I could see what the two upfront were saying as they turned to speak to one another.

"Freddie," said Daniel tentatively. He was a sensitive and nervous boy. "Can you teach me how to catch a baseball?"

"Sure, Daniel, I'm not the greatest baseball player you will ever see but I can certainly show you how to throw and catch the ball. Hasn't anyone shown you that before?"

"Nobody plays with me at school and my dad doesn't have the time."

I knew exactly what he was talking about. My own childhood had not been much different, although my father and grandfather did teach me to catch a ball.

"Okay, after I pick you up from school, we'll practice that and anything else you want to try."

“Dezzie says that you know how to use the computer. Can you show me that also?”

“Sure I can.” My attention was taken by Agent Carswell saying to Arthur urgently. “Take the first turn to the right. That Mustang looks like it is following us.”

I turned around and sure enough the sexy red car was there with Bud at the wheel.

I switched on the intercom: “Agent Carswell that red Mustang behind us belongs to Barforth Crawley and it is being driven by Bud de Beer the man that held Miss Bronson captive.”

Carswell acknowledged my comment and called up his agency. I could not see what he was saying as he did not turn his head.

Suddenly the red car shot out ahead of us and cut in on us driving us to the kerb.

Two men that I had not seen sitting in back of the Mustang jumped out waving guns.

Agent Carswell opened fire. He must have put in a lot of time on the shooting range because he hit one of his targets immediately. The other dodged behind the Mustang and returned fire.

I pulled Daniel down to the floor and covered him with my body. I pulled out Bud's gun and looked at it. It was an automatic and had a slide catch on the side. I presumed that this was the safety catch and I switched in on. I did not know whether the gun was loaded or not and at that time I did not know enough to take out the magazine and inspect it.

I peered over the back seat into the driving compartment and to my horror I saw both Agent Carswell and Arthur lolling over with blood everywhere. I glanced up at the red car and saw the gunman approaching cautiously with his gun extended before him. I could see in the car ahead of us that Bud was lying forward in the driving seat. There was a bullet hole in the back of his head.

The limousine had tinted side windows so the gunman could not see me as he approached it. I could hear the sound of police sirens, hopefully coming to our rescue but they were still a long way away and the gunman was not.

He edged carefully past the front door and reached out his left hand for the rear door handle. I could not restrain myself any longer, I pointed the pistol at him through the tinted window and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. I looked down at the gun desperately as the gunman pulled at the door handle. In a blind panic, I pushed what I thought was the safety catch in the opposite direction and pointed the gun at the gap of the opening door. The gunman's face came down as he peered into the car and I will never forget the look of surprise on his face as, with a deafening explosion in the confined space of the limousine, a hole suddenly appeared where his eye had been.

The police arrived a few moments later. Daniel and I were taken to the main precinct where I made a statement and signed it in front of Detective Jim Goodings. Reluctantly I was forced to leave Bud's gun behind. Apparently, it was a small matter of it having been used in previous crimes.

A second car arrived from the Mayor's house to pick us up. It was driven by Wilkinson.

As we drove homeward, all thought of schooling for Daniel now forgotten, I related to Wilkinson what had happened.

"It appears that you were correct about them coming after any of the master's children. It is as well that you were sent with young Daniel else this attack might have ended very differently."

"Yes, the only problem is that the police have confiscated the gun that I took off Bud. If there is another attack I have no means of defending myself."

"I have my old revolver, sir." Wilkinson assured me. "I was very handy with it in the old days and of course, Agent Charles Fenwick is still with us. The FBI will indubitably supply us with more protection."

"Wilkinson," piped up little Daniel. "It was very exciting but I knew that I was safe with Freddie. He always knows what to do."

Desdemona had heard about the attack and she was waiting anxiously for me to return.

She threw herself into my arms and hugged me tightly. "Oh Freddie, I was so worried that something had happened to you."

"I'm fine but poor Arthur Brown didn't do so well. He's dead. I heard that Agent Carswell has a good chance to pull through but he won't be back here again."

She took my hand and Daniel grabbed the other and they towed me into the house where Agent Fenwick was waiting to hear the news.

"I'm going to call Daddy while you tell Agent Fenwick all about it." Desdemona said to me before Fenwick required my attention.

I repeated the whole story to Agent Fenwick who then asked a whole lot of questions of both Daniel and me.

At luncheon, the Mayor returned and even Julietta came downstairs.

"Mr Huntsman," The Mayor said seriously. "Once more we are in your debt. I can see that I shall have to offer you a full-time contract to protect my family." The rest of the family agreed so eagerly that I became worried; not only about my ability to protect them but also about whether I had the strength of will to keep the womenfolk at bay.

"Shall we say, twenty thousand dollars a month for the next six months?" My reservations disappeared. There could not be another job I could do that would bring me anything like that amount of money.

I swallowed before I said. "That sounds very acceptable, sir."

"I shall get my attorney to draw up a suitable contract for you to sign, Mr Huntsman. In the meantime please behave as if the contract were already in force."

After luncheon, the mayor prepared to return to his office but was waylaid by Agent Fenwick.

"Sir, I need to speak to you about the new security arrangements that need to be put in place consequent to the incapacity of Agent Carswell."

"May I refer you to Mr Huntsman? He is my new head of security. Any arrangements you wish to make should be cleared

through him. Now if you will excuse me I have an important meeting I must attend.”

Chapter Four

I could tell that Agent Fenwick was not happy to have to deal with a kid like me so I conceived what I regarded as a brilliant idea.

“Agent Fenwick, I would like to discuss your proposals together with the butler and the gardener since both will be affected by your plans.”

He could not very well object so Wilkinson and Arturo Montez, the gardener were summoned. Wilkinson backed me in everything and Arturo deferred to Wilkinson.

At least when Fenwick left our meeting, he could not say that he had been pushed around by some whipper-snapper.

What I regarded as my advantage over the FBI agent was that I knew that there were only two people motivating this attempt at kidnapping: Spike and Dirty Gertie. Fenwick appeared to be under the impression that this was a gangland problem and that there were many henchmen awaiting orders to attack us. I was not certain that Spike and Gertie would take this matter any further having now lost Bud de Beer, their ‘fall-guy’ because it meant that one of them would have to move into the front line. Spike had already shown an inclination to avoid being too closely connected to the kidnapping. He only wanted to pick up the money and then get on an airplane to South America.

I knew that Crawley had employed at least two gunmen to support Bud but I got the feeling that it would not be so easy to find others to be FBI targets.

Of course there was one matter that Fenwick would not take into account at all. He was interested in protecting the Bronson family, you know, the rich and influential. He wouldn't bother his head about me but if Barforth Crawley was going to do anything it would be to kill me to show that no-one could mess with him and live. It was a matter of respect which is very big in criminal circles.

I decided that this was the time that I must learn how to use the gun that was sitting in my grandfather's safe back at home. There

was no way I would be able to get a permit to carry the gun since I was under twenty one years of age but I did not need a permit to keep it at home or at my place of business. That meant that I had to register the mayor's home as my place of business which I guess was just possible but how would I get to a shooting range to learn how to use the weapon?

I pondered this for a while and then I called a range downtown and explained my problem without providing specifics.

"No problem, bud, jes' gimme the details of the weapon an' I'll train yer here using a similar gat."

We came to a deal and I arranged to go to the range that evening. When I told Desdemona what I was planning she said: "I'm coming with you. I want to learn how to use a gun too."

"Your father won't let you leave the house just yet. You'll have to stay here. Once I've learned to use the weapon I'll show you how."

I should have realized that she gave in too easily.

When the mayor returned from his office he was accompanied by four mayoral employees that were helping him in his campaign for governor. He listened with half-an-ear and then said: "Sounds fine to me; you'll only be gone an hour and be back by dinnertime. As long as Agent Fenwick remains on duty, I'm fine with it."

I left immediately after telling Wilkinson where I was going and what I would be doing there.

My car felt strange after riding around in the limousine but I arrived at the shooting range to find that it was a dingy little place in a very rundown area.

The proprietor was called 'Gunny' Frost. He was an ex-marine with a decided limp.

"Yeah, come on in. Say, you only said one trainee. You gotta pay double if you both wanna be trained."

I turned around to where he was looking and there was Desdemona.

"Where in hell did you come from?" I asked her roughly.

"I was hiding in back of your car."

I made a mental note to check my car in future. Dirty Gertie was the type to plant bombs.

“Phone up Wilkinson right now and tell him where you are and how you got here. Your family could be in complete turmoil if they start looking for you.”

“Who’s going to do that? Daddy is in his study with four aides. Julietta is drinking again and Daniel is doing the homework that I called the school about.”

“Wilkinson is going to miss you. He watches over you all the time.”

“Oh, all right. I’ll do it but I still want a lesson on shooting.”

“Okay,” Said Gunny. “The pistol you described to me was the Browning 9mm FN GP35 Automatic Pistol. The GP 35 means it is the 1935 model and is a recoil operated, locked breech pistol. The safety locks both sear and slide. This here pistol is the same weapon. This is an old weapon but still a very good one.”

He took us over the operations of the pistol and showed how it was dismantled and re-assembled and when that was done there was only time for each of us to take a single shot at the target. To my disgust, Desdemona’s shot was plumb center while mine was on the outer rim.

“This one’s a regular Annie Oakley.” Gunny commented as he took the double fee.

We were walking out of the shooting range when I almost collided with a portly man entering the grubby building.

“That was Doctor Forrester.” Desdemona announced.

“What was?” I asked, wondering what she was talking about.

“That man you bumped into at the entrance to the shooting range. That was Doctor Forrester: Julietta’s doctor.”

“Why would a medical doctor be coming to a shooting gallery?” I mused.

“Maybe he enjoys the feeling of power it gives you. I know that I did!” Des said happily.

“Well, even if he did, why come to such a down-market place?”

“Why did we go there?” Des asked.

"It was the closest place to us that I could find in the phone book." I told her.

"Maybe he did the same thing," she suggested.

"Still," I mused again. "Why would a medical doctor of his age take to shooting?"

"Mid-life crisis?" Des queried lightly.

I drove us back to the mayoral residence with Desdemona chattering about how she and her friends used to enjoy going to the mall after school.

"Talking about school." I told her. "Aren't you due to return there? What grade are you in?"

She smirked. "I've graduated. I am trying to make up my mind whether to take a year in Paris or go to Harvard."

"You graduated? How? You are not old enough."

"I keep telling you that I am older than I look and besides I was a straight A student and I skipped a year in the earlier grades."

"I never took you for an achiever." I said jokingly.

"I was determined to make my father recognize my abilities. I worked really hard. It is only now that I have graduated that I have been kicking back the traces. Daddy never took any notice while I was achieving so I thought a complete change of attitude might get his attention."

"And did it?"

"What do you think? His mind is concentrated only on the governor's mansion."

Wilkinson was waiting anxiously for our return.

"Sir, you really should not have taken Miss Desdemona out of the grounds without letting anyone know."

"Wilkinson, you know Desdemona. She didn't ask me. She sneaked into my car. I never knew she was there."

"We are all concerned about young master Daniel, sir. He has taken a very bad turn with his asthma. Mrs Bronson is convinced that it was the period you spent with him in the garden throwing the baseball around. He says that he wants you to be with him when the doctor arrives."

"I'll go up to see him, Wilkinson. Is the mayor finished with his aides?"

"No sir, he sent out a note that he was not to be disturbed and asked for dinner to be sent into his study."

"In that case, do I have to dress for dinner?"

"I am afraid so sir. It is an invariable rule of the house."

I went up for a quick shower and changed into the evening dress. When I came down to the dining room the two women were already there, both looking ravishing and Julietta a little more sober than she had been on the previous evening.

I greeted them and enquired about Daniel.

"He is breathing easier now." His mother told me. "But he still wants to see you. Doctor Forrester will be here at nine."

Without the mayor present, the meal was far more informal and accordingly quicker especially as we skipped the cognac in the library.

We were in good time to meet the doctor at the door and for me to be introduced to him.

"Your face is familiar to me, sir." He said to me. "Is it possible that we have met before?"

"I believe that we almost collided outside Gunny Frost's establishment, this very evening."

His gaze shifted as he said. "You must be mistaken, sir. I have been with patients all day and now am here, on my way home."

I followed Julietta up the stairs as she walked with the doctor. The sight of her ahead of me made me wonder why I had so many scruples.

Daniel had overcome his asthma attack and was eating his dinner.

The doctor checked him out with his stethoscope and announced that he was satisfied.

"One can expect this sort of thing from time to time, my dear." He told Julietta. "Just keep him on the prescription I gave you and don't hesitate to call me if anything untoward happens."

I left Daniel to finish his dinner which he appeared to be enjoying and walked onto the landing looking down to the bottom of the staircase.

Julietta had her back to me so I could not see what she said but the doctor replied.

“No, Julietta. That was ten years ago. I cannot give you another prescription like that. I could be struck off the register. I have given you the five milligram tablets and that will have to serve you. I made a mistake giving you a prescription for such a strong pill and I bitterly regret it. My dear, you will sleep quite well with your current prescription.”

I know that Julietta continued to plead her case but Doctor Forrester was adamant.

“Absolutely not, Julietta: I gave it to you just that one time and never again. Goodnight my sweet, and don’t worry about the boy, he will be just fine.”

I did think that calling Julietta ‘my sweet’ was overly familiar but I did not know how long he had been her physician. He did not look that much older than she was but looks can be deceptive and possibly he had attended her from a very young age.

As soon as he left I went back into Daniel’s room to talk to him.

“Your mother said that you wanted to see me Daniel. What was it about?”

“Freddie, she said that my attack was caused by you playing ball with me but the doctor said that it wasn’t. Please get her to allow me to play with you again. She said that you are a bad influence on me.”

“Perhaps your mother is right, Daniel. Mothers are very good at detecting what ails their children.”

“No, Freddie, she can’t be right! No one has played with me like that before. It was great! I really enjoyed it and I’d like to do it again.”

“I will try to speak to your father about it, Daniel, but I can’t see your mother changing her mind just because I ask her to.”

He was not happy with my suggestion. He obviously did not think highly of my chances with his father either.

Without people to whom I could talk while we sipped sherry and cognac, I went to my room and booted up the computer. I pulled up the programs I had written and carried on with the long process of de-bugging them.

There was a soft knock on my door and I called out "Come in!"

Desdemona came in dressed in pajamas and a robe.

"Do you mind if we talk a bit before I go to bed. I'm not very sleepy."

I sighed and saved my work before I closed the computer down.

"Most people watch TV when they feel like that." I remarked mildly.

"I'm sick of re-runs, Freddie and anyway, I find talking to you soothes me. Would you like me to bring some pot? We could smoke some. It's very soothing too."

"No, I do not want to encourage you to smoke pot for that matter I do not approve of you smoking at all. What do you want to talk about?"

"You and me, Freddie."

"Well, then why don't we start with you? Tell me everything you can about yourself; what you like and what you hate, what you enjoy doing and what you dislike having to do. Just let it all roll out!"

"Oh, you mean free expression!"

"Yes, that's it: free expression."

She told me that her favorite color was orange and number eight was her lucky number. Her birthday was August 8 so that was understandable. She told me what she remembered of her mother.

"I remember that she was dyslexic but I never understood what that meant until I was in high school. Only then I understood why she would never read me bedtime stories. We were comfortably off but we were not yet rich so I did not have a nursemaid. Even then Daddy only came home late at night and he left early so I hardly ever saw him. Once or twice I remember us going out on a Sunday.

We definitely went to the zoo once. My mother and father seemed very happy. I remember them kissing a lot and we also had a picnic once. There were a lot of business parties. I was never taken to them but she told me about them. She hated them but for his sake she went along because he said that she would be a liability to him if she didn't. Then Daddy bought our first proper house that was when Wilkinson came to us. At first he was our only servant. He used to drive me to school, cook and clean and also do all the things that other girls' daddies used to do. Daddy said that there was no more excuse for mother not to be at his side at political rallies and meetings. She became very depressed and used to cry a lot. She told me that it was not in her nature to be a political wife. Daddy used to get very cross with her and he used to shout a lot. Only Wilkinson kept everything together. He secretly took her to a psychiatrist and they managed to keep mother calm. If Daddy had known about it he would have had a heart attack. He regarded seeing a psychiatrist as being on a par with being committed to a mental home. He was terrified of anything negative being attached to his name. 'Political suicide' he called it. I would not be surprised if that was where she got the idea of suicide in the first place."

After she had finished she insisted that it was my turn. I told her about my five years of deafness and its cure. I did not mention my ability to read lips. I have always found it advantageous to keep that to myself. I told her about my isolation at junior school and the terrible time when my parents died in the car crash and how I felt when my grandfather died thereafter.

"Well you can be part of this family now, Freddie. Daddy really likes you which makes a big change from the other boys I have brought around here. Julietta doesn't like you but she doesn't count because Daniel thinks you are his hero. I think that Julietta is jealous of that."

I looked at the clock on the TV screen.

"Des, it's getting late. I want to get up early tomorrow. I have an idea I want to follow up."

"Okay, let's hit the hay." She said surprisingly willingly.

I went into the bathroom to complete my routines for the day and came out dressed in my pajamas and a robe to find Desdemona in my bed with the covers up to her chin.

“Now Des, I thought that we ironed all this out already. I work for your father. We do not sleep together.”

“Oh Freddie don’t be a spoil-sport! Daddy won’t mind. He does this sort of thing himself. You don’t think that two of his aides are attractive females for nothing, do you?”

“What your Dad does is his and Julietta’s business. What I do is my business and depends on my scruples. I have them concerning you. Go to your own room or I will move back to my own house.”

She slipped out of bed, totally naked, picked up her clothing which was lying on the floor beside the bed and flounced out of the room slamming the door behind her.

I switched off my light and found that my mind was not yet ready for sleep. I lay back staring at the pilot light on the TV while I mulled over my plans for the next day.

One of the things my gramps had, left over from World War 2, was a pair of powerful field glasses. I intended to collect them along with the pistol in the safe.

Humans tend to be creatures of habit. If Spike and Dirty Gertie ate breakfast and drank coffee at that diner where I had first seen them, the chances that they did it on more than one occasion, were strong.

I intended to park across the road and watch for them to return. If they did, they would not know I was listening to every word they said by watching them through those field glasses. Knowing what the enemy plans to do before they do it is an enormous advantage.

I guess that I was beginning to get drowsy when there was the sound of breaking glass in the house below. I shot out of bed and into my new kid slippers. I looked about me for a weapon but could see nothing that would serve.

I crept down the stairs keeping my eyes peeled for intruders and also possible defensive weapons. On the wall of the landing halfway down the stairs was an ancient metal shield surmounting a mace

and an ax. The ax was screwed into position but the mace had been suspended on wall-hooks into the chain between the handle and the spiked ball. I lifted it off the wall as silently as I knew how and then proceeded, with greater confidence now that I was armed, to the bottom of the stairs.

I heard the sound of a voice coming from the library and I moved in that direction just as the light in that room was switched on.

“Put your hands up unless you would like to get plugged.” A voice said that I recognized as that of Barforth Crawley, otherwise known as Spike.

“The police have already been summoned. You cannot get away with this.” Wilkinson’s mellifluous voice replied.

“I ain’t here to rob the joint, bud. I just got one thing to do and then I am outta here. Where do I find that little creep Huntsman?”

“Find him yourself, you murderer. I have no intention of helping you.”

“So okay then I end up having two things to do. You don’t tell me. I shoot you dead. That creep Huntsman thinks he is a hero and when he hears the shot he will be down here in a flash and then I will shoot him dead. What’s the point of dying for some guy who is already as good as dead?”

“Your argument does not sway me. Shoot if you must.”

As I slipped around the door I saw Wilkinson draw himself up and prepare to receive the bullet. Spike had his back to the door and was pointing Wilkinson’s old revolver directly at the old man’s heart.

I swung the mace aiming for Spike’s head but the ball was on a chain and it did not fly as I planned it to. It struck the pistol in Spike’s hand and sent it flying across the room.

Spike was quick. He did not hesitate. He ran a few paces and slipped through the shattered window and disappeared into the darkness.

“Thank you, sir.” Wilkinson said gravely. “You most assuredly saved my life just then.”

“Thank *you*, Wilkinson. I heard you decline to give me up to him. You were incredibly brave.”

“When you reach my stage in life sir, life is not as precious as honor and integrity.”

The police arrived at that point and Wilkinson explained exactly what had happened. We were both required to make signed statements and were assured that we would be called for a lineup as soon as they could arrest the suspect.

By that time the whole household was roused with the exception of the mayor who had gone to his office and had not returned.

Wilkinson gathered the servants and led them back to their quarters while he related the whole story to them and I was left to explain to Julietta, Desdemona and a very excited Daniel what had happened.

I made sure that the library door was locked and the key placed on the hall table just in case Spike was bold enough to try again.

“How did he get into the grounds?” Julietta wanted to know.

“I don’t know that Mrs Bronson. We will establish that in the morning.”

“I think Mr Huntsman that you are drawing these miscreants to us since they are trying to get to you. It places our family in danger so I think that you should leave this house and find somewhere else to shelter.”

There were instant protests from both Desdemona and Daniel but Julietta was adamant. “I have to think of Daniel and Desdemona and I do not care what Bradford thinks. I cannot tolerate you under this roof a moment longer. Please go!”

“If Freddie goes then I am going too.” Desdemona asserted.

“Desdemona, you have always done whatever you wanted to and have never once heeded a single word of mine so do whatever you want, as usual.”

Chapter Five

I left everything that Wilkinson had purchased on my behalf, except the clothing that I had changed into from my pyjamas, and went down to my car. I drove away before Desdemona could put in an appearance; hopefully she had reconsidered her position.

It was after two in the morning when I got to my own bed after removing the pistol from the safe and placing it under my pillow.

Nothing disturbed my sleep but when I arose I was alarmed to see a strange car parked in front of my house. It was a small sports car with a soft top. Closer inspection showed it to be a Porsche.

I approached it carefully in case it contained any of Spike's henchmen but all I saw was the tousled head that I was beginning to know all too well: Desdemona.

I rapped on the side window and she opened her eyes. "Freddie, you locked me out!" she accused.

"No, I locked out Spike and his hirelings. You took a big risk sleeping out here. Why did you not ring the doorbell and wake me up?"

"I did but it seemed to wake up the entire neighbourhood except you so I got back into the car and went to sleep."

"Come inside. We will have to find somewhere else to stay. Spike knows all about this place."

She came in lugging a travel bag that looked inappropriately heavy.

"What's in the bag?" I asked her.

"Clothes, shoes and a pistol."

"Where did you get a pistol?"

"I took it out of Daddy's safe."

"How do you have access to your father's safe?"

"I've known the combination since I was seven."

"Did he give it to you?"

"No, but I have seen him open it so many times. I'm not stupid."

"Does he know that you have the combination to his safe?"

"I told you: I'm not stupid."

"We have to let him know where you are."

"Julietta can tell him. He's never wanted to know before."

"Oh hell, Des, you are damn near impossible!"

"Yeah, the funny thing is, everyone says that."

"You had better put your car in my garage. It is too noticeable. We can't travel around in that." I said changing the subject.

"If we want to escape from anyone my car is a better bet than yours."

"The idea is to get somewhere that they can't find us. Then we don't need to escape."

"Okay, I'll park the Porsche. Where are we going?"

"I was thinking a motel somewhere but it has to be somewhere that we don't have to pay for by credit card. Spike might be able to track us that way."

"Okay, how about our place up at the lake?"

"You have a place up at the lake?"

"Yes, we have had it for years. It belonged to my mother's family. My father doesn't go out there anymore. He thinks it is too low class."

"That sounds fine to me. Let's go."

I loaded the pistol, field glasses, my computer and most of my clothing into my car, moved the Porsche into the garage and we set off.

It was not a long trip; maybe twenty miles before we reached the lake. The cabin was the most remote property up there. It was up on a little knoll overlooking the water where an empty boathouse and a small jetty completed the facilities.

Des located the key in a corner of the porch roofing and she threw the door open for me, since I was carrying the luggage.

The place smelled musty and the furniture was dusty but it was a pleasant place with a breeze across the lake that cooled the heat of the day. Downstairs was one large room combining lounge, dining room and kitchen behind a counter on short stone wall. The upstairs had one bathroom between two bedrooms. The main

bedroom had a large double bed and looked out over the lake and the rear bedroom was smaller and had two sets of bunk beds taking up much of the available space.

While I was exploring, Des was investigating the kitchen cupboards.

"There is not very much here. The fridge is empty because the power has been switched off and the tinned food dates back to two years ago, which is interesting since to my certain knowledge we haven't been out here since Daniel was three."

"Maybe your father has used it or lent it to friends. The place does not look that unused."

"Maybe, you can never tell with Daddy. I know he gets up to mischief with the aide called Gail but the new one is even sexier so maybe he is in there too."

"I drew some money on the way home from your house. I'll drive down to the store and pick up some groceries. What sort of stuff do you like?" I told Desdemona.

"Don't ask me. I can't cook. Get whatever you know how to make." Des said as she switched on the TV. I thought that she ought to get on with dusting but clearly the thought never entered her head.

I drove down to the store. The place was quite busy as people had come to the lake as the weather warmed up. I collected the makings for spaghetti, the one dish at which I have no peer and then bought the routine things like bread, eggs, milk, sugar, coffee and breakfast cereal and a couple of steaks with a six-pack of cold beer. Prices were higher up there for the captive clientele so the purchases very nearly cleaned me out.

I was loading my paper sacks into my car when my attention was caught by a blonde getting out of a car. She had bent over to take something out of the back seat and the view was spectacular. She turned holding a case of empty beer bottles and I realized that it was Dirty Gertie. I ducked my head down and waited until she went into the store. I could see her through the glass storefront so I pulled out the field glasses from the glove compartment and focused

in on her.

She was saying: "Yes, we've just moved into number 176. We'll be there for a month so I guess we will be in and out of the store from time to time. It's very pleasant out here."

I could not see what the man behind the counter was saying but I knew that our cabin was 199 and judging from the cabin numbers I had seen that put us at the end of the road that Dirty Gertie was on. We would have to pass them every time we left the cabin.

I found my old floppy hat on the backseat of my car and I pulled it well down to cover as much of my face as possible. I found some mud and smeared it over my car registration plates just in case Spike had obtained that information from any of his sources.

I drove past cabin 176 with my face turned toward the lake and prayed that there was nothing about my very ordinary car that would attract his attention.

Des was still lounging with her feet up and watching a TV soap opera.

"You won't guess who I nearly bumped into down at the store." I told her dumping my paper sacks on the kitchen counter.

"Chevy Chase? He came up here once when my mom was still alive."

"Forget Chevy Chase. This is no comedy. Dirty Gertie, and I heard her saying that she was in cabin 176."

Desdemona sat up abruptly. "How did she know that we are here?"

"I don't think that she does. Spike is on the run. The police want him for breaking and entering. Not as bad as the kidnapping and conspiracy to murder that he should go down for but still a definite prison term. I think that they are holed up here for much the same reason as we are. It is quiet, off the beaten track and far from their usual haunts. No one is going to look for him here."

Desdemona reached for her cell phone. "I'll tell Wilkinson."

"No! Hold on, they might be able to trace the phone call. Where is the nearest public telephone?"

“Down at the store, I think. No, wait a minute there is one the highway and that is just a five minute walk on the path going west.”

“That would be better for two reasons. The first is because we do not have to drive past cabin 176 and the second is that if anyone does trace that call it would be on a highway and we could have been traveling in any direction before stopping to use the public telephone.”

“Okay, then, let’s go.”

“There is no need for you to come along Des. I can walk the path, find the public telephone and call Wilkinson.”

“Hey, I can’t cook remember? You make the supper and I’ll go to the phone. I know where it is and I want to talk to Daddy anyway.”

It sounded like a good plan. We were not close to cabin 176 so there would be no danger to Desdemona.

I began to prepare the pasta while Desdemona changed into walking shoes, pulled on a hat and set off.

My pasta was coming along very well when unexpectedly there was a knock at the door. I tried to see who it was but the large picture window from the lounge gave a beautiful view of the lake but did not allow for a view of front door visitors.

My sauce would burn if I left it unattended so I lifted it off the flame and wiped my hands on my cloth before opening the door.

The view from the lounge was really lovely but the view from the front door was even better. She might have been a year or two older than I, but in those shorts with her tee-shirt knotted under her breasts she could have graced any pin-up calendar in history.

“Good day, my name is Janine Drew and I am in cabin 198 down that way. Do you by any chance have some cooking oil? I need only a half-cup and it is such a long trip to the store just for that. I’ll return it to you tomorrow.”

When I was able to say anything at all, I said.” Sure, come on in. I’m just cooking myself. Did you bring a cup?” I could see that her hands were empty and her fingers were devoid of rings.

“Oh darn! I’m such a blonde. I forgot! Sorry, I didn’t catch your name?”

"Oh, I'm Fred. I think I saw a paper cup somewhere. Would you like a beer? I just got it in from the store; I think it is still cold."

"Ah, I'd love one Fred. That pasta sauce smells divine. Do you enjoy cooking?"

I handed her the beer and went back behind the counter to look for the paper cups. I found them while Janine watched the TV and sipped her beer directly from the can.

"There it is: a half-cup of cooking oil." I placed it carefully on the kitchen counter.

"Thanks, Fred. Just look at that wave!" she pointed at the TV. "Gee, I'd never try surfing something that big. Do you surf, Fred?"

"Not really. I tried it once but the damn board seemed to have a mind of its own. All I remember is swallowing a lot of water and ending with a mouthful of sand."

"You just need someone to show you the ropes. You should look me up when you get back to town. What do you do for a living, Fred?"

"I'm a security specialist and investigator. I work for the mayor."

"That's Bradford Bronson, right? The rumor is that he'll be pitching for governor this year."

"Where do you get your information, Janine?"

"I'm a reporter for the Clarion. Your boss is always big news. Working as a security specialist and investigator for the mayor is pretty high-powered stuff. How did you land a job like that?"

"I rescued his daughter from some kidnappers."

"Say, I heard about that. Detective Jim Goodings gives me the word on any major investigation that the police department is handling. He was telling me about this kid that snatched the victim away from the kidnappers before they even had a chance to send in the ransom note and then he said the kid helped the FBI fight off another attempt to snatch the mayor's son. Are you telling me that was you?"

"I didn't know Detective Goodings thought so highly of me. He didn't believe a word when I told him that I had located the Mayor's child that had been kidnapped."

“Well it seems that he has seen the light! He rates you as a genuine hero now. I would have published the piece but the mayor’s office asked us to put a hold on it. They felt it could upset the mayor’s plans for the future. In other words they didn’t want anything that might reflect negatively on the mayor. How they figure that having a hero on the mayor’s payroll reflects badly on the mayor, I’ll never know.”

“Desdemona should be back at any moment. Would you like to stay and eat supper with us, Janine.” I just loved it that she should know me as a hero.

“Desdemona? Who or what is that?” Janine joked.

“She’s the mayor’s daughter. I’m looking after her until the kidnappers are caught.”

“Poor kid. Who stuck her with the name Desdemona?”

“I think it was her mother but I don’t know for sure.”

“Look Fred, I’d love to hang around but my roommate is waiting in the cabin for the supper I promised her. If you are going to be here for a couple of days maybe I can take a rain-check on a pasta supper. I love a man who knows how to cook.”

Just then the door opened and Desdemona walked in.

“I thought I heard voices in here.” She said with a waspish edge to her voice.

“Des, this is our neighbor from cabin 198, Janine Drew. Janine came over to borrow some cooking oil.”

“Nice to meet you Desdemona.” Janine said with a wry twist of the mouth as she pronounced the name.

“It’s a pleasure,” Des said insincerely.

Janine came to the counter and collected the paper cup of oil. “Thanks for this Fred. I’ll return it to you tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry about it Janine. That surfing lesson you promised me will be repayment enough.”

Janine waved goodbye and stepped out the door. I could hear her footsteps on the flagstones as she walked away.

“You are as bad as my father, Frederick Huntsman. I’m five minutes away from you and already you have another girl on the

string.” Des said spiritedly.

“Not my fault, Des, she came over to borrow some oil.”

“I can’t believe that you would fall for that old trick! It’s just a variation on borrowing a cup of sugar. Why should she be here, half undressed and drinking beer straight from the can with you?”

“Des, you are not dressed that much differently yourself. People come to the lake for a break from the city. They don’t over-dress when they get here.”

“See! You are defending her. You men are all the same.”

I could see there was no point in arguing. Women have a knack for turning arguments against men. I finished cooking the meal while Desdemona stared moodily at the TV.

She said nothing to me as she ate her meal. She finished it and placed the plate and cutlery in the kitchen sink without washing them. Then she mounted the wooden steps to the bedroom and I heard her moving around the bathroom while I washed up everything and stowed it away.

I grabbed another beer and sat down in front of the TV. Some actors pretending to be doctors, were rattling away in a technical language that certainly wasn’t English. I assumed that there must be someone that watched that junk. Why else would they make it?

It was a warm night and eventually I spread out on the couch and dropped off to sleep.

I awoke to the sound of the early morning news. I had not switched off the TV and my attention was caught by the gossip columnist following the news with items of general interest.

“As reported by the Clarion this morning, the latest news on the attempted kidnapping of our mayor’s daughter is that she is now in hiding in a cabin near a lake being baby-sat by the hero that saved her from the kidnapping after local police refused to credit it. Rumor has it that the girl has a strong attachment to the young hero who is now a security specialist and investigator in the mayor’s office.”

Damn that Janine! She had blown our cover sky-high with Spike and Dirty Gertie just a few cabins away from us. I began packing

immediately and shouted out to Desdemona.

“Des, get up! We have to get away from here right now!”

She didn't respond so I went upstairs to rouse her and found her deep under the covers and apparently fast asleep. I shook her arm but she did not stir. I checked her pulse. It was rapid but not alarmingly so. She was naked under the covers so I had to dress her hurriedly, jam all her clothing into her bag, throw her over my shoulder and carry her out to the car. I was beginning to suspect what was wrong with her. My bet was that she went up to bed last night in a rage over me entertaining Janine and she took one of her drugs, maybe it was cocaine, I'm no expert in these things.

I drove like crazy the twenty miles back into town and straight to the nearest hospital.

The doctors treated the case as routine and to protect the mayor from any scandal I told them that she was my wife and filled in all the admission forms accordingly.

“We will have to report this to the police, Mr Huntsman. I don't know if it is an overdose but we are required to report drug-related admissions.” The ER doctor told me.

“Please refer it to Detective Jim Goodings. He knows about this case.” I hoped that Goodings would recognize my name and keep the matter closed as a favor to the mayor. My assumption proved to be correct, Goodings never said a word, not even to Janine Drew.

Shortly afterwards the doctor approached me in the waiting room and said:

“Mr Huntsman, it was nothing to do with cocaine. Apparently, she took a sleeping pill. I don't know where she got it from. It was extremely strong but she only took one so it was not a suicide attempt. She'll be fine although we will keep her in overnight for observation. A young girl like that should not have to take sleeping pills. I recommend that you persuade her to discontinue their use.”

I assured him that I would and then I drove back to the mayoral residence where a very chilly Julietta permitted me to speak to Wilkinson.

I told him what had happened since Julietta kicked me out of the house.

"Sir, the master was very angry with Mrs Bronson. He told her that he wanted you and Miss Desdemona here at the house and that she had no right to banish you without discussing it with him. Miss Desdemona called me yesterday and I had the police raid cabin 176. They caught Gertrude Spotless there but Barforth Crawley apparently eluded them."

I went up to have a word with Daniel, who was delighted to see me. Not so his mother, who would have loved to order me away from the boy but feared to annoy her husband.

I had expected to catch the mayor at home since it was still early but he had already left for his office so I drove there to see him.

I was met downstairs by a very glamorous and shapely lady, who informed me that she was the mayor's secretary and that the mayor could see me shortly. I noted that the secretary was wearing wedding rings and was probably twice my age.

After a thirty minute wait, the secretary asked me to follow her and I admired her shapely rear-end all the way into the mayor's inner office.

"Come in Mr Huntsman. Please sit down. I apologize for my wife's unseemly behavior. She is under considerable stress since this kidnapping matter started. Please move back into the house, everyone feels much safer with you there. Now, how may I help you?"

"Sir, did you see this morning's Clarion?"

"I skipped breakfast this morning. That is when I normally peruse the press offerings. Why? What has happened of any import?" I knew that the only matters of any import he was concerned about was whether his ratings were up or down in the gubernatorial stakes.

I related the details of the Clarion story to him without mentioning Desdemona's situation.

"I regret that I allowed myself to be wooed into a sense of security with Janine Drew, sir. I will never open up to anyone else like that again."

“Ah, no harm done, my boy.” He said expansively. “I have encountered that young lady myself and I know how easily one can be misled by one as attractive as she. I wonder how she knew that you were in cabin 199.”

“I can only think that she followed my car to the lake but I had my eye on the rearview mirror all the time so she must be an expert at it.”

“Ah, I doubt that, it is more likely that she had the Clarion staff track down every property owned by me or my family. That cabin is in the name of the Kingston Family Trust of which Desdemona is the sole beneficiary. Kingston was her mother’s surname before marriage. While you are here let me have Desirée show you to your new office although I do not know how long we shall be in this building. The polls indicate that we might be moving soon.”

Desirée turned out to be his attractive secretary and when she realized that I was not just a kid that wandered in off the street but the mayor’s Security Advisor, she became much friendlier and chatted freely as she took me to a large office with ‘Security Advisor’ painted on the glass door.

“Have you worked for the mayor for a long time Desirée?” I asked her before I stepped into the office.

“I was the previous deputy mayor’s secretary and became Mayor Bronson’s secretary when he married Julietta, who had been his personal assistant up to then. That surprised everyone because Mayor Bronson is a very ambitious man.”

“He seems to be very popular.” I commented.

“Yes, he knows how to work the electorate and I suppose that it helps to have a lot of money if you are running for public office.”

“How did the mayor make his money? I heard that he was not always as rich as he is today.”

“As far as I know, he inherited most of it through his first wife. Her parents were rich and they employed Bradford Bronson to manage their business when Delice’s father had his heart attack. Bradford took the business from strength to strength and married the boss’s daughter so in the end, he finished up with everything

when Delice's mother died a year after her father went."

Chapter Six

After enjoying the feel of my new office for a while I told the receptionist at the front desk that I would be out and gave her my cell phone number in case of emergencies.

I drove to the hospital to check on Desdemona and although it was outside normal visiting hours I was permitted to see 'my wife'.

Desdemona was sitting up in the hospital bed looking quite cheerful.

"Hi Des, how are you feeling?"

"Oh I'm fine, darling, aren't you going to kiss your little wife hello?"

"Oh that! Your father would have had a fit if I had you admitted under his name. What did you take a sleeping pill for and where did you get such a strong one?"

"My mother always took one whenever she was emotionally upset, which in her case was very often. Julietta gave me two. She said I should take both at once if I became emotionally upset but I thought I would just take one to see how it felt when I woke up."

I confessed to her how things had turned out from Janine Drew's visit.

"I knew that she wanted something other than cooking oil. What did you want of her that I wasn't willing to give you anyway?"

"I'm not used to attractive girls making up to me. At school I was regarded as a nerd. Even if I had wanted to, I wouldn't have known how to get her to leave." I told her contritely.

"The girls in your high school must have been blind and extremely shallow. Now when can I get out of here?"

"The doctor told me that they would keep you here overnight for observation." I told her.

"Tell him that I am going to my own doctor and *you* can take over the job of observing me all the time. You've seen me naked often enough. Let's get out of here."

It wasn't as simple as all that. I was required to pay out a lot of money and sign indemnities until my right hand was sore but eventually we were permitted to leave the hospital and I drove Desdemona home.

"Des, I want you to give me the second pill that Julietta gave you. I need to get a chemical analysis of it." I said as I was driving.

"Sure, Freddie, what's the problem? The pill worked fine."

"I need to be certain that Juliette was not trying to kill you when she told you to take two but also I am not sure that it is legal for someone to give someone else a pill prescribed for them. I think that it could be construed as drug dealing."

Wilkinson greeted us at the door. "I am pleased to see you recovered Miss Desdemona." He said with a fond smile.

"Thanks Armagh!" she said lightly.

"Why did you call him Armagh?" I asked her when we were back in her apartment.

"That really is his first name but no one knows how to pronounce it. He prefers to be called Wilkinson. So to tease him I call him Armagh every now and again."

"Why you want to tease him? He is such a nice man."

"He means more to me than my father does, Freddie. I love him and my teasing is affectionate."

"Let me have that second pill, I am going into town, Des, there is something that I have to investigate."

She dug it out of her purse but held back from handing it to me.

"I'm coming with you, Freddie." She said firmly.

"Don't you think that you should rest in bed as the nice doctor at the hospital wanted you to do?"

"Don't be silly. After that episode with Janine Drew, I'm not letting you out of my sight and anyway I'm fine and I wouldn't stay in bed even if you refused to take me with you."

"Okay! Okay! Come along if you must but promise me that you will obey instructions if Spike or any of his minions show up."

"I always listen to you Freddie." She said sweetly but inaccurately.

I understand why everyone just left her to do whatever she wanted. She was a diminutive steamroller.

I drove to the diner where I had first seen Spike. It was a little late in the morning so I did not hold out any great hope of seeing him eating breakfast but to my surprise he was sitting with two men in his usual booth. I had parked the car where I could get a good view of him but there was a bar across the diner window that fell exactly across his mouth so if I wanted to see what he was saying, I would have to move. Unfortunately parking at that time of day was at a premium so the only way I could watch him was if I got out of the car and stood in the street in full view of everyone while I focused the field glasses into the diner. If I did that he would see me as clearly as I would see him.

I thought for a moment or two then I pulled out my cell phone and called Detective Jim Goodings.

“Detective Goodings, I am sitting on Green Street looking into the Java Diner and I can see Barforth Crawley talking to two men. Can you come over and arrest him?”

“Gee Mr Huntsman, I’d love to do that but I am in the middle of a murder investigation. What I could do for you is call the desk sergeant and ask him to send out a squad car to pick him up. Would that help?”

“Sure it would help but I suggest you send at least two cars. Crawley won’t give up without a fight and I don’t know anything at all about his companions.”

“Okay, I’ll get it done Mr Huntsman. Give my regards to the mayor and don’t forget to tell him that I cooperated with you.” That last sentence explained to me his sudden change of heart. He had been anything but helpful when I reported the kidnapping to him and now he realized that he could end up on the mayor’s shit list.

I was telling Desdemona what I had done when we heard the sirens in the distance. Both police cars were making so much noise that the instant they turned onto Green Street Spike rose from his booth and slipped out the back way while the other two stayed where they were and carried on drinking coffee. When the police

entered the diner every customer shook his or her head in answer to whether they had seen the man in the photo. I saw a policeman leaving the diner saying "Another false alarm!"

I don't know why they expected him to stay put until they walked in and arrested him.

With that particular project down the tubes, I moved on to the next.

"Des, do you know which drug store Julietta uses?" I asked her.

"If you are referring to where she got those pills from, Freddie, I can tell you that it was not from our regular place. I noticed that the pharmaceutical label was from a drug store on the other side of town in Lincoln Street. I thought it kind of odd but I forgot about it until you started investigating that pill."

"Do you know what Julietta's maiden name was?"

"Yes of course I do. It was Finch. She used to be my Dad's secretary."

"Am I right in assuming that Doctor Forrester used to be Julietta's doctor before she married your father?"

"Yes, I remember because she wanted him to tend to me but I did not like him and refused to leave the doctor my mother had used."

I drove to Lincoln Street and located the drugstore. I went into the store and went over to the prescription counter where the pharmacist was filling in a prescription while a cycle messenger waited to rush it to the patient.

I waited until the pharmacist was done and then approached him.

"Good day to you sir; I am an investigator working for the mayor's office. May I have a moment of your time, please?"

"Sure thing, son, how can I help you?" The pharmacist was a man in his sixties.

"I am trying to trace a prescription that was issued to a Miss Julietta Finch about ten years ago by Doctor Forrester. Would you be able to access records of that prescription?"

"I sure could son. My records go back to when I first opened this drug store but there are a few things I am going to need before I can do that."

"Certainly, sir, what do you need?" I asked expecting him to ask for a fee.

"First off, I'll need to see your identity card from the mayor's office and then I'll need letters of authorization from Doctor Forrester and Miss Julietta Finch. After that I'll need the exact date of the prescription and then if you require a copy of the prescription I'll need a five dollar fee."

"Oh, as Doctor Forrester and Miss Julietta Finch are both suspects in this case, it won't be possible to obtain their authorization. Is there no way around that?"

"Sure thing son, then what you will need is a court order."

I was way out of my depth here so I said. "Thank you for that information, I'll get started on collecting the things that you want." I turned and walked out the door but I stood outside where I could watch the pharmacist from a safe distance.

He picked up the telephone and dialed. "Hello, may I speak to Doctor Henry Forrester, please. Henry? It's Silas Mason here. Look, I've just had a young feller come in here and ask to see a prescription that you issued to a Miss Finch about ten years ago. He mentioned that you were both suspects in a case he was working on for the mayor's office. I thought that I would give you a quick 'heads-up' in case you need to contact a lawyer or warn Miss Finch or whatever. Ah, don't mention it, you'd do the same for me, I'm sure."

I slipped back into the car where Desdemona was dozing. She roused as soon as I slammed the car door home.

"What did you find out, Freddie?"

"Only that: medical professionals stick together. I don't know how I'm going to get a copy of that prescription. Drug stores have a high level of security to prevent drug theft and that will protect those records also."

"Maybe you can bribe someone else who works in the drugstore to get you a copy." Desdemona suggested brightly.

I studied the drugstore and saw a cashier, a bookkeeper and clerk moving around inside the store. Cashiers are chosen for their honesty and bookkeepers for their integrity so that left the clerk. I pointed this out to Desdemona.

“Let’s just follow him home so we can get some idea of who he is before we tackle him, Freddie. It would be a pity if he was loyal and reported our approach to him to his boss. That would warn the pharmacist that we are willing to try methods other than a court order.”

We sat in the car all afternoon venturing out only to purchase two hamburgers and coffees. At six, the clerk put away his apron and pulled on a jacket and wheeled a bicycle out onto the pavement.

“That’s a good sign, Freddie. He did not work even one minute overtime.”

I followed at a distance as the clerk rode downtown to a seedy-looking apartment block of one room apartments where he hoisted the bicycle up on his shoulder and carried it up the stairs to the fifth and top storey.

After following him up the stairs I returned to the car and told Desdemona.

“The apartments are as gross as the outside of the building. There was one with the door wide open. Short entrance hall, bathroom on left and kitchenette on right and bedsitter beyond; this guy has got to be susceptible to a cash incentive.”

“Before we do that Freddie, let me see if I can’t coax him into it. If my way fails at least he is not likely to report my flirting with him to his boss and it leaves us one more crack of the whip. We can try bribery then.”

“How are you going to do it?”

“I’ll go to the drugstore and make some purchases, flirt with him a little and get him to suggest a date. If we get as far as the date I’ll ask him to do me a favor at the point when he wants *me* to do *him* a favor. He’ll think that he’ll get sex if he brings me the prescription. He is going to be very disappointed when all he gets is money.”

“Sounds as if that could be a dangerous game to play, Des; what if he gets violent when he delivers but you don’t?”

“You’ll be around the instant he delivers. My guess if he has to fight or take some money that he’ll opt for the money. You are taller and heavier than he is.”

Her plan seemed safe enough so on the next morning I dropped her off on Lincoln Street and since at that time of day there was no available parking I arranged to meet her at lunchtime in a restaurant around the corner from the drugstore. The restaurant had its own valet parking.

I spent the morning on Green Street watching the Java Diner for Barforth Crawley but he did not put in an appearance and as midday approached I left for Lincoln Street.

I was early for the lunchtime crowd so I found a table that gave me a view of the entrance and I settled down with the Clarion newspaper to while away the time. The restaurant made excellent coffee and I was already on my third cup when Desdemona came in behind a crowd of lunchtime diners.

“How did it go, Des?”

“It’s totally cool, Freddie. His name is Ray Winter. He wants to take me dancing tonight. He is into Latin-American and he says that there is a place out on the way to the lake that has a band that will blow my socks off. He definitely has aspirations to taking off more than just my socks. The place is called ‘La Bailadora’. As he doesn’t have a car I offered to pick him up outside the Drugstore at seven tonight. You are going to have to lend me your car; I don’t want to intimidate him with the Porsche. You won’t mind driving the Porsche will you? I really don’t mind if you bash it so you don’t have to be ultra-careful.”

The restaurant was not bad. We had a very nice lunch which Desdemona paid for with her credit card despite my protests. After lunch we drove to my house where we picked up the Porsche before driving to the mayoral residence.

“Sir,” said Wilkinson as we arrived. “Detective Goodings phoned for you twice. He seemed most anxious to speak to you but I could

not give him your cell phone number as I do not have it.” He said this last with a faint hint of censure in his voice.

I gave him my number for future reference and then telephoned the Detective.

“Ah, Mister Huntsman, thank you for calling me back. I was anxious to let you know that Miss Gertrude Entwhistle, also known as Dirty Gertie Spotless, was released on bail of one hundred thousand dollars. The Assistant DA thought that the bail amount would make sure that she stayed in jail but it was posted on her behalf immediately the judge ruled on it. Please let the mayor know that his children are once again at risk and give him my personal regards.”

Obviously Detective Goodings was working hard to get into the mayor’s good books.

As soon as Daniel returned from school, he now had three FBI agents watching him, I took him out into the garden to practice throwing and catching a baseball. Julietta would have objected to this harmless pastime but she was away at a committee meeting of one of her charities, where she, along with her fellow-members, would get too pie-eyed to remember that they *had* any children.

Daniel was thrilled when the three FBI agents joined in the game and praised his ball-handling abilities.

“Why have you got three agents looking after Daniel?” I asked one of them.

“The agency allocated two agents for each of the mayor’s children after the last kidnapping attempt on Daniel. Desdemona disappeared with you and Agent Smithson ate a bad hotdog and so all three remaining agents have been guarding Daniel.”

“Does that mean that one of you guys is supposed to be protecting Desdemona?”

“Yes, that’s my assignment. I’m Special Agent Godfrey Jayville Porter, my friends call me Jeejay.”

“Jeejay, I’m Fred Huntsman. Desdemona is going on a date tonight and I’m worried about guarding her on my own. Are you available to help?”

“Well, if I can knock off now for a few hours’ sleep, I guess I should be available. As I said: it *is* my assignment.”

At six o’ clock that evening, Desdemona set out driving my car with Agent Jeejay Porter sitting beside her and me following in her Porsche.

The Porsche was a new experience for me. It felt so powerful that it seemed that there would be ‘lift-off’ at any moment. Following my own car, my ankle developed a crick from being held up off the accelerator to prevent me from sailing past my little Ford.

We battled through the evening home-coming traffic to the other side of town and when we reached Lincoln Street, Jeejay swapped cars so that Desdemona could arrive at her rendezvous unaccompanied.

I watched her pull to the curb where Ray Winter was already waiting. He was wearing tight Latin-American pants and a blouse-like top with wide sleeves narrowing down to wrist bands. Obviously he took Latin-American dancing very seriously.

“Hi, gorgeous!” I saw him say.”You are really going to enjoy this place tonight. Sorry about not including dinner in the invitation but my budget just won’t stretch that far.”

I could not see what Desdemona replied but he said just before he slipped into my car:

“Gee that’s totally cool of you. Not many chicks will spring for dinner.”

We had already made reservations at La Bailadora. A table for four just in case Des and Winter arrived to find that they couldn’t get in. We need not have worried. Ray Winter was well-known and he had a little nook up near the bar where he used to perch his partner when every chair in the place was taken.

I saw him say to Des. “I used to work as a waiter in this place. They know me well and I have won a couple of dance competitions here. My credit is good and the bartender is a friend who is always willing to slip me some extra drinks every now and again.”

With the noise level in that place I was at an advantage. Even people sitting alongside each other had to shout to hear one another

whereas I could make out a conversation from clear across the room.

I saw Winter lean across the bar and speak to the bartender. He said: "This one is a good one, Hank. Towards the end of the evening I'll give you the sign and you can slip in a special, okay?"

"No problem, Ray, usual fee applies."

I worried about what the 'special' was. I didn't like the way that Winter made sure that Desdemona had moved away before he spoke to the bartender.

The steaks that Jeejay and I had ordered arrived. They were exceptionally good and were accompanied by a chili sauce that had to be eaten with great caution unless you had an asbestos tongue but was nonetheless delicious. I saw Winter order the same steak and Desdemona ordered a salad and grilled fish.

At nine the band began to play and I have to confess that the rhythms were stirring. My feet were tapping to the beat of the drums when Winter and Desdemona took to the dance floor. Winter really knew how to dance and Des did a very creditable job of matching his moves. The music was wild and exciting and Des's eyes were alive and sparkling when the music ended. I had not noticed before but Des looked very Spanish with her large dark eyes and black hair, which was somewhat disordered after the dance. I could see that Winter was much taken with her. He went up to the bar to collect drinks and I caught Desdemona's eye and signaled to her to go to the powder room.

I caught up with her just where the girl's room branched away from the boy's room.

"He is up to something with the bartender, Des. He said that he would need a 'special' later in the evening. Be careful what you drink."

She laughed at me. "You sound just like my father, Freddie. I know how to take care of myself. This isn't my first date, you know." She walked into the powder room and left me with the impression that she would not listen to a word I said.

I went back to Jeejay and told him about Winter's words with the bartender.

"It could be that the bartender is a dealer and Winter is asking for a hit." Jeejay suggested.

"Surely he would have bought it there and then in that case?" I asked.

"You don't do drugs, do you Fred?"

"No, I don't. Why?"

"Nobody carries drugs on them in a place like this. If there is a police raid you would get nabbed for possession. They leave it with the dealer until they want to take the hit then they pick it up and go directly to the bathroom or out to their car and take it."

"That worries me Jeejay, if Winter is on drugs, what might he do to Desdemona?"

"Are you stuck on her, Fred?"

"Hell no, but she *is* my responsibility. I have to answer to the mayor if anything happens to her."

He gave me a searching look and then said mildly. "Nothing is going to happen to her. That is why we are here."

In view of Jeejay's attitude I said nothing more but I became increasingly alarmed as I noticed Desdemona downing the drinks that Winter brought to her with increasing frequency. The dancing was fast and furious and both Winter and Desdemona were streaming with sweat and obviously constantly thirsty.

I felt a tap upon my shoulder and looked up into a familiar face.

"How about a dance, Fred?" It was Janine Drew.

I opened my mouth to tell her to get lost when suddenly something prompted me to change my mind.

"Sure thing, Janine. I'd really like a word with you." Not that she would hear much of what I had to say in the overall noise level of the place.

On the other hand I had no difficulty in making out what she said.

"Fred, I'm sorry about that article about you being out at the lake. It wasn't until it was published that I realized that I had broken your cover. It was very blonde of me. Will you forgive me?"

Janine looked very hot that evening and I am not talking about the ambient heat of the venue. Her long blonde hair and bright blue eyes almost out-shadowed her figure although those breasts cast a pretty big shadow of their own.

“Okay, Janine, you’re forgiven but don’t do that to me again. It could have cost me my job with the mayor’s office.”

I don’t know if she got all of my little speech but she nodded contritely.

We danced well together. Nothing like Winter and Desdemona were doing but it was smooth and satisfying.

“I see that you are still riding herd on little Miss Hellcat.” Janine commented into my ear since we were now swaying together as close as two people can get standing up.

“She’s really not a bad kid once you get to know her.” I murmured.

“Not according to all the stories I have heard.” She snuggled back.”When you are finished with your baby-sitting duties, look me up. I’ll show you what it is like to be with a *real* woman.”

Now I am as impressionable as the next man when it comes to beautiful blondes with killer figures but I had gone all through high-school with girls treating me as if I were transparent. Alarm bells were ringing in my head that this veritable pin-up girl was suddenly so anxious for my company.

The music ended just as I began to wonder how Janine managed, in the last few days, to be in two places where no-one had any right to expect me.

I led her back to the table where she had found me and being a gentleman offered her a drink. She accepted immediately asking for a rum and coke. I left her sitting at my table and shouting over the crowd to Jeejay. I could see she was asking him what he did for a living. His answer was non-committal. He said that he was a friend of mine and that I had offered him a free dinner.

I collected the drinks: two cokes and one rum and coke and waded through the crowd back to the table holding the drinks up above my head.

Janine accepted hers gratefully and drank it down in an instant.

"That was great!" she said. "Just what I needed after all those Margaritas I've been drinking." It only occurred to me then that she was not absolutely sober.

She rested her arms on the table and said. "Freddie, I could do with another drink."

I rose again and went back to the bar. The bartender looked at me and said quietly:

"Are you the guy with the drop-dead blonde?"

"Er, yes, I am."

"Is she putting out?"

"Er, no."

"Ten dollars and she will."

I had no comprehension of what he was saying. I thought he said 'ten dollars *that* she will' as in a hypothetical bet that tonight she was going to put out.

It just so happened that the smallest I had on me was a twenty and I passed it across to him when I asked for the rum and coke. I grabbed the change he gave me in one hand and the drink in the other and battled back through the press.

To clear my way through the crowd I pushed the change into my pants pocket where I forgot about it.

Janine reached gratefully for her drink as I reached the table and before I had seated myself, she had drained the glass.

I looked over at Desdemona to find that she was staring intently at me with what can only be described as a scowl on her Spanish-looking face. I looked away before Winter could turn to see where she was staring.

Janine was trying to stand up: "I feel weird, Freddie. You had better take me home."

"Oh hell! Jeejay, can you..." Then I remembered that I was in Desdemona's Porsche so I would have to take her myself but if I did that, I would leave Jeejay stranded and unable to keep an eye on Desdemona.

"Janine! Janine! Do you have a car here?"

“Shure, thing Freddie. Keyssh in my purshh.”

I picked up her purse and handed the Porsche keys to Jeejay. “Jeejay, sorry about this. I’ll have to get her home.” I slung her arm over my neck and clutching her purse in my left hand I staggered through the crowd, half-dragging and half-carrying an almost limp Janine.

By the time we were outside, Janine was hardly conscious and it was fortunate that I was able to identify her car by pressing the remote button and watching the parking lights flash on a small Chev. She had parked illegally close to the entrance.

I poured her into the passenger seat and checked the address on her registration tag.

I strapped her in and by that time she was complacent but barely conscious.

I drove quickly to her address which turned out to be a quite up-market block of condos. I had no idea which one was hers and after trying to get a response from her for several minutes, I left her in the car and knocked on the closest door.

“Hello, I’m looking for Janine Drew the reporter. Do you know the number of her condo?”

She’s number ten but I’m fairly certain that I saw her leave tonight.” The fat guy at the door said.

“It’s okay, she’s in my car but she has passed out and couldn’t tell me her number.”

“Hey, can I help at all? Janine is my favorite neighbor.”

“Thanks, I think I can manage but I’ll tell her that you offered.”

I lifted her out of the car and she murmured some protest. I carried her and her purse to her front door and used the key set from the car to open her door.

There were two bedrooms in use but the style and size of the clothing in the first closet did not suit Janine so I deposited her on the double bed in the main bedroom.

I took off her shoes but left her otherwise untouched on top of the covers. I left a note under her keys on the bedside table. “Home delivery service provided by Fred Huntsman. P.S. I hope you feel

better in the morning Margaritas do not mix well with rum and coke.”

Chapter Seven

I used her home telephone to call for a taxicab and had the cabbie drive me out to La Bailadora where the party was still going at full swing.

Jeejay had not moved from our table and he was still sipping on his glass of coke. The band was taking a break and conversation was marginally possible.

“What happened to the gorgeous blonde?” He asked mildly as I sat down.

“She passed out. I think she had quite a few Margaritas before she asked me to dance.”

“You’ve certainly got something that the women want, Fred. I wish I had two hot chicks crazy about me.”

“Janine is a reporter. What she wants is a story and I think she sees one in me. Desdemona is my boss’s daughter and it is my job to look after her. Women love twisting men around their little fingers. I think they both see me as the perfect patsy.”

“Not if I am any judge of body-language. Desdemona is furious that you danced with Janine, I saw her looking daggers at both of you. Of course, that might have had something to do with how Janine danced with you. She looked like she was a sticking plaster and you were an injury.”

I shrugged. “Women are impossible to fathom. It’s okay for Desdemona to dance wild sexy dances with Winter but I’m offensive if I dance a sensual dance with Janine. Go figure!”

“Oops, I guess we have to move. It looks like our targets are leaving.” Jeejay said suddenly.

I looked up and sure enough Desdemona and Winter were leaving. I was surprised. The way that guy danced I thought that they would be at it until the place closed up.

Desdemona was saying. “Sorry about wasting that last drink, Ray. It just tasted off to me. Would you like to go somewhere for coffee before we go home?”

I could not get his reply as his back was toward me. I hurried to their table and grabbed the glass she had declined to drink, wrapping the whole thing including the contents in some shrink-wrap borrowed from the kitchen before following my little blue Ford which was not hard to catch up to in the Porsche.

We soon found out what his answer had been to her question when they pulled into a drive-in place and ordered coffee and waffles.

I was unable to park where I could see their lips and in any event it was probably too dark in the car even if I had been in a good position.

"Why have you got that glass that you brought out of the La Bailadora?" Jeejay asked as soon as we parked.

"I want to have the contents chemically tested and I need it dusted for fingerprints." I told him.

"Okay, I'll handle it for you but do you mind telling me why?"

"I think that Winter had the drink spiked by the bartender. If I am right, I might be able to use it as a lever to get him to cooperate on a matter I am trying to get him to do for me."

"Ah blackmail!" Jeejay said smiling broadly.

"All in a good cause." I told him calmly so that he did not think too much of it.

Jeejay and I ordered our own coffee and waffles and sat for an hour watching my little car without knowing what was going on.

"If you are not interested in Janine," Jeejay said suddenly. "Do you mind if I ask her out?"

"Not at all but I'm not sure if tomorrow would be a good time to call her. She is likely to have the mother of all hangovers."

"I can't leave it too long. She probably won't remember me."

"You'll be lucky if she remembers where she was tonight let alone that you were there."

"That's the story of my life. The Bureau doesn't leave you long enough in one place to form a relationship with any woman let alone a gorgeous one. Most of the guys I know have relationship within the Bureau."

Just then Desdemona restarted my car and drove off. Jeejay had to get out and return our tray to the serving counter leaving us several minutes behind her so that once again I had to gun the Porsche to try to catch up.

We saw my car in the distance and were making good progress closing the gap when suddenly a black car swerved into my little car and forced it off the road and into the roadside barrier.

Two men jumped out of the black car just as we arrived. They were both brandishing guns as they ran forward.

Jeejay and I both followed after them but they were too intent on Desdemona to notice us. One of them wrenched open the door and found that he was looking at Winter. He struck at Winter with his pistol but Winter was much quicker than he anticipated. Winter's leg shot out and his foot rammed into the gunman's groin. The gunman clutched his pained crotch as Winter unbuckled his seatbelt and rammed his head into the gunman's lowered face. Blood spurted from his nose and he staggered backward dropping his pistol in the process. Winter picked it up as Jeejay clapped his pistol to the head of the other gunman who was struggling unsuccessfully to pull Desdemona from the car while she was still secured by her seatbelt.

With both gunmen under control, Jeejay handcuffed the two together and bundled them into their own car since my little car looked like a permanent roadside feature wrapped around the barrier.

I took Desdemona to the Porsche and promised Ray Winter that I would get her safely home. Winter drove the black car while Jeejay kept an eye on the prisoners.

Desdemona was still badly shaken by the crash and subsequent attack but she was not too shaken to say: "I suppose that you had a lovely evening with that reporter woman. I saw you dancing cheek to cheek with her."

"You didn't do too badly yourself Desdemona. You were throwing yourself around with wild abandon on the dance floor."

"It isn't too often that you get the chance to dance with someone who really knows how and anyway *you*'ve never offered to take me dancing."

"Of course not, I'm too busy keeping you out of trouble! Doesn't what just happened tell you that there are still people out to get you? As long as Spike and Dirty Gertie are free, there will be attempts at kidnapping you. Even when they are locked up others will get the same idea. You are the daughter of an important politician who also happens to be very rich. You are a prime target, for heaven's sake!"

"You are just trying to change the subject! Whenever that Janine Drew comes on the scene you forget everything and concentrate on her alone."

"That's garbage and you know it! She is only after news. Tonight she came up and apologized for publishing her first piece about us being up at the lake. I could hardly be rude to her after her apologies so when she asked me to dance I accepted. You were having fun so I saw no harm in doing the same thing."

"You went off with her. I thought you would spend the night with her."

"I took her home because she had too much to drink. I guess it is obvious that she followed us out there so she wasn't with anyone else. I couldn't just leave her there and by the time I got her home she had passed out completely."

"You see! She is a drunken tramp!"

"According to what I heard you did much the same thing every night except that you didn't just stop at alcohol for your kicks." I pointed out to her.

"Well, that may be true but I'm younger than she is and I had just graduated so going a bit wild is expected."

"You looked exceptionally attractive tonight and you danced incredibly well." I said diplomatically changing the subject.

"Do you think so? Ray said that I looked like a beautiful Spanish senorita."

"That was a very fair description. Where did you learn to dance like that?"

"I took dancing lessons and Spanish was one of my best subjects; also I love Latin-American music."

"How well did you do with Ray Winter? Did you get him to agree to get you a copy of the prescription?"

"He agreed tentatively and then that black car bumped us. I'll have to follow up with him later."

I returned to the Mayoral residence and as it was after two in the morning we both retired to our bedrooms.

On the following morning I went down to breakfast to be greeted by a very ebullient Jeejay Porter. "Fred, those two confessed that they were offered a kilo of cocaine by Barforth Crawley to snatch Desdemona and bring her to him."

"So where do we pick him up?" I asked immediately.

"They don't know. They said that they had to call him as soon as they had the girl. I tried calling the number but I get the 'service discontinued' message. The phone was a throw-away and somehow he knew that his plan had failed."

"So why are you so happy, Jeejay?"

"Well, we have their statements as hard evidence against Spike Crawley and we also know that he is using up his stock of drugs as currency to get things done. He can't afford to lose Dirty Gertie's bail money so she can't skip out on her bail. We've got him pretty well pinned down. All we have to do is find him."

"That's the problem. I've been thinking that he has a cop on his payroll that keeps him informed about what's going on. On the last two occasions that we have tried to grab him, he seems to have known in advance and sneaked away before we got there."

"I think that you have something there, Fred. Let's see if we can work out who the traitor is. What was the first occasion when he slipped out of the net?"

"We were up at the lake and I saw Dirty Gertie there. We phoned through to Wilkinson who called the police and they sent a team up to the lake. They caught Dirty Gertie but Spike got away."

"Okay, I wonder why he did not warn Dirty Gertie? It has cost him a hundred thousand dollars of his cash resources to keep her

out of prison. What was the second time?"

"I saw Spike in the diner where I first overheard about the kidnapping. I called Detective Goodings. He was at a crime scene working on a murder case so he could not come himself. He asked for two squad cars and they came with sirens blaring. Spike heard them blocks away and as soon as he knew that they were headed his way he slipped out of the back door. They were still two blocks away when he disappeared."

"So to whom did Wilkinson speak when he asked for someone to go out to the lake?"

"I don't know. Let's ask him." I said.

I found Wilkinson and he said that he had spoken to Detective Goodings on that occasion.

"Hmm, so the common factor here is Detective Goodings." Jeejay said reflectively. "Let me make some enquiries about him."

I took Daniel to school with one of the other FBI Agents. Daniel loved it. He said I was much more fun than the FBI men. He wanted me to promise that I would pick him up after school. I told him that I could not promise but I would be there if I could.

When I got back to the Mayoral residence Wilkinson informed me that the master wished to see me in his study. You don't keep the boss waiting so I went in immediately.

"Ah, sit down Mr Huntsman. Tell me how your investigation is going."

"Sir, last night we arrested two more men that had been sent by Barforth Crawley to try to kidnap Desdemona. They confessed that they had been offered a kilo of cocaine to do it. In the process my personal car was written off and I wondered if you would be prepared to lend me any spare car until the insurance company pays out on mine."

"I'll tell Wilkinson to put the Jaguar at your disposal." He said carelessly. "Have you got any closer to tracking down Barforth Crawley?"

"Sir, the two arrested men said that they were to call Crawley, on a cell phone number he had given them, when the job was done

and he would tell them where to take Desdemona. The FBI tried the number and it was no longer in use so someone, we think on the police force, is informing Crawley of our moves.”

“I am anxious to finalize this matter Mr Huntsman. The gubernatorial polls are going well for me at the moment and I would not like to see that trend reversed. It would be a feather in the cap of my campaign if the mayoral investigation team could uncover a traitor in the police force so please use every endeavor to track this person down. All the resources of my office are at your disposal. You have only to ask Wilkinson for anything you need and he will see to it that you get it. Keep up the good work and keep me informed, through Wilkinson if I am unavailable.”

I knew that I had been dismissed so I left the study. I ran up to my room to collect the insurance papers for my car to copy for attachment to my claim and by the time I came down again Wilkinson approached me and offered me a set of car keys.

“Sir, I have taken the liberty of having the Jaguar brought to the front for you. Miss Desdemona sends her compliments, she is going for a sauna and massage and will see you at luncheon.”

I thanked him and went out to the Jaguar. I was in awe of that car. It was like being in the cockpit of a fighter airplane. Just driving it was a pleasure that was almost sensual.

I drove to Janine’s condo and rang the bell. There was a long pause before the door was opened by a dull-eyed pasty-skinned apparition.

“Oh, it’s you! What the hell did you do to me last night?”

“I think the damage was done by a string of Margaritas before I even saw you last night.”

She threw the door open and gestured for me to come in.

“I’ve drunk Margaritas plenty of times but I have never felt like this before. Did you spike my drinks?”

“It would have been a sweet revenge if I had but I assure you that I did not.”

“I remember that the last rum and coke you brought me tasted funny and I began to feel woozy after that.”

"I am surprised that you could taste anything at all after all you drank. I brought you home and put you on the bed that I believed was yours and left you there. Don't you think that if I had been the type to spike your drink that I would have done a good deal more to you than that?"

"Yeah, I was fully dressed when I woke up but hell, I feel gosh-awful."

"Maybe, you should do what Desdemona is doing: she is having a sauna and a massage."

"That's great for her but in this town that sort of thing can cost around three hundred dollars. I work for my living. I don't have a daddy to pay my bills for me."

"I'll tell you what. I feel partially responsible for what happened to you. Pull on some clothing. I'll run you up to the country club and the sauna and massage will be my treat."

She didn't wait for me to put it in writing; she was down in the Jaguar exactly two minutes later.

"Say Freddie, is this your car?" she asked with wide-eyed wonder.

"No, the mayor has put it at my disposal, why do you ask?"

"It's the nicest car I've ever been in. The mayor must think very highly of you."

"I think that he is just a very generous guy."

"He certainly is a very good-looking man. I just love men with graying temples."

"Yes," I said a little irked that she should mention him with such admiration, "but have you seen his gorgeous wife?"

"No, but I hear that she is a lush. She spends all day drinking and has got herself into a number of scrapes that the mayor has had to buy her out of: speeding, reckless driving and even drunk and disorderly. I heard that he had to stop her from driving and gave her a full-time chauffeur."

I pulled up at the country club and went in with her to provide my credit card and signature for her sauna and massage.

"Freddie, I really appreciate this." She kissed me lightly on the lips before she went in for her treat.

Chapter Eight

Without much hope of finding him and almost as a morning ritual, I went down to the Java Diner on Green Street to see if Spike was there. To my amazement he was sitting in his usual booth talking to Dirty Gertie and one other man whose face could not be seen due to the position he was sitting in.

I was sorely tempted to call Jeejay to come and make the arrest but the chances of Spike getting away again were too high so I opted to find out what he was saying.

I used the field glasses to get a better view of Spike's lips.

"We gotta do a better job of getting one of those kids. This time I figure we should go for the boy. Bronson is more vulnerable there. If we c'n get that kid we c'n ask for five mill. Gertie, you concentrate on our getaway plans. We can't get out by air the FBI have that covered. I figure a rented motor boat from south Texas to Mexico; then a flight to South America. Pilcher, you get a team together to go after the boy. He is heavily guarded but he goes to school and that's where you ought to be able to get him. One FBI agent waits outside the school and the other goes into the classroom with him. If you neutralize the one outside in the car before he has a chance to use his throat radio then the guy inside the school should be easy enough to handle with so many school kids that could be used as hostages and cover. You get the kid to the parking lot at La Bailadora. At that time in the morning the lot will be empty and I will have a helicopter there to get us to Brownsville."

One of the other two must have asked him where the money was coming from.

"Don't you worry about the money that's my problem; you just get on with what you gotta do." Having said his piece he did not waste time in goodbyes, he simply rose and slipped out of the back of the diner.

I circled quickly around to see if I could spot him walking away but the diner backed onto nothing. The rear door was just a door

with two steps up to it and surrounded by garbage bins. I could not work out where he had disappeared to in the time it took to start the car and drive around to the back of the diner.

I consoled myself that at least I knew his plans and could get the FBI to counteract them.

I went back to the Mayoral residence expecting to find Jeejay Porter but he was on duty at Daniel's school however Desdemona was back from her sauna and massage.

"Hello Freddie. Boy! Did that Latin-American session work every muscle in my body! I ached all over. Are we going back to make sure that Ray Winter remembers that he has to get a copy of the prescription?"

"Yes, we are but I must first contact Jeejay Porter. We have to lay a trap for Spike's men."

"Isn't it better if we lay a trap for Spike?"

"It would be if we could corner the rat but I have information about his next plan and he intends to kidnap Daniel from his school."

"When?"

"That is what I don't know. It could possibly be today so I must warn Jeejay."

"How do you get all this information before the FBI does?"

"I listen in on what Spike says in the Java Diner." I hoped that would give her the impression that I had some sort of listening device set up in there.

"How do you know that it is Spike saying it?"

"Believe me; I know what his voice sounds like." I said untruthfully.

Wilkinson knocked and entered at my bidding.

"Excuse me sir, Special Agent Porter asked me to inform you that the laboratory had analyzed the drink you supplied to him. It contains a heavy dose of Rohypnol, the so-called date-rape drug. The fingerprints on the glass were those of Miss Desdemona and a Raymond Winter also known as Fancy Ray Fallon. Fancy Ray had been in prison for several cat burglaries and is now out on parole.

There was a third set of prints on the rim of the glass. They are those of a Domingo Fuentes who has a conviction for drug dealing. Special Agent Porter believes he is the bartender at La Bailadora’.”

“Thank you, Wilkinson. That is most useful information.” I said as Wilkinson withdrew.

“So the bastard tried to rape me did he?” Desdemona said harshly. “I’m going to get him for that.”

“No, you are not. You are going to ask him to get the prescription for you and only if he declines will we threaten him with parole violation and attempted rape.”

“What on earth is this damned prescription that you are so fixated on?” Desdemona wanted to know.

“I’m working on something to do with your beloved step-mother, Des. Believe me, it is in your interests to get that prescription.”

“I don’t give a damn about Julietta but I wouldn’t like Daniel to get hurt by anything that I do. Julietta is his mother, after all.”

I made no comment about that. All I said was: “We’ll use the Porsche. It is easier for parking.”

I drove over to Lincoln Street and after circling the block several times found a parking behind the drugstore. I let Desdemona walk around to the entrance before I followed her and tried to position myself where I could see them talking.

“Hi Ray,” Desdemona said cheerfully. “Thanks for a totally cool evening! Every bone in my body aches today but you have cool moves and I really enjoyed it.”

“It was my pleasure, Dezzy and thanks for springing for the dinner.”

“Don’t forget you promised to dig out a copy of that prescription for me. I have written down all the details on this paper for you.”

“Look Dezzy, those papers are stored in the stockroom which is kept locked at all times. Before I can get in there the boss wants to know what for.”

“You told me that you are always in and out of there stacking away newly-arrived orders and collecting items to re-stock the shelves.”

"Yeah, well I am but if the boss walks in while I'm scratching around the old files, I'm fired! There is no possible excuse I can give him for doing that."

"Yes there is! Tell him you saw a rat in the files and you are trying to kill it."

"He'll tell me to put some rat bait down. There is enough of it scattered around anyway."

"Okay but at least it is an excuse that will prevent you from being fired."

"Dezzy, I'm sorry but I really don't want to try it. I have too much to lose."

"But think about how much you have to gain, Ray. Wouldn't you like a night alone with me?"

"Are you offering what I think you are?"

"What do you think I'm offering, Ray?"

"A night in bed together, yes?"

"Well, that depends on how willing you are to please me."

"No, no Dezzy! It's tempting but I can't afford to risk it."

"What if I throw in a thousand dollars?"

"A grand *and* a night in the sack?"

"That's about the size of it."

"I can earn a grand in less than a month. Losing this job isn't worth a grand to me."

"Okay, I'll see if I can go higher on the money side. See you later, Ray."

I dodged behind a car as she walked past on her way back to the Porsche. I stayed to watch Ray Winter as he walked over to the pharmacist.

"Excuse me sir, could I take a short break? I need to make an urgent telephone call."

"You may use the public phone over there, Raymond." The pharmacist said kindly.

"The telephone number is in my book at home, sir, so I might as well make the call from there. I won't be away above an hour, sir."

“Okay, Raymond: one hour but no alcohol on the breath and definitely no drugs when you return, understand?”

I followed him as he walked back home in a hurry. He went up to his apartment and came down shortly later with a small black book in his hand. He went to the public telephone not too far from his apartment and dialed a number from his little black book.

“Can I speak to Spike, please?” There was a pause.

Winter liked to stare around him while he talked as if watching out for observers, so it made it easy for me to follow what he was saying while I was standing far back with the field glasses.

“Look it is Fancy Ray Fallon here, I did time with him. I need to get in touch with him really urgently about the reward he is putting out. Okay, just hang on while I get that down.”

I wrote down the number that he mouthed as he wrote it into his little book.

He clicked off the receiver and dialed the number he had recorded.

“Spike? It’s Fancy Ray here. I heard about that reward you were offering and I tried to collect the Bronson girl for you last night but two of your clowns rammed her car and got themselves caught. I thought that I wouldn’t see the chick again but she’s back this morning so I thought that I would just lay it out for you. I’ll deliver her to you for a hundred grand. Where do you want her? La Bailadora? Sure that’s no problem but Spike, I know you from way back, don’t try to pay me with a bullet. I’m playing straight up with you and I expect the same from you. No, coke won’t do instead of cash. I’m on parole for fuck’s sake. I can’t even have a single gram on me. Oh, okay, if he promises to give me cash for it and I don’t have to touch the stuff.”

Ray hung up the phone did another furtive look around and headed back for the Drug Store.

I doubled my pace and caught up with him just before he reached Lincoln Street.

“Excuse me, Ray Winter.” He turned to see who was calling his name.

“Yeah? Do I know you?”

“I doesn’t much matter whether you do or not. I am an investigator and I have had the glass of booze that you gave to Miss Desdemona Bronson at La Bailadora’ last night analyzed. It was heavily laced with Roofies. Your parole officer is not going to like this and since your fingerprints are on the very same glass you will go down for attempted rape of the Mayor’s daughter unless you are prepared to cooperate.”

“Cooperate how?” He snarled at me.

“Get us a copy of that prescription that Desdemona Bronson asked for and we’ll forget about the evidence, fail to do so and your parole officer will get a full report from the FBI laboratory about the glass and its contents. And after that attempted rape and conspiracy to commit kidnapping charges will follow.”

“I get the prescription and you drop all the charges?”

“Yes, but it had better be today. This is a one-time offer.”

“Okay, wait here. I’ll get the fucking thing when the old man hits the john. It takes him damned near fifteen minutes just to have a piss.”

He went into the Drug Store and I dashed around to let Desdemona know what was going on. I was back in five minutes and Ray Winter was not much longer. He came outside with a piece of paper in his hand.

“Here it is. I didn’t have time to take a copy so I brought you the file copy.” Fancy Ray handed the prescription to me roughly. “Do I get the grand that Dezzy promised me?”

“No, and neither do you get the night in the sack. Keep your nose clean, Winter. The FBI is watching you.”

I walked away and returned to the Porsche.

“You know, Freddie, you are supposed to be looking after me but you have just left me standing around out here near my car where anyone can see me, while you ran around trying to get your hands on that damned prescription for my bloody step-mother who doesn’t even like you.”

"The prescription is not *for* your stepmother. It is for you. I didn't abandon you at your car, you have your spare key and could have driven off at any time and besides I know that at the moment the enemy is working on kidnapping Daniel and not you. Let's get hold of Jeejay and fill him in on their plans."

I drove quickly to Daniel's school where I found Jeejay sitting in a car in front of the school, listening to radio music and chewing on a hamburger.

"You should know, Jeejay." I said walking up behind him and causing him to jump in the car seat from fright. "That the agent sitting in the car outside is the first target for the men who are planning to snatch Daniel for Spike Crawley."

"How do you know, Fred?"

"I saw them planning it. They are going to take you out and then go into the school using the kids as cover and hostages to grab Daniel then they are going to call Spike Crawley and he is going to send a helicopter to the parking lot of La Bailadora'. The chopper is going to fly them to Brownsville in Texas and then Spike and Dirty Gertie will take a boat to Mexico from where they will fly to South America with the five million that they will demand for Daniel's return."

"How do you get all this stuff?" Jeejay asked plaintively.

"He has rigged up a bug in the diner where Spike is known to hang out." Desdemona proclaimed.

"Okay, I guess we have to make it difficult for them." He popped the trunk and gestured with his thumb. "Fred, there is a pump shotgun in back there. Get it out and get it ready. I'm gonna be busy making lots of calls so would you go see Phil Duncan inside the school and fill him in on what is going to happen?"

"What about me?" Desdemona asked anxiously.

"Maybe you should take your car and go home, Des." I suggested. "There could be a lot of lead flying around here."

She gave me a look indicating that she was not too pleased with me but she got into the car and drove away.

I found Phil Duncan and he decided to evacuate the school by moving all the pupils into the gymnasium in back of the classrooms where the school principal set up a movie for them to watch and locked all the doors until the siege was over.

Of course I did not know when they were coming. They might have planned it for the next day or even later but I had the feeling that Crawley was anxious to get the matter done and so today was more likely.

Jeejay came in from the car.

“Everything is set. We have cars parked a few blocks away ready to come in when the action starts. The helicopter lease companies are covered and Brownsville in Texas is ready for any unauthorized helicopter activity.”

Just before school closing time a noiseless bullet hole appeared in the car window of the FBI car signaling that a bullet had gone through the brain-area of the dummy seated in Jeejay’s place. Shortly afterwards four armed men rushed the school entrance and went directly to the classroom where Daniel normally sat.

They burst into the room with guns at the ready only to find themselves facing a squad of FBI agents settled behind a bullet-proof wall and more agents coming in behind them. They surrendered without firing another shot.

Each of the four men made statements implicating Spike Crawley and all came away with a plea bargained five years.

The force sent to La Bailadora came up empty-handed even after Jeejay had called the number I had taken from Ray Winter and left a message that the kidnap of Daniel Bronson had been successful.

“There is definitely someone tipping off Barforth Crawley but we did not go near the police with this one. So who is it?” Jeejay asked me.

“Maybe someone is watching us.” I suggested.

“Sure that works for knowing what we are doing, but how does that help them to know that we were going to set a trap at La Bailadora?” Jeejay asked peevishly.

“Phone taps?” I suggested.

“We get ours checked daily and they are encrypted so unless someone resets the tap every day, there is no way they are going to tap us.”

“How about a directional microphone?” I persisted.

“Yeah, that is a possibility but they would have to follow us absolutely everywhere and you sneaked off to that lake with Desdemona, without telling anyone, but they still knew what was going on.”

“It’s a real puzzler but Jeejay I have another problem: it’s a murder and an attempted murder.” I told him seriously.

“Sorry Fred, you have to take that to the police.”

“Even when it involves the mayoral family?”

“I am afraid so. Look, I investigated Detective James Goodings and he came up clean. Not a single question mark on his record. You can safely take the matter to him. He has no known connection to Barforth Crawley and he is known to dislike drug dealers intensely.”

“Okay, I’ll give it a try. He seems to be anxious to offer the Mayor’s office any help that he can give. Now, can you give me a lift back to the mayoral residence?”

“Sure thing, Daniel will be pleased to have you ride with us. That kid is your number one fan.”

“Hell, Jeejay, I thought that was you!” I joked at him

When I got back to the residence, Desdemona’s car was in its garage but she was nowhere in the main residence so I went up to my room and took out the prescription. This was not the copy I had asked for but the actual prescription itself.

It was in the usual indecipherable scrawl that doctors believe to be handwriting and it was written in blue ballpoint pen. At the bottom of the prescription form was a block marked ‘number of times to be repeated’ and in this block was the number ‘12’. To my eye the number ‘1’ appeared to be written centrally while the number ‘2’ overlapped the line of the box on the right but the thing that really got me going was that the number ‘2’ was in distinctly different ink to the ‘1’. Over the years the ink of the ‘2’ had faded while the ‘1’ remained consistent with all the other medical scrawl.

There is only one person likely to have altered that item on the prescription and that was the recipient: Julietta Finch now Julietta Bronson. She had amended a dangerous dose of Seroquel for twelve times the amount of this antipsychotic that some doctors prescribe for sedation and sleep. So either she needed to sleep a lot more than her doctor deemed necessary or she had another purpose in mind for the pills.

I addressed a stamped envelope to myself at my grandfather's house, slipped the prescription into it and posted it.

Then I went down to the main lounge where Wilkinson found me.

"Sir, the master would like to speak to you in his study."

"Thank you Wilkinson." I said as I hurried to see the mayor.

"Mr Huntsman, thank you for coming so promptly. I understand that you have succeeded in arresting four more of this Barforth Crawley's men. When are we going to bring the man himself to book?"

"Sir, Crawley never exposes himself if he is able to find a minion that will do a job for him. He has been in prison before and he has no intention of going there again. He has been a major drug dealer in this town and controls a lot of people with drugs and money but the FBI believe that he is beginning to run out of money because he is offering drugs in exchange for either of your children. On three occasions now we have known where he is but on each occasion someone has warned him and he has slipped away before the police arrive. Initially, we believed that it was a member of the police force that was in his pay but on this occasion today we kept the police out of it entirely and yet he still knew of our plans."

"This man sounds extremely intelligent, Mr Huntsman, to be able to stay ahead of the police and the FBI."

"Not so much intelligent, sir, as cunning; it is possible that he is using a directional microphone to pick up what we are saying."

"I have this house and my office proofed against such things, Mr Huntsman. In politics one can take no chances so I have regular sweepings for bugs and the buildings have been proofed against

electronic surveillance.”

“That will work well, sir, unless the enemy owns the company that sweeps for bugs and protects your buildings and, of course, merely owning one or two of your employees could also work for them.”

“You raise a valid objection, Mr Huntsman. I shall have a security audit using a rival consultancy. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*”

“You are correct sir occasional auditing should work, especially to ensure that the auditors are not the ones to install the bugs.”

“Alas, my boy, you grow too cynical. You will be pleased to learn that the polls now have me well ahead in the gubernatorial stakes. I shall of course require you to move with me *when*, notice that I say when and not if, I am voted governor of this state.”

“Thank you for your continued confidence in me, sir.”

“Think nothing of it my boy! You have proved yourself an excellent investment. I am sure that you do not realize it but I find our little discussions most helpful. You have a solid down-to-earth simplicity that clarifies things for me exceptionally well.”

Chapter Nine

I skipped breakfast the next morning just so that I could be outside the Java Diner sitting in my car with a hot dog and coffee to-go and my field glasses in my lap if and when Spike arrived.

Sure enough, he suddenly appeared from the back of the diner and started shouting to the staff. "I want this place checked out with that bug-detector thing I bought for you. Someone is picking up every word I say unless one of you bastards is a traitor!"

I saw the three staff members mouthing "Yes boss." at intervals which proved what I had long believed, that Spike actually owned the diner. It explained why everybody seemed willing to cover for him with the police.

"Boss, what about a directional microphone?" a waitress asked.

"Yeah, good thinking Rosie! You, Butch! Get outside and see if anyone is hanging around with a directional microphone."

Butch came out from behind the counter and I deemed it advisable to move on before he reached the street. He was well over six feet tall with tattooed arms that would have put my upper legs to shame but as I drove past the diner Butch was still discussing the problem with Spike.

While I was out I thought I would look in on Janine Drew.

I knocked on her door and after a long pause the door opened and a well-groomed Janine looked out. "Oh, it's you, Fred, I'm on my way to work. You wouldn't like to drop me off there would you? My car is being worked on."

"Sure thing, Janine, I just called to find out if you had recovered from your big night out."

"Yes, I have. I'm feeling fine now but from now on Margaritas are off my 'to-do' list. Thanks for that sauna and massage, Freddie. It helped enormously."

"Ah, it was the least I could do. Actually, Jan, I had an ulterior motive for coming to see you. Would you dig out from the Clarion archives everything you can find on the death of the Mayor's first

wife Delice Kingston Bronson? If there are any fees involved let me know and I will pay them. There will definitely be a story in it for you eventually."

"That was quite a long time ago wasn't it Freddie? Any idea when?"

"I have a source that puts it ten years ago in October." The source was the date on the prescription but I preferred to keep my cards close to my chest.

"I'll see what I can do, Freddie. You know, I really enjoyed dancing with you the other night we must do it again sometime."

"You mean a proper date?"

"Sure, why not? Call me about it sometime."

I dropped her off in an almost dazed frame of mind. This was the first time that any girl, let alone a stunner like Janine, had suggested that I call her for a date.

I drove the Jaguar back to the mayoral residence. Wilkinson opened the door for me and greeted me with the words.

"Good morning sir. We missed you at breakfast this morning. Miss Desdemona asked if you would go up to her room. She was upset that you went out without her."

I was headed for the stairs when Daniel ran to me calling. "Freddie! Freddie! Are you taking me to school today? All the kids want to see you! Everyone says that things are very exciting when you are around."

"Daniel, I'm sorry I can't make it this morning but I'll see whether I can make your pick up this afternoon, okay?"

He was disappointed but the half-promise of the afternoon pickup consoled him. I ruffled his hair and said. "And later on when you've done your homework, we can pitch the ball around."

He ran off quite cheerfully to collect his books.

Going up the stairs I passed Julietta who returned my greeting with a frosty but civil reply.

I knocked on Desdemona's door and entered upon her summons.

"Where have you been, Freddie? No one knew where you had gone not even Jeejay!"

"I went to the Java Diner to see if Spike would turn up there again."

"Hah! Is it likely that he would be that stupid?"

"Yeah, maybe I was too early. He probably lies in late especially after paying a hundred thousand dollars just so that Dirty Gertie can lie in bed with him."

"I don't know what you men see in that Dirty Gertie. She is nothing but a drug pusher and an ex-prostitute. Just because she has big boobs and a broad ass you men seem to think that she is a great lay. That's like saying a girl with great legs must be a fast runner."

"Yeah? I guess us men are very visual and we all follow the principle of 'if little is good then more is better'."

"Do you think that I'm a fast runner, Freddie?" She asked as she flashed her very shapely legs.

"Fastest little thing I ever did see." I remarked dryly.

"I could show you how much better an enthusiastic amateur can do than an over-endowed professional." She assured me.

"Both kinds scare me." I told her firmly. "What happened to the old principle of not even kissing until the third date?"

"It's just that: an old principle, not at all cool and modern."

"Wilkinson said that you wanted to see me?" I said changing the subject any way I could.

"Yeah, I'd like to go shopping but Daddy says that I can't do that on my own."

I sighed. Shopping with a girl who has a limitless credit card was not my idea of a fun day but this was my job now so I had to do it.

"The Porsche or the Jaguar?" I asked laconically.

"We had better use the Jaguar; it has a bigger trunk."

I had a sudden thought: the insurers had notified me that the payout for my little car had been transferred to my bank account. My account was pretty healthy what with the front-end bonus for saving Desdemona from the kidnappers and my first month salary which had been paid early in terms of my contract of appointment. My lack of living expenses due to my residence in the mayoral

mansion had also contributed to this unaccustomed affluency. I could do some shopping myself!

I did not need any clothing since Wilkinson's purchase of a full wardrobe for me on the mayor's account, in fact there was not much I did need because Wilkinson was under orders to get me anything that I wanted to bring Barforth Crawley to book.

But I did want to get into a gadget store where I could purchase a few things like a directional microphone, night-vision telescope and bullet-proof vest because the mayor had told me I could make such purchases and hand the invoices to the receptionist at the office for a refund.

I was almost cheerful as I brought the Jaguar to the front to pick up Desdemona.

She was dressed to kill. She had skin-tight white jeans and a tight top that proved just how much woman she was. Her black hair was sleek and shiny and she wore two gold rings dangling from her ears.

She slipped into the seat beside me and said: "Let's hit the mall, Freddie."

The mall was not too far away and at that time of morning the traffic rush was over so the ride took us ten minutes or so and I found parking within fifty yards of one of the mall entrances.

Desdemona took my hand like a little girl going shopping with her daddy.

"Oooh Look there! Isn't that dress stunning?"

I was looking at a poster of the Mayor which urged all to vote for him as the next governor of the state. The picture on it was a year or two out of date; he had a lot more white hair now.

She went to an automatic teller machine and drew a large sum from it.

I followed Desdemona to the entrance of the dress shop but declined to go in.

She took the dress into the change room but came out shortly and returned it to the clerk but the clerk still took her credit card and handed her a purchase slip. I wondered why she did not use some of the cash she had drawn.

"Didn't you like the dress?" I asked her as she came out.

"No, it didn't look nice on."

"Then what did you pay for?"

"Oh, er, for the dress; it needs to be altered to look good."

I said nothing more but wondered how the dress could be altered if the attendant didn't measure her or pin the garment.

She went in and out of virtually every dress shop in the mall making frequent purchases but taking nothing with her.

"Oh, they'll deliver them to the house." She said carelessly.

We stopped for a soda on one occasion and then Desdemona decided that she needed shoes. Thereafter she followed exactly the same process that she had done with the dresses; trying on everything in sight, paying for some and walking away.

"It is just as well that you are having them all delivered, Des, I would have had to get a truck to carry everything that you have bought."

"I think that I am going to have my hair done, Freddie. You go do whatever you have to do and meet me here in an hour and a half."

"Sorry Des, I can't do that. I have to keep you in sight at all times."

"Well, you are not coming into the hair salon with me. That's where I pick up all the latest gossip and you will stop the other ladies from talking."

"I will watch you from outside. Tell them that you want a chair near the window."

She went inside and took a chair where I could see her but was nevertheless toward the back of the salon; as everybody said: she was uncontrollable.

I found a pillar to lean against and amused myself for a while 'listening' into the conversations of people milling about on the level below. When I looked up again Desdemona had her head in a hairdryer and was reading a magazine.

I turned away and my eye fell on a face I recognized. It was the man that Spike had called Butch. He towered above most of the

people milling around in the mall courtyard below me. I saw him talk to the much shorter man beside him.

"She'll be up at the beauty salon on the next level up. Her only guard will be that little punk that Spike wants us to terminate. To avoid too much trouble in the mall, we don't just grab them. We go in as police officers and arrest both of them."

They were headed for the escalators even then; I had no time to lose. I dashed into the salon and grab Desdemona by the hand.

"Come on, we are out of here. Two of Spike's thugs are coming up to this level and they know that we are here."

"Don't be ridiculous, Freddie, how could they know that we are here? I didn't know that I was going to get my hair until the thought occurred to me ten minutes ago."

"I heard them talking. They are going to come in here as cops and arrest us then they will kidnap you and kill me."

"Freddie, you are talking nonsense. How could you hear them if you were up here and they were on the lower level."

"I haven't time to argue with you, Desdemona. Come immediately!"

She opened her mouth to object and I threw the pinafore over her head and hoisted her onto my shoulder and headed for the fire escape. "Charge it to the Mayor!" I shouted to the girl at the cash desk of the salon.

I sprinted as fast as I could go with Desdemona shouting at me to put her down. I had to clap my hand over her mouth and drag her into an open stock room close to the sealed fire escape. I pulled the door closed and the Yale lock clicked into place.

I heard heavy footsteps in the mall passageway as our pursuers ran to the fire escape.

"Where in hell did those two get to?" I heard Butch bellow.

"Maybe they've gone to that Jaguar. Shouldn't we go down there in case they try to get away?" The other man said.

"Yeah, Barney, you go down there and guard that Jaguar. I'm gonna look around here a bit more."

I saw him try the door handle to the stock room but the Yale lock convinced him that we couldn't have got through it.

His footsteps faded down the passageway and I removed my hand from Desdemona's mouth.

"Now did you hear that woman? They were after us just as I said they were." I hissed in her ear.

"Okay! Okay! So they knew where we were. They must have followed us. I heard them mention the Jaguar." She hissed back at me. "How long are we going to have to stay here?"

"We can't leave until Jeejay gets here. Let me have your cell phone so I can call him." I told her.

"I left it in my purse back at the salon."

"Damn it! Mine is in the Jaguar."

With the door closed there was very little light in the stock room. There was a small window high up in one wall but it was so begrimed with dust that it was almost opaque.

I walked around the stock room looking for something that might be useful to me but apart from cardboard cartons on shelves I could not make out very much.

"Do you think that we could risk switching on the light in here?" I asked Desdemona.

"He will see it if he is still in the outside corridor." She replied.

"Maybe we should wait a little longer." I proposed.

We sat together in the dark for almost an hour before there was the rattle of a bunch of keys at the door and the door was thrown open and the light was switched on.

"Damn it all! I could have sworn that I left the door open and the light on. Must be old age creeping up on me."

Desdemona and I were wedged in back of the shelves, hidden by the stock cartons just in case Butch or Barney decided to come in there. My heart was in my mouth as I half expected that the man with the keys might have been one of them. I was just about to stand up and declare myself to the key-man when I heard Butch's voice.

"Hey, old man! Is there anyone in that room with you?"

"This is my store room, son. I'm the only one with the keys. Who are you?"

"I'm a police officer and I am looking for two suspects: a man and a woman. They ran this way and then we lost them. If you see them, they are both young, the guy is in his early twenties and the girl is tiny and looks about sixteen but she is older, give me or my partner a call. One of us is likely to be down at the information desk."

"Sure thing officer; I'll be down there shortly I just have to put away this newly delivered stock."

I heard him close the door behind him after he pulled a few cartons into the room.

"You folks like to come out now that dude claiming to be a cop has moved away."

I stood up. "Thanks for that, sir. How did you know that he was not a cop?"

"I was a cop for twenty five years before I retired. No cop I ever came across would call a member of the public 'old man' instead of 'sir'. What's going on here?"

"This young lady is the Mayor's daughter and I am charged with protecting her. Those men are criminals trying to kidnap her. I need a cell phone so that I can call the FBI to come here and arrest those goons."

"I don't hold with all that new-fangled stuff like cell phones and computers but this here telephone works just fine." He said opening the wall-closet in which the telephone had been installed.

"Thank God for that!" I said quickly and dialed Jeejay's number. "Jeejay? This is Fred here. I'm stuck at the Grant Street Mall. Two of Spike Crawley's goons are here pretending to be cops. They got the Jaguar staked out and are searching the mall for us. Desdemona is with me in a storeroom on the west end of the mall on the mezzanine level. How soon can you get here?"

"Not very soon, I'm afraid. I'm waiting for young Daniel to come out of school but what I can do is get Detective Goodings to take a team up there. You are just around the corner from them.

They will delight in taking in guys who are claiming to be cops.”

“Good man! Please do it! The situation here is very tight.”

The owner of the storeroom and I stacked case for a few minutes. This time the cops did not arrive with sirens blaring. They quietly occupied each exit to the mall and then went in and arrested Butch and Barney. It was easy to find them since they had told everyone in the mall that they were cops.

We had finished stacking boxes and were quietly chatting about police-work in the past and the changes that were happening in forensics when Detective Goodings arrived.

“Well, folks I guess I can get back to my store.” The old ex-cop said as he shoo-ed us out and locked the door behind us.

“Mr Huntsman,” said Detective Goodings expansively. “I guess the mayor will hear how we rescued you from those gunmen. I know both of those deadbeats. I arrested them before and as far as I know they are on parole so they are back in the joint for sure.”

“Thanks, Detective Goodings, I am sure that by now the Mayor knows that you are an officer to be relied on.”

He walked away as if he were ten feet tall.

I took Desdemona back to the salon where they finished her hair. She collected her purse and walked away.

I hung back while Desdemona walked to the escalator and thanked the girl at the desk. “Thanks for taking care of Miss Bronson’s purse. There was a very large sum of money in it.” I said gratefully.

“No sir, there wasn’t! I promise you that I checked because I didn’t want to be accused of stealing anything. That purse did not have a single cent in it.”

“Did Miss Bronson check her purse when you returned it to her?”

“Yes sir, she did. You can ask her. She didn’t say that anything was wrong.”

I pondered that mystery. I definitely saw her draw five thousand dollars.

I walked out to the Jaguar where Desdemona was waiting in a very bad mood.

“Let’s get out of this place, Frederick! This whole afternoon has been ruined by this unpleasant incident.”

I agreed with her. Spending most of an afternoon in a dusty storeroom is not the grandest way to pass the time.

Jeejay later took personal charge of interrogating Butch and Barney and both implicated Barforth Crawley, as the mastermind behind their actions, in exchange for a shorter sentence.

Chapter Ten

Once more early on the following morning I parked where I could watch the interior of the Java Diner with my field glasses. I had told no-one that I would be there, not even Jeejay.

Suddenly, almost as if he was sleeping on the premises, Spike Crawley appeared from the rear of the Diner and began shouting at his staff.

“Let’s have another sweep for bugs in this place and Gertie, you go outside and see if you can spot anyone with a directional microphone.”

I had been warned by his previous day’s rantings and I was too far back to be taken as a serious threat, nevertheless I could read his lips easily through the field glasses. My only disadvantage was I could not see the faces of those sitting opposite to Spike in his booth.

“Things are getting tight now people.” He said. “I have managed to get some hard cash together but most of my funds were tied up for Gertie’s bail. We are going to have to plan really carefully and execute my plan perfectly. Up to now, we have had two possibilities to raise money: either Desdemona or Daniel Bronson both likely to produce top ransoms but too well guarded for easy access. Now I’m ready to try a less lucrative but easier target. I believe that we can get a million dollars if we kidnap Mrs Julietta Bronson. No-one is guarding her at this time. She stays at home and is most often too drunk to drive. The FBI guards are concentrating on protecting Daniel and that dumb-luck kid Huntsman looks after Desdemona. What I am proposing is that we wait until Daniel has gone to school taking the FBI with him and Desdemona goes to the mall with Huntsman then we jump over the wall and collect Mrs Bronson leaving behind a demand note for a million bucks.”

Gertie stood up next to Spike where I could see her and she said: “Spike I think that we could use a bit more finesse than that. What about rolling up at the house and telling Mrs Bronson that Mr

Bronson has been in a motor accident. She then gets in the car and is taken out to see the injured Mayor but only then discovers that she has been kidnapped.”

“Yeah Gertie, you ain’t just a sexy body, girl! We could do that and slap an ether soaked cloth over her nose and mouth so that when she wakes up she is locked up in the place I have prepared for the kidnap victims. When that happens the FBI rushes back to the mayoral mansion leaving Daniel unprotected and we snatch him. In the meantime I will be personally attending to that irritating Huntsman and grabbing Desdemona.”

“Spike if you are attending to Huntsman,” Gertie asked. “Who will be kidnapping Daniel?”

“You will Gertie. I trust you to handle that important end.”

“So Spike when is this all going down?” Gertie asked.

“Today, Gertie, today. After capturing Butch and Barney yesterday they think that they have got us licked so they will not be expecting us to spring this all-out attack. We will hit them with everything today.”

Spike rose. “Okay I’ve given you your assignments, get going on them.”

I drove back to the Mayoral residence and found everyone except Desdemona and Julietta down at the breakfast table.

“Sir,” I said to the Mayor. “I need an urgent conference with you and Special Agent Porter. We have no time to waste.”

I will say this for the Mayor he took immediate action. He put down his knife and fork and rose while Jeejay took a quick last swig of his orange juice.

We moved to the mayor’s study where I told them everything I had learned that morning.

“How did you learn all of this, Mister Huntsman?” The Mayor asked.

“Straight from the horse’s mouth, sir; I overheard it in the Java Diner which is owned by Spike Crawley.”

“My word, my boy, you certainly are resourceful! To manage to infiltrate the very heart of that criminals operations; but why has he

not been picked up if you know exactly where he is?"

"We have sent the police in to arrest him but he just disappears. He must have a secret tunnel or an entrance into the sewers but whatever he has the police cannot find it and he always gets away."

"Very well, we can't all be perfect. Now, Special Agent Porter, what are your proposals?"

"Well, sir, to my mind the first step will be to see that the men who come for Mrs Bronson are captured. We will send an empty car to take Daniel to school and we will have the school assemble in the gymnasium as they did on the last occasion. We will seize anyone who assaults the school with particular reference to this Dirty Gertie woman. If Fred Huntsman will go to the mall with a female FBI operative disguised as Desdemona, we will have a team ready there to capture Spike Crawley."

"That sounds excellent, Special Agent Porter. Please feel free to use this study as your base of operations. I have an important meeting I must attend in Washington and must catch my plane by nine. I shall tell Wilkinson that Mister Huntsman is in complete control in my absence."

Jeejay began calling in the FBI agents that would be required for this job. He was an excellent organizer and within a half-hour a petite female agent had arrived to take Desdemona's place for the trip to the mall.

I had pondered about that. I wondered how Spike could be so certain that we would be taking another trip to the mall especially after our disastrous excursion the previous day.

I went up to her apartment and knocked on her bedroom door.

"Who is it?" Desdemona called out from under her bed clothes.

"Fred!" I called back.

"Oh: come in Freddie so long as you don't mind that I am naked."

I had seen her like that often enough so on this occasion I did not let it deter me but it turned out that she was under the bed covers anyway.

"I just came up to find out if there was anything you particularly wanted to do today because there are some things I must buy and also a few odds and ends I want to collect from my house."

"Oh can't those things wait? I wanted to go back to the mall today. There were things that I could not do considering that I was stuck in a dusty storeroom for most of the afternoon."

"Could we leave it until after eleven, Des? That'll at least give me time to pick up from my house."

"Well, I wanted to be there by half-ten."

"What do you need to do that would be so time-critical?"

"Er, nothing really; I suppose another half-hour won't matter that much. I'll call my friend Delia and make it for later. I think she might prefer that."

"No, don't change your plans. I'll try to get back here earlier. We probably can get there by half-ten."

"Good, please tell Wilkinson to send breakfast up. I'm going lie in bed a little longer if you are not going to be here to keep me warm."

I left her in bed went down to the Porsche and disconnected some important wires.

I went to the FBI agent supervising phone-calls in and out of the mansion.

"Please record all calls to and from Miss Desdemona Bronson this morning, particularly any on her cell phone. I want to listen to them when I get back."

"Sir, that will take some doing, I am not set up to monitor cell phone calls."

"But you can do it, right?"

"Sure, as long as it is authorized."

"I'm authorizing it. Check with Special Agent Porter and he will confirm that I have that authority."

I told Jeejay I would be out for a very short while and then drove off to see Janine.

She was just about to leave for work as I arrived.

“Oh, Freddie, I got all those news stories for you. They are in my car. Come down with me and I’ll give them to you. There are a lot. The story caused quite a stir in its day.”

She was right. It was a fairly hefty envelope of cuttings.

“Thanks for this Janine. I owe you for this.”

“No you don’t; this is in repayment of the sauna and massage and don’t forget you still owe me a story on those clippings and another date.”

I watched her drive off while I was trying to work out which was the most memorable: her blue eyes, her boobs or her buns.

I returned to the mansion and went directly to the agent at the telephone switchboard.

“Greg, did you tape any calls?”

“Only one outward. Seems pretty innocuous but here it goes.”

He played it as I listened.

“Hi Delia, it’s Dezzy here. Just to let you know that we might be a little late this morning maybe a half-hour not more, okay? See you then, bye!”

“That’s it?” I asked the Agent.

“Yeah, I traced the number but it is a throw-away.”

“Hmm, what teenage girl that you know, has a throw away number?” I asked, musing to myself. Desdemona was a very bright girl, if amazingly self-destructive.

I found Jeejay and told him what I suspected.

“Hell Fred, that’s an awful lot to swallow. Why would anyone do that?”

“Just keep her here Jeejay. We’ll have plenty of proof after I’ve been to the mall.”

The front door bell rang.

“That will be the ‘cops’ that have come to take Julietta to see her injured husband.”

“Is your female agent ready?”

“Sure she is. Wait until you see her. With a wig, she should be able to pass for Julietta Bronson.”

Wilkinson had not been informed of what was going on to keep down the number of people that could be intentional or unintentional informers to Spike Crawley.

"Sir, there are two police gentlemen at the door asking for Mrs Bronson. The master told me to refer everything to you while he is in Washington."

"Thank you, Wilkinson. I will deal with them. Please bring them in here."

He left and returned with two thugs that looked like anything in this world except policemen.

"May I help you? I am Mayor Bronson's security officer."

"Yeah, Mayor Bronson has been injured inna accident. He's asking for his wife and we are here to fetch her."

"Which hospital is he in? I shall bring her myself."

"Nah, he ain't in no hospital but you c'n come along if you want. The car's outside."

"Haven't you sent for an ambulance? Surely they must be there by now and will have taken him to a hospital?"

"Nah, he can't be moved yet. Yah gotta come now."

"I'd prefer to come in my own car. I'll get Mrs Bronson and we will follow you."

He seemed to run out of ideas for excuses so he shrugged. "Sure thing, come ahead. We'll drive out onna road so you c'n follow us."

As they turned, Jeejay and another officer stepped up and arrested them. Each man had two pistols on him and there was a submachine gun in the car with the driver.

"Okay, now is the time to send Daniel to school." I told Jeejay.

He spoke into his throat microphone and the limousine set out. Daniel was in his bedroom with two FBI agents keeping him amused.

We were in touch with the limousine as it glided toward the school.

As I had expected Dirty Gertie was not going to wait until the limousine reached the school. She had a bus slew across the road and came up behind the limousine, blocking it from driving away.

Two men rushed from the bus and Dirty Gertie and two more men came out of the car to snatch open the limousine doors only to be confronted by six heavily armed FBI men. Gertie was holding a submachine gun and standing back from the car as she expected her men to effect the kidnapping without too much difficulty. When two FBI agents jumped from the car and called upon her to throw down her weapon, she opened fire on them and was cut down in a hail of bullets from all six agents.

The time was coming up for ten fifteen when Jeejay took Desdemona into the study for questioning while I took the Jaguar and the petite FBI agent down to the mall. The exits had already been quietly covered by the FBI and both the little agent and I were wearing Kevlar vests under our clothing when we walked in. I suspected that, on the previous day, Desdemona had dropped off the cash she had drawn from the automatic teller machine at the first dress shop we had entered. She had gone into the change room with a dress and a bulging purse and had come out with the purse slung over her shoulder but in retrospect, although I did not think of it then, the purse was no longer bulging. I was fairly certain that this would be the place that Desdemona would lead me to and where Spike would be waiting.

We stepped into the shop and the small FBI agent immediately arrested the shop-girl while I went to the change room and threw open the door. I was greeted by two shots both of which struck me in the torso and Spike Crawley stepped over my prone body as I gasped for breath like a fish out of water.

The diminutive FBI agent had her gun holstered as she handcuffed the shop-girl so she was defenseless as Spike struck her down with the butt of his pistol.

I could not turn to see in which direction he ran, my chest was on fire and I could not seem to get any air into my lungs. For long minutes I was paralyzed until several FBI agents rushed up in response to the two gunshots Spike had fired.

They carried the unconscious agent and me down to the mall first aid center where a cute nurse gave us attention. I discovered

that it is very difficult to flirt when you are wheezing from lack of oxygen.

When we were finally able to return to the Jaguar I learned that Spike had somehow eluded them even after they had called in the police to assist with a thorough search of the mall.

Back at the mansion, Jeejay informed me that he had been unable to extract any sort of admission from Desdemona. The shop-girl turned out to be the Delia that Desdemona had telephoned and also had a juvenile record for drug possession. A search of the shop showed that it had been used as a distribution point for Spike's drug business, catering exclusively for women who liked to complete their deals in the privacy of the change room.

Desdemona's story of having gone to school with Delia proved to be correct and therefore no guilt could be attributed to Desdemona except in my own mind. I knew just how clever that girl could be.

Of course, Desdemona was no longer speaking to me as she believed, quite correctly, that I had set the FBI onto her. I deemed it preferable to move out of the bedroom that she had allowed me to use, into one of the guest suites that Wilkinson offered me.

"Miss Desdemona is not really a bad person, sir. She needs psychological help but the master is not prepared to entertain the idea for fear it would reflect badly on his candidacy."

"Wilkinson, this is his only daughter we are talking about. She has conspired with a known felon to defraud her own father of millions of dollars and risk the life of her brother and step-mother in the process."

"Ah, sir, but you have no proof of that. Miss Desdemona denies it and your theories are supported only by circumstantial possibilities, I hesitate to call them evidence."

"You are quite right, Wilkinson but those circumstantial possibilities are the only things that fit the facts. Only Desdemona was present when I discovered where Crawley was on two occasions. She is the only one who could have warned him."

"Why would she warn the villain, sir? He kidnapped her and has been terrorizing this family ever since."

“He was her drug dealer, Wilkinson. She relied on him for cocaine. She told me once that he took her virginity. I suspect, although I do not know, that she was the one who suggested the kidnapping to him. She is a very bright girl. She has spent all her life trying to get her father’s attention. She has substituted the man who gives her sexual and drug pleasure for the father that ignores her. Her plan was to collect a five million dollar ransom for her own kidnapping and to go to South America with Crawley to live a life of drugs, alcohol and sex. When I messed up her kidnapping by rescuing her, she was quite happy to change the plan to the kidnapping of Daniel.”

I could see that my arguments had struck home with Wilkinson. His anguish showed on his face.

“I have cared for that girl as if she were my own daughter. Why could she not have substituted me as her father instead of that criminal?”

“As you quite rightly said, Wilkinson, she needs psychiatric help and we must do what we can to persuade the Mayor to accept that.”

“He never will, sir. You have seen how fixated he is on becoming the State Governor. If he achieves that aim he will then move on to being fixated on the Presidency.”

“There is something of the father in the daughter, Wilkinson.”

“You are correct, sir. Please will you excuse me now.” I could see that he was about to break into tears so I left the room to him and went down to the pool with my envelope of news cuttings.

I opened the envelope and settled down to peruse the cuttings.

There was a lot about the tragedy of a young woman with so much to live for, dying in the prime of her life and leaving behind a grieving husband and eight year old daughter. Several commentators attributed the Mayor’s success in the municipal elections to the very large sympathy vote.

The Mayor had done some very good public relations work on the matter and most articles concluded that it was an accidental death arising from the deceased awakening in the course of the night and sleepily overdosing to get back to sleep again.

The family doctor named as Carter had confirmed that he had prescribed the pills due to the patient's stress from overwork but nowhere was the substance of the pills disclosed although it was once mentioned that the prescribed dose had been 25 milligrams whereas the fatal dose was many times greater than that.

I looked up Doctor Carter in the local directory and found two: a Charles and a Donna.

As the article mentioned 'he' prescribed the pills I went for Dr Charles Carter.

"Doctor Carter is semi-retired." The receptionist-nurse said. "He doesn't take new patients and he only works from nine until one from Monday to Friday."

"I am an investigator looking into the affairs of one of Doctor Carter's patients. The patient has been dead for ten years. I would be happy to pay his consultation fee if he be so kind as to give me a moment of his time. I am sure that my questions will not take up more than ten minutes."

She lifted the telephone and repeated my story into the mouthpiece.

"The doctor will see you for ten minutes."

I went into his office. The furniture looked about as old as the man behind the desk. I judged him to be in his early seventies.

"Doctor, ten years ago you treated a Mrs Delice Bronson who died as a result of an overdose of a sleeping pill. Are you able to remember what that sleeping pill was?"

"I certainly remember that case very well. That was our mayor's wife, wasn't it? I prescribed 25 milligrams of Seroquel but it was not solely as a sleeping pill that I gave them to her. She had other problems which I am not at liberty to divulge, lack of sleep was one of the effects of her problem."

"I understand Doctor that they found a lot more Seroquel in her stomach than 50 milligrams, which would have been a double dose?"

"Yes, it was puzzling at first but then I realized that a suicide is likely to collect pills over two or three months to make up a fatal

dose.”

“Do you by any chance know the total amount that was found in her body?”

“Yes, I do. It was in excess of 4000 milligrams.”

“Did you not find that suspicious?”

“Not if the woman was trying to commit suicide, sir. It appears that she saved up every pill I ever prescribed for her and took them all at once.”

“Four thousand milligrams would be 160 pills which at thirty pills a month would have taken over five months to collect. Had you been prescribing them to her for so long?”

“I certainly had not but I fear that people with her problem and also suicides can be amazingly cunning. She may well have found other means to acquire the pills.”

“Surely, there are better and easier ways to commit suicide than swallowing a hundred and sixty pills?”

“Quite possibly there are if you are thinking rationally but I fear that this lady was not. Sir, you asked for ten minutes of my time and I believe that you have now had them. Please pay my consultation fee to the lady at the desk.”

She charged me a hundred dollars but I believe the information was worth the cost.

Chapter Eleven

When I returned to the mansion the place was a-swarm with FBI agents.

“Pardon me, Wilkinson, what is happening here?” I asked him.

“Sir, Mrs Bronson went for a stroll in the garden and two men came over the wall, covered her face with an ether-soaked rag and were back over the wall with her before Arturo Montez, the gardener realized what was happening. He ran around to the gate and out onto the road but the car they had come in had already disappeared. With the whole family here within the grounds only two FBI men remained. Special Agent Porter was on the telephone making a verbal report to his superior and the other man was playing ball with Daniel by the pool.”

“Shit!” I said inelegantly as I ran in to see Jeejay. He was still on the telephone but now he had bad news for his boss.

“Jeejay, how could this happen? I told you that snatching Mrs Bronson from the grounds was part of Crawley’s plans!” I said as soon as he put the telephone down.

“You did, Fred, I admit it, but we all thought that it was over and Crawley was on the run. Dirty Gertie died on her way to hospital and all his men were in custody, it felt like ‘case closed’.”

“Okay Jeejay, I guess I felt very much the same way. I allowed myself to be diverted by another matter. Has anyone checked to see that Daniel and Desdemona are okay?”

“Yes, as soon as I realized what had happened, I checked them and they are fine.”

“Make sure that they are secure. Desdemona is likely to make a break for it all on her own. She must not be allowed to get away.”

“I have a man at the door of her apartment.”

“Put someone to watch the windows also; that girl is very intelligent and super- cunning. Oh, and put a female agent *inside* Desdemona’s apartment.”

“I’m on it, Fred.” Jeejay ran off to organize the manpower.

Greg, the agent on the switchboard, waved to me and mouthed 'ransom demand'.

I moved to him and listened in.

"Tell the mayor that we want five million dollars for the return of his wife and our undertaking that we will cease trying to kidnap any other members of his family. He is to stand by for instructions on the numbered account that the money is to go to."

"The mayor is in Washington and won't be back until late this evening." Greg managed to get in before they cut him off." He turned to me. "That undertaking they are giving is highly unusual."

"Not really, Crawley wants us to turn off the heat on Desdemona. Once we stop guarding the mayor's children, Desdemona can just walk away and join her lover."

"Her lover? You mean this Crawley guy and that cute little kid are an item?"

"Yeah, weird isn't it?" I replied.

I looked for Jeejay and found him in the study.

"Jeejay, I have an idea where Crawley is hiding out and where he might be holding Julietta Bronson."

"Fantastic! Where?"

"I think that Crawley owns one of the buildings on either side of the Java Diner. I'm going to have ownership checked out in municipal records. If I turn out to be right, can you get us a search warrant in a big hurry?"

"I can try. Fred, maybe the Mayor could help there. He has a lot of friends in the judiciary."

"Okay, I'll ask him when he gets in. I'm going out again. Please make sure that Desdemona doesn't get away from this house. I am reasonably sure she won't move until after the ransom is paid but you can never tell with the crazy ones."

I went first to the diner. It was doing pretty good business for a place with sub-standard coffee. There was no sign of Spike and the place seemed a lot duller without Dirty Gertie swaying around it. I watched for an hour and also looked over the two adjacent buildings but saw no lights to indicate occupation.

I swung by Janine's condo but her car was not in its bay and there were no lights on in her unit. Reporters do not keep regular hours.

I did not feel like going back to the mansion, there were still two hours before the mayor touched down from his Washington trip. I would have to be at the mansion before he got there.

I walked about the town center and began my customary pastime of assessing people from their body language and bearing and also lip reading. By some strange coincidence, I always seemed to settle on the attractive women as subjects for my study. My eye was caught by a shapely red head that was standing on the street corner and smiling at all the men passing by. Instantly I took in body language, bearing and read what her lips were saying. "Stupid jerks! Come on, try to pick me up!"

She was clearly a hooker but that didn't tie in with what her lips were saying. She had a beautiful figure but her pose was too ladylike for her apparent occupation. Something was off here. I hung back and watched the girl a little longer; it wasn't a hardship.

A large man walked directly up to her and grabbed her by the wrist, tugging her toward the closest alley. "Hey! What do you think you are doing? Leave me alone!" By way of answer he slapped her across the face and turned in my direction as he did so.

"Listen bitch! You stand on mah corners and you become mah property. This here pitch is where mah girls trade, y'hear?"

I began to move forward as he began once more to drag the girl into the alley.

She screamed a scream of pure terror; nothing like the stream of invective that most hookers would be spewing out in a similar situation. It was that scream that convinced me to act. I grabbed a piece of planking that had been part of a heavy crate but now was lying in the gutter, and ran forward.

The big man held her pinned to the alley wall by a large hand around her throat and with the other he was slapping her hard as he chanted "Who's de boss, eh?"

I just ran forward and hit him over the head with the plank as hard as I could.

He sank to the ground instantly and I grabbed the girl by the hand and dragged her out of the alley. "We don't want to be around when he comes to." I told her breathlessly as I hurried her to the Jaguar.

"Gee, thanks a million, Freddie! I thought I was done there."

"Do I know you?" I asked glancing quickly at her while I drove faster than the law allows straight out of the town center.

"Freddie, it's me." said Janine as she removed the red wig and peered at me through swollen and bruised eyes.

"What in hell were you doing standing on street corners and smiling at all the men that passed by?"

"I was trying to write an exposé on prostitution in this town. I needed to experience what hookers have to go through to earn their money."

"Well, I guess you just had your first encounter with a pimp." I said harshly. "You could have got yourself killed or at the very least, raped. What were you thinking, girl?"

"Look, Freddie, I'm the youngest reporter they have at the Clarion. I would never have even got the job if the editor didn't have the hots for me but he is very rapidly cooling down because his wife caught sight of me and has been giving him a hard time over hiring me. If I don't come up with a really good story or exposé pretty damn quick, I'm going to lose this job and in a town this size it means I will be out of work. I have to do something and writing stories about lost cats and stray dogs just won't cut it."

"I told you that I was going to give you a story from the cuttings you collected for me." I pointed out.

"Yes, but by the time you are ready to break it I will be out on the street in a different sense from tonight's little episode."

"So hold your editor off. Tell him that you are working on a story that will solve a murder that was committed ten years ago and has been passed off as an accidental death and on top of that you can break the story that the Mayor's wife Julietta Bronson has

been kidnapped and is being held for five million dollar ransom. She was taken from the Mayoral residence even though the FBI was working on the fact that the family had been threatened with further attempts after Desdemona Bronson had been rescued from the kidnappers.”

“Wow! Turn here! Turn here! Get me back to the Clarion office. I had better file the story before anyone else does.”

“You had better wipe some of that makeup off your face. You look like a circus clown right now. And do something about your eyes, you are going to have some beautiful shiners tomorrow.”

“To hell with that! I have to get this story in. Can’t you go any faster?”

I was already doing eighty in town. It was just as well that all of the cops seemed to be taking a break, maybe this was between shifts.

I dropped her in front of the Clarion and she was so eager to get to her desk that she did not even thank me but ran straight in before the Jaguar had come to a stop.

I drove serenely back to the Mayoral residence and parked the Jaguar.

Jeejay was looking haggard when I saw him.

“Fred, where have you been? Crawley keeps calling about the ransom. He doesn’t believe that the Mayor is flying back from Washington. He says that we are stalling him. He says if the money is not in the numbered account by midnight Mrs Bronson will be history. We can’t reach Mayor Bronson. He is flying in a chartered plane that does not have telephone facilities. The airport is trying to contact the pilot of the plane by radio but the weather is giving them some problems until the airplane is in closer range. What the hell can we do?”

“We can raid the buildings on either side of the Java Diner and see what that turns up.” I suggested.

“We will never get a search warrant on mere guesswork, Fred.”

“What if I take a force and raid them? What could I as a private citizen be charged with?”

“Breaking and entering and trespass, I guess.”

“But what if there is a fire in the building can we then enter to extinguish it?”

“You might get away with that but then again they might simply add arson to the list of charges.”

“Okay then what about getting a warrant to search the Java Diner? Can you do that?”

“That I can do: we already have one from the last few times we tried to catch Crawley. All I need to do is phone the judge and ask his permission to use it again. He’ll re-date the order tomorrow.”

“Okay, let’s do that and bring some heavy equipment we might have to break down a wall.”

We left the house with a team of ten agents all heavily armed and one technical specialist who claimed he could locate hidden rooms and passages with his equipment.

The manager of the Java Diner was the cook. He complained bitterly about the interruption of his business for yet another search. He whined that Crawley was a regular customer, no more, and he could not be held responsible for what his customers did when they were not eating his food.

Jeejay waved the search warrant under his nose and then ignored him while the FBI team went over the building with a very fine tooth comb.

The technical specialist was an agent called Wacko. I am sure that was not his name, just his inclination. He inspected the rear walls of the building by listening to them with a stethoscope.

I was standing in front of the building watching the FBI team when I saw the manager whispering to one of the waitresses; the youngest and most attractive.

“Go stand in front of the closet and talk to the FBI guy. See if you can keep him away from it, understand?”

She nodded and moved to the back. I walked into the diner and found Jeejay. I told him what I had ‘overheard’ the manager say.

“Gee, Fred, you must have exceptional hearing.” He commented but he talked to Wacko who then moved the waitress out of his way

despite her best efforts to distract him and he went to work on the closet.

It took him two hours to decipher the set-up but he did not give up until he had it. It was an ingenious plan. The four light switches for the windowless rear part of the diner were customarily 'on', with the switches in this position the walk-in closet light functioned purely as a light switch. When all four light switches were 'off' the closet light switch functioned to operate an elevator. The entire concrete floor of the closet then silently descended twenty feet to an old unused sewer pipe which ran under the road behind the diner. A switch at the bottom reversed the elevator so that it returned into the closet or returned to the sewer pipe. The sewer pipe was fitted with electric lighting and entered a basement under a building on the other side of the road.

The basement was set up as a Methamphetamine laboratory and storage facility for other drugs, judging by the traces found, mainly cocaine. In back of the sealed basement was a small room with a bed on which lay the dead body of Julietta Bronson.

She had been overdosed with cocaine but a tape found near the body carried her voice pleading with her husband to pay the ransom.

The medical examiner established that she had been dead for several hours when we found her.

There were plenty of Crawley's fingerprints around but no sign of the man himself.

The Java Diner was sealed and every member of the staff was arrested as accessory before and after the murder and kidnapping and also other drug related charges.

I left Jeejay to tie up all the required FBI procedures and returned to the mansion.

Wilkinson informed me that the Mayor's plane had landed and that he was rushing home to deal with the crisis.

While I was waiting for him to arrive I telephoned Janine and updated her on the kidnapping so that she was able to scoop her opposition on the story.

The Mayor looked worried and stressed when he finally arrived. I followed him into his study to brief him fully on the whole story.

“So she was dead already when you found her?”

“Yes sir, she had been killed shortly after her kidnapping. I expect they doped her with cocaine and got her to plead for the payment of the ransom but they overdid the cocaine and she died. It would not have worried them as long as they had her talking to you on tape. If you had not been delayed in Washington you would have paid five million dollars for a dead wife and your daughter would have found a way to fly to South America with the perpetrator.”

He slumped down in his chair behind the desk.

“It was turning out to be such a successful day. My candidacy for governor has been approved by the President and a number of very influential senators have thrown their weight behind me. Now, my wife is dead and my daughter is crazy over a criminal and has been cooperating in trying to extort money from me. My son is without a mother. Admittedly, she was not much of a mother to him. I never understood why she took to drinking. Before we were married she was so anti-alcohol that she didn't want any of it in the house. We had our first row over it. I had to put my foot down and point out that it was a political necessity. I could hardly entertain politically important people without offering them a drink or some wine with a meal. I understood that with her sleeping pills she could not also take alcohol but no one was forcing her to drink. She could have taken a soda and no-one would have been any the wiser. Instead she began drinking avidly but fortunately she gave up using sleeping pills.”

“Well sir, since you have already been hit by bad news I suppose that this is the best time to tell you the rest of the bad news.”

“You mean there is more?”

“Yes sir, but it is from the past. You need to know that your first wife did not commit suicide as you have always believed. Delice was murdered by Julietta who administered an enormous overdose of her sleeping pills. It was a guilty conscience that caused Julietta to start drinking but that conscience did not stop her from trying

exactly the same thing on Desdemona. Julietta gave Desdemona two 400 milligram pills and told her to take both of them. The normal dose is 25 milligrams. Fortunately, Desdemona only took one pill and she survived it but I had the other pill analyzed and it was confirmed as Seroquel which is an antipsychotic that some doctors prescribe in small doses for sedation and sleep. With these available facts, Julietta would certainly have been arrested and charged for murder and attempted murder.”

“But what about the suicide note? I saw it myself.”

“Yes, I believe you did and you also destroyed it.”

“Suicide would have been bad publicity. People would have blamed me for it, saying that I couldn’t keep my wife happy.”

“But that note was typed, wasn’t it?”

“Yes it was.”

“Wilkinson told me once that Delice used to write to her friends often and she used pen and ink to do so, is that not correct?”

“Yes it is but who can say what a disturbed person will do?”

“An ex-secretary will type everything but a person that wrote letters in an ‘elegant’ hand will not go looking for a typewriter to type a note before she takes an enormous overdose of sleeping pills, which, I have confirmed, were Seroquel, not a common sleeping pill.”

“I can see that you have investigated this very thoroughly, Mister Huntsman and I must beg you not to disclose this matter to anyone. I fear that it will have a very adverse effect upon my image at exactly the wrong time for my campaign.”

“Sir, I cannot make a promise about this. My investigation has required FBI and police assistance. The story might get out even though I have disclosed the exact details to no-one but you. However, I will do my best to keep the lid on this matter until the gubernatorial process is complete.”

“I would be most grateful to you, Frederick. Believe me, you shall be an important part of my team in the governor’s mansion and beyond.”

Wilkinson knocked and entered.

“Sir, there are many representatives of the press wishing to speak to you about recent events.”

I spoke up. “Wilkinson please tell them that the governor is overwrought with the tragic death of his second wife and is unable to give interviews tonight.”

“No wait!” said the Mayor. “I do not wish them to think that I am unable to continue to function due to personal tragedies. I will speak to them.”

I watched him as he did it.

With tears streaming down his face, he stood before TV cameras and furiously scribbling reporters.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is the second wife I have lost in tragic circumstances so you will forgive me if I am somewhat brief. I would deem it a favor if you would hold your questions over until I have had some time to absorb the enormity of what has happened. I will say that the FBI and my own staff have done a fantastic job of tracking down my poor wife’s prison and recovering her body before any ransom money was delivered to the dastardly murderers. You may be sure that we will bring these criminals to book as we have in the last few weeks and shall continue to do so throughout my administration as mayor of this town. Thank you for your forbearance and goodnight.”

His ratings shot up by ten points the next day.

Chapter Twelve

On the next day I received a call from Janine Drew asking me to confirm that Doctor Henry Forrester had been the family physician of the Bronson family.

"Not exactly," I told her. "He was the medical practitioner to Mrs. Bronson before she married the mayor and after that he attended to her and later to Daniel her son but not to the mayor and Desdemona Bronson."

"Why didn't he tend to the other members of the family? Isn't that unusual?" Janine persisted.

"Not really, as far as I know when the first Mrs. Bronson was alive the family used a Doctor Charles Carter and the mayor and Desdemona continue to do so. Julietta tried to get Desdemona to use Dr Forrester but she didn't like him and went back to Dr Carter. Why are you so interested in the mayor's family doctor?"

"Doctor Henry Forrester committed suicide last night. He left a suicide note which mentioned Mrs. Bronson. I haven't seen the note but I think he was in love with her and might have had an affair with her before she married Bronson."

"Who is handling the case in the police department?" I asked.

"Detective Jim Goodings: he is the one who told me about the case."

"What would you say if I asked you to put a hold on publishing any mention of Julietta Bronson in your story?"

"Gee, Freddie that's the most interesting part of the story. Why would you want me to hold back on it?"

"It could damage the mayor's chances in the gubernatorial race, Janine."

"Look, Freddie, I wouldn't do this for anyone else but for you I'll do the story without mentioning the connection with the Bronson family. Just remember that you owe me."

It was Detective Jim Goodings that gave me the rest of the story when he showed me, as another of his 'favors for the mayor',

Forrester's suicide note:

"I cannot go on any longer. Julietta you have me in thrall. I am like putty in your hands but still you will not divorce him. I have besmirched my standing as a medical doctor by having an affair with a patient and worse still by supplying you with prescriptions that I should never have given you and now Bronson's young investigator is on my trail and will soon bring evidence against me. I cannot take the shame of it. Twenty years of unblemished medical practice has been wiped out in one period of emotional madness. Julietta, why did you marry him instead of me? I love you. Forgive me. Farewell my love, goodbye."

Apparently he used a pistol to his temple to do the deed. That was probably the pistol he had been using on the shooting range when I first encountered him.

His note gave the impression that Julietta was the only woman in his life but according to detective Goodings he had been married from shortly after Julietta's marriage to Bronson and had two children, one of whom was a son that suffered from chronic asthma.

I did not report any of this to the mayor.

Later that morning I went up to Desdemona's apartment to talk to her in the hope that I could persuade her to relent and disclose something that could lead us to Barforth Crawley.

The female FBI agent was using the bedroom that I had originally occupied and she let me in to see Desdemona.

"What the hell do you want, Huntsman?" Desdemona said spitefully.

"Desdemona, I am sure that you have heard that Spike Crawley is now wanted for murder as well as kidnapping. He will be extremely lucky if he escapes the death penalty, and he most certainly will spend the rest of his days in prison, if he does. When you became involved with Spike you were a young school girl with a big resentment against your father for ignoring you while he progressed his political career. You turned to drugs to ease your unhappiness and Spike used your dependency to control you so that he was able to take your virginity, an act that is called statutory rape. No one

blames you for that and your father must take some culpability for neglecting his motherless daughter and providing you with an excess of funds with which to indulge your craving for release from your insecurities through cocaine.”

“If you knew all of that, Freddie Huntsman, why did you reject me when I needed someone to help me turn away from Spike?”

“I guess I made a mis-judgment there, Des. I felt that it would be wrong of me to take advantage of a girl who had already been abused as much as you had. I found you very attractive and in time we probably would have become much closer but you opted to support Spike Crawley instead.”

“I had to! He was falling for that Dirty Gertie creature. If I hadn’t given him my support and love he would have kidnapped someone in my family and used the money to fly away with Dirty Gertie. It was all my idea in the first place! A way of punishing my father for what he had not done for me. Spike had the audacity to ask me for the money for Gertie’s bail. I told him that if she was so valuable to him he should sell some of his cocaine to bail her out. He said it was my fault that she had been arrested at all. If I had not reported that they were at the lake, Gertie would still be free. He accused me of doing it deliberately to get Gertie out of the way when all I was concerned about was warning him so that he would not be caught.”

“If he was so concerned about Dirty Gertie, why didn’t *he* warn her instead of just running away to save himself?” I asked her.

“I asked him the same thing but he said that he had gone to town to take care of business and when he called Gertie the police were already there.”

“That’s an obvious lie. You called him before you phoned Wilkinson. Wilkinson still had to call the police who would have taken a while to drive the twenty miles out to the lake. Spike had plenty of time to call Gertie, he just didn’t bother. Only when the bail was set at a hundred thousand dollars, did he regret his inaction. Des, that is because Spike cares for no-one except himself.”

“Well it is true that he had taken the car and Gertie had no means to escape.” She said defensively.

“That doesn’t excuse him failing to warn her. She could have escaped by hiding around the lake and calling him after the police had gone. You have to face it, Des, you are dealing with a conscience-less person, a psychopath, and you don’t need to waste yourself on him.”

“That’s not true! He loves me! He says it whenever we fuck. No one else says that. My father never did and you never have.”

“I haven’t because I will not lie to you, Des. I was growing very fond of you until I realized that you were the one that was warning Spike. You have to stop imagining that Spike is something that he is not. For Daniel’s sake you must tell me whatever you know about Spike and where he likely to be hiding.”

“Daniel? What’s Daniel got to do with it?”

“Daniel is the only member of the family left for Spike to kidnap, if he is serious about taking you with him. Spike needs a big score. He has lost his men, his drug stocks and his money. Either he leaves the country now empty handed or he grabs Daniel and makes a last try to recover what he has lost.”

She giggled. “You have forgotten the original plan, Freddie. Spike and I run away together and make a ransom demand on Daddy for five million dollars. He pays the money into Spike’s numbered account and he never hears from either of us again.”

“Des, once that money goes into Spike’s account he will not need you anymore. You will end up dead, just like Julietta.”

“That’s what you say but you don’t know Spike like I do. He loves me and we are going to be together forever.”

“Okay, Des, let’s look at that possibility. If Spike was going to take you to South America with him, why did he make Gertie get a passport?”

“Who said that he did that?”

“I heard him say that when I first overheard that you had been kidnapped and after her death the police found a brand new passport in her possession.”

“That doesn’t prove anything. He probably said that to keep her calm and willing to do whatever he asked.”

“Okay, then what about you? How did you come to be unconscious when I found you if this had been all part of your own plan?”

“Spike said it would look better in case anything went wrong. No one would suspect my involvement if I was unconscious when I was found.”

“My word, Des, I always thought that you were extremely intelligent but what you have just said borders on idiocy. Why would Spike expect anything to go wrong with your plan? He certainly didn’t expect anything to go wrong with any of his other plans.”

“Ah but things did go wrong with all the plans, so he was right to be careful.” She said smugly.

“Let me get this right, Des. You believe that Spike accepted your plan then drugged you so that Dirty Gertie could lock you up in a cage while he sent in a ransom note for you and left Gertie’s current boyfriend to guard you. You, the girl who had made the plan in the first place? In your nice clean original plan surely you simply skipped over the border into Mexico with Spike. Spike sent in the ransom demand. The money was transferred to Spike’s numbered account and you both took a flight to Brazil and were never heard of again.”

“Er, yes, that was the plan but...”

“Stop making excuses for him, Des. He had kidnapped you in all seriousness and if he had been paid the ransom your body would have been found there dead in that cage where I first saw you. He would have flown to Brazil with Dirty Gertie.”

She opened her mouth but said nothing as she thought about what I had just said.

“Now listen to me, Desdemona, is there anything that he has said that might give you a clue as to where he might be hiding right now?”

“Well we were talking about escapes from prison once and he said that if he ever escaped from prison he would head out into the woods and spend a few months there while the search cooled off.

He said that he had a stash of money that he could use once he had got out of the States and he knew how to live in the woods because he had done it before.”

“What woods were those?”

“I don’t know. He just said ‘the woods’.”

“Okay, Des, thank you for that. Now remember, you risk being grabbed by him if you go wandering off on your own. Don’t do it until we have him back in jail.”

“Freddie?”

“Yes, Des.”

“Are you going to come and see me again? Can we be friends just as we were before?”

“Yes, Des, just be patient for a few days and then everything will get back to normal again.”

Wilkinson was waiting anxiously outside the apartment when I came out.

“Sir, has she come to her senses yet?”

“It’s difficult to know with someone like her but I have done my best to show her what sort of person Barforth Crawley is. She has disclosed something to me which might be useful but we will have to see how it turns out.”

I went down to see the Mayor.

“Sir, I have spoken to Desdemona and she has given me certain information about Barforth Crawley which may or may not be valid. Until I am able to prove it out I recommend that you get her doctor to give her a tranquillizer to keep her complacent. She is bound to feel the effects of cocaine deprivation so someone should be with her at all times.”

“Thank you Frederick. I greatly appreciate your help.”

“Sir, I could be away for a few days following up on the hints I have had from Desdemona. Hopefully we will pick up the trail to Barforth Crawley.”

“Good luck with that Frederick. If there is anything I can do to help do not hesitate to ask.”

Jeejay was no longer at the house so I went down to the local FBI office to see him.

He was sitting with a very attractive female agent discussing various possible ways to track down Crawley but they did not appear to have found any scheme that showed promise.

“Oh hi Fred, this is Agent Jadi Benton. Jadi this is Fred Huntsman the mayor’s investigator.”

“Oh very pleased to meet you Fred; I’ve heard so much about you.” She was a slim brunette that looked like she belonged on the cover of a magazine. “I hope you can give us some ideas on tracking down Crawley because we are fresh out of them.”

“What’s the best idea you have had so far?” I asked Jeejay cheerfully.

“Jadi came up with tracking down the numbered back account but the problem is that Spike never got around to giving it to us. Even if he had, identifying the bank from the number doesn’t work either and he never got around to giving us the bank name either.”

“I did an exercise of trying to identify every property he owned.” Jadi remarked. “But all that we know of are held in the names of corporations so it is unlikely that the ones we don’t know about will have his name on them. I did a search on each of his names in all the property registers of the state and came up with nothing.”

“Okay, well the good news is that I have had a hint of an idea from Desdemona Bronson. She said that Spike once told her that if he ever was a fugitive he would head out into the woods and spend some months there while the search cooled off. He said that he had a stash of money that he could use once he was out of the States and he knew how to live in the woods because he had done it before.”

“Excellent!” Said Jeejay. “that gives us something to go on. We can track back through his past and see where he used to go hunting and fishing.”

“Where did he go to high school?” Jadi asked.

“I’ve been through all his files and I couldn’t see any mention of it.” Jeejay said.

"I'll ask Desdemona in case she knows anything about it." I commented.

"I think that I could search the school databases to see if his names appear anywhere there but of course there is no guarantee that he went to high school in this state at all." Jadi remarked.

"What about hunting and fishing licenses?" I suggested. "Can you do a search of those? Bear in mind that the licenses might be in his father's name."

"Actually that is the best idea yet. You see, Jadi I told you that this guy had it."

"Let's find a result before we do any back patting." I responded modestly. "I'm going to visit a friend. Give me a call if you find any matches in the databases."

I drove to Janine's condo and this time her car was parked in its bay.

I went up to the door and knocked and a face with two beautiful purple black-eyes peeped out. "Oh, it's you Freddie. Come on in!"

She had been eating a very late lunch and there was a tall, well-built and handsome young man seated at her table with a glass of wine in his hand.

"Freddie, this is my colleague, Robert Mellor. Robert is a senior reporter at the Clarion."

"Robert this is Frederick Huntsman the Mayor's investigator that I have been telling you about."

"Wow, Fred, you certainly seem to have a most enviable reputation. I am very pleased to meet you."

"Don't believe everything that Janine tells you Robert. She is unreasonably prejudiced in my favor because I passed her some leads on her stories."

"Yeah? Well that would do it for me too but I've seen the evidence of her black eyes and that pimp is still in hospital with a fractured skull so I am inclined to believe all the stories that Janine has told me."

"Janine, this isn't purely a social visit." I said turning to her. "How did your editor take your promise about that murder and attempted

murder story I told you that I was working on?"

"Freddie, I never mentioned it. The scoop on the Julietta Bronson kidnapping did it for me and when you followed that with the news of her death the editor gave me a raise."

"Good, please leave it like that. The mayor doesn't want me to take that matter any further until I've captured Barforth Crawley. He wants my full attention on that."

I rose. "Well, I'll leave you two to finish your meal. Did you get the story that you paid for with your two black eyes?"

She looked down. I gather it was an embarrassing issue. "No, I didn't get anything I could make a story out of. Hang on, Freddie, I'll walk with you to your car."

She took my arm and went down to the car with me.

"Freddie, Robert is just a work colleague. We both worked late and missed lunch so I offered to share mine with him."

"Yes, I like him. He seems to be a very nice guy." I remarked. "Now, Janine before you try any stunts again, like that hooker one, ask someone like Robert or me to back you up. You hear me? That was a very dangerous thing you did."

"Don't worry Freddie, I've learned my lesson. "

I drove back to the mansion to find the place in an uproar.

"Wilkinson, what has happened?"

"Sir, we are searching for Miss Desdemona. She has disappeared."

"How can she have disappeared? She had a female FBI agent with her at all times."

"Apparently even FBI agents have to use the toilet facilities from time to time, sir. The agent says that she went to the bathroom after breakfast. Desdemona was dozing after taking the tranquillizer that you suggested. The agent was washing her hands when she heard the front door of the apartment closing but she thought nothing of it. When she went to Desdemona's bedroom a few minutes later, it was empty. We searched the house and now the grounds but there is no sign of her. None of the servants saw her leaving and no cars are missing but she is gone."

"Was there anyone on duty at the gate?"

“Yes sir, there is always someone at the gate. No-one entered or left except earlier when you left and then the mayor went to his office but both of those things happened long before Desdemona disappeared.”

“Has the FBI lady advised her office?”

“Yes sir she has and they have put out a state-wide advisory to be on the look-out for her. I supplied them with some recent photographs.”

My cell phone rang and it was Jeejay. “Fred, I’ve just heard about Desdemona Bronson. We’ve notified the police and sent out copies on her photograph. Agent Jadi Benton has had some results in that search for hunting and fishing licences. Apparently about twenty-five years ago a licence to hunt and fish in Stonewall State Forest was issued to a V B Crawley. According to Spike Crawley’s birth certificate that could be his father whose name was Vernon. Spike would have been a teenager at the time.”

“Did you put some roadblocks up along the route to Stonewall State Forest?”

“No, but I will arrange that now. What are you going to do?”

“I am going to head there by the shortest route.”

“Hold fire on that one, Fred, I think I can organize a helicopter to get us up there.”

“Okay, I’ll be back shortly. I’m going to get some equipment and supplies just in case we end up searching among the trees.”

I drove to an outdoors store to pick up a large backpack, a tent, a tarpaulin, a gas stove, two gas lamps, two battery headlamps, two large water canteens, some cutlery and a hundred meters of strong light rope. I went to the supermarket and picked up a range of groceries that did not require refrigeration.

When I returned Jeejay was waiting with a pile of his own equipment: a telescoped rifle, a shotgun, a portable two-way radio, night-vision glasses and Agent Jadi Benton.

We loaded everything into an agency van and drove out to the small airfield where the helicopter was waiting.

We transferred our baggage into the helicopter and the three of us climbed on board.

It was the first time I had travelled in a helicopter. Normal conversation was impossible although I could tell what the other two were trying to say they could not receive my replies. For some reason, Agent Benton gestured in sign language as she tried to talk to Jeejay. I tapped her arm and asked her in sign language.

“Do you know sign language?” I signed to her.

“Yes, my little brother was born deaf.” She responded.

“Why are you on this trip? I thought that you were a computer expert.” I signed.

“I am a girl of many parts, Fred. One of my specialties is tracking. I was taught by my grandfather who was a full-blooded Navajo. The FBI has used me many times for that reason.”

I could see now that her olive complexion, high cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes which added to her attraction were probably the result of her Native American blood.

We chatted silently to pass the time until the helicopter put down in a clearing near a ranger station.

Once we were out of the chopper Jeejay said: “We will remain here at the ranger station until we hear something about the fugitives. I am in radio contact with FBI, police and rangers. If Spike Crawley enters this forest by any of the recognized entry points we’ll know about it.”

“Jeejay, I don’t think that is very likely. He’ll know that we are looking out for him although he probably doesn’t know that we expect him to be in the forest. Let’s have every supply store in the vicinity of the forest polled to see if someone answering his description has bought anything from them.”

Jeejay liked that idea and he ordered it done immediately.

It was not long before a report came in from the extreme south of the park.

A 4x4 pickup had stopped to buy beer and a tarpaulin. The driver answered to the general description of Spike Crawley although he had grey hair but there was also a small girl that stayed

in the vehicle. The storeowner had no reason to be suspicious of the couple at that time but he remembered them as soon as the description of Spike was broadcast.

Rangers sent out to investigate the sighting reported finding a 4x4 pickup vehicle abandoned some miles up an old unused logging trail.

Jeejay ordered the helicopter again and it carried us down to the ranger outpost closest to the abandoned vehicle.

"The vehicle had been stolen in town according to our office." Jeejay reported while we were offloading our equipment. "That makes it ninety percent certain that the grey-haired man was Spike Crawley. I'll lift some fingerprints off the pickup and then we will be certain."

One of the rangers gave me a lift to a nearby ranch where I bought a mule and rode it bareback to the ranger outpost. It did not do my posterior any good since I had not ridden a horse for several years but the mule had an easy walking pace so I covered most of the distance in much the same time as if I had walked it.

"What's the mule for?" Jeejay asked as Jadi cheerfully took control of it.

"Do you feel like carrying all our equipment over miles of rough country?" I asked him.

"What? Are we taking all this stuff with us? I thought that we would make excursions each day from the ranger outpost. I have to keep in touch with the FBI office to coordinate the search."

"You won't find this man with day excursions, Jeejay. He is going to go as far and as deep into the woods as he can. Remember he intends to sit it out until everyone gives up the search and he wouldn't do that unless he knew that he had a secure hiding place and adequate food supplies. He couldn't carry enough supplies for a few months so food must be available from the surrounding countryside."

"I agree with Fred." Jadi said promptly.

"Okay, I understand the points you are making. You two will have to conduct the search in that case. Jadi, I brought a walkie-

talkie that you can take with you. It's the latest thing and works through a commercial satellite. If you go any great distance away you won't be able to reach me or hear me unless the satellite is overhead and that is mainly at night. I expect you to report to me every evening while you are away. Am I clear?"

"Yes Special Agent Porter." She said smartly.

We packed all the supplies and camping equipment onto the tarpaulin rolled it up and tied it neatly onto the mule's back. I carried the shotgun and Jadi carried the scoped rifle and all the spare ammunition was in my back pack with what was left of the rope after it had been used on the mule-pack.

We set out immediately with Jadi following tracks which I could not make out.

"He seems to know exactly where he is going," Jadi said. "He has set a course and he is walking directly to a landmark. My guess is that it is that peak over there."

The going was not too bad for the mule at this point although we had to squeeze it past a few trees that grew too closely together. The mule was a complacent animal which was a blessing because some mules can be very self-willed. It tottered gamely on with its bulky and heavy load and seemed content to follow behind Jadi's shapely butt just as I was. We seemed to walk for miles through thick forest until darkness which began early under the canopy of trees.

When Jadi could no longer see to follow the signs of Spike's passing she called a halt and we made a sparse camp in a space barely big enough to allow for the two humans, the mule and our impedimenta.

Jadi reported to Jeejay and as we were still close enough to him as the crow flies, the reception was clear.

"I've had those prints that I lifted from the pickup checked. They are definitely those of Barforth Crawley," Jeejay told them.

There was no space to erect the tent but the night was fine so we ducked under the tarpaulin with our blankets and spent a good night sleeping the sleep of physical exhaustion.

In the morning, I watered the mule by pouring water from my canteen into my felt hat. The mule drank it eagerly and also consumed the oats I offered on a corner of the tarpaulin. Jadi made breakfast which consisted of bread with baked beans and coffee cooked on my gas stove; no milk and no sugar.

We packed up the mule and began following the tracking signs once more. After struggling until noon through the dense forest we came to a stream. The sign went over the steep bank and while I waited on the trail with the mule, Jadi descended the bank, which was far too steep for the mule, and found evidence that the stream had been crossed.

"They are still on course for that peak, Freddie, so we will walk along the bank until we come to a point where the mule is able to cross and then double back to here on the far side of the stream."

That sounded easy but it took us all afternoon and by the time we got back to Spike's trail, it was time to make camp.

There was a nice clear spot on the far bank and so we filled our canteens, let the mule have a really good drink and set up the tent. We made a proper supper with a stew of corned beef and tinned vegetables with what was left of the bread I had bought at the trading store before we set out. We rounded it off with a pot of coffee.

"How did you get into the FBI, Jadi?" I asked as we sipped our bitter black coffee.

"They needed a tracker and the sheriff recommended me. I was working as a computer programmer at the time and the agent in charge was impressed with me so he recommended that I should be offered a fulltime position."

"When you say that he was impressed with you, do you mean that he was hot for you?"

"Maybe that had something to do with it but I like to think that it was my skills that got me the job."

"Judging by the way you have been tracking our fugitives, I would say that they did. I've never seen anything like it. Isn't it unusual for the Navajo to train a woman as a tracker?"

"The Navajo did not train me; my grandfather did. He knew that he was getting old and he also knew that he had exceptional tracking skills to pass on. He really wanted me to be a boy but when my mother only produced a deaf boy; he resigned himself to passing on his skills to me. I pride myself that I have not failed him."

"I am sure that you have not. Where is your brother now?"

"He still lives with my mother. He works in leather, making Native American artifacts, mainly moccasins for the tourist trade. He doesn't do too badly at it and with the pension that my father left; my mother and brother live quite comfortably."

I stirred the fire with a stick. We did not truly need a fire as it was a warm night but it was comforting and the smoke kept the insects at bay.

"Freddie, I understand that you are the Mayor's investigator. That sounds like quite a high-powered job for someone in his early twenties."

"Yes, it came as a surprise to me too. The mayor is exceptionally generous to people who serve him well. He is planning to be the next state governor and he tells me that he wants me with him."

There was a loud crack and something hit the fire sending sparks flying in all directions.

I grabbed a double handful of sand and threw it on the fire and then rolled away from it as another bullet struck nearby.

I heard Jadi hiss at me. "Stay down Freddie. I'll see if I can spot him with the scope on the rifle." I heard her moving off into the bushes and lay still shielding my eyes from the few remaining scattered flames that the bullet had blown out of the fire.

Gradually my eyes became accustomed to the dark and to my surprise I could see reasonably well. I reached for a flashlight from my backpack and extended it well away from me before I switched it on pointing it in the direction from which I believed the bullet had come.

There was a shot that knocked the flashlight from my hand leaving it numb but another report sounded and there was the sound of a bullet striking something and a gasp of pain from the

ridge above us.

“I hit him!” said Jadi triumphantly. I grabbed the shotgun and charged up the slope but it was steep and rocky and it took me several minutes to get to the top.

On the rocky ridge away from the shadowy trees the moonlight shone quite brightly so that I could see that the ridge had been vacated.

“He has gone Jadi!” I called down to her. She made it up the ridge quicker than I had and searched the terrain. “Here!” she said pointing at a dark spot on a boulder.

It looked like a shadow so I touched it and my finger came away wet and sticky.

“Yeah, you are right. It’s blood!”

We returned to our camp.

“I’ll pick up his trail tomorrow, Freddie. We are going to have to move carefully now that he knows we are behind him. He must have seen our fire and he doubled back to bushwhack us. He is likely to try that again. What we will do is make a detour. I know he is headed for that peak so we might be able to get ahead of him particularly now that he is wounded. Of course, the wound might be nothing but we’ll find that out tomorrow.”

“We had better not sleep in the tent just in case he starts taking potshots at it.” I suggested.

“I think you are right. Let’s sleep under the trees.”

Chapter Thirteen

On the next morning Jadi went back up the ridge and checked the signs. She returned while I was preparing breakfast.

"I think that the wound is more than a scratch. He slipped and fell twice as he left. I think he will now forget about us and concentrate on getting to his hiding place."

"So we are still going to try to get ahead of him?"

"No Freddie, I've changed my mind. I don't want to risk losing him. He will be moving as fast as he can to put distance between us. We will stay on his trail until he goes to ground at his hiding place then we can call in the cavalry. No need to risk ourselves any more than necessary."

"Yeah, that guy is a good shot. He knocked the flashlight right out of my hand."

"I'm pretty sure that he wasn't aiming at the flashlight. He was shooting at where he thought that you would be. Hitting the flashlight instead means that he is not as good with his rifle as he thinks he is but his shot did serve one useful purpose: I was able to shoot at the flash from his rifle and that was how I winged him."

We ate a breakfast of *frijoles* and coffee and set out along trail by this time we had named the mule *Clementine* and she was getting quite accustomed to us and followed us without having to be dragged by her lead rope. I think she had grown fond of her ration of oats which she was fed each evening.

Jadi had found several spots of blood on the trail and she found the place where the fugitives had spent the night.

"It looks like he was hit high in the body." Jadi said as she examined a blood-smear on a boulder against which he had rested his back.

She moved quite quickly because the trail signs were more obvious what with Spike moving rapidly and with much less care than he had been doing up to then.

We travelled hard without drawing any closer to our quarry until darkness drew near.

"I guess we had better put up the tent tonight, Freddie. That sky looks as if it is getting set to rain."

We had no sooner erected the tent when it began to drizzle and we were forced to unpack the tarpaulin and feed Clementine in the rain. We were both drenched and were grateful for the gas stove which we could operate in the tent for warmth and cooking.

I made a beans-and-corned-beef stew with some pancakes and coffee for our supper while Jadi stripped naked, towed down and changed into dry clothing.

She did this quite openly with no coyness and she braided her long damp hair into a single plait down her back. She looked more Indian than ever before.

"You had better change into dry clothing also, Freddie. This is no time to catch a chill."

I could feel the chill of the dampness so I did as she suggested however on my part there was considerable coyness because looking at her naked body had done things to my nakedness that were embarrassing. I kept my back turned to her and pulled on my dry pants as soon as possible.

"You know Freddie, you look lean and wiry but actually your body is quite well muscled." She commented easily, mainly I think, because she sensed my embarrassment.

"Er, Thanks Jadi, nice of you to say so especially since you have such a gorgeous body yourself."

"Do you think so? I've always been afraid that I would develop the heavy upper thighs and butt that my mother had."

"Take my word for it, there is no danger of that at present and in any event I'm inclined to believe that you do a lot more exercise than your mother ever did."

We ate supper and talked about exercise programs and mothers and to my relief the embarrassment of my extremity faded but the rain did not.

“This rain is going to become a problem for tracking Crawley also I can’t get through to Jeejay in this weather.” Jadi commented as she extended her tin plate out of the tent flap into the driving rain, to wash it off. “I hope that Crawley stays on course for that peak. It will make it much easier to pick up his trail again.”

I followed her example and washed down my plate. She had chosen the site for the tent and I had wondered why she had perched us on a mound instead of the nice level site I had expected. Now I could see the wisdom of her choice. The level site was like a lake whilst the rainwater ran by us without seeping into the tent at ground level.

We folded the tarpaulin into a square several thicknesses deep. It was not easy to do in the confined space of the tent but Jadi insisted upon it. It covered most of the tent floor-space except for a few feet near the tent entrance.

“Now we sleep on that and at least we will be protected from dampness seeping up through the dry ground.” Jadi pointed out.

I threw my sleeping bag down against the tent wall expecting Jadi to do the same on the opposite wall but instead she placed her bag in the center of the floor-space, leaving no more than a foot of space between us.

We intended to rise early in the hope that we could pick up Spike’s trail after the rain where the trail would be even clearer than it had been in the dry dust so we extinguished the gas lamp and settled down in our sleeping bags with the rain still pelting down on the canvas above us.

I find rain very soothing and I dropped off to sleep quickly.

I was awakened by a thud against my back and turned in my bag to find Jadi pressed up against me. She was still sleeping and had apparently rolled down the slight slope from the crest in the middle of the tent to my lower position.

I found her body pressure against mine pleasing and I dropped off to sleep once more.

I cannot say how long I slept but I was awakened again by an arm that snaked out around my neck as Jadi cuddled into me with

her nose and lips pressed just below my ear. I tried to move away without disturbing her but any retreat was counteracted by the tightening of the arm and further burrowing into my neck.

I lay there for a while trying to think of a way of extracting myself. It was not an unpleasant situation, in fact I was rather enjoying it, but I thought it better to avoid embarrassment by distancing myself before Jadi awoke. To exit her encircling arm, I would have to raise my upper half but if I did that her head would be in the way and I would be withdrawing from her face which was buried in my neck. I tried moving in one direction or another but she followed me and tightened her grip. In the end I gave up trying and lay still until I dropped off to sleep again.

I was woken again by some heavy breathing in my ear and soft lips sought out my mouth in a passionate kiss. My hormones raged and I slid my arms about her as she slid out of her sleeping bag and lay on top of me. Our tongues met and I was ready to strip off her singlet and shorts when there was an almighty bray from Clementine followed by a loud roar.

I shot out of my sleeping bag and scrabbled for the pump shotgun as Jadi shouted out:

“What’s going on, Freddie?”

I unzipped the tent flap and peered out into the darkness.

“Jadi bring a flashlight. There is something out there that is upsetting Clementine.”

I edged out into the darkness as Jadi handed me the flashlight. The beam from the flashlight cut into the rain-moist air as I stepped barefoot into the mud and peered ahead of me. A large dark outline stood between me and the frantic Clementine who was tugging hard at her hobble and struggling to move away from the object of her terror.

The column of light settled on a nine foot mountain of flesh, teeth and claws as the grizzly turned away from the mule and dropped to all fours roaring its anger as it did so.

I knew it was about to charge so I kept the shotgun at the ready as the hind-legs bunched in a powerful forward spring. I fired once

and worked the slide pump and then fired again almost directly into the monstrous face of the beast.

Another step forward and I knew that this was my end. The claws were like reaping sickles and the teeth were daggers in an unstoppable machine.

I didn't hear the crack of the rifle because I was bowled over by the monstrous body falling on top of me and knocking every vestige of breath out of my lungs.

I lay beneath the oppressive weight struggling to draw breath but unable to do so. My heart was pounding like a steam engine going up a rise when Jadi grabbed my arm and pulled me out from under the beast. This was a feat impossible to achieve except that the rain had created a pool of greasy mud that acted as a lubricant allowing my body to be dragged out from under the fur mountain.

I was still struggling for breath when Jadi's mouth came down upon mine and she began to blow air into my strained lungs. That air was like nectar to me and my lungs refilled and began to function. She kept it up for at least five minutes and the emergency procedure suddenly became another kind of emergency as we kissed passionately. Unfortunately, my experience left me with too little drive to enable me to proceed any further and I was forced to break away and resume breathing.

"Thanks a million, Jadi." I panted. "You saved my life."

She rose up out of the mud.

"Now we will both have to wash down again." She said casually. "Is Clementine okay?"

"I could not see. The bear blotted out my view." I panted as I pulled my legs out from under the bear's carcass.

I saw her walk off into the darkness and then there was the sharp crack of the rifle.

She returned and helped me to my shaky legs.

"Poor Clementine! The bear had mauled her. I had to shoot her."

She shone the flashlight down on the bear's head. "You were lucky, Freddie the shot from your gun took out both of his eyes. He might have got you otherwise."

I limped back to the tent and regardless of modesty stripped off my mud-soaked sleep- clothing and threw it in a corner of the tent.

"We are going to need a stream to get rid of all this mud." I told Jadi as she did much the same thing as I had done.

"There is a large puddle down near Clementine's body. It's muddy but it will help to wash off the worst of the mud until we can find a clear stream."

I limped down to the puddle with Jadi holding my arm and guiding me. The puddle was about a foot deep and it was cold but it did wash off most of the mud, leaving only a brown scum on our skins which transferred to our towels when we dried down.

We sat on our sleeping bags and discussed how we would manage without Clementine's help.

"We can't take the tent or the gas stove and lamps. They are too heavy and bulky." Jadi said firmly. "We must take our weapons, ammunition, sleeping bags, canteens and some provisions. Everything else we will have to leave behind."

"What do we do if it rains again?" I asked.

"We get wet. We will try to find shelter but in the end we will just get wet."

I couldn't argue with her logic so we made a large breakfast of all the things we would not be able to carry with us and keeping something for a later meal, we ate over-well before getting back onto the trail.

After what I had just been through with the bear, carrying over a hundred pounds of essentials on my back was no picnic. Jadi struggled with an equal burden even though her body weight was only two thirds of mine.

We had only just found Spike's trail again when we mutually decided that we had done enough for the day. We found a rock overhang that allowed us some protection from the elements and threw down our burdens too exhausted to collect the damp firewood that could have provided us with some warmth and protection against the wild creatures of the forest. It was just as well that I had stubbornly carried the extra weight of the leftovers from breakfast

so at least we had an energy-providing supper, albeit a cold one.

We slipped into our sleeping bags with our weapons in hand and fell asleep on the rough stony ground, huddled together in our separate cocoons and without making our evening call to Jeejay.

On the following morning we were both stiff and sore, as much from sleeping on the stony ground as from the previous day's exertions.

I limped around picking up the driest wood I could find although there was not very much that did not smoke like a locomotive engine. We cooked up some beans in a mess-tin and ate them, then used the same container to boil some coffee which we drank, grains and all straight from the mess-tin.

Thus fortified we set out on the trail once more but our progress was even slower than the previous day's march.

At midday we came upon a river. What with the heavy rain that had fallen, the river was swollen and wild.

"We will never get across that river with these packs, Freddie. Let's rest and make ourselves a lunch and debate what we should do."

I started gathering driftwood. There was plenty of it that had been washed down the river from upstream. I built a fireplace of smooth river stones and soon had a smoky fire going under the mess-tin with muddy river water and coffee grains.

Jadi decided that she would see what Spike had done about getting across the river and wandered off without her pack to study the signs.

There was a single rifle shot a short way upriver and I snatched up the shotgun and ran hard toward the sound.

I found Jadi picking up a large wild turkey.

She glanced up at me as I approached.

"It's a bit like killing a gnat with a sledgehammer, but I had to use the rifle on it. It will make a nourishing supper." She looked down. "Freddie, I've got bad news. The reason why Crawley headed here is because he had a canoe stashed in the bushes under a bank. The imprint is still there where it lay for all these years and you can

see where they dragged it down to the river.”

“That doesn’t make sense, Jadi. A wooden canoe would be rotten and riddled with insects by now and a buffalo hide one would perish even quicker.”

“That’s true but I think that this canoe was made of fiberglass. Look there. It was so heavy that they did not carry it down to the river but dragged it. Crawley didn’t care that we would see the signs because he knew that we would not have a boat and could not follow him.”

“But he is wrong, Jadi. If he has gone upriver he will battle this strong current caused by the rain and we can follow on foot as quickly as he can paddle particularly with his wound.”

“You are probably right about that but what if he has gone downstream? We could never keep up with him at the pace this river is flowing.”

“We can do two things, Jadi; we can call Jeejay for the helicopter and we can build a raft and punt it downriver. We won’t travel as fast as he does in his canoe but we won’t be far behind him.”

“But Freddie, I can’t track him on the river. How do we know when he leaves the river and moves overland?”

“Jadi, I think that he would hardly have a specially stowed boat just to take a little trip down the river. If he had a land-based hideout, he would not have headed for the peak to relocate his boat. He would have headed directly to his hideout by the shortest and most direct route. Therefore I believe that his hideout is an island or something completely surrounded by water and for which he needed a boat.”

“Okay, I can buy that, Freddie but now comes the sixty-four thousand dollar question: did he head upstream or downstream?”

“I don’t think that we should worry too much about it. I think we should call for the helicopter. It can whip up and down the river in a couple of hours. In the meantime we will build our raft and travel downstream because that is the course of least resistance and I am betting that it is the direction that Spike has taken anyway. If I am wrong we find a clear spot for the chopper to land and ask

Jeejay to pick us up.”

“Okay Freddie, I guess I can vote for that plan. Let’s get this turkey onto your fire and make a start on the raft. I hope that you know how to make a raft that will stand up to that river.”

“I’ve got plenty of rope in my pack and as long as there are not too many rapids downstream I think we can get a raft together that can manage the river as well as a canoe handled by a wounded man.”

Chapter Fourteen

While Jadi basted the turkey over the open fire, I dragged together a collection of poles with which to construct the raft. At some time past there had been logging done upstream and the rain had washed down a number of logs. The timber was as dry as an overnight immersion in a river permitted, showing that it was not freshly cut. I roped four of these buoyant logs together. I had to choose them carefully because I had no means of cutting them to a uniform size. I found some long slender saplings that would do for poles to use for punting.

Next, I lashed our packs to the central logs of the raft and I was ready just before the turkey was.

We had a fine feast of turkey and then wrapped the remainder in my slicker and jammed it into my backpack.

Having constructed my raft on the narrow beach our next problem was to get it into the water and this proved very nearly impossible until Jadi hit upon the idea of using the punting poles as levers so as to push the contraption forward about six inches at a time. By this means, with plenty of sweat and even more swear words we got it into the water and pushed it out far enough to float.

Optimistically, we climbed on board with the punt poles ready to prod it out into the current. Our combined weight drove it down so that it was almost flush with the water, which was inconvenient but not disastrous. However the bottom of the raft grounded on the stony riverbed and would not move.

I jumped into the water, thereby lightening the load and allowing the raft to float an inch or two off the bottom and I gave it a shove to put it out into the current.

The raft shot away, spinning around and around while Jadi shrieked that she didn't know what to do. The raft traveled speedily downriver leaving me holding my punt pole but otherwise unencumbered. I sprinted down the short beach waving my punt pole while I shouted at Jadi to use the pole to guide the raft but she

was not accustomed to boats or rafts. The beach ended and I had rocks to climb over and when I got to the other side of them the raft and Jadi were nowhere in sight. I ran around the next bend and there too I could not see them.

I was not sure what to do but I could not stay where I was and Jadi was not in control of the raft so I had to keep going in the hope that something fortunate might happen.

In a sort of a way, something fortunate did happen, the raft got jammed against a large collection of driftwood and after travelling hard I eventually came upon Jadi, stuck in the middle of the river with the water pressure holding her where she was.

The water was in a venturi caused by the very blockage that held Jadi. That meant that the river was narrower there and it was running at increased speed and pressure.

The distance from my bank to the raft was about fifteen feet from the nearest boulder. Because of the boulders there was no place for a run up before attempting to jump the fifteen feet and if I missed the raft the water would carry me straight into the venturi and down the river. I studied the problem while Jadi begged me to come over and get her off 'this damned contraption'.

Suddenly an idea occurred to me. It all depended on how deep the water was at that point. My punt pole was about eighteen feet long. The distance to the raft was about fifteen feet; maybe, just maybe, I could pole vault the distance.

As I have remarked before I am no athlete but after our days of hiking I was as fit as I have ever been. I had never tried pole vaulting before but there is a first time for everything.

I mounted the closest boulder and felt the bottom of the river with the end of my punt pole. It seemed about six feet deep at that point. I lodged the pole on the river bottom and launched myself out in space with the pole as my fulcrum. The pole reached the perpendicular and I hung suspended for several heart-stopping moments before the bottom end of the pole suddenly slipped on the slimy river-bottom rocks and propelled me toward the raft where my toe tips just reached the logs. Only Jadi's quick-thinking

saved me for another bath; she darted forward grabbed my hand and pulled with all her might. I shot forward on top of her, losing my punt pole in the process and we both rolled in the water sloshing around the raft.

I took control of the raft and using Jadi's punt pole I levered us off the driftwood and into the venturi where we shot off down the river narrowly missing some boulders. My time was cut out to fending off the banks and obstacles in the river but by evening we had traveled at least twenty miles down the river which by then was widening and becoming tamer. We put into a likely-looking beach where Jadi studied the sand and said triumphantly.

"Well Freddie, at least we haven't gone in the wrong direction. Crawley stopped here last night."

We spread out everything in our packs to dry since all had become thoroughly soaked on the raft. Even the clothing we wore was damp so we built an enormous fire and rigged a rack near to it to dry out our most important items.

We stayed close to the fire ourselves while we ate leftover turkey and warmed our damp near-naked bodies.

"I hope those sleeping bags dry out properly." Jadi remarked. "It gets cold toward morning and I would like to feel warm and dry while I sleep."

"How far do you think Crawley is ahead of us?"

"Not much more than twelve hours. From what I can judge he is only using his right arm so I imagine that they didn't rise early this morning. That reminds me; we were supposed to contact Jeejay about the chopper."

I fetched the radio which had also been drying out and gave it to her. She got some static but even that was weak. She opened it up and checked it.

"I think that it is the battery. It's too weak to send out anything in fact I can't receive anything but static anyway."

"How are we going to get hold of Jeejay?" I asked.

"We'll have to try my cell phone but we'll need a high point for that."

“Let’s see where the river leads us. Perhaps there is a ranger station somewhere.”

Apart from flashlights we had no light at night so we slid into our sleeping bags as soon as they appeared to be dry and lay there talking to each other until we fell asleep.

I rose before dawn and rigged a piece of driftwood onto the raft. The drift wood had two uprights to which we could tie our backpacks to keep them as far above the water as possible. It would not ensure that they never got wet but it would minimize the soaking. In principle the backpacks were waterproof but of course that would not apply for total immersion.

We set out before the sun rose. The river was almost lazy now. The worst of the rainwater had passed and the river had become wider and shallower.

Our progress was steady and did not require absolute concentration on keeping the raft from obstacles. We told each other about our lives, our likes and dislikes and hopes for the future.

“I see myself settling down with someone that enjoys country life. I’d like a small farm not too far from a medium-sized town but I guess I have a good few years of work yet so as to save money for that dream.” Jadi told me.

“I’ve never thought that far ahead.” I said. “I was thinking of college provided I had enough money to live on while I studied. I have the house that my grandfather left me and some money from the insurance payout for my parents. But now I have this job with the Mayor who is set to become the governor and I don’t suppose that I could improve on it even if I had a degree.”

“Jeejay wants you to join the FBI. I saw the memo that he sent to Head Office. They might make you an offer.”

“There is certainly a lot of prestige in being an agent for the FBI but I can’t see them offering me what the mayor is paying. He is a rich man in his own right and doesn’t concern himself with rigid pay-grades.”

“I heard that you and his daughter were an item.” Jadi said with a slight inquisitory note in her voice.

“No, I rescued her from what appeared to be a kidnapping and then the mayor hired me to guard her. She’s a very spoilt child that thinks that she can have whatever she wants. She was the one that thought up the idea of faking a kidnapping so that Spike Crawley could collect a pile of money from her father and both of them could disappear together. That came unstuck when Spike decided that he preferred a more mature woman who didn’t expect to have everything her own way.”

“It looks as if Crawley changed his mind about that. He seems to have kidnapped her anyway.”

“I’m not at all certain that he seriously expects the Mayor to pay a ransom for her any more. I think that he has her as a hostage in case he is ever cornered.”

“I’ll bet that she doesn’t know that!” Jadi laughed.

“I’m sure she doesn’t. She has Spike Crawley all mixed up with her father inside her head. She spent most of her life doing things to attract her father’s attention but he has always been too busy with his political career to pay her any mind. She thinks that Crawley loves her because he took her virginity. She just doesn’t get it.”

The lazy river suddenly began to get turbulent again.

“What’s going on Freddie?”

“I think that there may be rapids ahead.”

I poled the raft over to the bank but it was steeper here and there was no beach area. We could not stop so we had to proceed at the much increased pace.

The water became more turbulent and then there was an ominous thundering in the distance.

“Was that thunder?” Jadi asked. “There isn’t a cloud anywhere.”

“I don’t think so, Jadi. Grab your rifle and hand me the shotgun.” I made a rope sling for the shot gun and slung it diagonally across my back. “Fill your pockets with cartridges and hand me that box of shotgun shells.”

“Why Freddie? What’s going on?”

“That thunder you are hearing now. I think that is a waterfall. If I find anywhere we can stop I’m going to do it but right now

it looks as if we are likely to go over it. If that happens, the most important thing is to keep our weapons with us.”

I kept looking for any means to stop our forward progress but as the banks became steeper the water ran faster and so did we. We began to encounter rocks in the riverbed and my attention was absorbed by fending the raft off from the rocks.

“Freddie! Look ahead!” Jadi shouted.

I looked but there was nothing I could do about it. The river dropped over a sheer twenty foot cliff. I could not stop the raft and there was no escape on either side even for a swimmer. I dropped the punt pole and grabbed Jadi’s hand as the raft went over the edge and plunged into the pool below. I launched us out in a jump designed to get us as far from the falling raft as possible and the overturned logs narrowly missed us as we hit the water. I clung to Jadi’s hand even though we were tumbled head over heel by the water and came up a hundred yards downriver with bursting lungs.

The river carried us onward as we clung to one another and suddenly we were in a wide calm lake. The under surface current still carried us on until we grounded on a low island that had been created by river silt. By that time the lake shores were hundreds of yards away and it would have taken a considerable swim to reach either of them.

We staggered away from the water to rest under a low tree.

“Freddie we have lost everything on the raft.”

“We still have our weapons and there are a lot of water birds around. We won’t starve.”

“Maybe not but how do we get back to Jeejay?”

“Right now, I’m not going to worry about that. Our first priority is how do we get off this island?”

“How do we know that it is an island? It might be a peninsula.”

“You’re right. It could be and the only way we are going to find out is by exploring it. Do you feel up to it?”

“I don’t feel up to sitting up let alone going exploring. Let me just lie here for a while. I feel as if I have just been processed by a washing machine.”

I didn't feel a great deal different so I lay back next to her and before I had time to think about it I was fast asleep.

When I awoke it was dark and chilly. Jadi was cuddled up tight against me. We were rather exposed on the open beach and our clothing was still thoroughly wet.

I eased away from Jadi who murmured something but did not awaken.

I trudged up the loose river sand and found a more sheltered spot among a stand of reeds. I gathered as much dried reed material as I could find and placed it in a shallow hole I dug in the sand. I found a smooth river stone and struck it with my pocket knife. A shower of sparks flew off and one burnt a small hole in a dried reed leaf. It went out immediately but I knew I could get this right. I struck the smooth stone close to the driest material I had and a shower of sparks descended upon the tinder. I blew immediately and industriously until the sparks began to eat into the tinder and suddenly burst into open flame. I picked up a reed that had caught fire and found that it made a reasonable flaming torch so I picked my way back to Jadi and roused her.

"Jadi, there is a better spot up there, a short away. I've a small fire going. Come up with me."

She staggered to her feet getting tangled in her rifle sling as she did so. I took it from her and led her to my spot. The reeds had burnt quickly and there were only embers left. I threw on more material and left a sleepy Jadi to keep feeding the fire while I looked for something more substantial to burn.

I did not have far to go before I came upon driftwood washed down by the river and I collected a large piece that I could drag back to Jadi.

Soon we had a blazing fire going and our clothing was draped on the reeds to dry while we soaked up the warmth and dozed.

Jadi woke me when the sun was already up.

"Freddie, I'm hungry. We have to find something to eat."

I rose and pulled on my pants and shirt, checked the shotgun and said:

“Okay Jadi, let’s see what we can find. I plan to make camp as soon as we find something to eat.”

The island or peninsula, at that stage we did not know which it was, turned out to be a lot bigger than it looked from the beach where we originally landed. Most of it was swamp and reeds grew everywhere but waterbirds loved it and nests with eggs were easy to find. One problem arose though and that was finding fresh eggs; most of the nests we found were close to hatching but eventually by looking for a clean newly made nest we found a clutch of eggs that had not yet been incubated.

Without pots or pans, Jadi showed me how to cook the eggs in a hole filled with water and adding stones heated in the fire.

After eating six soft-boiled eggs each we both felt adequately refueled and ready to explore this piece of territory.

As I remarked earlier, a lot of it was swamp and we spent much time looking for solid ground to traverse. By the end of the day, it was clear that it was a swamp in the middle of a lake; if such a thing could be called an island then that is what it was.

Most of the dry ground was at the end where we had come ashore but there was a maze of paths of solid ground weaving in and out of the shallow pools that formed the swamp. There were fish in those pools and that was another attraction for the water birds.

“Well, we certainly won’t starve here.” Jadi commented. “But I don’t plan to live the rest of my life here so how do we get off?”

“The best idea I can offer you is that we find a piece of driftwood that has good buoyancy in water, tie our weapons to it and then swim for shore using the driftwood to keep us up when we get tired and need to rest.”

“I guess that would work Freddie. Swimming was never my forte. Let’s go find our driftwood.”

We wandered along the outer perimeter of the island inspecting all driftwood.

Jadi suddenly stopped and pointed.

“Yeah Jadi, that looks like something has been dragged ashore here.”

“Not just ‘something’ Freddie: that is the canoe that Crawley was using.”

“Where does it go to?”

“They pulled it to the swamp over there and re-launched it.”

“If that is what they did, you know what that means?”

“Yes, of course, this is the place that Crawley was headed for.”

“If we hadn’t come short on the waterfall, we would have passed this place by.” I commented.

“That’s exactly why he chose it. Plenty of food: fish and waterfowl and I’ll bet you that he has a reed-built shack inside there somewhere that will never show up no matter how many times you pass over it with a chopper. If this was merely an island someone would have bought it for a summer retreat but as it is a swamp no one would want it. People could wander about on this maze of paths and never find his shack unless they came in a boat or canoe and knew where they were going.”

“That’s fine, Jadi, so you are saying that we know that he is here but we will never find him?”

“That’s not necessarily true, Freddie. If he uses his rifle we would hear it and if he takes out his canoe for fishing we will see him. It might take patience, however.”

“Wait a minute, what about at night? They will need light and also a fire for cooking. Trees don’t grow too well out here so they will have to come to the perimeter for firewood.”

“If they do, I will be able to pick up their tracks but they will only lead back to the swamp and they will disappear in the canoe again.”

“So our best bet is watching at night to see if we can catch sight of a fire or lamplight.” I asserted.

“I guess you are right, Freddie, so how do we go about this?”

“Let’s set up camp so we can watch this spot where we know they have been before. We’ll find the highest point and watch it through the rifle telescope. If we spot them we follow them with the telescope as far as we can and then move to the spot that we last saw them and repeat the process. I’m betting that Crawley will use his

rifle before I have to use the shotgun because I know how to trap birds instead of shooting them.”

“What if he has the same skill, Freddie?”

“Crawley? He hasn’t the patience and he likes shooting a gun. Killing something is something he enjoys.”

We setup camp on a knoll about three hundred yards from where the canoe had entered the swamp water. It was more a swell in the ground surface rather than a knoll but it did command a good view of the sea of reeds which all lay at or beneath the lake level.

Before withdrawing into the hide that I constructed from reeds, I set one or two traps at points where I had noticed the wild ducks were wont to come up out of the water before waddling to their nests. The island had the enormous advantage that there were no mammalian predators on it, at least there weren’t until we arrived. My traps were quite simplistic: just a strand from the rope sling to the shotgun, tied into a loop and pegged into the ground so that when the bird exited the water and stepped into the loop, it often tightened around the foot. The more the bird struggled the tighter it became. I had learned to make these snares as a lonely boy wandering around the woods and streams of my boyhood hometown.

Jadi and I had settled into the hide alongside each other looking outward to the spot in the swamp where the canoe had been dragged from the lake.

We had been watching for an hour when Jadi nudged me and pointed.

A yellow flame appeared in the swamp and moved slowly toward the point we were watching. It was full dark by that time but I could make out that a kerosene lamp was placed in the bow of the canoe and the single occupant was paddling slowly to the spot we were watching.

“Let’s wait and see whether he had his rifle with him.” I whispered to Jadi.

She focused the telescopic lens and watching closely.

Crawley had almost reached his landing point when suddenly there was an unholy row beneath us as a duck found its foot secured in my trap and began squawking its alarm in its raucous voice.

Crawley did not hesitate. He turned the canoe with a practiced sweep of his paddle, extinguished his lamp and slid away into the darkness.

At least we had marked the spot where his lamp first became apparent.

Chapter Fifteen

There was no chance that he would return that evening so I went down and collected my snared bird. We returned to our camp of the previous night and built a good fire where we toasted slices of duck for a late supper.

Since we had no blankets left and the early mornings were still cold, we slept in the egg-and-spoon position with my arm around Jadi and somehow during the night I ended up cradling her breast. When I awoke in the morning I realized what my hand was doing and I tried to withdraw it but Jadi pulled my hand back and cuddled it to her. We lay like that until the sun came up and then Jadi toasted more duck while I hunted for fresh eggs.

I returned triumphant with eggs in the bottom of my tee-shirt to find Jadi with toasted duck laid out on a mat she had woven from reeds.

“That gives me an idea Jadi.” I said after admiring her handiwork. “I spotted a willow tree growing on one of the swamp islands. Let’s make a willow-frame and thatch the frame with reeds. It will serve as a shelter against rain and wind. It will be easily portable so we can take it with as we move.”

She thought it a good plan so I ventured out with my shotgun and pocket knife while she stayed ‘at home’ weaving a large reed mat.

I found the willow island after a considerable amount of casting about. All those channels and islands looked the same. Cutting willow wands with a pocket knife is hard work and then I had to collect strips willow bark for binding the planned frame.

I found a fresh nest on the island so I collected the eggs in my shirt. I had to manage my shotgun, the willow wands and bark strips all at once without breaking the eggs as I waded through the swamp waters ankle-deep in mud under thigh-high water. It wasn’t easy and it was well after noon when I finally got back our camp.

I saw Jadi from about three hundred yards. She was cowering down behind a clump of reeds. She spotted me and signed to me in sign language.

“Keep down! Crawley is collecting wood to the north.”

I laid down the eggs, wands and bark and checked the shotgun. It appeared to be in order. I crept toward Jadi's position. She signed to me.

“I left the rifle at our camp while I collected more reeds. I cannot get to it.”

I pointed at the shotgun and moved forward. Crawley was about five hundred yards away. His rifle was slung across his back and his left arm was in a grubby sling. He was dragging a log of driftwood up the beach and there was minimal cover between us. He was right out of shotgun range and if we moved to collect the rifle he would see us and have plenty of opportunity to shoot at us before we reached our rifle because we would not be out of his rifle's range.

My only chance was to creep back to where I expected his canoe to be. If I could surprise him there, we would have him.

Once I was back in the reeds I was able to move freely. I sprinted for the spot where we had originally seen signs of the canoe being dragged but it was not there. At least it was not where I thought it should be. Possibly I had taken a wrong turn in the reed maze. I widened my search keeping close to the beach since I calculated that he would bring the canoe as close to the beach as he could so that he would not have to drag the firewood too far.

I was not wrong. I found the canoe just as Spike came up to it dragging his driftwood.

We were both surprised. I scrambled for my shotgun and as I had two good arms I had mine pointed at him before he had even unslung his.

I will grant him that he was a quick thinker. Without a fraction of hesitation he dived into the black swamp water and effectively disappeared. I knew that he would hide in a reed thicket and that if I went after him he would see me when I could not see him. As he had a rifle that would give him the advantage so instead of pursuing

him, I threw my shotgun into the canoe and dragged it bodily down to the beach and into the lake water. I am not an expert canoeist but I will warrant that few experienced canoeists could have moved that canoe faster than I did then.

Long before Spike would have thought it safe to move from his reed thicket, I had the canoe around to the top end of the island where we had first landed. Not being prepared to take any chances with this valuable resource, I removed everything of value from it before sinking it in a spot where I knew I could find it again.

I surveyed the items I had found on the canoe. I had a large rain slicker, a fishing box filled with hooks, reels of line, sinkers and floats, two paddles and a kerosene lamp with half a tank of fuel. I carried these treasures up to where Jadi was waiting and worrying.

I told her what had happened and proposed that we leave the island immediately to run down river and look for a ranger's post.

"What if Crawley has another means of getting off the island, Freddie? He could get clean away."

"You are right, Jadi but I'm betting that he does not have another means. His entire presence on this island is calculated to be unnoticeable. The inside of the canoe was thoroughly wet when I found it. That tells me that he keeps it submerged when he is not using it. I think that he will waste some time trying to find us to see if he can steal the canoe back again; probably after killing us. We must move quickly to get a chopper and search party to this island. I would not put it past him to abandon Desdemona on this island, where she will starve, while he swims ashore and disappears back into the woods."

"Okay, I understand that leaving now is our best option." She said. "And it comes just when I was beginning to enjoy our vacation!"

We gathered the eggs I had found and took what was left of the duck and returned to the canoe where we upturned it and dumped our treasures back into it.

Jadi turned out to be a very competent paddler and between us we traveled rapidly downstream on constantly lookout for a ranger

post or a tourist camp.

We made one overnight stop on a likely beach just as the rain came down again. We overturned the canoe and spent a reasonably comfortable night lying on the slicker in each other's arms but when morning came and it was still raining we decided to keep going.

We finally found a ranger post where we arrived wet and hungry at midday.

Jadi telephoned the FBI and got patched through to Jeejay.

"Where the heck have you two been? We've been searching the forest for you." Jeejay said in a voice that betrayed his relief.

Jadi explained our various disasters and asked the ranger give Jeejay directions to the ranger post.

"We'll have a chopper there in a couple of hours." Jeejay told her. "Tell Fred that his boss was elected as governor probably due to the sympathy vote over his daughter being kidnapped. Anyway, our Fred is now on the governor's staff."

Jadi and I showered together in the ranger's bathroom while our clothing was washed and dried in the laundry. The ranger was a nice lonely guy that obviously wished that he had Jadi as a shower-mate but he contained himself and prepared a great meal for us of steak, eggs, French fries and plenty of coffee.

"How the hell did you two survive out there with no provisions whatever?"

"We had our weapons and ammunition." Jadi told him. I didn't exist if Jadi was in the room. "Freddie made a snare that caught us a duck and there were plenty of water-bird eggs around."

"But how did you cook without pots and sleep without blankets?"

"Oh we managed okay, mainly by grilling meat over a fire and sleeping close to each other."

"Oh, are you two married?"

"No," said Jadi sweetly. "We're just good friends."

The chopper arrived too late in the day to set out again but Jeejay had thoughtfully brought us most of the things we were lacking.

That evening we sat down to a roast beef, potatoes and vegetable supper cooked plainly but nevertheless well by Ranger Bob, whose full name was Robert Jones.

We spent the evening discussing the island and Spike Crawley.

"You will have to search the island center. Freddie is convinced that Crawley has a shack that blends in with the reeds. If you drop Freddie and me on the river banks we can check whether he has left the island yet. The place is remote so he is the only human likely to leave tracks from the water to the forest."

"Maybe, but it has been raining since you left the island and the tracks might very well have been washed away." Jeejay pointed out.

"We cannot assume that without looking." Jadi said firmly.

"You are correct Jadi but first let us see if he is on the island."

"Jeejay, Freddie has just been telling you that it is going to be a long search to find Crawley's shack. If he is not there we will have wasted a lot of time that could have been spent in tracking him down."

"Okay, okay! We'll drop you off on the river bank but which one is he likely to use?"

"My guess is that he will take the south bank back to the nearest city and ultimately Mexico." I said. "I do not think that he will take Desdemona with him. I am convinced that he will abandon her on the island."

"If that is the case Fred, we should find her quite easily. She would be eager to get off the island."

"That depends on what story he spins her, Jeejay. He might tell her that he has to get himself another canoe and that he knows where there is one to be had. If he leaves her with supplies and tells her that he will be back in a day or so, she might hunker down and hide from the chopper. Crawley is a very convincing liar."

"Okay, in that case I had better call for some bloodhounds. They'll take a while to get here but if she does hide from us, we might need them."

The ranger's post was not over-large so all of us slept in the main cabin on the floor but for Jadi and me this was comparative luxury.

I was touched when she placed her blankets right next to mine even though Ranger Bob offered her the use of his bed. She told me later that she didn't want him fantasizing about her and smelling his pillow after she had gone.

We rose the next morning to a full breakfast of pancakes, maple syrup, bacon and some really special coffee. Ranger Bob was trying to persuade us that staying on was worthwhile.

We said goodbye and thanked the disappointed ranger and took off upriver to look for the waterfall and island.

Within a few hours we sighted the island and flew directly over it.

"Gee," Jeejay said. "I never realized just what a maze this place was. It looks like a jigsaw puzzle only every piece looks identical."

"Just drop us on the far bank." Jadi said laconically.

"I can only make one or two passes over the island, sir." The pilot told Jeejay. "Then I have to return to my base for fuel. I'll need to fit long range tanks if we intend to do some serious searching. We are a long way from any repair facilities and I have to make sure that I have enough fuel to get back to base. We are carrying a lot of people and equipment and that sort of thing uses up gas."

"Okay, Bill, I hear you. Drop off Agent Benton and Mister Huntsman on the far bank of the river and then fly back across the island, you can drop me and the other agents on the island and then head for your base. We'll see you back here as soon as you have fitted your tanks."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when Jadi said: "Jeejay, look down there! Someone has started a fire."

We all looked and a column of smoke was rising near the center of the island.

"Bill, get us down there!" Jeejay instructed the pilot.

By the time we had circled around and dropped lower, the flames were spreading fast. The dried leaves on the reeds caught fire easily and an entire swamp island was aflame. Fortunately the water channels around the flaming island were wider than most and the flames were not spreading beyond it.

There was no clear spot on any nearby island, the reeds filled every inch of ground and the nearest place for the chopper to touch-down was at least a half-mile away.

"I'll go back to the burning island." I told Jeejay. "It is likely that the fire was lit by Desdemona and she is my responsibility. Get the pilot to hover and drop me down on a rope. I'll make my way back to the top end of the island where you were planning to make your base."

"Here take this two-way radio with you, Fred." Jeejay said.

"If you are going, I'm going with you." Jadi said.

"No you are not Agent Benton." Jeejay said firmly. "You are the only tracker we have and I need you to track down Crawley. He cannot be on the island. He would never have permitted this fire to break out. I cannot stop Fred Huntsman from going but I certainly can order you to stay."

I stayed out of the argument. I was very used to having Jadi around but my word carried no weight in the FBI. I tied a loop in the rope they gave me and stuck my foot into it like a stirrup. They lowered me down to the reeds on a neighboring island and I dropped the last few feet into the reeds.

I was taking no chances I still had the shotgun and now the two-way radio. Crawley was probably not on the island but he was as unpredictable as a rattler and maybe this was part of some devious plan.

I battered my way through the reeds and into the water channel between the islands. The heat from the blaze was blistering and the breeze carried sparks that burnt wherever they touched. I was grateful to be in the water channel where even the water was beginning to feel warm. I waded around the burning island calling out Desdemona's name and peering at the moist reeds around the edges of the water channel that had not yet caught flame.

I heard a sound above the loud crackle of the burning reeds and waded forward calling her name again. There was a weak response from a patch of green reeds right at the edge of the fire. I waded up the muddy bank and crawled into the green reeds. The heat

was such that even the green reeds would shortly burst into flame. Everything I touched was painfully hot and smoke blurred my vision so that I actually fell over her.

She was lying in a tight bundle. Her hands and face were blistered and she was unable to stand. I picked her up after thrusting the two-way radio into my shirt and abandoning the shotgun. I threw her over my shoulder and dived out of the green reeds straight into the shallow muddy water of the channel. The water brought little relief. I waded as far away from the fire as I could before carrying her in both arms became too much of a strain and I had to stop to swing her around onto my back, piggy-back style. She clung around my neck weakly as I waded heavily through the mud up to my calves under two feet of black water. I could not long sustain the strain and once away from the direct heat of the fire, I struggled up the bank onto a small island.

I laid her down by flattening an area of reeds, stamping them down to make a dry spot.

I collected water in my cupped hands from the water channel and splashed it on her face. She whimpered but did not open her eyes. Her lips were dry and blistered as she murmured something. I could not make out what words she was forming because she did not move her painful lips.

“Des, it’s Frederick Huntsman, are you okay?”

I placed my ear close to her as she mumbled a reply through swollen lips.

“I knew you would come for me, Freddie.” She said before she passed out.

I checked her vital signs and she seemed to be breathing normally and her heart beat appeared to be regular but I am no medic. I rested awhile before I pulled out the two-way radio and tried to contact Jeejay. The radio appeared to be functioning normally but Jeejay did not respond.

I rose as if I was lifting the world on my shoulders and considered the water channel. I pondered on whether there was any easier way to do this but nothing occurred to me.

I remembered from the chopper ride that the river seemed to be closest to the fire on the southern side so I checked the location of the sun in the sky and faced myself south. I cursed myself for having headed north away from the fire thereby wasting mud-tramping energy getting further from the easy going on the beach.

I tried to heave Desdemona onto my back but she was unable to hold onto my neck so I had to hold her arms myself which meant that her legs trailed behind me in the water of the channel. The going was so difficult that I was forced to stop at an island and put her down every two islands or so. I lost my boot to the mud and had to lay Des down and come back to relocate my boot which was not easy. I had done my best to mark the spot where the boot had disappeared but on water that is not a simple thing to do. I felt around with my toes for an hour before I touched the boot and by then the sun was beginning to drop down to the horizon and I realized that I would have to find a camping spot for the night.

The island that I chose was one of the few that had trees growing on it. I say that I chose it but more likely it chose me. It just happened to be there when I realized that I would have to make camp. I dragged Desdemona up under the trees and found some almost dead-wood and dry reeds to use for a fire. I had a disposable cigarette lighter in my breast pocket; it was one of those items that Jeejay had thoughtfully provided after we had explained to him how we had made fire when first arriving on this island. The cigarette lighter was a godsend. Imagine going click and having a fire that could be applied directly to the kindling!

The fire served more as a cheerful reminder of good things than for any other purpose.

I lay exhausted alongside Desdemona and eventually fell asleep myself when the fire was no more than a hot ember.

I woke up to find that Desdemona was sitting up and holding my hand.

“How do you feel, Des?” I asked looking up at her.

“Weak and hungry.”

“When did Spike leave?”

“Two days ago, he said that he was going to get another canoe and that I would be perfectly safe on the island then he gave me a hit of cocaine and when I came to he was gone. I tried cooking for myself, something I’ve never done before, and I tipped over the pan and the hot grease caused the fire. I almost died in it because the shack went up with me in it but something gave me the sense to dive through the flaming wall. After that I don’t know what happened. All I remember is saying to myself, over and over again, Freddie will save me. Freddie will save me.”

“We thought that you had started the fire to attract our attention.”

“I would have if I had thought of it but I didn’t. I was too busy cursing Spike for bringing me to this horrid place. He kept saying that it was just for a couple of months and then we would be over the border to Mexico but I knew that my father would not pay the ransom after I left the house voluntarily. After this experience, I know that I could never live the sort of life that Spike had planned for us, without the ransom money.”

“Des, everyone has been telling you that Spike was not good for you and you just wouldn’t listen.”

“Freddie, it’s all your fault! If you had loved me as I wanted you to, then I would never have gone off with Spike.”

“Desdemona, you must stop behaving as if the whole world revolves around you. What Spike has done for you is that he demonstrated that everything is not always about you.”

She began to cry. “Freddie, I’m sorry. Even Wilkinson told me that I should stay with you. He said that if I behaved myself I had a good shot at getting you to love me. I should have listened but Spike had cocaine and you wouldn’t even allow me to touch it.” She began to sob and I hate to hear a woman cry.

“Des, Wilkinson was wrong. There was no time that I regarded you as anything but a little sister but your mistake wasn’t in failing to behave. Your mistake was in clinging to cocaine because cocaine meant Spike and Spike always has meant trouble to everyone he has ever associated with. Look what happened to Dirty Gertie and

all his henchmen. They are all either dead or in prison. You do not appear to understand that if your father permits it, you could end up in prison also. Conspiring to extort money is a crime and that is what you did when you planned your own kidnapping.”

“I just wanted Daddy to take notice of me. I felt that if he paid five million dollars to ransom me that would prove that he cared. Spike knew that I didn’t intend to take the money and that is why he took up with Dirty Gertie. He didn’t intend to give the money back like I wanted him to.”

“That story won’t cut it with the FBI, Des. You still ran off with Spike which makes you his accomplice. Your Daddy cannot afford to back you on this, he has been voted in as the next governor on a get-tough-on-crime ticket. Unless you change your story and say that someone lured you out of the mayoral mansion and Spike kidnapped you and that you started the fire on this island to attract the FBI’s attention, you are in for a rough time that will end in prison.”

“Well, Spike *did* lure me out of the mansion. He got Nadia to call me and say that she had a prime source for coke but was a little short of money right now and if I would stake her, she would cut me in on the deal.”

“The FBI was taping every conversation in or out of the mansion, Des. If you are going to tell that story it better be factual.”

“Of course it’s factual. Nadia went to high school with me. She introduced me to Spike in the first place. We used to talk about coke as ‘having some fun’. When she called asking me to come out for some fun, I told her that I couldn’t but I was willing to lend her the money she needed. She understood that because we had sneaked out of the mansion many times when we were in high school. She was waiting for me as she used to do outside the east mansion wall and she drove me straight to Spike who gave me a hit and when I came back to earth, we were in the forest.”

“Make sure you have all the facts in place, Des. Your entire future depends on it.”

Chapter Sixteen

As soon as it was light enough, we set out for the southern beach once more. This time the going was much easier for me as I did not have to carry Desdemona. Being lighter also meant not sinking so deeply into the mud.

We reached the beach around nine in the morning and I called Jeejay on the two-way radio and on that occasion I got him immediately. I explained where we were and he sent two agents down to collect us. It took them a while to get to us and Des and I used the time to wash ourselves down in the river so that we were wet but clean when the agents arrived.

Jeejay was waiting for us when we arrived at the camp.

"The pilot has radioed to say that he will be returning to collect us now that we don't need to search the island. Jadi says that she cannot find any tracks on the southern bank and recommends that we put out alerts for Crawley in all major towns between here and Mexico. She has asked to be picked up by the chopper. I think that girl just wants to be back with you, Fred. She has worked with Agent Parker before but on this occasion she didn't want to give him the time of day. Fred, take a walk with me down this beach, would you?"

I left a reluctant Desdemona giving a statement to one of the FBI agents and I strolled with Jeejay.

"Fred, you would make one helluva good FBI agent. I recommended you to headquarters and they authorized me to approach you. I could almost guarantee that you would be partnered with Jadi Benton. Are you interested?"

"Jeejay, I have really enjoyed working with you and Jadi has been the best partner a man could have but the Mayor pays me a heap of money, is very generous in many other ways and leaves me to my own devices. He made a point of telling me that he would be taking me with him into the governor's mansion and he has no intention of stopping there. Much as I would enjoy the prestige of being an

FBI Agent, I think that I have to stay with the Mayor.”

“Hell, Fred, I’m really sorry to hear that and I know that Jadi will be even sorrier than I am. I have to admit that it would have been hard to drop from a salary level close to that of one of our deputy directors to that of a humble agent but the training and scope of an FBI agent can be its own reward.”

We returned to the camp where Desdemona was finishing off a vast breakfast that had been prepared by an FBI man. I stopped by to grab a cup of excellent coffee and to construct a bacon sandwich to go with it.

In due course the chopper arrived and we swung over the south bank of the river to pick up Jadi and Agent Parker.

Jadi spotted me in the chopper and insisted on sitting on my right. Desdemona sat on my left so I was rather like the ham in a sandwich. The other FBI agents sat around wondering what I had that they didn’t.

Jeejay had us flown directly back to town and radioed ahead so that Wilkinson had a car waiting for Desdemona and me at the heliport.

Jadi signed to me as I left the chopper with Desdemona

“Give me a call. I expect a date soon.”

We had no sooner sunk into the cushions of the limousine than Desdemona was at me.

“Who was that girl sitting on the other side of you in the helicopter? She behaved as if you belonged to her.”

“She is an FBI agent and an expert tracker. The two of us followed you and Spike through the forest and to that island.”

“So she was the one that shot Spike?”

“Yes, she was.”

“Tell her to watch out for herself. Spike doesn’t forget things like that. He’ll pay her back for certain sure.”

“I guess she knows how to take care of herself, Des. How bad was Spike’s wound?”

“The bullet is still lodged in his shoulder and its giving him hell. First thing he is going to do is look up a doctor that he knows and

get him to extract the bullet but the second thing he will do is kill Agent Jadi Benton.”

“What? Has he forgotten all about me? I feel like I have been dumped.”

“Don’t worry Freddie. He’s going to get you too as long as it doesn’t interfere with his escape plan.”

“Special Agent Porter is going to make things very interesting for Barforth Crawley. I doubt that he will have the time to pursue his personal vendences.”

“Freddie, you don’t know Spike like I do. If he says he is going to get you he will get you, no matter what.”

We arrived at the mansion to be greeted by a cheerful Wilkinson.

“Welcome back sir! And you Miss Desdemona, what were you thinking running away like that?”

“I didn’t run away I was lured away, Armagh. Ask Freddie, he’ll tell you.”

Wilkinson turned to me. “The master wishes to see you in his study, sir. You have heard the good news? We are moving to the governor’s mansion.”

I knocked on the door of the study and was called in.

“Ah, welcome back my boy! Thank you for recovering that wayward daughter of mine. I hear that the kidnapper has not been brought to book yet?”

“I’m afraid not sir. He escaped as soon as we seized his canoe. He abandoned Desdemona and made off through the forest on his own.”

“Are you going to catch him?”

“Sir, the FBI agent with me wounded him. He will have to seek medical help and the FBI believes that it has that possibility covered. Also he is known to be headed for Mexico and they have tightened up security along the route and at the border. Yes, I would say that we will catch him. His cash resources are so low that he forced Desdemona to draw five thousand dollars for him and he certainly has already used half of that.”

"I am delighted to hear that. You know that we will be moving to the governor's residence? We will need extra staff and I am leaving that to you and Wilkinson. Armagh will handle the domestic staff and I want you to handle the security and public relations end."

"Public relations, sir? I understand the security side but public relations is a little outside of my field."

"I have every confidence in you, my boy. I shall need someone to deal with the press. The mayoral press liaison officer is staying with the mayor's office since he is due to retire soon. Find me a replacement. Someone young and trendy that knows people in the world of the media and while you are about it, you had better expand your security section. If they hit the mayor hard with kidnappings and the like what will the criminals try to do to the governor?"

"Sir, do we have a budget limit on these things?"

"Well, the governor's office certainly does but I am happy to supplement the budget from my own resources so you need not concern yourself about it. Just find the people that you believe that you can trust to do the job properly."

"I shall do my best for you, sir."

"I know you will, my boy. That's why I am putting it in your hands. Please go up and visit Daniel. He has been asking for you."

I went up to find Daniel sitting moodily in his suite watching television. It was a Saturday and the boy should have been outside with his friends but what with the FBI restrictions on his movements, he was alone and, due to his mother's recent demise, not feeling too happy.

"Hi Daniel!" I said cheerily. "Let's go to a ballgame!"

He jumped up and ran to me in joy. "Freddie! You're back! What's a ballgame like?"

"Haven't you ever seen one on television?"

"Yes, but I don't understand it. It all seems pretty boring."

Just then Desdemona came in. Her facial blisters were covered in ointment and she didn't look her usual cute self.

"Hi Daniel! How have you been?"

“Freddie is going to take me to the ballgame!”

“Oh? Then I think that I’ll come along too. What time are we leaving, Freddie? I have to take off the cream and put on makeup.”

“We’ll leave at one because our lunch is going to be hotdogs and popcorn. This is Daniel’s first visit to a ballgame and I want it to be special.”

I went down to see Agent Greg Simpson on the switchboard.

“I need an agent to come to the ballgame with us this afternoon; both Daniel and Desdemona will be there.”

“Hell I could do with a break like that myself. Do you mind if I come along?”

“No problem Greg, happy to have you.”

I left him organizing a replacement agent to take over the switchboard.

I went up to my own room and found that Wilkinson had everything of mine cleaned, polished or pressed and put away more neatly than my mother ever did. I changed into fresh comfortable clothing and then telephoned Janine Drew.

“Hi Jan, it’s Frederick Huntsman. How are things?”

“Freddie! Where have you been? I’ve called just about every day but the Mayor’s switchboard said that you were away on business.”

“If you call crawling through a forest in mud and being washed over a waterfall, business then that’s where I’ve been. Do you feel like going out sometime?”

“Sure! I’m free tonight. What do you have in mind?”

“A nice quiet dinner in a very good restaurant; any suggestions?”

“I’ve never been to the Excelsior but I hear it is the best in town. I don’t know about reservations though; it’s usually booked up I’m told.”

“I’ll see whether the mayor can help with that. I pick you up at seven thirty.”

“Call me back if you get a reservation, dressing for the Excelsior isn’t like going for a hamburger you know. You might have to wear a dinner suit.”

I went to speak to the mayor.

"The Excelsior? Yes, certainly, I know the owner. I'll arrange it for you." He said graciously.

He called me up in my room a few minutes later.

"A table for two at the Excelsior at eight o'clock this evening; the reservation is made, my boy. The bill has been taken care of, it's all on me, enjoy yourself."

I thanked him for his generosity. He was exactly like this with his children. He gave them anything they wanted except his personal time and attention.

I remarked on the matter to Wilkinson.

"Ah, yes sir. He would do that. You see, sir, he *is* the owner of the Excelsior."

"Oh damned it! I hope he doesn't think that I conned him into this." I said.

"No sir, he wouldn't. It is not open knowledge that he owns it. He keeps a private dining room there and uses it to entertain business acquaintances. He says that the Excelsior pays for itself and covers his business entertaining costs."

I called Janine and confirmed that we would be dining at the Excelsior.

"Wow! That's what I call having pull." Janine said admiringly. "My friends say that waiting time for a reservation at Excelsior can run to months."

I went upstairs to collect my two charges.

Daniel was ready and eager but Desdemona was still applying makeup. I left her to it and brought the Jaguar around to the front where Agent Greg Simpson was already waiting.

When Desdemona came down, I have to admit that she had made an excellent job of making up her face. Her blisters could only be seen when the light fell on her normally smooth young skin. Otherwise she looked pert, pretty and certainly cute.

I sat alongside Greg who drove the car mainly because he wanted to feel what it was like to drive a Jaguar but also because he knew exactly where we were going which was more than I could say. Desdemona and Daniel sat on the back seat and talked animatedly;

Desdemona about her experience in the forest in response to Daniel's questions and Daniel about what one of his friends had told him about going to a ballgame.

I kept my eyes open on everything that was happening around us but nothing untoward occurred and we arrived at the ballgame safely.

Daniel ate two hotdogs with sauerkraut and carried an enormous container of popcorn around as he waited for me to pay for the tickets. He kept Greg Simpson on the run the whole time as he looked at everything and asked a thousand questions.

Desdemona stayed with me and clung to my arm possessively. I bought the expensive tickets because the queue was shorter but it also gave us really good seats.

We settled in with Greg explaining everything and anything to Daniel as the boy's active mind hopped from one question to the next.

Desdemona, still clinging to my arm, said to me privately under the noise of the crowd.

"Freddie, you didn't really mean it when you said that you only ever regarded me as a younger sister, did you? I've seen you look at me when I've been naked and no brother would look at his sister like that."

"Des, I did mean it. I'm a young guy myself and I like looking at naked girls but that doesn't mean that I am going to fall for them. You are my boss's daughter and it's my responsibility to look after you. I am your friend not your lover."

"Don't you find me attractive, Freddie?"

"Sure, you are attractive. You are pretty and very cute. If you ever get yourself under control lots of guys would fall for you but not me. I don't believe in mixing business with pleasure."

The crowd roared over something but I was not watching. Something had caught my eye in the crowd; something that looked like an arm in a sling. I searched again but I had lost it.

Desdemona was also processing the crowd for hot young men and Daniel was asking questions furiously. I was glad that Greg

had come along with us otherwise I would have had to field those questions.

I caught the flash of a white sling again but it was only a short moment and it was lost in the crowd again. It occurred to me that a ballgame would be an excellent place for a fugitive to hide, at least for an afternoon. It would also be a good place to meet someone like Desdemona by waiting for her near the ladies restroom. Lastly, it would also be a good place to get lost in the crowd when the game ended.

I leaned across to Greg.

"Greg, did Desdemona make or receive any telephone calls this morning?"

"Yes, Fred, she made one and she received one: girlfriends."

"Did you catch any names?"

"The one that called her said her name was Nadia."

That was the girl that lured her out of the mansion for Spike.

Nothing was proven yet. I had to wait to see if Desdemona made a move for the restroom shortly before the end of the game.

I never did know what happened in that ballgame, I was too absorbed in trying to spot the arm-sling again. I wished I had brought my field glasses up from the car but it was too late now.

Desdemona seemed quite unconcerned. She must have been following the game because I heard her cheering along with everyone else. My eyes stayed on the part of the crowd where I had last seen the arm-sling.

The board showed that there were four minutes left of play when Desdemona turned to me and said: "I need to pee."

I feigned indifference as she rose and walked to the ladies restroom. I leaned over to Greg. "Do you have a pistol?"

"Sure, why do you ask?"

"I think that something is going to go down with Desdemona. I think I saw Crawley in the crowd."

"I'll go watch her. Where is she?"

"She went to the ladies restroom. Do you know how to recognize Crawley?"

“Of course, I’ve seen hundreds of photos of him.”

I took Daniel’s hand as Greg squeezed past me and headed for the ladies restroom.

“Freddie, are the Sox going to win?” Daniel appealed to me as if I could make it so.

I glanced at the board and the Sox were ahead and there were only two minutes left to play of their innings.

“Sure Daniel. They are going to win.”

He beamed up at me as if I had just given him a present.

The game ended with a roar of approval from the crowd and I heard two faint pops over the noise.

I scooped Daniel up and rushed ahead of the crowd to the Ladies Restroom. The marshals had formed a protective barrier around the area. I pushed my way through the crowd. “What’s happening? My girl is in the restroom.”

“You have to wait there sir. This is a crime scene. An FBI agent has been killed by a fugitive.”

Greg had spotted Crawley and had tried to arrest him. According to a witness Crawley had a pistol inside his sling. He turned sideways onto Greg and blasted him twice then he calmly walked away knowing that no-one was about to stop him as he blended in with the milling crowd.

Daniel stared with wide eyes at the man with whom he had spent the afternoon. Greg lay on the floor and they covered him with a sheet before carrying him down the emergency exit.

I watched as Desdemona came out of the ladies restroom clearly unaware of what had taken place outside the restroom door.

I showed the marshal my credentials as the Mayor’s security advisor and he permitted me to move forward to collect Desdemona.

“What’s going on here, Freddie?”

“Spike just shot and killed Agent Simpson. Tell me Desdemona, how did Spike know that you would be in the ladies restroom at this time?”

“Maybe Nadia told him.” She said blandly. “She asked me where I was going this afternoon when she called me.”

“That explains how he knew we were at the ballgame. It doesn’t explain how Spike knew that you would be in the ladies restroom at this particular time.”

“Who says that he did? Maybe he was just walking by or maybe he was watching us all the time through field glasses.”

“According to witnesses he appeared to carry nothing but he had a pistol in his arm-sling.”

“That’s nothing to do with me, Freddie. I told you that Spike doesn’t give up easily. If he was watching us he was probably waiting for you to come for me. He was going to kill you; Agent Simpson just got in his way.”

I had to admit that it was a feasible story, but Desdemona deciding to come to the ballgame with us had just cost a man his life. Something did not ring true here.

I called Jeejay and told him what had just happened.

“Ah, shit! Greg was a nice guy. He wasn’t really a field agent. His expertise was in telephony and listening devices. Now I’m going to have to inform his mother. She’s a widow. Her husband was a cop and he died in the line of duty too.”

Chapter Seventeen

I did not feel much like going out that evening but after all the effort of securing a reservation at the Excelsior, I could not very well back out.

What I did do is arrange for an FBI team to watch out that I was not being followed. I did not want to put Janine's life in jeopardy.

Jeejay had the Jaguar swept for tracking devices and found the one that had been installed by the security company against motor theft.

"I guess that it is possible that this Crawley guy could have a connection in the security company so I'm having this one removed and I'm replacing it with an FBI device."

I dressed in a tuxedo for the evening out and I would have loved to wear a kevlar vest but the well-tailored jacket that Wilkinson had purchased for me would not permit it.

I arrived at Janine's door feeling depressed but that soon changed when she came to the door. She was stunning.

"Hello Freddie, my, don't you look handsome in your tuxedo!"

"You look stunning Janine and I'm pleased to see that your black eyes are gone."

She laughed.

"I'm delighted to hear you say that. They haven't fully gone yet actually but I'm obviously doing a good job with my makeup, thanks."

"I'm really surprised that you were not already going out on this Saturday night." I told her as I assisted her into the Jaguar. "What happened to Robert Mellor?"

"I guess he is at home with his wife, why?"

"He's married? Oh, I thought from the look in his eye when I met him that he was very much into you."

"He probably was but *I* am not into married men."

I drove to the Excelsior secure in the knowledge that the FBI was backing me.

I had never even seen this restaurant before. It was at the top of a building that I suspected was owned by Mayor Bronson. The view from its picture windows rivaled Janine's cleavage.

We were ushered into the private dining room and anything we ordered was brought in and accompanied by French champagne which the maitre d'hotel assured me was 'of the finest'. I had never previously seen French champagne, let alone drunk it. I stopped before I finished the second glass because it went straight to my head.

"Janine, there is an ulterior motive why I asked you out tonight." I told her over the dessert.

"What?" She giggled. "You mean there is another reason apart from wanting me?" She had not stopped at the second glass.

"Yes. You will know that the Mayor has been elected as the next governor. He has asked me to find a press liaison officer for him and I want to know whether you would be interested in the position."

"What position do you want me to assume?" She asked and giggled again.

"Janine, listen to me! Would you like to have the job as the governor's press liaison officer?"

"What do I have to do to get it?" she asked jocularly.

"Nothing, just tell me whether you would like to give it a try."

"Give what a try?"

"The job as Governor's press liaison officer, Janine." I said patiently.

"Oh yes, that would be very nice. What does a press liaison officer do? Nothing immoral, I hope." She giggled again.

"Prepare press releases and answer questions raised by journalists about the governor's proposals and future plans."

"Ah! I can do that!"

"Good, then we'll talk about this on the telephone tomorrow." I could see that she was in no condition to discuss business tonight.

We drank coffee, without the cognac offered by the maitre d'hotel, and spoke of other things. It turned out that Janine was not too happy at the Clarion as all the men were hitting on her and at

the same time treating her like a complete idiot. They ragged her continually about her black eyes and wanted to know what she had to do to get the two scoops she had received from me.

“They didn’t believe me when I said that you were just a decent guy. They said that you must be gay. No red-blooded man would give me anything without some hope of a return. Tell me, Freddie, do have any hope of a return from me?”

“Janine, first of all I am not gay and secondly I went through junior high and high school without any girl showing me the slightest amount of interest. I wasn’t looking to get into their pants, I would have settled for a friendship because I didn’t have any guy friends either. You are only the second girl that has shown me that you like me as a person. I was enjoying being friends with you. I passed information to you as a friend not as a prelude to seduction. So do I have any hope of a return from you? Yes! The return I expect from you is your friendship. I am too young to get married and maybe I have read too many romantic novels during my teenage years; I expect an emotional investment before starting a sexual relationship.”

“Freddie, I guess that’s what put the girls off in your teenage years: you are too serious about things. I am your friend and maybe even further than that I have an emotional investment in you. You are the only guy I have ever met that offered me friendship without any strings attached. You are a very special guy, Freddie.”

I threw up my hands in the air.

“You are right Janine! We are being too serious. Let’s just enjoy ourselves this evening. Would you like to go back to La Bailadora for some wild Latin American dancing?”

“Let’s take a rain-check on that, Freddie. I think I have had too much of that French champagne. I think that I had better go home and sleep it off. Will you call me in the morning?”

I drove her home and she gave me a light kiss on the lips before she ran inside.

The mansion was still ablaze with lights when I returned.

"What's going on, Wilkinson?" I asked as he closed the door behind me.

"Sir, the outgoing governor has had a heart attack. He is not expected to last the night. We are moving into the offices in the governor's mansion tomorrow morning and will transfer into residence as soon as the family has removed all his personal effects."

"Ah, never a dull moment in this household, is there?"

"Rather like the Chinese curse, sir. You know: May you live in interesting times."

I left the servants to enjoy the overtime they were being paid and went up to my room.

I undressed and flopped into bed falling asleep almost instantly.

I was awoken by the rocking of my mattress as someone or something crawled onto my bed. I slid my hand out and switched on the light.

It was Desdemona dressed in a negligee and very little else.

"What is it, Desdemona?" I asked blearily. I was still not happy with her since I believed that she had a hand in Agent Greg Simpson's death.

"Freddie, who did you take out to the Excelsior tonight? Was it that Agent Jadi Benton?"

I ran a frustrated hand through my hair. "Not that it is any of your business, Desdemona, but no, it was not Jadi."

"Well who else are you cheating on me with?"

"Look Desdemona, I'm tired and you have just woken me up from a deep sleep. Go away! We can talk in the morning."

"My Daddy spoke to me this evening. He asked me why I wasted my time on deadbeats like Barforth Crawley when I could have been going to the Excelsior with a decent young man like Frederick Huntsman. It was the first time in years that he has actually tried to hold a conversation with me instead of dealing with some trouble I had got myself into."

"Well in broad principle, he is right. Crawley has nothing to offer you and you have wasted yourself on him."

"I told you Freddie, it's entirely your fault. If you had made love to me I wouldn't have to go to Spike for affection."

"You were going to Spike long before I came onto the scene, Desdemona. You can't use me as the scapegoat for your troubles."

"Anyway it is all too late now, Freddie, and I hope you are satisfied at where your selfishness has led me."

"What's too late?" I asked with a cold feeling running up my spine.

"It's too late for you to make love to me, Freddie."

"I was never going to, so lateness doesn't come into it."

"That's exactly what comes into it, Freddie: I'm late."

"Late? What are you late for?"

"My period is late, Freddie. You *are* slow this evening."

"Great goshawks! You mean?"

"Yes, I'm pregnant by Barforth Crawley."

"Oh. fantastic! Pregnant by a cop-killer and murderer who deals drugs! You really know how to pick them, Desdemona."

"Maybe now Daddy will sit up and take notice."

"Tomorrow I'm taking you to your doctor. He can give you a proper test."

"I don't need a proper test, Freddie. I can feel it and I've missed a period that has always been like clockwork."

"You and I will discuss this with Wilkinson in the morning. Now go back to bed."

"Freddie, I need a friend now. It's very scary. Please let me stay with you." She said in a pitiful little-girl voice.

I guess I am a sucker for a woman in distress and I let her stay.

Early in the morning there was a frantic knock on my door.

"Sir! Sir!" Wilkinson called. "Miss Desdemona is missing again!"

"Come in, Wilkinson." I called out calmly.

He came in looked flustered and upset. Then his eye fell upon Desdemona still asleep in my bed.

"Oh thank God! And in your bed at last! Congratulations sir! And may I say about time too."

"I am afraid that this is not an occasion for congratulations, Armagh. Please sit down there on the end of the bed."

"Sir, that would not be proper."

"Sit Armagh! And it is about time you called me Frederick. We are both employees of the Mayor. I have to talk to you."

Desdemona stirred and opened her eyes. "G'morning, Freddie. I really sleep well when I'm with you."

"Sit up, Desdemona, Armagh is here and I am about to tell him of your predicament."

She sat up careless of her nakedness.

"Armagh," I continued. "Last night Desdemona came to me and told me that she had missed her very regular period and that she was certain that she was pregnant by Barforth Crawley."

"Ah sir, er, Frederick, surely you are the most likely father to the child?"

"No, Armagh, as Desdemona will confirm, I have never touched her, sexually speaking. She is my employer's daughter."

"Oh? In that case this is terrible! But wait a minute, why is she naked in your bed?"

"She came to tell me the bad news last night and as she was distraught I allowed her to stay with me. As you can see I am fully dressed in the pyjamas you bought for me."

"I will attend to this matter immediately, Frederick. Please leave everything to me. Miss Desdemona please cover yourself and return to your own quarters immediately."

To my eternal surprise, Desdemona rose, drew on her negligee and left the room.

"That poor child!" Armagh remarked as soon as she had left. "She needs urgent psychiatric help."

"And we are going to see that she gets it, Armagh. Get her doctor over to examine her and ask him for a referral to an appropriate psychiatrist."

"I tried that once before, sir, but he said he needed the instruction from her parents."

“Summon me if he does that again. I shall show him my letter of authority from the mayor and tell him that due to the transition to the governorship, the matter has been placed in my hands.”

At nine thirty that morning the doctor arrived. I left the matter in Armagh's hands and telephoned Janine.

“How are you this morning, Janine?”

“Surprisingly well, Freddie. That French champagne has a kick but it certainly leaves no hangover.”

“Do you remember what I said about the Press Liaison Officer for the governor's office?”

“Vaguely, what was it about again?”

I repeated the offer to her.

“You are offering me the job of Press Liaison Officer for the governor's office?” she said incredulously.

“Yes, I believe that you have the right contacts and the ability and resourcefulness to get the job done.”

“Yes!” she said.

“Yes what? You agree you have the abilities?”

“Yes, I want the job! When can I start?”

“We haven't discussed salary yet.” I pointed out.

“I don't care it couldn't be less than I am getting now. I have to give the editor two weeks' notice.”

“I thought that the guy only just gave you a raise for the two scoops you had.”

“No, he *promised* me a raise but that was before he let me know what he expected in return. I told him that although I had tried to get a story on prostitution in this town that didn't mean I intended to become one.”

“Okay, Janine, meet me at the coffee shop on the corner of your block. I'll bring a contract for you to sign.”

I collected a standard contract for the mayor's office and made a few amendments to it before driving to the coffee shop.

Janine was already there.

“I gave the editor my notice and he said that if I thought that this would force his hand over the raise I could think again. I could

go immediately and forget about a letter of recommendation.”

“That suits me fine, Janine. This is a standard contract for the mayor’s office. I have amended it to cover the governor’s office and filled in the salary. You will have the right to stay in the governor’s residence if you wish, but that is not compulsory.”

She stared at the contract for quite a while before she signed it.

“I hope you are not going to tell me that the salary was a mistake and has to be amended.” She said earnestly. “It’s far more than double what I was getting from the Clarion.”

“No, the salary is correct. I checked it with the Mayor before I came. He believes that we are getting you cheap at the price.”

She grabbed me and kissed me fervently. “Thank you, Freddie. You have been my lucky star.”

“Hey lady, easy on how you treat me; I’m your boss from now on and I don’t believe in over-familiarity among employees.”

“That’ll be a pleasant change!” she said. “I see you have given today as my starting date. Where to I start and what do I do?”

“You can follow me out to the mayor’s residence. I have to find the mayor and introduce you to him. After that you take notes of whatever he tells you and you start preparing press releases bearing in mind that the governor’s job is only a stepping stone to senator and then president.”

“Wow! That is some ambitious guy!”

“He is entirely focused on it. His family is in ruins because of it but despite everything I have a sneaking feeling that he is going to make it.”

She followed me back to the mayor’s residence and I caught the Mayor just as he was leaving for a meeting.

“Sir, this is your new press liaison, Miss Janine Drew. She has started with us today.”

“A pleasure to meet you Miss Drew; you worked for the Clarion, did you not? I recall seeing you among the sea of faces at the press conferences. I am sure that you will be an asset in the governor’s office. I am going to a meeting right now. You are competent in shorthand, are you not? Perhaps you would care to accompany me

and take notes?”

That was it. Janine was immediately absorbed as part of our crew.

Wilkinson approached me. “Sir, er, I mean Frederick, I explained the situation to the doctor and he took her away with him for tests: something he called a curettage. Strangely, enough he did not hesitate when I asked for a referral to a psychiatrist but arranged one there and then.”

“I am so relieved to hear that. We must also make an arrangement for young Daniel. He has seen Agent Simpson, a friend, killed and his mother was recently kidnapped and murdered.”

“I shall raise that with the doctor when next I speak to him.” Wilkinson said.

I went up to my room and put in a call to Jadi Benton, instead I was put through to Jeejay.

“Hi Jeejay, I was trying to get through to Agent Benton. Is she available?”

“Sorry, Fred, she flew to Washington yesterday. There’s a serial killer that they need her expertise to track down. She’s one of a very select group of trackers in the FBI and their services are very much in demand. They bitched like crazy over the time she took on the Crawley case.”

“I never realized that she was so good at tracking. When I first met her I thought that she was a computer expert.”

“No, she is pretty good on a computer but her main skill is her Navajo training. Her maternal grandfather was a full-blooded Navajo. That’s where she got her unusual name: Jadi. It means ‘antelope’. She asked me to tell you that she will give you a call. I guess you two got pretty close out there in the woods?”

“Well, you cannot live in basic conditions without getting to know someone well. Not only is she beautiful but she is as tough as nails without losing any femininity.”

“Yeah, well she is destined for big things in the FBI. I guess being good-looking helps to get you noticed anywhere you work.”

“I’m rather glad that she is away from here, Jeejay. She wounded Crawley and Desdemona tells me that he intends to get her for

that.”

“I wouldn’t take any threat that coyote uttered lightly. We’ll catch the bastard but he can do a lot of damage until we do. He’s top of the FBI wanted list after killing Agent Simpson. Such a pity, Greg was a good guy and the best telephone technician in the Bureau.”

“I’ve been thinking. Maybe you could use me as bait. If you have another female agent that could pass for Jadi Benton and we started hitting the high-spots in town. Crawley could come after us. He has vowed to get us both. Maybe we could nab him then.”

“That could be worth a try. Finding an agent to pass as Jadi Benton won’t be easy but on the other hand Crawley has probably never seen her close up. As long as we get a general approximation of Jadi and make sure everyone calls her Agent Benton that should be bait enough for Crawley. I would agree that he won’t want to give up the chance to get both of you at once. We will have to move quickly on this before he tries to get into Mexico.”

“I don’t think that he is in a hurry on that one. He knows that you are watching the border. He wants the heat to cool down before he makes his try and when he does, it will probably be by a means that no-one has thought of before.”

“But where is he going to hide from us until then?”

“He is utterly ruthless, Jeejay. Even if he has to hold an entire family hostage, he will do so. He is also daring; the family he holds hostage could be that of a police officer or even an FBI agent. He would look for someone who had a status that could help him in some way.”

“I can see where you are going with this one, Fred. I’m going to make sure that none of my agents are vulnerable. I can do nothing about police officers but I can make sure that FBI personnel are protected.”

Chapter Eighteen

That evening I reported on the situation to the Mayor. I told him that Crawley was still at large and that he was likely to make attempts on my life before crossing into Mexico.

"I don't want to see that happen, my boy. I have ordered the very best Kevlar vests and when they arrive I want you to wear one at all times."

I was not averse to the idea. Getting shot was not one of my plans for the future. We discussed various plans for the security of the Bronson family and in the course of that discussion I realized that he knew nothing of Desdemona's condition. That worried me. It was not like Wilkinson to hold anything back from the mayor.

As soon as our meeting was over I went in search of Wilkinson. I found him in Desdemona's apartment fussing over Desdemona.

"Armagh, I have just spoken to the mayor and it appears that he knows nothing about Desdemona's condition."

"Condition, sir? What condition?"

"Call me Frederick, Armagh. You know, her pregnancy!"

"I beg your pardon for the correction, Frederick, but Miss Desdemona is certainly not pregnant as the test she underwent today clearly shows."

"Oh," I said greatly relieved. "So, Desdemona was wrong and she was not really pregnant."

"No Frederick, the curettage clearly ensured that this was not the case."

"Ah! I am so relieved! And when do the visits to the psychiatrist begin?"

"This afternoon, Frederick; I was about to ask you if you would be so kind as to escort her to her appointment."

"Not only shall I escort her but I shall ensure that she doesn't use it as an opportunity to run off again. Did you also arrange an appointment for Daniel?"

“Yes, I did. His appointment is tomorrow but with a different man who specializes in emotional trauma. The police use him a lot.”

I turned to leave and Desdemona called out. “Freddie, could you stay with me for a while? Armagh has to get back to his duties and I don’t want to be alone.”

I walked over and sat down on the edge of her bed as Wilkinson withdrew.

“You look a little pale, Des. Was the test stressful?”

“Oh, no, there was a fair amount of blood involved and it seems to have induced my period so I am feeling rather drained.”

“Ah.” I said wisely, not knowing what else to say.

“Freddie, this scare has made me think. I thought about what it would be like if I really were to have a baby. I realized that I would then be a mother and mothers have to be responsible. I would have had to stay away from coke and other drugs because they could harm the baby. Then it came to me in a flash: it was time I stopped being a spoiled young girl and became a responsible woman. I accept that my Daddy is not going to pay more attention to me because I am unruly and difficult but he might be willing, now that Julietta is gone, to use me as his official hostess. Of course he will only do that if I learn how to behave just as Julietta had to. So Freddie, I am asking you to help me change myself into the governor’s hostess. Will you help me?”

I was cornered and I knew it. Desdemona was a very clever girl. She had said exactly the right words and there was no way that I could refuse except by resigning from the Mayor’s service. I was thoroughly enjoying this job and I did not want to lose it. Desdemona knew that.

“Sure thing, Desdemona, I’ll help in any way I can but you have to remember that I have my own responsibilities and they must always take precedence over everything else.”

“Of course, Freddie, Daddy’s needs must be met, not mine.” She said with a sarcastic tinge.

“No, I did not say that! I said I *will* help but I do have a job to do and I cannot shirk that!”

It appeared that she was satisfied that she had gained what she intended from this conversation.

"Thanks, Freddie, I knew I could rely on you. Who is the new girl I saw going off with Daddy after lunch? She's very attractive although it looks like she is already getting bags under her eyes."

"That is Janine Drew. She is the new Press Liaison Officer for the governor's office." I said shortly.

"She certainly seems to have impressed Daddy. He was dancing around her like he used to do when he first married Julietta but I think that she is a little too young for him. Although they say that there is no fool like an old fool, don't they?"

"Your father isn't that old, Desdemona. He's only forty-five or so."

She wrinkled her nose. "Ugh! Forty-five? That's a dirty old man, isn't it?"

"To my certain knowledge the almost-father of your almost-child is forty-three. So why did you fool around with *that* dirty old man?"

"It isn't fair that you should throw my mistakes in my face, Freddie. I'm trying to turn over a new leaf and change my old ways." She said petulantly.

I changed the subject to a series on television that I knew she liked to watch and after that we drifted from subject to subject until I looked at my wristwatch and said:

"Ah, now I have to return to the duties for which I am paid."

She was looking drowsy so I slipped out of the room before she had a chance to object.

I went to my own room and had hardly arrived when my bedside telephone rang.

"Fred Huntsman!" I said as I picked it up.

"Freddie? It's Jadi. Sorry I couldn't get back to you earlier but they have me working on a new case. I was really looking forward to our date. I miss you! I got very used to having you around with both of us in a state of undress. Have you missed me?"

“Sure I missed you Jadi! In fact I went to the FBI office to see you but Jeejay said you had been moved to another case.”

“Why did you come to see me Freddie?”

“The mayor, soon to be state governor, has charged me with creating a security division for the governor’s office. I need a second-in-command and I immediately thought of you. The prestige is a lot less than being an agent in the FBI but the pay is much better and also you don’t have to go chasing around the country after sickos.”

“That’s quite a big step to take, Freddie, do you mind if I think about it for a while?”

“No problem, Jadi but please don’t leave me in mid air too long. If you don’t want the job I must find another candidate.”

“Don’t worry, Freddie, I’ll get back to you as soon as I have weighed the pros and cons.”

“One of the pros is that Bradford Bronson does not intend to stay governor too long. He has set his sights on the presidency. Just imagine if we were both on the presidential staff. Now that would be prestige! Now, what was it that you called me about?”

“I have something on my mind that I wanted to ask you about, Freddie. I’ve hesitated over it up to now but it’s eating away at me.”

“Jadi, we are very close friends! You may ask me anything at all that you wish.”

“Freddie we were together for quite a few days in very close and intimate circumstances.” She stopped there and so I prompted her.

“That’s true, Jadi we were closer than many married couples I know of.”

She spoke with a rush. “So why did you never make love to me?”

I was taken aback and could hardly get together the words to respond.

“But, but, Jadi...I didn’t want to take advantage of you in a situation that you might find it difficult to reject me.”

“I was never going to reject you Freddie. We came very close to sex, I am quite certain but you never took the final steps and I need to know why.”

“Actually, Jadi there was one very important reason. No, maybe there were two. I have very little experience with girls. The fact is that I am still a virgin but the second and even more important reason was that I did not have any condoms.”

“That’s it? That’s the reason?” she said sounding horrified.

“Yes.” I said sheepishly.

She put the telephone down.

I could have kicked myself. Driving off Jadi was the very last thing I would have wanted to do.

What did I say? Was it the disclosure that I was an inexperienced nerd that had never had sex with a girl before? Or was it that I had insulted her in a way that I did not understand?

I had no answers. All I knew was that I had made myself as miserable as I can ever remember being. If I were a drinker I would have downed a bottle of something strong and very intoxicating; maybe that French champagne stuff that went to my head very quickly.

I forgot about my duties and sat in the armchair in my room and stared at the wall. I probably would have stayed there until supper time if my telephone had not rung again.

“Fred, it’s Jeejay. That girl you wanted that could pass for Jadi, I’ve found one. She is an almost perfect match and looks quite a lot like her. She’ll be arriving at the airport tomorrow morning. Do you want to meet me there at nine thirty?”

“Sure, where is she coming from?”

“Washington but don’t worry I’ll be waiting for you at the information desk.”

The mayor called in to say that he would not be there for dinner and Desdemona did not put in an appearance so Daniel and I ate dinner and talked about baseball and the Sox, both of which I knew very little. I had intended to give the boy a care-free day in the sunshine with hotdogs, sodas and popcorn and had instead turned him into a baseball fanatic and avid Sox fan. Still, it beats turning out a nerd that had no experience of baseball, Sox or girls.

I retired early not even bothering to switch on the television in my room. I tried to read a novel but Jadi's voice saying "That's it? That's the reason?" kept reverberating in my head. After an hour of re-reading the same paragraph of the novel thirty-three thousand times, I put it down and switched off my light. I told myself that I had to be at the airport early so as not to keep Jeejay waiting but actually I imagined being there to greet Jadi as she returned to town to be with me.

I dreamed of Jadi and felt her nuzzling into my neck. It was so real that I opened my eyes to look at her and instead found Desdemona cuddled up to me in my bed.

I sat up abruptly.

"Desdemona, what are you doing here? Go back to your own bedroom immediately!"

"Why, Freddie? It was okay to be here last night, why can't I be here tonight?"

"Last night was when you were a young girl made pregnant by her dastardly kidnapper and in need of a friend. Tonight you are just a girl with sex on her mind."

"I do not have sex on my mind, Freddie. I am having my period. All I wanted was a friend to hold me. I haven't touched coke or anything else not even a sleeping pill and I can't sleep so I thought that being with you might help; unless, you want me to take sleeping pills? The very least you can do is help me through this, Freddie."

"Oh hell! If I let you stay tonight you'll come back tomorrow night with the same story and as the withdrawal symptoms get stronger you'll demand that I help you until I am never allowed to sleep without you ever again."

"That sounds like a fine solution to me, Freddie and if you really were my friend you wouldn't hesitate to do it."

"Oh yes I would and I am hesitating right now. Desdemona, go back to your bed or I shall have to take steps to deal with you."

"No, Freddie, I'm staying here and there is nothing you can do about it."

I got out of bed and walked around to Desdemona where I picked her up and threw her over my shoulder.

At first she just struggled and demanded that I put her down but when she realized that I was heading to her apartment, she began to scream on the top of her voice.

By the time that Wilkinson arrived with his revolver, I was locking the door of the apartment.

“What’s happening, Frederick?”

“Miss Desdemona is insisting on sleeping in my bed. She says she cannot sleep without a sleeping pill and since she has given them up at my behest it is incumbent upon me to comfort her in my bed.” I handed him the apartment key. “Armagh, do not open that door at least not until I have returned to my bedroom and locked my door.”

He took the key with a bemused look upon his face.

As no-one battered on my door for the rest of the night, I assumed that he had decided not to return the key to Desdemona until morning.

When I awoke the second time it was morning. I rose, washed and dressed and only then unlocked my bedroom door.

I joined Daniel for breakfast and was astonished when the Mayor also came down.

“Good morning sir, you are extremely early this morning. Do you have an early meeting?” I asked him.

“I am going through some procedures with Janine Drew before a meeting a little later in the morning. I must say that I greatly approve of your choice, my boy. That young lady is intelligent and capable. I enjoy working with her.”

I thought he had left out one most important attribute of his new press liaison officer: sexy.

I went down to the Jaguar and was about to get into it when an FBI agent stopped me.

“Sorry sir, under Special Agent Porter’s instructions we have to check the vehicle before anyone drives it.”

They took an explosive-sniffer dog around the car, checked under it with mirrors, examined the brake cables and made sure

that the accelerator was not rigged to jam down before they allowed me to drive away.

I was at the information desk at the airport before Jeejay arrived.

“Good morning, Fred.” He said cheerfully. “The young agent that we are meeting here this morning is called Luisa Cordoba. She is a volunteer for the job which as you will know is highly dangerous. We chose her from her picture and vital statistics and then gave her the choice after explaining the risks to her. I think that you will be impressed at her resemblance to Agent Jadi Benton.”

“I am guessing that this young lady has other qualifications for this job than her looks?”

“As usual Fred, you would be right. Agent Cordoba is an expert pistol shotist and has her second Dan in karate. We must now stop calling her Agent Cordoba and always speak to and of her as Agent Jadi Benton. I have instructed her to kiss you when she arrives just in case anyone is watching so don't act surprised and try to be enthusiastic.”

I was not hard to be enthusiastic. Luisa Cordoba was a very attractive girl. She was a few years older than Jadi Benton but otherwise of similar build, height and presentation.

After greeting her as Jadi, I took her hand and we walked hand-in-hand to the Jaguar.

“So you are the famous Frederick Huntsman, are you?” She said as we drove off. “I expected something different but you look perfectly normal to me.”

“Famous? What's famous about me?” I asked in genuine bewilderment.

She laughed. “I called Agent Benton to get a little background information and she made you sound like Superman crossed with Sean Connery. According to her you are the finest investigator she has ever worked with.”

“Ah, but that is Jadi, generous to a fault. I'm just an ordinary guy working for the mayor of this town and I've really had a lot more than my share of luck.”

“Well, we will have to see won’t we? If this Crawley man takes the bait this could be a very dangerous assignment.”

“On the other hand, if he doesn’t, you are going to get wined, dined and danced for a few weeks.”

“On an assignment like this Freddie, it doesn’t pay to drink at all. You have to keep your wits about you if you want to stay alive.”

“You are probably right but we have to give the appearance of being young, carefree and in love. Special Agent Porter has invented a case for us to be working on since we can’t appear to be on vacation. It means that you will spend a good deal of time at the FBI offices but lunchtimes and evenings we will go out together.”

She gave me an amused look. “Who is paying for all this fun we are going to be having? I can’t see the Agency shelling out for it.”

“The mayor is personally picking up the tab. He is a very rich man and he is anxious that the threat to his family should be eliminated.”

“Tell me everything that you know about this Barforth Crawley. I’ve read the files that Porter sent to me but they are entirely factual and they don’t give me a sense of the person. I would like your take on him.”

“Barforth Crawley is a man in his early forties. He is handsome in a vaguely Latin way and he is extremely vain about his person. He goes in for the ‘macho’ look. You know, open neck shirt showing a hairy chest with thick solid gold chains around the neck and wrists. He has a good head of hair receding slightly and deeply black, probably dye-assisted. Judging by his vocabulary he is not highly educated. He expects people to fear and respect him. He is cunning rather than clever and extremely ruthless. When he wants something he is prepared to pay for it but is not averse to using strong-arm tactics to get what he wants. He generally pays for underlings to do his dirty work. He does not have what a normal person would regard as a conscience. At the moment, his left arm is in a sling because Agent Benton shot him in the left shoulder and that is why he wants to ‘get’ her. He wants to ‘get’ me because I have stymied his plans on numerous occasions. He is in a corner

at the moment. He has run out of funds. He does have a stash that I think may be in Mexico and if I am right then his cash resources are down to much less than five thousand dollars. I don't think that he can afford to pay anyone to do his dirty work at the moment so he has to do it himself. That is where you and I come in. We are the bait to get him to come after us. Jeejay has Global Positioning System transmitters hidden in this car and each of us will have one for insertion into the heels of our shoes. The mayor has ordered the very latest in Kevlar vests for us to wear under our clothing. Every time the car is parked it will be checked for explosive devices before we are allowed to use it again. Jeejay says he is open to suggestions for any other security measures."

"Does he have anyone following us?"

"No, Crawley won't fall for that he is too careful but wherever *we* decide to go Jeejay will have a team there waiting. I get the feeling that Crawley likes to work in big crowds. He killed Agent Simpson at a ballgame. Simpson tried to arrest him but Crawley had a pistol in his arm-sling and caught Agent Simpson by surprise. After that he simply walked away and lost himself in the home-going crowd."

"So you are suggesting that we go to crowded events in the hope that he will try the same thing on us?"

"Simply put, yes! I expect him to use some sort of disguise and to approach us from behind where he will shoot us in the back with a silenced pistol."

"Did he use a silenced pistol on Agent Simpson?"

"No, I don't know why not. Maybe it was to create a crowd panic so that he could escape in the confusion."

"So why do you think that he will use a silenced pistol this time?"

"I guess because it is what I would do were I in his place. It gives a better chance to get away while people are trying to find out why a young couple has suddenly passed out in the middle of the crowd."

"Okay, I'll buy that. But I must say that I don't like the idea of being shot in the back even with a Kevlar vest on."

"That's the best incentive that I know for keeping on the lookout for him. We have to give the impression that we are totally absorbed

in each other while really watching everything around us.”

“How about wearing sun glasses?”

“That won’t work too well at night when he is most likely to strike. What you can do Luisa....”

“Jadi, you must always call me Jadi.” She put in quickly.

“Sorry, what you would be able to do, Jadi, is obsessively look into your pocket mirror as if checking your mascara. That will give you a look at what is behind you.”

“So when do we start all this play-acting?”

“We are in it already. I’m going to drop you off at the hotel where the other agents are staying. You can settle in and freshen up to be ready for when I come to pick you up for lunch. If he is watching we want him to think that we cannot be apart longer than necessary; so plenty of displays of affection and adoring glances at each other.”

“What’s the idea of that?”

“I want to plant the idea into his head that he might be able to kill two birds with one stone. That will tempt him to follow us looking for his opportunity.”

Chapter Nineteen

I picked Luisa up just before one o'clock and she looked fantastic in a tailored business suit that displayed all the right things.

I kissed her lovingly and took her hand to lead her to the car.

She brushed imaginary dust off my jacket shoulder in that feminine gesture of possessiveness.

I drove to a restaurant that catered for business lunches and we sat up at the wet-bar drinking ginger ale in wine glasses until our table was ready then we gazed into each other's eyes across the table for two, hoping that our quarry was taking this all in.

I whispered across to her as if I was telling her how much I loved her.

"Do you see that guy up at the bar? That could be Barforth Crawley with a beard."

She pulled out her pocket mirror and gazed into it as if inspecting her mascara.

"That's Agent Collings." She said lovingly. "I've worked with him before."

"Sorry," I said stroking her hand. "Just getting paranoid, I guess."

By the end of the lunch I actually felt affectionate toward her as I took her hand once more to return to my car.

"Do you have a weapon on you, Jadi?" I whispered as I handed her into the front seat of the Jaguar. I hoped that it looked like I was murmuring an endearment.

"Of course, darling. Isn't that what this is all about?" She remarked as she brushed my ear with her lips.

"Yes it is darling. Shooting is not my forte so I don't carry one but there is one in the glove compartment of the car, just in case we ever need it."

That was the first date and we were both nervous because, although we did not expect him to attack so quickly, he was most mercurial and could do just about anything without warning.

I dropped her off at the FBI office and kissed her tenderly before I pulled away.

The mayoral residence was in a state of chaos as room by room things were packed into crates preparatory to the move over to the governor's residence.

Daniel, normally the one to run to greet me, was at his first session with the psychiatrist. The Mayor was at a meeting in the mayoral offices, handing over his duties to his deputy and Desdemona was sitting in the lounge waiting for me.

"Why were you not here for lunch, Freddie? I waited for you."

I had told Desdemona nothing about the trap we were laying for Spike Crawley. I still did not trust that she was not passing messages on to Spike. Jeejay was having all of her calls vetted at my request and I listened to every word at the end of every day.

"I had a lunch with an FBI agent. We are working on a new plan to track Spike Crawley." I said as truthfully as I knew how.

"Please sit down Freddie. I have to talk to you about your behaviour last night."

"My behaviour? I didn't know that my behaviour was an issue. It's *your* behaviour that needs adjustment."

"My psychiatrist says that I need a male paradigm that I can admire and respect and to whom I can turn to for advice, guidance and help. Now in my case that is clearly you, Freddie. And yet when I come to you for advice guidance and help, you reject me and lock me out. Are you behaving like the friend that you promised me you were?"

"Desdemona, you may come to me for advice, guidance and help at all reasonable times but appearing in my bedroom at night and crawling into bed with me does not constitute a request for any of those things. Not even your psychiatrist would tolerate such behavior because he, like me, is man with natural urges and cannot be expected to stay objective when the patient, or friend, want physical demonstrations instead of advice, guidance and help."

"My psychiatrist is a woman, not a man, Freddie."

“That does not change the basic principles at work here, Desdemona.”

“Maybe not but it shows you to be a sexist and a bigot.” She spat back at me.

“Very well, if that is what I am then obviously you are wrong in thinking that I am the right paradigm for you. Why not consider Armagh Wilkinson for the job?”

“Armagh is too old to understand what a young woman wants and needs in life. Freddie you are just using excuses to wriggle out of the promises that you have made to me.”

“Desdemona, I made no promises to you. I do recall assuring you that I was your friend and I shall remain your friend as long as you do not try sneaking into my bed again.”

“But Freddie, it is at night that I cannot sleep and get the urge to take coke and sleeping pills. That’s when I need your help. Why won’t you give it to me?”

I sighed. There was a strange logic to her request and she really needed all the help that was available to get past her cravings.

“Desdemona, you should be in a clinic for a couple of months. They will help you overcome your cravings and control you with professional medical help.”

“My father will not hear of it. He says it could ruin his political career if his daughter was in a drug re-habitation clinic.”

“Armagh and I will persuade him to send you to a clinic in Switzerland and everyone will think that you are away at finishing school.”

“Freddie, in Switzerland I will be away from you and any other friends I have. I will be alone in a strange country with no support. My father will not visit me and I will not even see my little brother Daniel.”

I could see that this was going to be a hopeless argument.

“Okay Desdemona, this is what I am going to do. I will visit you every day from eight in the morning until twelve noon. During that time you may talk, ask questions, beg for advice and ask for help. I will do whatever I can for you during those times. Will that help?”

"Yes, Freddie, it will help but it still does not help me at night when I need support most."

"I am working on a case with the FBI. I cannot be available at night. Perhaps Armagh would be willing to sit with you?"

"Armagh can't hold me and soothe me as you can, Freddie. The FBI have hundreds of agents, they don't need you but I do."

"You are wrong. In this particular case, the FBI can only use *me* and your father wants me to cooperate with them."

She began to cry. "No-one cares about me! I might as well commit suicide as my mother did!"

"Your mother did not commit suicide and neither will you." I told her firmly.

I left the room and found Armagh.

"Desdemona needs a tranquilizer. She is talking about suicide. What can her doctor do about that?"

"Frederick, the doctor left tranquilizers with me but I haven't given her any because she seemed under control. What has upset her now?"

"She wants to sleep with me in my bed, Armagh, and I cannot allow that."

"Why not? Lots of young men would be eager to do so. Why not you?"

"I have an attachment to a young lady and allowing Desdemona into my bed would be a betrayal of that attachment."

"No one need know about this, Frederick. We can keep it between the three of us."

"I would know about it Armagh and if that were not enough Desdemona would become so attached to me that I would not be able to tear away from her. I would be stuck with her for life."

"Is that so bad? She is young and very attractive and an heiress to a considerable fortune."

"I don't love her, Armagh. The whole thing would be a recipe for a divorce which could cause her to relapse anyway."

He looked down. "I suppose that you are right, Frederick. It isn't fair to ask you to sacrifice your life for a girl that has already made a

mess of her own.”

I went up to my room and packed my clothing into a valise that was in the closet. It had probably been used to move my effects from the spare bedroom in Desdemona’s apartment to this spare bedroom. I also packed the special Kevlar vests that the mayor had ordered and which had finally been delivered that morning.

I carted the valise down to the Jaguar and dumped it into the trunk. I did not want Armagh or Desdemona to know that I was moving out so I told no-one of my plans, intending to speak to Jeejay about it later.

The afternoon was still young as I left the Mayoral residence and returned to my grandfather’s house. I parked the Jaguar in the garage and walked through into the kitchen.

Something was wrong. There were dirty dishes in the sink and I would never have left them there. I slipped back into the garage and collected my grandfather’s pistol from the glove compartment and carefully closed the car door before sneaking back into the kitchen.

I slipped off my shoes and walked quietly in my socks to the main bedroom door. I tried the door handle and the door opened easily. I peered inside but everything there was exactly as I had left it.

I moved to the spare bedroom door and eased it open. The room was dark on a bright afternoon so holding the pistol at the ready I switched on the light. A thick blanket had been fixed over the window reveal. The bed was rumpled and a pack of cigarettes lay on the side table. I searched through the room quickly and found new male clothing hanging in the closet and a pair of brown shoes beneath it.

I moved to the bathroom and found shaving tackle and one of my towels damp and hanging over the shower door.

I moved into the lounge. That was exactly as I had left it.

So it appeared that a male had entered my home without breaking in and had slept in my spare bedroom and showered in my bathroom but was out at the moment.

Whom did I know that would make free with my home in this way?

At first I could think of no-one, and then a thought came to me. Crawley knew where I lived and doubtless knew that I had moved into the Mayoral residence. That's what I meant about cunning. The one place that no one would be looking for Barford Crawley, was in the home of the person who had been most active in pursuing him.

I called Jeejay and told him of my discovery.

"Hold it right there, Fred, I'll have a team out there in a jiffy. By the way, what are you doing there at this time of day? You are supposed to be at the mayor's house."

"Long story: I'll tell you later. Get your team moving; I don't fancy myself in a face to face confrontation with Crawley and pistols."

I set about making the place more secure against Crawley getting inside should he return before the FBI team got here.

I locked the Yale lock on the kitchen to garage door by pressing down the locking lever and I pushed a kitchen chair under the door handle.

At the front door there were glass panels that could be broken so that he could push an arm through and manually lift the locking lever and the door handle was too high to jack a chair underneath it as I had done in the kitchen. The kitchen had a solid oak table and two oak benches. I grabbed an oak bench long enough to seat three and wedged that under the front door handle. That would hold but if he got his arm through the lowest glass panel he might be able to un-wedge the oak bench.

I pushed the couch forward and crouched behind it. It was well-stuffed and should be able to stop a bullet. So if he did break the front door glass and stick his arm through the door, I could take some potshots at his arm without too much risk.

My relief was enormous when the FBI team arrived before Crawley did.

I removed my temporary barricades and welcomed them into the house where they made preparations to give Spike Crawley a

hot reception.

They had hardly cleared the street of FBI vehicles and removed the Jaguar from the garage when a car drove down the street in front of my little house. It parked at the front gate and the engine switched off.

Every man in the house held his breath as we waited for Crawley to get out of the car. The occupant did not stir. We waited ten minutes and still no action from the car.

Just when we were about to rush the car its headlights flicked on and off and then repeated the flash. From the far end of the street there was a deep throbbing sound and a black motorcycle ridden by a black-leather-clad rider came slowly toward the parked car. The car door opened and a very thin black man stepped out and approached the front door with a key in his hand.

He slipped the key into the lock and turned it. It was a perfect fit and worked smoothly.

He stepped into the lounge and was immediately surrounded by FBI agents with guns. He was handcuffed and bundled into the kitchen where an immediate interrogation began.

“Who are you? Why did you break into this house? Who is on the motor cycle?”

“Ah’m Leroy Pattison, sah! Ah ain’t broke in no place. The dude gimme a five spot to open his doah with the key I got from him. He got him a broke shoulder ‘n’ said opening his doah was whut he call a ‘ordeal’ so I done him a favor.”

“Shit!” The lead FBI agent shouted. “Grab that motor cycle man!”

Another agent rushed in through the front door.

“He knew we were here! He high-tailed it up an alley too narrow for our car and cut out into the woods.”

The lead agent was furious. He had seen the head-light flashing procedure and he knew that Leroy Pattison was lying but there was no way of disproving his story.

I took the man aside and said to him: “Look here Leroy, I’m not one of these cops. This just happens to be my house that I lent to

Spike for a couple of days. I need to get in touch with him urgently before these cops track him down. It's worth a couple of centuries to me. Where can I find him?"

"Ah sure w'd like to git my hands on dem centuries, sah, but ah don' know whe' he is at. He my pusher 'n' when ah needs a hit ah done hang at La Bailadora. Soonah er latah he done turn up deah."

"Leroy, there is a large reward, offered by the mayor, for Spike's capture so you be very careful who you talk to about him. Spike isn't the forgiving kind." I slipped him a fifty. "This is to keep you going until next time."

His eyes lit up as he took the money and he hurried to his car and drove away.

"Are you watching that Leroy Pattison, agent? " I asked as I returned to the lounge.

"Yeah sure we are but I doubt that Crawley goes near him again. Jeejay just called back to say that the motorcycle was reported stolen day before yesterday. It belonged to a biker in the 'Demons' gang. Crawley used to supply them with coke so the likelihood of it being a genuine theft is small. The insurance company is bitching to the cops about it but they are going to have to pay what with the whole gang as witnesses to the 'theft'."

"It serves them right for accepting the 'Demons' business." I remarked before the FBI team left.

I called Jeejay and re-scheduled the venue of my evening date with Luisa to La Bailadora after explaining to him why I had changed my plans.

"Fred, I expect he will lie low for a few days after this." Jeejay replied.

I arranged for new locks and substantial door bolts to be fitted to the house while I prepared for my date with 'Jadi Benton' in the form of Agent Luisa Cordoba.

I put on the Kevlar vest under my clothing. It was much lighter than police bullet-proof vests, but still inclined to be uncomfortable when the temperature was not low particularly as one had to wear a jacket to hide it.

I drove uptown to the hotel where Luisa was staying with all the other out-of-town FBI agents and went up to her room to deliver the other Kevlar vest.

I knocked on her door and called out, "It's Fred Huntsman, Jadi, I've brought you that vest I promised you."

She opened the door wearing only bra and panties.

"Come in Freddie." She said taking the vest from me. "I can't wear this tonight. It will never fit under the dress I've chosen."

"I have to admit it is like wearing a sweater in mid-summer." I told her.

"Sit down Freddie, I won't be a moment."

I doubted that. Her hair was disordered and she had not applied her makeup.

She left the bathroom door open as she pulled on her dress and worked on her face and hair.

"There is a bottle of tequila in the refrigerator if you would like a drink, Freddie."

"Thanks!" I called to her although I did not move to get it.

"I hear you had this Crawley character in your sights today. How did he get away?"

"He sent a stooge to check that the coast was clear before he approached. When his stooge didn't wave him in, he took off on a motorcycle dodged through an alley that was too narrow for a car because of some packing cases and dumpsters in it and tore off on a footpath into the woods. The agents in cars couldn't get near him."

"Has the stooge given him up?"

"The stooge had a pre-prepared story that was just reasonable enough to be believable. They couldn't hold him and they had to let him go. He did tell me however that when he needs drugs he meets Crawley at La Bailadora. That's the Latin American nightclub we are going to tonight."

"What's the food like?"

"Not too bad particularly if you like your food spicy."

"I can live with that. My grandmother did all the cooking in our house and she used chili like most Americans use French fries. My

father liked it that way so we all had to get used to it or starve.”

“You didn’t do too badly on it.” I said gallantly.

“Thanks darling! I thought that you would never notice. Would you zip me up?”

To my surprise she stepped out of the bathroom looking as if she had just spent two hours on preparation.

“That was quick! And you look stunning! I’m going to have to fight off all those Latin men at the nightclub.”

“It won’t be a problem, believe me. I’ve had my fill of Latin men.”

She picked up her purse, which seemed rather heavy, and took my arm. “Let’s go, darling.”

I felt ten feet tall walking through the hotel foyer with her on my arm and she played the game by snuggling up to me and even kissing me while we were waiting for the valet parking to bring my car around.

“This place we are going to is known for drugs. You can get just about anything you are willing to pay for. Crawley probably had a lot to do with that. The music is great and everyone has a wild time and as I said before the food is okay but if Crawley goes for us, he will be able to gun us both down in full sight of everyone in the club and no-one in that place will remember what he looks like. We will get a different description from each witness.”

We parked and walked into the club. Soft rhumba music was playing in the background as we were shown to our table. It was not the best table in the house because I had made the reservation so late but being away from the band and having a good view of the entire room was not a bad thing.

I ordered a bottle of the cheapest domestic champagne. We had no intention of drinking it but it was there for decoration and the champagne flutes that came with it.

We also ordered ginger ale and that was what went into the champagne flutes throughout the night.

Luisa ordered a Mexican dish and I was astounded to see that the plate it was served on was not made of asbestos. I contented myself

with a Brazilian steak done with what they called peri-peri and that was hot enough. It burned like the fires of hell going down but left a very satisfying after-taste in my mouth.

We chatted and gazed into each other's eyes during the meal. I found it easier to call her 'darling' than to try to remember that Luisa was supposed to be Jadi.

The music was beginning to heat up as the diners finished their meals and more and more couples were moving onto the dance floor.

"Darling, I'm not the world's best Latin dancer but I think I can avoid trampling on your toes. Would you like to dance?" I had noticed that she was swaying to the music as we chatted.

"I'd love to darling." She said as she grabbed my hand and tugged me onto the floor.

She was one of those dancers that can make her partner look good. No matter where I put my feet she moved in concert and succeeded in making it appear that we were dancing in perfect unity.

The tempo changed to bossa nova, cool and smooth. She moved in to me and we plastered to each other and began nuzzling and kissing.

I came up for air just as I saw Crawley sitting at a table with two men up in the wet-bar section. He was in the one spot that we could not see from our table.

I whispered into Luisa's ear. "That's Crawley over there at the bar. I'm going to take you to our table and leave you to call Jeejay. I'll head for the men's room where I hope I can get a better view of them and hopefully pick up what they are talking about."

"You are not going to get close to them, Freddie. If that man sees you he will shoot you and walk away."

"Don't worry, darling. He won't see me. Just call Jeejay. He must have men here already. This is our big chance to get Crawley."

I slid away toward the rest room and positioned myself where I could see the three men and watch their lips.

"I just got to attend to a few little matters here and then I'll be ready to go. Have you got the boat ready?" Crawley wanted to

know.

“Sure thing Spike. It’s fueled and the diving equipment is aboard. We’ll put out to sea at night and motor down the coast to a spot where we can go inshore without alerting anybody. My Mexican contact will have a car waiting for us in Mazatlan and we drive down to Acapulco. Stay there while you dig out your money and then you dash back to Mexico City and fly to Brazil. It’s a breeze.”

The second man spoke. “Spike, the money *has* to be there. The cartel doesn’t fool around. They don’t run no debtor’s book. You don’t pay, they gonna take you out.”

“Don’t worry Ignacio, the money is there. I set it up the last time I took a break at the coast.”

“Those banks in Mexico they ain’t as reliable as US banks, maybe the bank has closed down or something. If there’s any chance of something like that, better you don’t accept the cartel’s help.”

“Hey, we’re talking Banamex/Citibank here. That’s solid, man!”

“As long as you are sure, Spike; it’s your neck.” The first man said. “When do you want to go?”

“As I said, Domingo, I gotta clear up some things here first so give me until Saturday and then we’ll take off on Saturday night. There should be plenty of weekend sailors out at that time so the Coast guard won’t take too much notice of us.”

Spike stood up. “I gotta go guys. The FBI have put out a reward for me and you never know when some ass-hole is stupid enough to go for it. I’ll give you a call through Nadia to keep you up to date in the next few days.”

“This chick Nadia; is she reliable?”

“Sure, her father is a Police Detective. No-one is gonna suspect her. She’s nuts about me and will do anything I say.”

He moved away so quickly that I didn’t realize that he had left the room. I thought he had just stepped out of my line of sight until I saw Ignacio say to Domingo.

“Why are we helping that ass-hole? He ain’t gonna do us any good when he’s in Brazil.”

“Why do we do anything, you dodo? For money is why; he’s paying through the nose for the help we give him. Also he’s got a lot of contacts in the cartels. He’s the sort of ass-hole that can bounce back at any moment. If that happens we’re in the hundred dollar seats with him.”

They finished their drinks and stood up as I saw Jeejay rush in and go over to our table where Luisa was sitting with her cell phone glued to her ear.

I walked over to him. “Jeejay, those two men walking around the dance floor; their names are Domingo and Ignacio. They are the ones that are planning to get Crawley out of the States and into Mexico.”

“Oh, they are, are they? We’ll see about that. Agent Fothergill take a few men and grab those guys before they get away.” Fothergill went off at a trot and Jeejay turned to me. “Where is Crawley?”

“He is trying to keep ahead of the FBI. He won’t phone those two in case you have a phone tap going so he arranges to meet them by getting a girl called Nadia to set up a date with the younger guy, Ignacio. They set up to meet here and Crawley turns up instead of the girl. I found out that the girl Nadia’s father is a police detective. You should be able to identify her with that information.”

“Okay, I’ll get on it but where is Crawley?”

“He left several minutes ago. My guess is he avoided the road and drove back into the woods. Sit down Jeejay, let me tell you everything I have just learned.”

Luisa, Jeejay and I sat at the table while Agent Fothergill arrested Domingo and Ignacio and rushed them back to the FBI offices for interrogation.

“So you are saying that we’ve just caught the two guys that would have sneaked Crawley out of the States?” Jeejay asked after I had reported on what I had ‘overheard’.

“Yes, and now that you know what bank he is using, you could probably freeze his money and keep him from moving anywhere at all.” I pointed out happily.

“Well, you continue to amaze me Fred! How in hell do you always get close enough to hear what these guys are saying? The sound decibels in this place must be incredibly high. I can hardly hear what you are saying to me now unless I bend over and get close to your mouth.”

“I have a very forgettable face, Jeejay. People don’t notice me even when I am close by.”

“Well, that’s a crock if I ever heard one. What do you think, Luisa, does this guy have a very forgettable face?”

“He has a very nice face, Jeejay but it is difficult to describe and I find it hard to hold it in my mind’s eye.”

“Gee, thanks darling and here I thought that we were making great progress together.” I complained.

Jeejay stood up. “I’ve got to interrogate those two we’ve just arrested. You two enjoy yourself here but I think that your lovebird act isn’t going to get you anywhere: Crawley has already left and I can’t see him coming back here tonight.”

We stayed on for a few more hours. The music was lively and we were enjoying ourselves but eventually the band played a final tune and began to pack up. It was not a weekend when they played into the early hours of the morning.

Luisa grabbed the untouched bottle of domestic champagne and said.

“Let’s go somewhere where we can kill this bottle. With Crawley temporarily out of the way there is no need to stay cold stone sober.”

“Okay by me darling. How about my little house? It’s got a spare bedroom if you don’t feel like going anywhere after the champagne.”

She gave me a strange look but she took my arm and we went out to the Jaguar.

Chapter Twenty

I drove into the little garage. It was a tight fit for the Jaguar and we had to contort ourselves to get out of the car.

The new keys worked easily in the expensive new lock.

We walked arm-in-arm into the kitchen where I located two non-matching wine glasses from my grandfather's collection of glassware.

The domestic champagne was no more than cool so after opening it and pouring it into the wine glasses, I put the bottle into the freezer compartment of the old refrigerator.

"What a quaint little house this is, darling, but everything in it is so old!"

"It was my grandfather's house. I moved in with him when my parents died in a motor accident. After gramps died the house became mine. I've got used to the old furniture and don't notice it anymore."

"Why didn't you sell the house and buy a modern condo?"

"It helps me to remember my gramps and the rooms are much more spacious than any of the condos that I've seen. Also, I was planning to go to college up until the mayor offered me a job as his investigator. Had I gone to college, I couldn't afford to be saddled with the monthly cost of a condo."

We sat down on the couch in the lounge and I put on a Julio Iglesias disk on the CD player. We sipped our wine in the dimmed glow of a single heavily shaded side light. Luisa's head dropped onto my shoulder and I slipped an arm around her waist.

"This is kind of nice." I murmured into her hair.

"Yes, it is." She replied dreamily. "but it would be a lot more comfortable if we were lying on a bed rather than sitting up on a couch."

"Are you feeling tired darling? Do you want to go to bed?" I asked considerately.

"I thought that you would never ask." Luisa said rising to her feet and taking my hand with her.

She led me into my bedroom and pulled me down on the bed with her.

I opened my mouth to say something about this not being the spare bedroom but while it was still opened she kissed me and our tongues met.

After that it was a race to divest ourselves of clothing and an hour of twining bodies and much heavy breathing.

"Gee, Luisa, I am so sorry! I did not mean that to happen."

"Oh? Well, I did. Why would you be sorry about it? I thought that it was great!"

"Yes, well I guess that it was but I'm apologizing because I did not use a condom."

"Apologizing doesn't normally fix that sort of problem, darling but relax: I'm on the pill."

"Are you? Why? Are you in a relationship?"

"No, but I used to be a girl scout and the motto is 'Be prepared'."

"I cannot tell whether you are joking or trying to put on a brave face because of my thoughtlessness."

"I'm not joking about being on the pill, darling but I am joking about having been a girl scout. Now I have to use the bathroom, where is it?"

"First door on the right. Will you bring the champagne from the freezer when you come back?"

I saw her beautiful naked body outlined against the weak light from the lounge as she ran quickly to the bathroom.

There was a loud explosion. Even in my languor and champagne induced befuddlement, I recognized a gunshot. I looked about me. My grandfather's pistol was in the glove compartment of the Jaguar and Luisa's was in her purse lying on the floor in the lounge.

I dived for my clothing and pulled on underwear including the Kevlar vest. My pants were on the far side of the bedroom and I scrabbled over the floor to get to them. I yanked them on just as the faint light from the lounge was blocked out by a human form.

The bedroom light clicked on.

“Darling why are you getting dressed?”

“I heard the gunshot! I thought that Crawley was in the house.”

“Don’t be silly, darling that was the champagne bottle exploding as I tried to take it out of the freezer. I am afraid that your kitchen is a bit of a mess.”

“Oh hell! I nearly had a heart attack! Bring your purse here from the lounge. I want that gun right next to us. I’m not taking any more chances.”

The rest of the night was amazingly peaceful but when I awoke Luisa was gone.

I wandered through the house looking for her but she was most definitely not there.

I called Jeejay and even though it was five minutes past six in the morning he picked up instantly.

“Jeejay, do you know where Agent Cordoba is? I can’t find her anywhere.”

“Yes, Fred, she has had return home urgently. Her husband has taken a turn for the worst.”

“Her husband?” I said stunned by this revelation.

“Yes, as I am sure she told you, the poor guy has been suffering with testicular cancer. He had been stable for some time otherwise we would never have been able to persuade Luisa Cordoba to take this assignment but last night he had to be rushed back into hospital. Agent Cordoba flew back on the red-eye flight.”

“She never said a word to me about this.”

“Probably she was afraid that it might affect the inter-action between you. She is very meticulous in her work.”

I put down the telephone wondering just how meticulous you had to be to do what we did last night.

I felt very depressed as I dressed but I concluded that if I hurried I might get to the mayoral residence in time for breakfast with the family.

I left the kitchen in its state with sticky champagne residue on almost every surface and hurried into the garage. The Jaguar was

getting low on gas but the mayoral chauffeurs could take care of that once I was back at the mansion.

I pulled into the gates at exactly seven o'clock, handed the Jaguar over to the chauffeur with instructions to fill 'er up and dashed into the house in time to catch the Mayor just finishing off his meal. Janine Drew was also at the breakfast table.

"Good morning sir, I trust that you are well? We spotted Crawley again last night but he got away on a motor-cycle over paths that cars could not use. Special Agent Porter has requisitioned some motorcycles to give chase when next we locate him. We have identified the Mexican bank account where he has his back-up funds. Porter has applied for a court order to freeze it. We have also arrested the two men that were going to help him leave the States and enter Mexico illegally. So unless he can come up with another plan that does not require money, he is stuck here in the States."

"In my heart, although I know that this villain must be brought to book, I would prefer that he was in Mexico. At least there he does not threaten my family."

"We will catch him yet, sir. He is a very slippery character but we now know how he communicates with all his contacts and that too will be blocked off."

"Well I can see that you are still making good progress even though we don't see you as much as we would like. Desdemona, in particular, claims that you have been neglecting her."

"And me too!" Chimed in little Daniel.

"I'll be spending this morning with Desdemona, sir. My FBI partner is not available today and when you get back from school, Daniel, we'll play some softball."

Wilkinson came in to announce to the mayor: "Sir there is a call for you. Shall I have it put through here?"

"No, I'll take it in my study, Wilkinson, thank you."

Daniel ran off to get ready for school and I sat opposite Janine.

"How is the new job coming along, Janine?"

"The job's wonderful, Freddie but I see you are visiting everyone except me. Why don't you come to my condo for supper tonight?"

“Fine by me, what time shall I be there?”

“Any time after six but don’t expect gourmet cuisine; just steak and salad.”

She hurried after the Governor-elect leaving me to finish my breakfast alone.

As soon as breakfast was done I went up to Desdemona’s apartment.

“Where were you yesterday?” She asked as soon as I walked in.

“I was tracking down your lover.” I said somewhat sharply.

She burst into tears. “Why are you being so horrible to me, Freddie? I know I have made a lot of mistakes but I’m trying now to pull myself straight and the least you can do is to be supportive instead sarcastic.”

“I am sorry Desdemona. I did not intend to sound sarcastic but I did warn you that my duties came before anything else. Barforth Crawley is a very slippery person. He is probably the most cunning man I have ever encountered. He slipped through our fingers twice yesterday but at least we are blocking off his bolt-holes. Do you know that he had the audacity to lodge in the spare bedroom in my house? He must have known that I was now residing here.”

“Of course he did, Freddie. I told him myself. I certainly didn’t realize that I was disclosing any secret.”

“I am not blaming you Desdemona. It is just typical of his cunning thought-processes to take advantage of every opportunity. If he had not left used dishes in the sink I would never have looked into the spare bedroom. He could have been staying in my house for a month without me even noticing it.”

“Yes, he is very clever, Freddie. He always knows exactly how to entrap people in their own weaknesses.”

“How are your psychiatric sessions coming along?”

“I think that they are helping. I’m certainly gaining a clearer picture of the type of person I have been over the last five years. The doctor says that I have been obsessed with my father’s indifference to me.”

“Desdemona, your father is not indifferent to you. Along with many other men in the world today, he is determined to deliver the highest possible status to the members of his family. He is already rich so he does not concentrate on making money. He concentrates on status and is determined to become the President of the United States. Everyone will judge that he is doing this for his own aggrandizement but from what I know of him that is only marginally true. He is working for his family and with the exception of Daniel, all of them; two wives and his daughter have thrown his efforts back into his face by behaving in highly self-destructive ways.”

“Well isn’t it about time that someone told him that love is shown by physical affection and consideration? I cannot remember the last time that he even touched me.”

“He certainly does give you consideration, Desdemona. He is just not good at physical affection and that could be because he didn’t get much from *his* parents.”

“Yeah? Well that is what drove my mother to pills, Julietta to drink and me to coke. I didn’t care what men did to me as long as they touched me and kissed me: all things my father never did.”

I stayed with her until ten in the morning, chatting about her past and her intentions for the future. She was still very nervous and jumpy and inclined to take offence easily but I could see that her thought processes were becoming very gradually more rational.

I went downstairs to look for Armagh Wilkinson and found him in the kitchen.

“Armagh, how are things going with Miss Desdemona? Are we certain that she no longer has access to cocaine?”

“Frederick, I searched her apartment from top to bottom and found two places where she stored cocaine. I have destroyed those and the FBI is still keeping track of all telephone calls so I am reasonably well assured that she has been without the drug for at least three days. She is taking tranquilizers prescribed for her by her psychiatrist. I keep the pills and issue them to her only as the doctor has prescribed.”

“Do you permit her out into the garden?”

“Only into the fully-walled conservatory and that can only be entered through the house. I do not permit the other servants access to her when I am not present.”

“That sounds as if you have everything under control, Armagh. I venture to say that we have a good chance of pulling her straight provided that *she* stays resolute.”

“I certainly hope so, Frederick. I am very fond of Miss Desdemona despite her many faults.”

I went to the mayoral offices to see if I had any important messages. I thought that Luisa at least owed me a short note of explanation. There was nothing waiting for me so I drove to the FBI offices where Jeejay was in a conference and not to be disturbed.

That was probably FBI code for interrogating witnesses.

I drove back to my little house pondering what I would do next if I were in Crawley's shoes. He was unlikely to be aware that his bank account in Mexico was soon to be frozen so no doubt he would be trying to set up another boat to carry him to Mexico but it would have to be done with someone who would trust him to pay only when he got to Mexico. That party was the cartel he was dealing with and he would only be dealing with them if he had no other choice because failure to pay did not bear contemplating.

Were I in his position, I would try another alternative. Signing on as a deckhand on a tramp steamer and deserting when I arrived in a Mexican port. To do this, I would need a valid passport that was not in my own name but bearing a picture that would pass for me or else substituting my picture for that on the passport. This last possibility would require an expert forger and would be expensive.

With his cash resources almost exhausted he was likely to look for someone whose picture would pass as his own and to do that he would frequent the waterfront where footloose deckhands were likely to hang out.

I turned the Jaguar about and drove down to the waterfront and only when I got there did I realize that I could hardly inspect ship's records to see if I could find Crawley among the recently hired

deckhands. That was a job I would have to leave to Jeejay.

I diverted to a thrift shop a block away from the waterfront. Here a number of shore-bound sailors lounging outside the Sailor's Mission watched a well-dressed man step out of a Jaguar and enter a thrift shop coming away fifteen minutes later with an armful of old clothing. It gave them something to talk about over the next beer they were bound to drink that day.

I drove home to my little house where I changed into well-worn work clothing and donned a cap, slightly on the large side, before catching a bus back to the waterfront.

There was a bar on the corner of the waterfront where seamen gather to meet old shipmates and pass on the word as to which ship was hiring and whether the captain was worth working for.

I bought a beer and sat down in the furthest corner where I could watch the entrance. I sipped the beer very slowly and watched the men coming and going, reading their lips but not really concentrating on what they were saying.

I had often passed time in this way, watching people and reading their lips and speculating about them and their lives so I did not find this boring.

A man entered the bar and I almost stood up in surprise I was so certain that this was Crawley himself but he greeted a few friends and asked if they knew of any ship that was hiring.

"Not at the moment Pepe but old Shaw will dock tomorrow and he is bound to have a few vacancies going back Panama. Last time he came half of his crew disappeared here. They should raise a statue to him. He has substantially contributed to the population of the United States."

"What's his ship?"

"The Caterina out of Panama; not too bad an old rust-bucket, Shaw might be a bastard to work for but he keeps his ship in good shape."

This was the right man. If Crawley saw him he would kill him and take his passport. He could hardly find someone closer to him in general appearance, build and height.

I angled over to him and greeted him. "Hi Pepe! How is it with you?"

Naturally he stared back at me with incomprehension.

"Come and have a drink with your old shipmate. What are you having?"

Now among impoverished deckhands that is an invitation not to be ignored.

"I'll have a tequila, amigo."

I called for a tequila. "I can see Pepe that you have forgotten my name. I understand it has been a long time. People call me Hunt. Have you had any good gigs lately?"

"Gigs? I do not understand, Hunt."

"Cruises, jobs, trips whatever. Sorry I can't think of the right word in Spanish."

"I do not have too many gringo friends, Hunt, and I ship on Spanish-speaking ships." He was emboldened to say but only after he had downed his tequila.

"But you speak good English my friend. Another drink?"

He could not resist. "Si, gracias."

After the third tequila, he forgot that he did not know who the hell I was and began to talk freely about his wife and family in Costa Rica.

I invited him to come and eat lunch with me and that too was an invitation that he could not forego.

We took the bus to my little house where I fed him well after I had put in a call to Jeejay. We had hardly put away the lunch dishes before Jeejay arrived.

We moved into the lounge where I explained to both Pepe and Jeejay what the consequences of Pepe returning to the waterfront were likely to be and why.

"Fred, how can you be sure that Crawley will try this stunt?" Jeejay asked bluntly.

"I can't be sure, Jeejay but we can't risk Pepe's life on it either."

"No, you are right and if you are completely right, we will capture Crawley." Jeejay agreed.

“Do you understand what we are asking you to do Pepe?” Jeejay continued.

“You wish me to hire onto the Caterina but you will watch me and look after me because this criminal called Crawley who is a very handsome man like me will try to kill me and take my papers.” He paused, possibly to clear some of the tequila fumes from his brain. “I will do this thing because it is what I would do anyway if you had not warned me about this *delincuente* only now you will protect me for the sake of my wife and children, no?”

“That is correct and what is more I will speak to Captain Shaw before he docks and I will ensure that he will hire you.” Jeejay assured him.

“And I shall give you two hundred dollars for your children.” I told him.

Pepe was a very happy man; a drunk man but very happy.

Jeejay spoke to Captain Shaw aboard the Caterina over the radio and established that he would be in port for three days and that he would hire Pepe Sanchez as a favor to the FBI.

I put Pepe up in the spare bedroom and two FBI agents were installed to keep an eye on him until the Caterina docked when he would be taken aboard to be signed up after which he would spend time in the bar telling everyone how he had already been signed onto the Caterina ahead of all his peers.

That evening at six o'clock I presented myself at Janine Drew's condo.

She welcomed me warmly. She was wearing a pretty little apron and looking very domesticated.

“Freddie, could you pour the drinks while I grill the steaks?”

The drinks turned out to be an already opened bottle of California red so the task was not onerous.

We sat around her kitchen counter which served as her dining table.

“First of all Freddie, I want to thank you again for getting me this job. It gives me the chance to stick my finger in the eye of all those jerks that pestered me when I was the junior reporter of the

Clarion. You cannot imagine what satisfaction that has given me particularly when I know that I am earning so much more than they are. But the real reason I wanted to talk to you is because Bradford Bronson has asked me to marry him."

She paused for effect and believe me it really did have one.

"I know that we've known each other less than a week and that he is double my age but his proposal makes a lot of sense. First of all, he needs a presentable woman to stand by his side at the many functions that he has to attend. Of course, I already do that as his Press Liaison Officer but he needs a partner which, as an employee I cannot be. Secondly, he needs an intelligent woman to be the head of his household and his hostess for the many functions he must provide. Thirdly, he is a man and has sexual needs that, if he is to become the President, can only be satisfied by his wife. In exchange for this, he offers me anything that money can buy on condition that I stay married to him to the end of his first term as president. He does not object to me having outside relationships but they have to be absolutely discreet because any scandal will nullify the pre-nuptial agreement and leave me with a pittance."

She stopped and looked at me in her very appealing manner.

"Freddie, you are the best friend I have ever had. You are the only man I have ever encountered that gave me help without a single string attached. I trust you more than anyone I have ever met. Freddie, please tell me if this would be a mistake. Shall I accept his proposal or not?"

I paused a good while before I replied.

"Janine, there are a lot of dangers to accepting this proposal and equally there are a lot of advantages. The first is that it is very difficult to sustain a marriage even when both parties are of identical backgrounds and beliefs. The mayor is of a generation that does not understand ours. There will be disagreements arising from that generation gap. The second is that being the wife of the governor and later of the president will make incredible demands on you as a hostess and as a person. You will never be able to get irritated or have an 'off' day because anything you do will reflect upon your

husband. The third problem is that of the money itself. Right now, he is eager to be generous and to spoil you but as the years roll by his sexuality will diminish to nothing while yours could even be at its peak. His inclination to give way to you on matters of money will dissipate and if it should come to a divorce he will see that the best lawyers in the country trim your entitlement down to the bare bones. The advantages are that of course you will be the wife of the governor: the highest status of any woman in the state and ultimately the wife of the president, the highest status in the land."

"Okay, so what do you recommend Freddie? You will be there always as my friend. You will help me through the tough times and advise me in difficult circumstances. Surely we can do this together?"

"This is a tough call, Janine. Only you can make it. Few women get the chance that you have been offered. I could advise you to find a man of your own age for whom you feel a powerful love and that whole thing could fizzle out in a few years. That's happened often enough. It's like marrying into a royal family. You don't make the rules, you merely follow them."

"Freddie, I'm asking you for your opinion because I value your opinion. What shall I do?"

"Do you think that you can be constant to a man that you do not love, Janine?"

"I could be constant to my employer. As his press liaison officer I believe that I could stay in that employment until retirement. Surely as a wife I would merely be better paid and have to offer him certain privileges which a lot of bosses ask of their attractive female employees?"

"Well, if that's how you feel, Janine, maybe you should go for the golden ring."

"I wouldn't do it if you told me not to, Freddie."

"I can't tell you not to. You are your own woman. If you want to take the chance, I would not stop you. As your friend I will be there to help pick up the pieces if you come unstuck."

She reached across the kitchen counter and kissed me full on the lips for a long time.

“Thanks Freddie, you are the best friend a girl could have.”

Jeejay and I laid our plans carefully. Several FBI men were sent to join the job queue for the Caterina. Others lounged about in the bar. Four motorcycle riders were posted at the entry points to the docks and two men were scheduled to be on the deck of the Caterina.

For two days we lounged around with no sign of our quarry while Pepe spoke loudly in the bar of his expertise in snagging jobs on a ship that stopped in all the major western seaboard ports of central America.

On the last day before the scheduled dawn sailing, I was sitting in the bar sipping my beer when a large man walked through the door and asked: “Who is Pepe Sanchez?”

“That is myself, Senor.” Pepe said grandly.

“You are needed to help with a difficult load. Captain Shaw sent me to fetch you.”

“Ah you see, my friends, already the Captain knows his most experienced hands.” Pepe said proudly.

I watched as two FBI men, unshaven and dressed roughly, rose and left the bar immediately after Pepe had.

I abandoned my flat beer and followed after them.

By that time, Pepe and the big man were several hundred yards away.

I saw Pepe saying “Hey, this is not the way to the Caterina!”

The big man grabbed his arm and pushed him into a block of shipping containers.

I saw the FBI men ahead of me begin to run. They were at least a hundred yards away from Pepe.

I could never reach them in time to be of any assistance so I sprinted over to the side where I could see through the rows of containers.

I could see Pepe being dragged by the big man toward Spike Crawley who was leaning against one of the containers.

"Take his passport from him." I saw Spike say.

"He hasn't got it on him, Spike." The big man replied.

"Where is it, Pepe?" Spike asked.

Pepe said bravely. "You think I am stupid? I tell you and you kill me."

Spike moved his shoulder off the container and approached Pepe.

"I don't have to kill you to get you to talk, Pepe. I can start by shooting you in the foot and if you still don't answer I do the other foot and after that your hands. You'll never be able to work again Pepe, then where will your family be?"

"Where will my family be if you kill me, eh? Those FBI men they said that you would do this."

"FBI? Shit! Let's get out of here!" The big man said releasing Pepe and running hard for the far corner of the container block.

Just then the two FBI men came around the corner with guns out. I could hear the sound of their shouts from where I stood but I could not make out what they said because I couldn't see their mouths.

Spike fired at them and they immediately returned fire. Spike leapt for the top of the container. He had to drop his pistol to do it but his fingers gripped the edge and he swung himself up. The body of the container now protected him from the gunfire of the FBI agents. One of them ran around the containers to stop Spike from jumping down while the other tried to swing up onto the container but was not tall enough to emulate Spike's actions.

I saw Spike run to the opposite corner to which the FBI agent had run to cut him off.

He jumped down and was up on his feet running for one of the exit roads from the docks.

I pointed with my arms to the distant FBI men who then began to run in the same direction as Spike.

I began to move also because Spike was closer to me than the FBI agents.

I could see the motorcyclist agent waiting on his bike for orders to move but Spike saw him too. Before the agent could remove his leather gloves, so as to unzip his leather jacket, so as to reach his holster, Spike was on him.

I heard the thud when Spike hit him in the face with something solid and saw Spike cast him from the motorcycle and slide into the seat himself.

I was shouting myself at that point and running as fast as I could although on reflection I do not know what I could do when I got there as I had no weapon.

Spike did not wait to see what I could do. He started the motorcycle and rode off at full speed.

I reached the fallen agent and snatched up his two-way radio.

"Crawley is headed away from the dock on an FBI motorcycle on Waterside Road. FBI man needs ambulance. Hurry!"

Jeejay replied. "Is that you Fred? What is happening?"

I repeated what I had just said. "Okay!" Jeejay said. "I have the cars after him."

Of course exactly what occurred last time happened again and Crawley knew exactly how to lose a motor car while on a motorcycle.

The big man who had helped Crawley was arrested and he turned out to be a member of the 'Demons' motorcycle gang.

Not even the threat of a charge of accessory after the fact moved him to talk and he was out on bail before I had supper.

I saw Pepe Sanchez aboard the Caterina where I thanked him for his help and sent him away with the promised two hundred dollars.

Jeejay met me coming down the gangplank. "Bastard got clean away!" he said bitterly "That asshole has the luck of the devil himself."

"If your man on the motorcycle had his gun out when he should have this might have been a different story." I said to Jeejay. "How is your man, by the way?"

"He has a broken jaw. Crawley hit him with a knuckleduster."

“It just goes to show you can never assume that Crawley doesn’t have a weapon no matter how many he drops.”

“Talking about dropped weapons, the one Crawley dropped is probably the same one that he used to kill Agent Simpson and his fingerprints will be all over it.” Jeejay said happily.

“Fine Jeejay but first we have to catch him before we try him.”

It was dark when we closed down the sprung trap. I had missed the promised softball session with Daniel so I decided to call him to apologize rather than face him. Feeling somewhat depressed, I drove home to my grandfather’s house.

The place seemed barren when I stepped into the kitchen and it reminded me of Luisa and that reminded me of the gun in the glove box of the Jaguar so I went back into the garage and collected it.

I spent an hour cleaning the house before I started on a spaghetti dinner complete with canned sauce.

I ate it in front of my grandfather’s old television which cut off both sides of the picture.

Not that it made much difference because I didn’t see anything on it. I looked at it but I saw nothing. I was too busy running over in my mind all the things that had gone wrong with trying to nail Barforth Crawley.

When the front doorbell rang, I was surprised to see that I had eaten all the spaghetti because I didn’t remember doing it.

I put down my plate and picked up the gun before I went to the front door.

Through the peephole, I saw a shapely woman and I immediately thought it was Luisa returning to duty.

I opened the door with the words “Why didn’t you tell me you were married?”

“But I’m not married!” Agent Jadi Benton said.

“Jadi! What are you doing here? Aren’t you on a case in Washington?”

“I was but the suspect ran back to the city and I took the opportunity to resign. I’ve come to take the job as your assistant.”

“Really? I thought you were mad at me when you slammed down the phone the last time we talked.”

“I didn’t slam it down, I dropped it. I couldn’t believe it when you said that the reason why you didn’t make love to me was because you didn’t have a condom. I had been thinking that you were already married or engaged or had AIDS. I knew you weren’t gay but I never once thought that you held back because you didn’t have a condom.”

“Well, that and the fact that I was a virgin. I never even had a girlfriend in high school.”

“That is because you have no concept of self-worth, Freddie. Well, aren’t you going to invite me in?” She had a valise with her.

I opened the door wide. “You can’t believe how much I have missed you.” I told her as she stepped in and strangely enough I wasn’t lying.

Jadi walked straight into the main bedroom and started unpacking her valise. She cleared one drawer by the simple expedient of dumping its contents into the drawer below it and she deposited her underwear in the upper drawer.

Then she swept every hanger in the closet to one side and hung her own clothing in the cleared space. After that she went into the bathroom and ran a bath while she set her toiletries out around the hand basin.

“We are going to have to modernize this place a bit, Freddie. I know it reminds you of your grandfather but I think we can get his photograph blown up and hang it on the wall instead.” Strange, but I had never thought of that.

She took a bath with the bathroom door wide open.

“Freddie, pour me a drink and come sit over there on the toilet. Talk to me as you used to do when we were in the woods together.”

I handed her the drink. It was my grandfather’s bourbon with branch water.

She took a sip and grimaced but she said: “Nothing like a shot of bourbon to get rid of inhibitions. What have you been doing while I have been away, Freddie?”

I gave her an expurgated version of Luisa's sojourn in town and explained how Barford Crawley had escaped from our various attempts to arrest him.

"He seems to lead a charmed life." I remarked.

"Or the devil looks after his own." Jadi countered.

"Hand me that towel over there Freddie." She said pointing at a towel that made mine look like single-ply tissues.

She stepped out of the water and wrapped herself in the bath-sheet. She smelled of roses, lavender and sweet-peas.

"That's better!" She said as she pinned her steam-damp hair up. "Let's go to bed."

I divested myself of clothing and jumped into the bed just as she slipped under the sheet.

"Hold on a minute!" I said sitting up suddenly.

"What? Still no condoms?" She asked testily.

"No, I forgot the pistol in the lounge." I ran naked into the living room to collect it and placed it on the floor beside the bed.

"This is a very odd time to think about pistols." Jadi said severely as she pulled me into her arms.

After that we murmured a lot but didn't do any talking.

I woke up several hours later with the feeling that something was not right. I felt for Jadi but her soft feminine form was right there where I had left it.

The overhead electric light clicked on and for some seconds I saw nothing until my eyes adjusted to the light.

It was Barforth Crawley sitting in the bedroom armchair and waving a revolver around casually as if he were thoroughly enjoying himself. I think that he truly was.

"Don't make any false moves Mister Huntsman. I have waited for a long time to catch you two together. You didn't think that you were fooling me with that Cordoba woman did you? Little Miss Benton's legs are much more slender and graceful. I'm a leg man so I notice these things. Ah, the Indian maiden awakes! Sit up Miss Benton. I'd like a nice view of the upper half."

"Get lost you pervert!" Jadi spat out without moving to sit up.

“Don’t get uppity with me little miss. You broke my shoulder for me and you are going to have to pay for that.”

“How did you get into this house?” I asked to divert his attention from Jadi.

“Why, did you think that putting in new locks and bolts would keep me out? I have more experienced burglars in debt to me than you have FBI agents at your beck and call. I came through the tiles in the garage and out through the ceiling trapdoor in the kitchen. Burglars know all these little tricks and they even held the ladder for me while I did it.”

“You are not so clever Crawley, we’ve frozen your bank account in Acapulco and cut off your boat-trip to Mexico. You are still going to have to pay the cartel for everything they set up for you and you won’t have the money to do it. You know what *that* means don’t you?” I goaded him to keep his attention on me.

“Huntsman! You Cuntsman! I’m going to have the last laugh here!”

“Barforth! Barf for short! No wonder you prefer Spike! Is it because everyone wants to barf when they see you?”

“Huntsman, I am going to make you suffer! You have been a pain in the ass ever since you first stuck your nose into my business.” He tried to pull back the hammer of his pistol with his left hand but the strain was too much for his injured shoulder. He grunted with pain and glanced down at the pistol and that was when I threw my pillow at him and dived down the side of my bed for my grandfather’s pistol.

His shot struck the headboard of the bed where I had been a split second before.

My shot blanked out one of his eyes. A very satisfactory shot which displayed my complete mastery of the weapon except for one thing: I had been aiming for his chest.

Jadi threw herself into my arms. “Darling, you got him! You got him!”

“No darling,” I told her firmly. “What is far more important is: I’ve got you!”

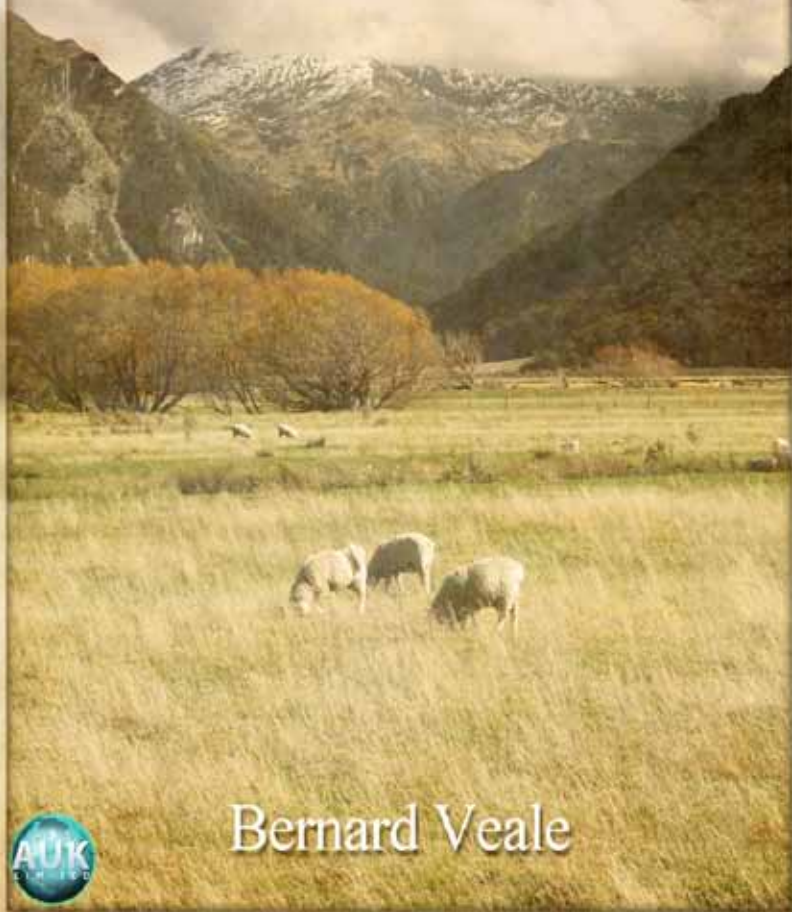
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