

PAT RUGER:

FOR HIRE



PAT RUGER MYSTERY SERIES #1

JACK HUBER

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By Jack Huber

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Chapter 1

The knock had an impatient tone. I opened the door to find cleavage, a lot of it.

“Angel sent me.” The young Hispanic woman wasn’t exactly stunning but she was pretty and made the most of what she had. She nervously pushed her way past me and huddled on my ottoman.

“I don’t know what Angel told you, but I’m not interested in a party.” And if I was, I said to myself, it wouldn’t be with someone Angel sent over.

“You’re Mr. Pat, si? Mi seesta’s missin’. Angel said you could find ‘er, yes?”

Puerto Rican? Columbian? Latin accents were always hard for me to put a finger on. “I’m not a dick.”

“What?” She was still anxious, looking from window to window.

“I’m not a P.I... I’m not a licensed investigator.”

“I don’ care, he said you’re good at it. I ain’t seen my Elena for over a month. The cops don’ care. I need to find her, sumptin bad’s happened to her.” She reached in her skin-tight leather pants and from somewhere pulled out a wad of cash. She reached out with the money, “I can pay you.”

“Wait... what’s your name?”

She dropped her outstretched arm and sighed. “Lola, but that’s not really my name, that’s just what my

man makes me say. Mi mama named me 'Agata,' but he says that's not pretty."

"Who's your man?"

"I can't... it doesn't matter! No puede ayudarme por favor? Necesito encontrar mi hermanita..."

"Hold on, hold on, no habla español." That was the extent of my Spanish repertoire, other than maybe 'patio' and 'burrito' "Calm down for a minute. Want a glass of water or something?"

Leaning back, she tucked her money away and nodded. I brought her cold water in a decorated jelly jar, the only clean glass in the house. She took a big drink and seemed to relax a bit. "You got anythin' stronger?"

"Yeah, but I don't think that's a good idea. What's the trouble?"

"Mi seesta, she is missing. I'm afraid she is kidnapped, but the cops, they won't do anythin'."

"Why not? They usually want to know about kidnappings."

"Cuz." She hesitated and crinkled her brow, seemingly intent on saying it right. "She quit 'er job at Frankie's, so they think she's... that she wants to be gone." She turned and looked me in the eye. "I know that ain't true."

Frankie's was a dive on Broadway, not too far from downtown. Open 24/7/365, it was the kind of place that does a lot of its business late, after the bars close at two.

Every Denverite knew Frankie's. "What's Elena's last name?"

"Soto, same as me."

"What makes you think she's kidnapped? How old is she?"

"Twenty-four. We're legal, that's why. No reason for her to quit and..." she lifted her free hand and waved it in the air. "Desaparecido! Poof!"

After a moment or two, a look of determination came to her face and her free hand joined the other, holding the jar. "And," she finally continued, "Elena called me."

"What did she say?"

"She asked me to pay her rent next month. I asked her why and she said nuthin'. I know she's in trouble." Lola stood up and came toward me. "How much for you to look? I have some money..." and started to reach again for her cash. I stood up and stopped her.

"Look, honey, you can't afford me. I get 5 hundred dollars a day for this kind of work, plus expenses."

"I can pay you 5 hundred dollars on Friday, and..." Lola took the red scarf out of her bronze-colored hair and began un-buttoning her blouse. "I can do some things for you, some good things..."

Her bosom popped open and she reached for my hands while I backed away, startled. She had my hands on her breasts before I could even protest.

I came to my senses and pulled my hands from her grip, grasping instead her shoulders. "I can't do that."

Lola looked bewildered. "Are you... do you... like boys?" She looked away, embarrassed, then looked back. "Maybe sumptin... I can do for you..."

"Look, you are really attractive." I was more than a little stymied. "No, I'm not gay. I like... girls, but I'm... my wife..." I tensed up, which annoyed me. I didn't like to talk about my wife, who had left me a widower just 16 months and two weeks before, and I wasn't about to then. "Anyway," I tried to regroup. "Keep your money, for now. I'll look into it and if there isn't a simple explanation, I'll take your case at 5 hundred dollars a week. Can you afford that?"

"Si!" She smiled for the first time; she almost beamed. "Gracias, Mr. Pat, gracias." She buttoned back up her blouse, with some difficulty I noticed. Something confirmed that, indeed, I wasn't gay.

"Friday, I'll find ya on Friday." Lola kissed my cheek while pushing past me again, this time towards the door. "Gracias, Mister Pat, gracias." Looking both ways out the door, she vanished as quickly as she had arrived.

What had just happened, I asked myself. Angel had some explaining to do.

Chapter 2

I pulled into one of several trailer parks in the area; this one was far more rundown than most. Baby blue and white mobile homes from the 60's and avocado double-wides from the 70's alternated on each lane in the park, with a few old beige travel trailers mixed in here and there. Clumps of grass clung to the tilted merry-go-round in the playground. Broken swings accentuated the lack of maintenance here. A decades-old fifth wheel sat on blocks under a tall, overgrown cottonwood, which only slightly hid the dilapidated cardboard boxes tied down on its roof rack.

About 6 or 7 blocks in from the street, I parked my blue Camaro across the lane and down a couple of doors from Angel's place, content to sit and watch the faded yellow and white mobile home for a bit before approaching him.

I remembered the tattered green banner in the window, announcing to those in the know that he was open for business. Every few minutes a teenager would come and go, most stopping in at this underground dispensary, and leaving in more of a hurry than when they arrived. I watched as each exiting customer rushed to the cement wash next to Angel's side yard, crawled under the bent-up chain-link fence and disappeared into the park bordering this one. I had suspected that pot legalization had changed Angel's primary clientele from hippies and bikers to mainstream minors, but now I was pretty certain.

I recalled the first time I was here. My father was dying from cancer and the medical marijuana laws hadn't yet passed in Colorado. I wanted him to be as comfortable as possible, but his meds were aggressive and just wouldn't allow it. Angel wasn't your ordinary pusher- he only dealt weed, though, like many of the legal dispensaries, he proudly supplied about a dozen strains. A relic of the Viet Nam era, local police left him alone because he refused to deal more serious drugs. In fact, I was originally directed to Angel by Joey Galveston, a longtime member of the Denver SWAT team.

In the front window, I noticed the green banner disappear and a red one take its place. Suddenly, there was no more teen traffic. A little early to be sold out, I thought.

Not 10 minutes later, a vintage black and yellow Porsche drove slowly by. The old sports car reminded me of my granddad. "A 10-year-old Cadillac beats a brand new Chevy any day," he often said, adding that I should buy the best quality car I can afford, even if it's older. I remember his 1962 Cadillac Fleetwood convertible, baby yellow with a bright white leather interior, the year GM shrank the fins by half. That was the most comfortable car seat I ever rode in, before or since. Unfortunately, to Granddad's dismay, I fell in love with muscle cars when I began driving.

The Porsche stopped for a couple of seconds in front of Angel's place and continued down the street. It was time for me to find Angel.

I left my car where it was parked and walked to the residence. I opened the rickety wood and screen storm door and tapped the perennial pass code on the mostly-solid front door, 'shave and a haircut...' Instead of the double-knock of 'two bits,' the door opened and I was pulled inside quickly by the arm.

"Don't stand on the porch," Angel said. "You'll be seen."

"A bit paranoid, isn't it, Angel?"

He replied, "You saw the Porsche... that's Eduardo. He wants to buy my business."

"So what's the problem?"

"I said no." Angel seemed satisfied that the car wasn't coming back and visibly relaxed. "He wants my clientele so he can up their habits to something stronger, more addictive." He came over closer and bro-hugged me. "I haven't seen you in ages, cabron. Where ya' been?"

No matter how many times I've met up with Angel, it always struck me odd that even though he looked like an old, pure-bred Chicano, he spoke Gringo as good as, well, *me*. He had salt and pepper hair, almost never combed, and an unkempt gray beard barely covering his deep wrinkles. He almost always wore a multi-colored, striped Mexican wool vest. Yet, no accent at all. None. He could have been an extra in a Cheech and Chong movie filmed in East L.A., or just as easily a French history teacher in Cincinnati.

"Here and there," I answered. "I just got back from Finland just about a month ago. Way too cold..."

"Finland? What's in Finland?"

"I was following a client's ex-girlfriend; you know how these things go. Turns out, she wasn't up to anything." I looked around and noticed that not much had changed. "I had a visitor yesterday... Lola."

"Good, good... I hoped she would find you. I knew her as 'Agata'... That's Spanish for 'Agatha,' did you know that? Are you going to help her?"

"That's why I'm here. You got anything cold?"

"Sure, but it's the light stuff." Angel left for the kitchen and returned with a Coors Lite. He patted his stomach bulge. "Watchin' my weight..."

I took a big drink. "What did Lola tell you? How do you know her... do I want to know?"

"Nothing like that. Her and her sister grew up in my old neighborhood. She said Elena was missing and begged me to help find her. I asked her how long she was missing and she said she didn't know. She just knew something had happened to her."

"That's pretty much what she told me." I took another gulp. "She seems adamant."

"She is, yes. She said Elena called out of nowhere and asked her to keep her place rented and kept up. She even quit her job, and you know Frankie's. Openings there are hard to come by."

“Maybe she wanted to get away.”

“That’s what I wondered, too. But I heard that she’s been spending some time with some Muslim dudes. Some of my friends are saying that she’s been radicalized. That’s why I sent Lola to you. That’s outta my league.”

“Mine, too. This beer is runnin’ right through me.” I walked towards the hallway, recalling that the bathroom could be found there.

“First door on the right,” Angel directed while pointing down the hall.

“I think I remember the way.”

The floor beneath the gold shag carpet creaked as I found the right door. I opened the toilet lid and decided to close the door behind me. I’m not at home, I thought, which was painfully obvious. The 30-year-old bathroom fixtures were white, thank God, but were cracked and rusted, and the combination tub and shower smelled of chlorine and mildew. Edges around the ancient, cracked, brown paisley linoleum were peeling up from every angle, especially against the tub, revealing moisture-warped floorboards. The shower curtain was actually newer and fashionable, with a multi-colored swirl mixed with a few clear lines, but was held on the crooked chrome rod by only five hooks instead of the usual dozen or so.

I relieved myself and zipped up. While washing my hands, I wondered if the result would be worse than if I

had skipped it. At least it wasn't brown water coming out of the tap, though the pipes did cause a variety of sounds to come from throughout the house while it was running.

I looked up and my father's image looked back at me. I've always seen his blue eyes in the mirror, but now, with my reddish-brown hair having gone mostly gray, it was eerie. I had his frame: 5 foot 8, 210, a slight middle-age bulge in the stomach, and muscular legs. He had more shoulders than me, but I never performed the kind of labor he did in his 20's- milling, mining, brick work, tractor engine repair...

"Lola didn't say anything about Muslims," I continued when I returned to the living room.

"I don't think she wants to believe it. Everything go okay in there?"

"Yeah." I took the last swallow of my beer and set the bottle on the table, chuckling to myself. I felt pretty silly looking for a coaster on this fourth-hand lamp table stained with moisture rings from the distant past.

"What are you going to do?"

Angel really liked this girl, I thought. "Do you know which Mosque she's been going to?"

"No." He looked up for a moment. "You know, there is one close by her apartment, on Havana." Angel suddenly seemed to be upset. "Maybe there's a sleeper cell and they've got her programmed."

It was too early to jump to that conclusion. “I guess I’ll start at Frankie’s and see where that takes me. Do you want in on this? It seems like you do.”

“I can’t drop everything, but if you let me help, we’ll be even.” He hit me with his fist on my shoulder.

“Even? For what?”

“Horsetooth.”

I knew what he meant.

Chapter 3

You do a lot of watching when you are investigating. Patience is more than a virtue. It's a requirement.

I sat in the diner's far corner where I had a pretty good view of the customers and the kitchen. Frankie's was always busy, but tonight was busier than most nights. I was on my third cup of coffee.

The booth next to mine was empty, the one beyond that held an older couple, sitting across from each other but not saying a word. Then there were 5 teens crowded into 4 seats, all drinking coffee, and one guy was thoroughly enjoying the gal sitting on his lap. Continuing down the aisle, there was another empty table and 2 more booths that each had middle-aged couples sitting in them. One of those had just met; their body language spoke volumes. Also, from their clothing it looked like a normal date, but having a first date at Frankie's was not what you would call normal.

The aisle made a left turn but that area was closed off. Down the length of the café was a counter with maybe a couple dozen bolted-down swivel chairs, leather mostly intact. Several bums and "interesting characters" occupied most of the counter seats, many drinking coffee.

I glanced around at the 45 records and covers hanging around the walls. "Hound Dog" was nearby, as were 2 or 3 Chubby Checkers tunes, "Grazing in the Grass" by Friends of Distinction, "Revolution" from the Beatles and "One" by Three Dog Night. The décor must

have been 50's- or 60's-themed at one time, like a nostalgic diner. Unfortunately the owners didn't keep it up, so there were scattered, discolored circles and squares on the wallpaper where records and album covers used to hang. I couldn't help but think about the 12" stack of 45's I had as a teen, and wondered if they also ended up on a diner's wall as decor.

The waitress came over with a steaming pot. "This one's just been made... want a fresh cup, hun?"

"I think I would, Nancy." I didn't know her personally, but she was wearing a nametag. I tried to use servers' names often in a restaurant, helping me remember later. "When," I said as the coffee neared the brim. "Thanks, Nancy."

The waitress smiled and continued to the next table. I couldn't help but notice her shape as she leaned over that booth with her pour. She was clearly fishing for tips, but I didn't mind.

"Nancy?"

She stepped back over to my table. "Something else?"

"Just a quick question. Do you know Elena Soto? I was told she worked here until recently."

"I'm not sure..." she hesitated until I passed her a ten-spot.

"Yes... Elena..." she suddenly remembered as she picked up the bill. "Don't know what happened there.

One day she was here and the next she was quitting. I heard she found religion." Nancy leaned down and confided, "There's all kinds working here..." Then she straightened up. "You don't look like a cop."

"That's good to hear. I'm not. The cops aren't looking for her, her sister is."

"Lola? I thought they had a falling out."

"What kind of falling out?"

"I'm not sure, but they've had them before. It never lasts." Nancy nodded toward another booth. "I gotta go. Their food's ready."

"Thanks, Nancy."

As the night went on, between several bathroom breaks, Susan, Vickie and a woman nicknamed Spence all told me the same thing- that sometime before she left, she had an argument with Lola.

But Spence confided that she thought the Muslim angle was spot-on. From all the conversations, Spence seemed to be the most credible confidante. She sounded sincere, and she was a single mom with a tween. She wasn't far from her 40's and she knew kids very well, even 24-year-old kids.

"I saw her Quran," she had said. "She hid it when I came in to change one night, but I recognized it. My cousin showed me his copy one time."

"Tell me..."

A noisy busload of school athletes entered abruptly and interrupted us, and ruckus appeared all around the place. I decided I had heard enough, since the “Eagles of Omaha Central High School” probably wouldn’t add anything to my investigation, and these track and field kids seemed to be especially wound up. They must have won their meet, I thought as I paid my tab, considerable by then, leaving a hefty tip.

I went home, finally, hoping I could get to sleep.

Chapter 4

I took the 10-pound test line with my index finger and opened the bail on my 15-year-old Mitchell reel. I swung the pole straight back, letting the spoon almost touch the ground and flung it forward, just missing the target, one of several used tires I set up in my back yard.

This was how I ruminated, thinking through a myriad of circumstances. It was so much more convenient than fly fishing, and as a side benefit, when I actually went spinning in a lake, my casts were nearly perfect. My granddad loved to fly cast to clear his head. “A River Runs Through It” could have been made about him.

I lifted the rod tip straight up to keep the lure from snagging and reeled in fast. I had removed the treble hook, but a spoon is odd-shaped enough to catch on any obstinate weed or fallen twig. I tried the cast again, this time popping the lure directly into the center of the target tire’s hole. There was a time when I could have hit it left-handed and facing backwards. I guessed it *had* been a while since I had been back here.

My mind turned to Angel. I wasn’t in ‘Nam. I turned 18 just a month before the draft ended. Angel wasn’t so lucky, being a year older. He did find a way to endure, making sure he was the best cook in his company, and inventing his own version of supply-side economics-- if you had the economics, he had the supply on the side. Two years in, he inexorably made state-side and never looked back. He always said that he was too successful for the Army and they couldn’t stand it.

Another cast, this time a bull's-eye into the sixty-foot target, a petite Yugo wheel at that. Tip up and popped, I reeled back in. I put the rod down, grabbed my beer and sat on the cement garden bench nearby.

A couple of years after my father passed, I had invited Angel to go bass fishing at Horsetooth, a large reservoir overlooking the Fort Collins area, about 90 minutes north of Denver and a stone's throw from Wyoming. We rented a nice bass boat and by 10 we had each caught 3 or 4 good-sized stripers, well on our way to bagging both our limits before noon, as was our usual "official" objective. It was hot that early summer day, I recalled, and dozens of boats were out on the 6-mile-long lake.

We were drift-fishing in one of the half-dozen bays that were popular angling spots, sheltered from most of the ski-boats, jet skis and small yachts that frequented this deep reservoir. Mid-cast, something behind me jarred the boat and I was thrown into the chilly lake water. The lake was fed by winter snow-melt from the Rockies, so it was cold year round.

One lesson I learned that day was that bass boats are top-heavy with fishermen aboard, especially when we're standing. The "something" that jarred us, I found out later, was an old johnboat with several drunk Gen-X punks. When they were caught by Larimer County park rangers, the yuppies weren't even aware they had hit us. I don't think they were even aware that it was June.

Trouble was, I couldn't swim. Oh, I could flail and thrash, but I couldn't tread water for more than a minute or two.

I interrupted my reminiscing to finish my beer and throw the empty towards the trash can. It caromed off and onto the gravel. Disgusted with myself, I got up, picked up the can and pushed the contents down to make it easier for my next shot attempt.

Thinking back, I should have pressed charges on those punks. Who knows, I thought. I just might have owed Angel my life after all. Moments after hitting the water, before my thrashing could make rescue improbable, Angel dove in and helped me back to the boat, where I grasped the ledge tightly. I remember thinking that we had life jackets on board, but where were they? Staying in the water, we held on and guided it the 200 yards or so back to the inlet's shore. It took a couple of hours to dry off and a decade to get over the embarrassment.

Angel had always acted funny about that day, throwing it up in my face whenever he could, but I knew he never meant it. I'd saved his butt more than a few times over the years.

A buzzer sounded, meaning someone was at my front door. I hurriedly stowed my tackle before making my way through the house.

"Just a minute!" I shouted. "I'll be there in a sec!" The buzzer kept its quick rhythm while I navigated through the obstacle course of my home and got to the

front. By sheer habit I looked through the peep hole-again, cleavage.

"Lola," I said as I opened the door. "Come in."

This time she was dressed to kill. In one hand she was holding a paper bag with what was obviously a bottle of something. As she stepped in, she held out the bag. "I thought you might like this." She walked around me wearing five-inch heels and made her way to the sofa.

I dropped the paper bag off the bottle and read the label as best as I could. "'Tress quarto ya cinco...' This is expensive. Tequila like this runs, what, 5, 600 bucks?"

"Tres Cuatro y Cinco," Lola corrected. "Don' worry, a friend owed me a favor. Let's open it!"

"Business first." I set the tall, narrow bottle on the coffee table and sat on the ottoman. "I'll take your case."

Beaming, Lola pulled out her cash roll and counted out ten Benjamins, putting the rest back where it came from. "I knew ya would, si?" She set the money on the table and pushed it forward. "How soon?"

"That's too much. I said 500."

"Expenses, si?"

"No promises, but I do think something has happened. I think I can find her... but just one thing."

"What? You found sumptin' bad?"

“Not exactly. The police might be right- she might not want to be found.”

“No!” She picked up the cash. “You must find her and bring her home.” She reached out with the money. “You take. You bring home mi Elena!”

“Okay, okay... like I said, no promises, but I think I can find her.”

I took the bills and Lola relaxed. I asked, “Do you have a photo of her?”

Lola reached into her back pocket and pulled out a wrinkled picture of the two of them. As she handed the faded photograph to me, she pointed at the girl on the right. “That’s her last year. It was mi birthday.”

Elena was just as attractive as Lola, but with jet black hair and a bit more petite, especially on top. These two were obviously close. I sat the money and the picture on the table. “I’ll get glasses,” I said, standing up. I tried to think where shot glasses might be. In the kitchen... I followed my guess. I opened several cupboards and stood there, staring, as if the glassware would magically appear.

“Havin’ trouble?” Lola’s bosom was against my back and her left hand rubbed my sternum.

Surprised, I stepped forward but her arm pulled tighter. “Don’ worry,” she said softly. “I know you’re not... ready.” Her breasts massaged me for another moment or two and she stepped back, releasing me. “I do want ya to think ‘bout it, though.”

I turned around and she wore an evil smile. I had fully expected to see her stripped naked, but thankfully she was completely dressed.

She reached for the mason jar in the bottom shelf of the open cupboard. I noticed she had the tequila bottle in her other hand. She expertly opened the top and poured. She took a large guzzle from the half-full jar and gave it to me.

I took what I thought was about a shot, but found it was a bit more. The elixir, instead of burning like Cuervo or Sauza, went down with a warmth I had never experienced, a balminess that travelled down my esophagus, through my stomach and lower. When I finally caught my breath, all I could muster was, "Wow."

She caught my eye and leaned over, kissing me lightly on the cheek. "Find mi seesta, please?" She turned and while still thinking about the tequila, I heard the front door open and close. Suddenly the room felt exceedingly empty.

Chapter 5

Daylight shone in my eyes slowly as I awoke. Not realizing where I was at first, it soon came to me that it was my living room coming into focus. I was half on the sofa and the rest of me was on the floor.

On the coffee table was the deformed tequila bottle and Mason jar, both empty and on their sides. No headache, but my insides were queasy. Top-shelf booze wasn't prone to hangover, and I was ever so thankful. I can hold my own, as my German-Irish heritage can attest, but a full bottle of tequila... well, I would have handled it in my younger days, probably.

Difficult at first, walking came back to me as I hiked to the bathroom. I tried to find some antacid in the medicine cabinet, fumbling with the ibuprofen, acetaminophen, naproxen, and other tablets piled inside, but no such luck. I grabbed a couple of ibuprofen capsules and swallowed them dry, hoping for relief of some kind.

A convenience store was around the corner, I hazily remembered. I changed out of yesterday's clothing and into something more presentable, jeans and a tee. Slip-on tennis shoes completed my ensemble and I locked my front door on the way out.

Mr. Pak was always amusingly grumpy. I don't think I ever saw him out from behind the counter; usually he stood on an obviously-raised platform so he could reach across it, and also so he could see more of the store. I've seen a seven-foot Korean here and there, but Mr. Pak

continued the normal stereotype of diminutive height. "You not come here yesterday," he chirped at me when I walked in. "You say you come on Friday."

"I'm sorry, Woojie."

"Woo-jin! I always tell you!"

I smiled, as usual. I went down the second aisle and found the Tums. I reached for the multi-colored tablets and an eerie silence caught my ear.

Turning back towards the front counter, I was shocked to see a brief flash of a six-inch knife, which disappeared behind a grimy khaki jacket. There was fear on Woojie's face. I looked around quickly and noticed a row of canned corn on my right. Fifteen years ago I had stopped a man beating a kid with a can of green beans. Could I do it again?

I wouldn't have considered doing it with a gun involved, but a knife? I picked up the can, aimed and threw as hard as I could. The corn whizzed by the assailant's head and through the plate glass window next to the door. An alarm screamed, almost deafeningly. The loud crash and alarm startled the neighborhood; the thug ducked out and Woojie started to yell. At me.

"You owe me nine hundred dollahs! Why you break my window? I call police!"

But police sirens were already getting louder.

"I'm sorry, I was trying to help..."

Uniforms showed up and cuffed me -- no one I knew, unfortunately -- and I was taken to the precinct be booked for my trouble.

"Next time stick to green beans!" It was the unmistakable voice of Detective First Class James Stewart, an old friend and ex-partner. "Corn doesn't seem to agree with you..."

"Sure, Jimmy." Yup, Jimmy Stewart, but everyone knew not to bring that up. "The sun was in my eyes."

"I thought maybe you pissed on yourself and slipped in the puddle." He unlocked the cage.

"Hey, I was a pretty good pitcher in my day..."

"And you tried out for the Rockies... I've heard this story a hundred times."

After we exchanged a brief bro-hug, complete with the double-pat on the back, I followed him through the precinct maze to his desk. "Where do you work, now, in a cave?"

"It *is* pretty gloomy in here..." Jimmy pointed to the guest chair as if to say, 'have a seat.'

"How ya been? How's Erin doin'?"

He picked up and handed me a framed family photo, him, Erin and two little kids. "Justin just turned two. I don't think you've seen him."

Jimmy was a dozen years my junior, but looked much younger than that. “No, you just had Kelly last time we got together. Man, time flies.”

“Hey, I’m really sorry about Ellie. I tried callin’ a few times but I guess you needed time.”

“Yeah, I appreciate it.”

Jimmy opened a flimsy file folder and read aloud. ““The D.A.’s Office declines to press charges due to the Good Samaritan statute. Signed, Assistant D.A.,’ blah, blah, blah...”

“I thought that would be the case. Why was I even arrested?”

“You know the drill better than anyone. Mr. Pak was pressing charges; we had to take you in until something official came down. Sorry.”

“No harm done, except for my pride. Missing the guy didn’t even cross my mind...”

“Remind me to skip you when we’re choosing up for softball teams. You throw like a girl.”

“You need a better act, Jim.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“Hey, I was going to look you up next week, but now’s as good a time as any. Ever hear of Elena Soto? She seems to be missing.”

"Isn't that the sister of the pros' from 19th Street? I remember hearing that she was making a stink but there was no proof of foul play."

"Yeah, but there's more to the story, I'm sure of it."

"Let me go get the file. Want some java?"

"Division coffee? No thanks... why ruin lunch?"

The detective disappeared and returned after a few minutes with a slim manila folder, which he slapped open on his desk. "Yeah, it says Elena quit her job and most likely joined a religious group. Nothing is saying foul play except her sister's worrying, and she's not exactly reliable. Besides, she probably wouldn't have quit her job if it wasn't something she planned. Now they call this sort of thing a SITO- 'self-imposed time-out.'"

"Which religious group?" I took the file out of his hands and looked over the summary. "The Greater Denver Muslim Society. Know anyone there?"

"Hold on, I can't investigate this. It's not an open case."

"No, but I can. You must know someone in the Muslim community."

"Well, I helped find a missing kid for one of the elders, or whatever they call them." He looked up and seemingly plucked the name from the ceiling. "Adam... Adam Farzaid. That's it. I don't have his number, but I'm sure you'll find him."

“How’s that?”

“I know you.”

Chapter 6

Early Monday morning found me back at Angel's place. This time I didn't do any watching, I just made my way through the almost deserted park, pulled into his driveway and knocked on the door. At dark-thirty it took a few minutes of knocking before I heard rustling around inside. I knocked louder.

"Hell's bells, Patty," Angel mumbled as he opened up. "The sun just came up!"

"I'm heading over to the Muslim Community Center. You said you wanted to help."

"A little warning... why so early?"

"Traffic."

Angel trudged off and closed the bedroom door, which took a second slam. I sat at the breakfast bar and glanced around the room. These long single-wide mobile homes were roomier than they looked. From the outside they didn't seem much bigger than a travel trailer. Seventies design shouted at me, with gold appliances and faded wood paneling throughout the kitchen and living room. Cigarettes and dope had turned all of the white lace in the curtains to shades of yellow and brown. I heard the shower come on from the other side of the wall and knew it would be a while.

From my seat I had a view straight out the kitchen window to the back yard. I could see a covered, 4' tall above-ground pool amidst patches of grass and weeds, and beyond that, a 6-by-10 wooden shed. The semi-

bleached blue pool cover had puddles of murky rainwater; obviously the pool hadn't been used in a while. I leaned over for a little more view and noticed there wasn't even a ladder.

There was a deep path worn into the "lawn" leading to the shed's door, which I surmised was where Angel kept his weed. Also, there were three padlocks on the door.

I wondered how long I would have to sit here in the fog before I was high. Who needed a joint? Hemp vapors were abundantly present.

The shower stopped and I could hear, in order, an electric razor, the squeak and slam of the medicine cabinet door, a vibrating toothbrush, the shower curtain sliding shut, clanging hangers and a closet's accordion door closing. Whistling announced he was about ready.

"You know, I was thinking," Angel said, finally leaving the bedroom behind. "Muslims are so secretive. I don't think we're going to find out anything."

"I've got a name," I replied. "That should help."

Angel stopped me from leaving, first peering out the front window, looking left, then right. He nodded back the all-clear. "You can't be too careful."

"You think Eduardo is up before noon?"

We climbed in my Camaro and pulled away, laying a few feet of rubber. "Time to wake up, people."

I knew I would hit the late morning Monday traffic, but didn't remember it being this bad. Heading south towards downtown was always a chore, but this morning we moved a few feet, stopped, went a few more feet, stopped. At this rate, it might have taken until afternoon, so I turned off the Interstate at the next exit and headed west. I turned left on Federal Boulevard, which runs north and south, parallel to the freeway, and was often a good backup route. Apparently, that's what everyone else believed too.

Angel was strangely quiet. Perhaps he was nodding off. By late-morning, we pulled up in front of the Center, and looked for a parking space.

Angel perked up. "You packin'?"

"My piece is in the trunk. I don't wear it if I don't have to. This is a mosque, for God's sake."

"For Allah's sake, you mean. I think you better bring it."

"No, that would be deemed improper, worse, really. Sacrilegious. That's not going to help our cause."

"I don't trust these guys."

About two blocks east a parking space appeared and I headed towards it. I placed four quarters in the meter and opened my trunk. "Yours, too."

Grudgingly, Angel dug for his Baretta, checked the chamber, flipped the safety on, and tossed it in. I closed

the lid and we walked up to the Muslim Community Center's front steps.

The Greater Denver Muslim Society's Center of Prayer and Community was a collection of 5 or 6 buildings, designed with the usual Middle Eastern style. Tall, pointed towers stemming from plain square structures covered more than a city block. On the sign hovering over the entrance was the welcome, "We are open to all who wish to develop a closer relationship with Allah." Below that was the equivalent in Arabic, I assumed.

Angel and I got to the top steps of the Center before we were joined by a dozen or so Arab men of varying ages, all in traditional garb. The largest of them moved into our way and extended his hand, palm forward. We stopped and I wondered what I should do.

"Please, you cannot enter," the robed leader informed us. "Will you join us in the visitor center?" It didn't seem like a request, but no weapons appeared and we went willingly.

The group walked us to the left of the prayer center into a nondescript building with few windows. I worried about what Angel might do. I put my hand on his shoulder firmly indicating everything would be fine. I hoped he believed it.

The floor was polished cement and the lighting was dim, but the rooms were clean. We turned right, then left into a sitting room, where an older Arabic leader was

waiting. He rose and pointed his hand to the empty seats nearby.

"Please, sit," he said meekly and sat again. His Middle-East accent was slight but present- he was not a newcomer to America. "I hope you were not inconvenienced."

"Not at all," I replied. "Did we do something to offend you?"

"No, Patrick. I needed to speak with you."

I was a bit perplexed he knew my name. "I am at a disadvantage..."

"I am Samir Al-Abawi. Your reputation precedes you, and I mean that as a compliment."

"I see," I pointed to Angel. "This is Angel Mercado. He is helping me locate someone, a girl."

"Elena Soto, yes. This girl is known to me."

I waited for more, but there was silence. "And?"

"Why are you searching for her? She has been a good student."

"Well, she seems to be missing. People are saying kidnapped. Do you know Adam Farzaid? I was told he would help me."

"I can have Adam contact you. We wish to cooperate with your... investigation."

Angel piped up, "Are you sponsoring a sleeper cell?"

"I assure you we are not. In fact, we turned in a so-called sleeper cell 2 years ago." Samir did not appear upset with the direct question.

Angel countered, "Maybe you sacrificed them to give yourself credibility in the future."

Samir directed his response to me. "Your investigation will show we have abhorred jihad and its allies. Extremists have warped the teachings of the Quran and we do not support them."

The disciples helped Samir to stand up. He put his hand on my shoulder. "Please let me know how we can help."

"Access to your mosque would be helpful."

"As long as you follow the rules of the Quran, you would be welcome there. However, there is no speaking allowed, other than prayer. Verbal inquiry would not be tolerated."

The rest of the entourage rose and indicated we could leave. As we did, Samir called out, "Allah will see to your mission, which is right. Allah be praised."

Once back in the car, Angel was suddenly hostile. "You don't believe them, do you? They are hiding something."

"I don't know, but my first inclination is that Samir was sincere. You have a different take?"

As I pulled away from the curb, Angel seemed to sulk. "I just don't trust a culture that uses... sleepers. They hate us, you know."

"People are people. Some hate us, some love us, some don't care either way." I sounded like Granddad for a minute. "These Muslims are thriving and are well respected in the neighborhood, even with 9-11 hanging over their heads."

Angel stopped talking, obviously not thrilled with my view.

After a while I decided break the silence. "You still into R.C. 'copters?"

"Nah," Angel muttered. "No time."

"Ever put a camera on one?"

"Like a drone? I did once." He sat up, now somewhat interested in the conversation. "I got it up a couple hundred feet and hovered over a neighbor's back yard. I wanted to make sure nothin' was going on over there."

"But it worked? You had good video?"

"Yeah, but there was nothin' to see. A vacant back yard."

"How about a cell phone cam transmitting to a PC? Would that work?"

"I don't see why not." Angel paused in thought. "It can't defend itself, though."

“Good to know.”

I dropped off Angel, retrieving both of our weapons from the trunk, and started home. Something happened to him and I wondered what that might have been. Certainly discrimination was no stranger to Angel, but this seemed more like a vendetta.

My thoughts were interrupted with a bump and I looked back. An older car was on my tail. Another bump and I sped up. This wasn't a fender bender.

The rear view mirror showed a '72-or-so Chevy, maybe an Impala, black with primer gray fenders, filled with Mexican teens. It rammed me again, this time with more force. “Dammit!” I was doing almost 60 by then, so they definitely had something under the hood.

I turned right, then left into an alley. The Chevy kept pace. My deeply-honed driving skills finally kicked in. I slammed on my brakes and let the Impala hit me. I immediately hit the accelerator and left the kids in the dust.

Out of the alley, I turned left again and knew where I would head. At Zuni I turned north and soon I saw the Chevy turning north to follow, about 3 blocks back. I maintained my lead for a mile or so and I had my break. I crossed under the interstate and a few blocks up I turned right on 52nd, instantly finding the driveway I was looking for. A right into an apartment complex and around two aisles, I found an empty parking space under an awning and hastily turned in. I shut off the motor. I

found my 9 mil as I leaned over, out of sight, onto the passenger side.

Minutes went by and I decided they hadn't seen my maneuver. I sat up slowly, looking for any sign of the chase car. Instead, creeping by, was a squad car, stopping directly behind my car when they spotted me sitting up.

"Crap."

Chapter 7

My Camaro, I surmised, was dented pretty good. I lifted my Ruger out the window by the trigger guard and stuck my other hand out.

Yes, my gun was a Ruger. Coincidence? The Ruger family started making firearms with the Sturm clan in the late 40's, and obviously, they became very popular. When the company went public in 1990, I wondered if any of my relatives ever made out. I guessed I would never know.

An officer took the pistol from my hand and opened my door. Amid shouted instructions, I kneeled on the asphalt and put my hands on top of my head. Handcuffs were placed rather firmly and I was pushed to the police car.

"Please call Jimmy Stewart," I announced to whomever would listen. "He's a detective in the 6th."

For the second time in a week, I had gone through booking and Jimmy was checking me out of a cell. "Really, Patty?"

"Asshole." I was in no joking mood. "Yes, really. Did you pick up the guys that were ramming me?"

"In fact we did, with your description. The color of their car matches your rear end." He chuckled. "And they had your blue on their front bumper."

"I want to talk to them..." I started toward the interrogation rooms. "Are they here?"

“No, wait, Pat. I already questioned the driver. He’s not talking. They’re all down in booking for reckless driving and assault. I assume you’ll be pressing charges.”

“You bet your ass I am. Where’s my car?”

“In the impound lot. I think they got everything they wanted,” meaning the Crime Scene group. He turned and grabbed a uniform passing by. “Joe, go grab Mr. Ruger’s car, will you?”

He did so and I climbed in without a word of thanks. I got home in the early evening, rather pissed, and inspected my Camaro, walking around and around the car. This wasn’t my first classic muscle car, but definitely my favorite. There were several dents in the old chrome bumper, one rear light smashed to hell, and some damage to the left quarter-panel. About a thousand buck’s worth, I figured.

My first power car was a ’69 Nova, which was totaled in a t-bone when I had just had it for a year (not my fault). My second was the one and only Ford I ever owned, a 1972 Mach 1 Mustang. It was souped up with a 351 and a 4-barrel carb, but I never did feel comfortable. I also hated being beaten all the time by Roadrunners and Chevelles. By ’74, Mustangs were well past their prime. I sold it and bought the first of my 3 Camaros, and the third was definitely the charm.

For surveillance, I had a beater- an ’88 Dodge Dart. Tan and ugly, you might say it was pre-dented for blending in. It also had hidden pencil cams and a couple

of mics built in, and of course, a GPS transmitter. Technology had gotten cheaper in the last couple of years and I tried to keep up.

The next morning I grabbed my camera bag and a cooler filled with bottled water, ice and string cheese, and headed out. My guess was that Eduardo knew something about my little scuffle and I was going to have a talk.

I cruised in the Dart over to Angel's park and pulled in about 5 houses down from his place. Settling in, I took out my Canon with my new telephoto lens. Eighteen to 400mm, it replaced 3 other lenses. I pointed the camera and set the bulk of the lens on the steering wheel. The viewfinder showed what I expected- teens coming and going every few minutes, each ducking in and out of the camera's view. When watching for something with a camera, I learned not to use the built-in LCD, only the viewfinder. But, this took stamina.

In a couple of hours, and after several pieces of cheese, the Porsche I was waiting for slowly made its way down the street, past me, and into Angel's driveway. Interesting.

The driver, which I took for Eduardo, went to the door, knocked, and was let in, Angel looking around before closing the door. I thought about the sound amplifier I had left at home and wondered if I had made a mistake in not bringing it. I rarely took it on surveillance jobs because it was large and bulky, easily seen, and cumbersome to use in a car.

I did, however, have a GPS transmitter about the size of a quarter. I sneaked down to the Porsche and attached it to the underside of the rear wheel well with duct tape. Careful not to be seen, I ran back to my car and pulled a U-turn, heading back to the park entrance. Pulling up the GPS app on my Droid, another little wonder of economics, I enabled the connection and a blinking dot appeared on a map.

After about a half-hour, Eduardo drove by and I stayed down until he turned out of the park onto the city street. I watched the dot moving west on my phone's map for about ten minutes and began my virtual chase.

Business signs slowly turned from all English to primarily Spanish as I approached Little Mexico, as I called it. My beat-up Dart didn't look too out of place in the barrio Eduardo was leading me into. I wanted to be able to leave quickly if needed, and it appeared he had stopped in a cul-de-sac, so my plan was to go to the end, turn around and back past Eduardo before parking.

Sure enough, the bumble-bee-colored Porsche was sitting in a driveway as I passed by. There were also about 30 Chicanos in the front yard, most looking at me as I passed. By the time I turned around, they were in the street in front of me. I shoved my pistol into my ankle holster hoping I wouldn't be searched there, pulled over and got out of the car.

When I raised my empty hands and asked for Eduardo, the crowd lessened their Spanglish swearing and escorted me rather raucously to the house. There

some bodyguards took me and shoved me into the living room where Eduardo was standing.

“Why you here?” he said with the authority of one who is always in charge. “I got no use for you, tonto.”

I assumed I was being called a dumbass or an asshole, but that was the least of my worries. Eduardo was smaller in stature this close up. He was muscular -- he had obviously worked with weights -- but thin. His armless t-shirt was too white for his surroundings and his partially-grown mustache revealed his age, in his mid-20's, I guessed. This type of leader earned his position either with brains or cruelty, sometimes both.

“You had use for Angel ... and you had someone try to wreck my car while I was still in it. I want to know why.”

“How it feel to want?” he laughed, and the room followed. “Nothin’ personal. I have a deal with Angel and don’t want no one to mess it up.” He looked at the larger of the two bodyguards and signaled with an upward head gesture. At least I assumed it was a signal because he immediately began punching me in the stomach while Eduardo left the house. Now, I can take a punch in the abs; I even train for it. But 10 or 12 punches from the Hulk, that’s different.

When I hit the floor, his partner started kicking me. Timing it just right, I grabbed the guy’s foot and quickly turned it hard enough to hear some bones crack. He yelped in pain and crawled away and I managed to get to my feet. I hit the bigger one with everything I had,

which knocked him backwards into the kitchen. I grabbed his head and slammed it into the counter and he went down.

I grabbed for my gun but it wasn't in the holster. I looked back in the living room and saw it partially under an upended chair. I dove for it as reinforcements came in the front door and pointed it at the first man in before he could pounce- he froze. Others reached for their guns and I was able to grab my guy and turn him around. Holding him with my gun to his head, we backed into the kitchen, which was still empty. I headed for the back door and heard a gunshot.

The punk I was holding became dead weight, literally. I looked up and saw Eduardo with a smoking barrel. He had just shot his own man.

I didn't have time for shock. I lifted my pistol at Eduardo and he pointed his at me. I almost smiled when I thought, Mexican standoff. I opened the door behind me and backed out. As I ran to the side yard fence and leapt over it, I heard Eduardo shouting. "Don't worry, ese. We'll find you again."

I ran quickly to the street towards my Dart, pressing my auto-start button as I traversed the confused crowd that had assembled nearby, jumping in and dropping it into drive. I floored it, hoping I wouldn't run over anyone on the way out of the neighborhood. I did sideswipe an old pickup, but I think I only added another dent to its myriad of body dings.

Chapter 8

Angel and Eduardo had a deal? I remember thinking this as I headed home. Angel knew where I lived, so I needed a backup location. I had to lock up shop for a while.

Pulling into my driveway I noticed a couple of figures sitting on my back porch steps, both female. I was in a lot of pain when I got out of my Dodge, but I managed to grab my gear out of the back seat and toss it into my Camaro, also in the driveway.

“What happ’n?” It was Lola, accompanied by a co-worker, it appeared. “You okay?”

“Who’s this?” I was in no mood for pleasantries.

“Anna, she works wit’ me.”

Anna came forward to greet me but I practically fell onto her when I couldn’t hold myself up. “Let’s go inside...” and the two of them helped me up the 3 steps to the door. I fumbled with the keys and Lola took them and finished unlocking the knob. We went in and made it to the living room, collapsing on the couch.

Both Lola and Anna were there when I woke up. It was nighttime and they were eating a pizza and drinking my apple ale. Lola noticed my eyes were open. “Hey, Patty. Dreamin’ o’ me?”

Groggy, I ignored the question and sat up slowly, still very sore. “Don’t ever let a bunch of assholes clean your clock, that’s what I always say... ooh!” I grabbed my side where I had been kicked. “That’s gonna leave a mark...”

Anna piped up, "Who did this to you?"

"I forgot, you are..."

"Anna. I work with Lola, or at least I used to. We quit, that's why we're here."

"Not a good time," I lamented. "I'd put you both up for a bit, but I've got to leave this house for a while. They can find me here."

"Who's 'they'?" Lola seemed very concerned.

"Only the entire Latino community north of Denver. I can't believe it but Angel seems to be involved."

"No, that's not right, he can't be! I know heem really good."

"I know, but the people he's apparently in business with tried to kill me, twice now. They'll hit this place at some point and I don't plan to be here when they do..." I had to think of an alternative base of operations, besides the Intensive Care Unit.

About then I noticed how pretty Anna was. More voluptuous than Lola, slightly heavier, but she was a golden blonde and her face was that of a model. With her hair cut short, she looked Scandinavian. "What do you mean, you quit?"

"We told Ronnie we were out," Anna answered with a smile. "We've had enough." Lola nodded with her.

"You think Ronnie's going to just let you go?" I shook my head. This just wasn't the time for another distraction. "You both need to come with me."

"Where?"

I looked for my cell phone and breathed a sigh of relief when I found it deep in my left front pocket. I found Jimmy Stewart in my contacts and pressed dial.

"What's up, Patty? You're not calling from jail again..."

"No, no. But I do have a favor to ask. Do you still have that place in Morrison?"

"Yeah, it's still my little summer getaway."

"Can I borrow it?"

"What's going on, Pat? Spill it!"

"Let's just say I don't want the Mexican Mafia finding me home. It'll only be for a few weeks, and I'll get myself out of this trouble."

"Anything I can do officially?"

I hesitated, considering my options. "Not yet, but I'm sure they'll be a nice perp walk for you when it's done... I witnessed a shooting, don't know if the guy is dead."

"Who are we talkin' about?"

"I don't know his name, but I was holding him at the time."

"Come again?"

I sighed and decided to give him the story. "This stays between us, for now. I figured it was Eduardo behind my traffic situation, he's a Latin kid dealing drugs on the north side. I followed him to a house and got jumped. Eduardo had his henchmen do me over and before they could kill me, I grabbed one of them and had my gun on him, up close and personal."

"Patty..." I could hear him shaking his head.

"That's when Eduardo shot his own dude. He went down pretty hard, not sure how bad he was hit. Somehow I got out of there, and I'm not hanging around to give him another shot at me."

"Probably wise. Listen ..." There was concern in Jimmy's voice. "I'm doubting Eddie boy's going to turn over a d.b. to the police, if that's what he's got. He'll have 'em dumped in a field somewhere, so you'll have some time before we need to bring you in for a statement."

"I just wanted you to know."

"That's the right thing to do... Be careful. Really."

"So I can use the Morrison house?"

"Of course. I have a security lock, the code's '23548'. You know where it is?"

"Yup, over on Middle Street past the Cliff House. '23548,'" I repeated. "I owe you one, Jim."

"I figure it's just one less that I owe you. Check in with me, will ya?"

"Will do. Thanks!"

I hung up and turned to the girls. "We're going to Morrison."

Chapter 9

In 1986, I attained the rank of Detective Sergeant in Colorado Springs and my first junior partner was a rookie detective, James Stewart. Jimmy was a tall, well-built man with traditional Irish features, including a red mane and stout shoulders. Although you might expect him to speak with a Gaelic or British accent, he did not, unless he was making fun at himself or needed it for effect.

What he did have, however, was an enormous self-confidence masked by bravado. He confronted anyone who made a Jimmy Stewart joke, but smiled as they backed down, as they always did. No two opponents could take him in mock combat in the academy, and as a street officer, he once took on a gang of six, no worse for the wear. Of course, that was before guns hit the streets like they have.

Another quirk I quickly learned about the new Detective Stewart was that he feigned ignorance well. To the contrary, he was extremely intelligent, one of the reasons he made detective after only two years on the beat. It didn't hurt when he found a missing child and brought the kidnapper in, a high-profile case that had stumped the detectives involved and made great news-fodder.

Jimmy also faked a penchant for alcohol, taking full advantage of people's preconceptions of his heritage. He actually could drink most brutes under the table, but he chose to keep his wits about him.

Our first case was investigating a major theft ring. They would hit at night when the upper-middle-class victims were away on vacation. We spent several days trying to figure out how the thieves targeted the homes and it was Jimmy who broke it open. When we interviewed postal workers, my idea, he pretended so well that he couldn't make hide nor hair of the postal procedures that I had to leave the room more than once to keep from laughing out loud. But he got one supervisor to admit that all mail-hold requests went through his hands.

Sure enough, we soon found that all the victims had indeed requested their mail be held. A quick check of the supervisor's bank account revealed several large deposits, each just under the fed's \$5,000 limit for cash. Jimmy got the guy to roll on the gang's leader, and it was a snowball from there.

Our first case as partners, and we had eleven arrests, eleven convictions, and had recovered loot valued at just over \$200,000. Made me look good, too.

Just like all police partners, whether in the detective squad or in a squad car, eventually things even out. You watch each other's back. He saved my butt and I saved his-- that's how it worked. But if you listened to Jimmy, it was all one way, with me the hero. I guess he liked it that way.

Our wives got along famously. We often joked that Ellie and Erin enjoyed the partnership more than we did. We didn't have kids, but Ellie made a wonderful aunt to

Emma, and later on, Kelly. Jimmy and Erin didn't seem to mind that Ellie spoiled the girls more than a little.

Before I retired, one of our C.I.'s fed us a lead regarding a new drug dealer, apparently just setting up shop. We followed the intel to a makeshift lab in a warehouse on 45th Street. Rather than calling for back-up, I went in solo, with Jimmy watching the roll-up doors in the back. A couple of henchmen got the drop on me and took me to see the boss.

Inside the lab, there was a chair set up with bindings and a table with various pieces of equipment sitting nearby. It had been a while since I had seen a torture setup, but this sure looked like one. The thugs threw me into the chair and I waited to be strapped in.

A muffled noise in the other room arose and died down. A minute or two later, sounds of another scuffle came and went. The henchmen were getting nervous and the drug dealer showed up in a hurry. "Tie him up and leave him," he shouted, pointing to me. They obeyed and headed out to the front door. Jimmy appeared out of nowhere and got a shot off as they closed the heavy metal door behind them."

"I'm okay, go after them," I said, shaking my head, obviously angry at myself for being stupid.

"Not now. I've called for backup." Jimmy replied, a little beat up. "Let's live to fight another day." I noticed then he was bleeding.

He had taken out four pairs of dudes watching the building and had received two stab wounds for his efforts, one in his right leg and the other in the left hand. Yeah, maybe were even over the years, but you never forget the last one.

Chapter 10

Jimmy must have had my car sprung, because a uniform came to the door and handed me the keys. When he left, getting into a squad car with his partner and pulling away, I noticed it parked in the street out front. It was a tight squeeze in my Camaro, with the 2 gals and all of my surveillance equipment, my laptop and some food. Camaro's were fast but not passenger-friendly.

Morrison was a close-by getaway from Denver- not a destination, but a home base in the foothills of the front range, a rush-hour closer to Pike's Peak and many of the other "fouteeners" in the Colorado Rockies. In the winter, an hour can be the difference between getting on virgin powder or being miserable on trampled slopes. The town itself did attract tourists from the metro area, with the quaint Bear Creek Avenue providing a Main-Street-style avenue of shops and restaurants. Around the town are locals' homes scattered among Denverite getaways, all of which are small but expensive.

My passengers were making the most of things. Ignorance must be bliss, indeed. I didn't think they had a clue how mad their old man would be. Here they were talking shop, telling stories I didn't really want to hear.

"No more Mr. Rosales," Anna rejoiced. "No more changing old man diapers..."

I tuned it out the best I could, making sure I wasn't being followed- my 45-minute drive to Morrison took

twice as long that day. I was still wondering what Angel had to do with all of this. He was one of my most trusted friends, and I, his. Even though I hadn't seen him for a long while, I couldn't imagine him involved with taking me out. It was ludicrous. But- there he was with Eduardo, and there was Eduardo saying he had made a deal.

My thoughts turned to alternatives. Maybe Eduardo had something on Angel or he was being replaced by force. What could Angel do?

We arrived at Jimmy's house, our new safe-house, and sat at the curb.

"Aren't we goin' in?" Lola asked, and began to open the door.

"Wait!" I demanded. "Not until I'm sure we weren't followed and the house is safe."

We sat there for about 10 minutes and I quietly exited the car, motioning the women to stay put. I closed the car door gently and went to the back door. I pulled my Ruger and got ready for any surprises, but none emerged. Peeking in, there was no sign of movement or of anyone having been home. I holstered the pistol- I didn't want neighbors to see it- and snuck around front, looking into each window as I passed. The security door was locked, as expected, and I entered the code, 23548. The green light above the knob blinked and I turned the deadbolt. The door opened.

Seeing no trouble, I relaxed, waving to the girls to come over. They immediately jumped out of the car and raced to the house.

“I have to pee,” Anna exclaimed as she passed me on the porch.

“Me, too,” Lola followed. I didn’t get involved in the race to the powder room.

While each girl took over a bathroom, I decided to take a quick inventory of the house. I found 2 bedrooms, one with a double bed and one slightly larger with a queen, and each sporting its own bath. The living room was dark, with a combination of cherrywood wainscoting beneath a dark forest green wall. This wasn’t a hunting lodge — no deer or elk heads hanging on the wall — but it was rustic. Dark was good for laying low, I thought. Harder to see in at night.

The kitchen had a yellow and white dinette set, probably handed down from previous generation. Again, cherrywood cabinets and deep-colored walls conspired to make it a darker room. The counter followed 2 walls, from doorway to doorway, and it left enough room for an island, but there was none. The hallways leading to the kitchen were short, just barely connecting with the living room, bedrooms, and the powder room.

Lola and Anna met me back in the living room and I divvied up chores. I had Anna check the fridge and cupboards for food and Lola check for towels and toiletries. I made it clear that under no circumstances

should they order in food for delivery- oldest trick in the book to access a safe house. I went back outside for my gear.

"Lots of stuff to eat," Anna reported when I returned. She grabbed a couple of bags and gave me a questioning look. "In there," I pointed to the smaller bedroom. "You guys can share the master."

"I like sharing the master," she replied with a satisfied grin, and she toted the bags to the bedroom.

"They'll be none of that," I said, following her in. We both tossed our loads onto the bed and retreated to the living room, where Lola was waiting.

She was looking out the window, somewhere in the distance. "I hope Elena is okay."

I wasn't sure what to say, so I said nothing. After a few minutes of silence, I realized how sore and tired I was. "If you don't mind, I'm going to skip dinner and go to bed. I need some rest."

Lola perked up. "I can make you up a TV dinner if you like. That's probably what we're having." Anna nodded in agreement.

"Thanks, but, I'm not hungry. You can eat and watch some TV, but don't go outside until morning when I make sure it's clear."

"Okay, Mr. Pat," Lola said, heading to the kitchen. "We'll try to be quiet."

“Let me know if you hear anything or something seems odd ...”

Anna cut me off, following Lola, “Go to bed, we’ll be fine!”

That’s what I did, and I don’t remember undressing before falling asleep.

A big thud from the other room woke me up. My instincts kicked in and I grabbed my gun as I jumped from the bed. It was dark and I glanced at the glowing clock radio, which said “1:04.” I rushed in the master bedroom door and was somewhat stunned. In the dim light from the hallway I saw a naked Anna on the floor, laughing, having fallen on her behind, evidently, and an also undressed Lola was on the bed, toting a similar grin. Covers had been kicked off and pillows tossed aside.

I sighed heavily, feeling some relief. “Come on in, Patty!” Lola was saying, but I closed the door.

I stood there, outside the door, assessing what I just witnessed. “Have fun,” I raised my voice to get through the door. “Sorry about that...” I returned to my room.

No sooner had I gotten back in bed when Lola came to the open doorway. She was in a robe and nothing else, I suspected, but appreciated the gesture. “I’m sorry we woke you. I really meant it that you could join us.”

“I’d rather not, if you don’t mind.” I pushed my fist up into the pillow a couple of times, balling it up. “I’m just not in that frame of mind right now. Too much going

on.” I was good at excuses. “Besides, I’m really hurting...”

“Okay, then. We’ll keep it down.” Lola left and I heard her door close down the hall. Muffled giggles and tiny voices echoed for a while, and eventually I was able to fall back asleep.

I dreamed of piloting a jet and ejecting from 32,000 feet, I floated in the clouds, looking down on a moonlit earth. The wind was in my face and I noticed the city below, the lights from Coors Field making the infield grass glow green. I dropped down and into a high-rise, where a meeting was waiting for me. A company merger I had suggested generated applause in the board room, and I signed the deal. A gorgeous woman, who was duly impressed, took my hand and led me to her office. She undressed me, leaning me against her desk, and began sucking on my nipple, her hand expertly holding my manhood.

I began coming to and realized I was still feeling the warmth of a woman’s mouth on my chest, her hand still clinging to me down below. I opened my eyes and saw Lola, her yellowish brown hair moving left and right as she sucked on one nipple, then the other. She looked up and smiled, then slowly disappeared under the covers. Her expertise was unsurpassed and what I felt was simply amazing.

“Now that that’s taken care of, we can have some fun,” she whispered when she reappeared from under the sheet. I didn’t stop her from climbing on top of me.

Lovemaking continued for many more positions, and before daybreak Lola left my bed for her own.

I'm not a kid, but I hadn't remembered ever having such a night, even in my younger days. I felt guilty, of course, but strangely less so that I had thought I would.

Chapter 11

Morning came quickly but found me sore, but refreshed and energetic. I made a mental to-do list in the shower and sorted through my equipment once I was dressed. I smelled coffee and headed for a cup.

“Good mornin’, baby,” Lola got me a cup. “Black?”

“Please.” I looked around. “Where’s Anna?”

“She went for her mornin’ jog. She never misses it.” The cup was poured and handed to me.

Before I could take a sip, Anna burst through the back door, startling me into grabbing my pistol. “Don’t do that,” I instructed firmly when I saw who it was. “And don’t leave the house for a few days.”

“But I always take a jog in the morning.”

“Do you realize we’re hiding out? If they trace us here, we’ll have more trouble than we can handle.”

“Who’s ‘they’? The ones who beat you up?”

“Not just them,” Lola interrupted. “Ronnie’ll be lookin’ for us, too.”

“That’s right.” I added Ronnie to my list. “I promise, as soon as it’s safe I’ll take you home.”

“We’d rather stay with you,” Lola replied, and both girls surrounded me in a tight three-way squeeze while I held my coffee mug high, trying not to spill it.

“Okay, okay, business first.” I broke out of the group hug and took one last gulp of java. “I’m going to be out for a while today. Will you be good and stay inside?”

Both nodded and they sat on either side of the dinette. I held out a burner phone I had retrieved from my stash and Lola took it from me. “‘Bubble’ is the code word for trouble. Hit the red button and it autodial me. Say ‘bubble’ and I’ll know to hurry back here. Go ahead, say it with me...”

“‘Bubble.’”

Satisfied, I left through the back door. I heard the lock set behind me and felt better.

The street dead-ended as an unofficial scenic overlook and I thought the vantage point would be a good way to tell if we were followed. I drove my Camaro up the hill and turned around, parking facing downhill. I turned off the engine and reached for my cell phone. What was that Arab’s name? I looked through my contacts until I recognized the name, Adam Farzaid.

I dialed my favorite precinct operator. “Janice, are you still a princess?”

“Sho’ ‘nuff am. What’s up, Patty?”

“Adam Farzaid. Can you grab his number for me?”

“My son still wants ‘Christie Front Drive’ tickets... They’re playing at the Bluebird next Thursday.”

“It’s sold out, but I’ll bet I can get backstage passes.”

"Even better!"

"Have him go to the back stage entrance about an hour and a half before the show starts, ask for Ralphie. Tell'em Patty-boy sent him."

"Thanks, Patty... Here's the number, ready?"

"Shoot!"

"303-555-1829... 303-555-1829"

"Got it, princess."

"You, stop!" She didn't mean it.

I hung up and dialed Farzaid. Two rings and an answer, "Praise to Allah. Hello?"

"This is Pat Ruger, a friend of Jim Stewart. He said you could help me."

"Indeed. I've been waiting for your call."

"You have?"

"Yes. Jimmy told me you were looking for a follower, Elena Soto?"

"Exactly. Do you know where she is?"

"I wish I did, Mr. Ruger. Elena had the promise to be someone special in our cause."

"Pat,' please. 'Our cause?'"

"No, no, you misunderstand. We at the Muslim Center live in harmony with our neighbors. Nine-eleven

and the media have made this very difficult, as you can imagine.”

“Okay...”

“Elena was priceless. She understood the Quran in an American way and found it exhilarating.”

“You seem to have known her pretty well.” Traffic below was still scarce.

“There were three of us mentoring her.”

“You mean indoctrinating her?”

“Not in the way you mean, I assure you. We want only peace among all faiths. Elena was going to be a brilliant ambassador, a shining light for Muslim ways.”

“So, what happened?”

“I honestly don’t know. She left the mosque for the library about three weeks ago and never returned. We are all very worried. The police never contacted us after we reported her missing, I assume because she was an adult and there was no proof of violent events.”

“Did she have any arguments or confrontations with anyone, either Muslim or outside?”

“Nothing of which I am aware.”

“Maybe not everyone in the Center was so excited about a non-Muslim being your ambassador...”

“Elena was very well-thought of by everyone here. Believe me, there’s no one in the Muslim Center with

any contempt for our plans for her. Quite the contrary. In fact, her faith was more... inspirational... than many who were raised with it."

"I've seen people kill for much less. An outsider comes in and takes the honors from those who were already here..."

"Pat..." he paused, then continued. "I promise to keep my mind open to the possibility, but I do think you are following the wrong path."

"Then let's look at another possibility- would radical factions be attracted to her success? They would certainly want to fan the racist fires, not put them out."

"That could be feasible, I agree. How can I help?"

"Can you show me the room she was staying in?"

"That can be arranged. Please meet me at the Center's side doors at 2 o'clock."

"See you then."

Chapter 12

I hesitated to let Anna drive the Camaro, but I had to retrieve my Dodge. After dropping me off a couple of blocks from my house, I instructed her to drive straight back to Morrison. I cautiously crept to the garage and backed out the Dart, then locked the garage door before leaving.

I had an idea of where I should look for Lola's pimp. Midday wasn't exactly the best time for staking-out hookers, but I didn't want to wait any longer than I had to. Lunch just had to wait.

I stopped at my bank and withdrew some cash from an actual teller. The paper envelope was full but fit snugly inside my belt.

North of downtown were pockets of Hispanic neighborhoods and businesses, and I was pretty sure Lola was working out of one such block. I pulled into a paid-parking lot with a southern view of York Street and watched. I noticed call girls walking by every once in a while, so I knew I was close, but I didn't see any of them meet up with a potential Ronnie or any clients.

When the next one walked by, I got out, took out a twenty and approached her, holding it up. "I'm looking for Ronnie."

The short, Latin girl was wearing a ton of makeup, short shorts showing torn web-lace leggings, and an open tan leather vest offering a view of the goods. She stopped and looked intrigued, but kept chewing her gum

instead of offering any information. When I added a second twenty, then a third, she grabbed the cash and said, "He's down on Trevor and 31st," pointing north. "Make a left on 31st and it's 2 blocks up... in the Hamacker building." She turned and continued on her way as if I had never stopped her.

I decided to chance the walk and tipped the lot attendant to watch my car. Making the left, I began seeing what I expected, Johns being accompanied up the cracked cement steps of the four-story brick Hamacker building and disappearing inside. A couple of taxis were waiting for their fares, and one gentleman hurried out down the steps and into one of them while I was getting nearer.

I walked up the steps and was greeted by a large doorman who stepped out from inside the door when he saw me. He reached out his hand to stop me. That was probably a mistake.

The hand tuck has been taught to police and military cadets for decades, but thugs still seem to blindly walk into them. Stupid. I performed the maneuver as I had done a hundred times, and the doorman was immediately on the ground while I held his wrist above him. I took a heavy-duty cuff-strap out of my back pocket and attached it to the stair rail and around his wrist.

I released him and avoided his free arm while I entered the building. Inside, people moved aside or hurried the opposite way, perhaps thinking I was police. Prostitutes were rushing out of the third room down on

the left, and I hastily moved to the opening and prevented the pimp from leaving. I threw him bodily onto the sofa and told him to stay put. Ronnie was a tall, skinny black dude, and probably didn't weigh more than a buck-thirty. His half-dozen gold-plated teeth looked ridiculous.

"What you want from me?" he pleaded, obviously looking for an escape route.

"I want to purchase a couple of girls."

"Hell, you didn't hafta make all of this fuss fo' dat. What're ya lookin' fo'? Mexican, black, white trash? Hell, maybe you're inta fatties..."

"I'm interested in two girls in particular, Lola and Annie."

"Where dem bitches go? Wit you?"

"I'm going to make it worth your while, or..." I pulled my pistol and pointed it at him. "... we can rock 'n' roll."

"No!" He held his hands up in front of his face. "We can deal! Don' do anythin' stoopid!"

"Here's my offerl. You let them both walk away and don't try to haul them back. Forget they exist."

"And whatcha gonna pay for dat?"

"Ten grand, right now." I threw him the envelope. "I ain't no cop and I can find you easy if you double-cross me."

“You got a deal, brotha. You can have dem bitches. More trouble than I needed anyway.”

“I mean it, leave ‘em alone!” I backed away and looked around, still pointing the gun in Ronnie’s direction. “Tell your guys to let me through.”

Ronnie spoke up so the hallway could hear him. “Let ‘em go, he’s okay!”

“Nice doing business with you.”

As I left the room, I heard Ronnie ask, “Who was *that*?” I had to smile.

Chapter 13

I headed to a little Italian dive in Aurora where I felt safe. They served a calzone as big as a football for ten bucks, and there were many seats facing the door. Free wi-fi made it a trifecta.

I sat in one of my two usual booths and heard a shout from the kitchen. "Patty! Good to see you, my friend!"

"Papa! You, too!"

"Carla! Come take care of our friend!" He told her to bring me an iced tea and turned back to me. "You've got a calzone coming... pepperoni and Cerignola olives!" He said 'Cerignola' with as thick an accent as he could manage and a big gesture with both hands. "Papa Rizzole takes care of Patty, yes?" He patted me on the back.

"Yes!"

As I waited for lunch to be served, I pulled out my smartphone and Googled Adam Farzaid. Carla brought my iced tea, set it in front of me and my phone, smiled and scurried away. My search took a few minutes, but some results did show up: a Denver Post article where Farzaid spearheaded a multi-faith effort to curb religious violence, another where Farzaid donated \$12,000 to a public school that had suffered a sink-hole in the soccer field, an Arabic group's person-of-the-year nomination (he didn't win), and a series of on-line columns he wrote following 9-11, basically apologizing for Islamic

extremism. Interesting reading, but nothing indicated anything close to hard feelings ... to the contrary.

Lunch arrived and I put everything aside to concentrate on some home-made Italian food. As expected the calzone was monstrous. Papa came out and asked, "You like?" All I could do is nod my head with my mouth full. Papa beamed and returned to the kitchen.

I thanked Carla when she cleared away my plate, practically licked clean, and refilled my tea. Returning to the Internet, I searched for Elena Soto but had no results. Curious, I Googled myself and a few items did come up. The first was an obituary for Ellie. The second was my retirement from the Colorado Springs PD detective squad in 1996. That long ago? Didn't seem like it. A few commendations rounded out the search, along with my father's obit.

I left in time to make it to the Muslim Prayer Center by two, and a gentleman was waiting at the side doors, as promised. "Mr. Farzaid?"

He reached out his right hand and we shook. "Indeed. Nice to meet you, Mr. Ruger... Pat. Please come in."

I followed him into what at first looked like a convent, but rooms on either side of the main hallway looked more like dorm rooms. He stopped at one such room and opened the door.

We entered and the lack of décor was stark. Bare, off-white walls displayed no photos or other accoutrements, and the bed was simply made with a green woven blanket and white pillowcase. A desk in one corner was bare, as was the dinette. There were no bathrooms.

“Did anyone clear out this room?”

“No,” Adam replied. “Students are taught to live simply.”

I walked to the desk and opened the top drawer. Finally, something to look at. I picked up a pile of photos and started browsing one picture at a time, mostly of family. I stopped at one of Lola and Elena and saw how pretty they both were as teens. I turned it over and read aloud, “Elena and Agata, June, 2004.” That reminded me how young Lola was.

I continued to flip through the photos until one had what looked like Elena and a boyfriend. Nothing was written on the back and I showed it to Adam. “Know who this is?”

“Yes, it’s her friend, Isa. He is no longer here in the Prayer Center. He returned to Saudi to be with his parents.”

“Is that common?”

“It sometimes happens. It’s difficult to be a teenager here in the States. Some don’t enjoy it and others are just homesick.”

I thought about possible ramifications. “Were they involved?”

“No, that would not be allowed. They were good friends.”

I finished with the photos and other miscellaneous notes and tidbits in the desk drawer and moved down a drawer- nothing. The bottom drawer was also empty.

“Adam, can I ask a personal question?”

“You may, but I reserve the right not to answer.”

“Agreed. I think you are an upstanding guy, an especially good community man and religious leader. What would you do if you found out about a sleeper cell?”

Without hesitation, he answered firmly, “I would call the FBI and we would root out these terrorists. They are enemies of Allah.” I believed him.

“Have you heard of such a group in our area?”

“Nothing whatsoever. I don’t believe such a cell exists here. I think I would hear of one if it were so.”

“What about the so-called ‘indoctrinations’ we hear about?”

“The media jumps on that term, but I have never seen that in Denver.”

“Where did Elena keep her clothes?”

“They would be here,” pointing to an empty cubbyhole on one wall. “The members living here are allowed to use the laundry facilities, but must accompany the clothing until washing is complete.”

I was coming up empty. I made one last pass through the room, lifting the mattress and looking underneath tabletops to no avail.

Farzaid saw that I was finishing up and came closer. “I really appreciate your efforts, Pat. We miss her.”

“You have no idea what happened?”

“None,” he replied sadly.

Chapter 14

When I got back to the Morrison house, the girls were eating dinner. Apparently there was a pizza in the freezer.

"There you are," Lola said when she saw me open the back door. "Hungry?"

"Not really," I said, still too full from lunch. "I might not be hungry again until tomorrow." I pulled a chair from the nook and turned it backwards, and sat down with my arms folded over its back. "I've got good news."

Anna, who had been standing, joined us at the table. "What news?"

"Ronnie won't be a problem. We came to an understanding that was mutually beneficial."

Both Lola and Anna smiled widely, but seemed to be stunned into silence.

"Let's just say I made a small deposit into his trust fund."

"How much? We'll pay you back."

"No, I don't want indentured servants. But I did have an idea..." I paused, unsure how to make the offer. "I ... need some help ... in the business. I need someone to take calls and keep my schedule, and also do research."

"I volunteer for research!" Anna stood up and hugged Lola. "I love the library ... and the Internet ..."

“And Lola? Or should we call you ‘Agata’ now that you are not under Ronnie’s thumb?”

“I never thought about that.” She looked up for a moment. “I don’ think Mama would care if I still was ‘Lola’. Nobody ever heard a Agata.”

“What about coming to work for me? You’d be great talking to people. They always like you.”

“I don’ know... I hafta think ‘bout it...” She looked down as if in heavy thought. Then suddenly she rose up and hugged me. “Yeah, baby, you the boss!”

“I’m really glad,” I said as I pulled away from her. “But this is all business. I need you guys to be professional... no, not that kind of professional.” The three of us laughed and I went into the living room to rest.

The two of them followed me out and Anna turned on the iPod unit sitting on the TV stand. A song was playing I’d never heard of, I guess you could call it soul or R&B, but it wasn’t unpleasant. Anna began moving to the music and disrobing.

“Wait, none of that. I need you to respect me on this.”

“Ahh,” she pouted. “We could pay ya back fasta with some ‘professional’ services...”

“You’re not paying me with sex. You’re not paying me back at all.”

Lola brought out a bottle of white wine she had found in the kitchen, along with three goblets. "Let's drink to our new boss..." She poured the wine and gave each of us a glass. "To Pat... we love you!"

We drank up and she divided the last of the wine into the three glasses, just about two fingers in each. I was pleased it wasn't tequila.

When we finished, Lola grabbed my goblet and kissed me, even as I tried to avoid her.

"It's my turn..." Anna pulled her off but I kept her from taking Lola's place. Again, Anna was pouting. She briefly flashed her amazing bosom at me and turned away, toward the hallway. "It's up to you, Patty. Tonight, who do ya wanna be with?"

They both undressed before leaving the room, their clothes dropped and bundled in the doorway. I heard one door close, then the other. It hit me then... they had each taken a bed, waiting for me.

Uncertain of my own intentions, I slept on the couch.

Lola was sitting on the edge of sofa in front of my hips when I woke up. She had a cup of coffee in her hand.

"Time for work, boss."

"What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty," she replied. She leaned in and whispered, "I don't mind 'bout last night, but I hope you

c'n be my boss with benefits." She smiled, kissed me on the cheek.

"What was all that noise last night? It was like living next to an air base."

"That's Bandimere, I think."

"The drag strip? I heard it was loud; now I know what all the complaining was about."

"'Bout as loud as yo' snorin'," she snickered and hopped up toward the kitchen.

After a few sips, I successfully arose from the couch and went into the open bedroom, mine. The other door was still closed, thankfully. I closed my door and grabbed a clean set of clothes for the day. I locked the bathroom door behind me and shook my head in disbelief. Who would have figured I'd have this kind of problem?

I showered and got dressed, and Anna was waiting for me in my bed when I came out. She was dressed.

"It's not fair, you know."

"What?"

"Lola's not the only woman in the house. Don't you like me?"

"Listen, I like you plenty, believe me." I reached for her hands. "I'm a widower, do you know how long it's been for me? Almost two years. It's all just happening too fast."

“Promise me you’ll let me have a shot. I’m really good at it.”

I stood up. “We’ll see.”

She popped out of bed. “What can I do for you?” She saw my confused look. “Today... for your investigation.”

“Ah, good...” I thought for a moment. “You know how to use Google or Yahoo?”

“Like it was made for me.”

“I’ll leave my laptop and you too can find me stuff about Angel. Something’s up.”

Anna saluted. “Aya-aye, cap’n.”

“Lola!” I shouted towards the hallway.

Lola scampered in. “Yeah, Boss?”

“Can you get me Sam Bryant on the phone? He’s with the FBI here in Denver.”

“Comin’ up!”

This might just work out, I thought to myself. I finished my coffee and headed into the kitchen for some grub. There was leftover pizza in the fridge, so I threw it in the microwave. Two minutes later I was enjoying my oddly tasty breakfast.

As I finished, Lola rushed into the kitchen. “No go, Boss. He retired last summer. Anyone else dere I c’n call?”

"No, just get the address for me... Wait!"

She waited.

"I wanted to ask you something. I heard you had a falling out with Elena."

"Not really. We used to fight all the time. She hated what I did and I fought back. But we always made up."

"So other people knew about your tiff?"

"You know me; I don't hold back much unless I have to."

"You sure it wasn't more serious?"

"I would tell ya if it was... I'll get you that address."

Chapter 15

The FBI building was a beautiful structure on East 36th Avenue, north of downtown. I parked in the lot across the street and made my way through security (I had left all my metal objects in the car), and to the information desk.

“Excuse me,” I said softly, but wasn’t acknowledged. I stepped directly in front of the officer and tried to make eye contact.

“Can I help you?” the desk clerk said gruffly. He looked like his working days were numbered; his demeanor ruled out a second career as a Wal-Mart greeter.

“I was hoping to meet with an old friend of mine, Agent Samuel Bryant...”

“He’s retired.”

“So I’ve heard. Is there anyone else I can talk to about Islamic activity here in Denver?”

His eyes focused in on me. “Are you wanting to report activity?”

“Not yet, just an inquiry at this point.”

“Just a minute...” He got up, and hobbled back to an open office and exchanged words with someone, then returned and sat down on his stool. “Agent Sizemore will be right with you. Your name?”

“Patrick Ruger.”

"Middle name?"

"Henry."

"Have a seat," he said as he furiously typed into his tablet and pointed to a hard, polished, wooden bench nearby.

After a long ten minutes, an attractive woman came out to escort me to an office. I was anxious to have a conversation with Agent Sizemore, but the office she led me to was empty, at least until she passed me and sat down behind the desk. "Please, sit..." she pointed to the cushy red guest chairs. "I'm Amanda Sizemore, Federal Agent. Glad to meet you, Mr. Ruger."

"Likewise, Ms. Sizemore."

"It's Miss," she emphasized with a pleasant smile. "What can the Bureau do for you?"

Miss Sizemore was about my height, brunette and slim. Her "uniform" was a navy blue skirt and plain ivory blouse, and flat shoes, I noticed. How many cop shows have women running in high heels? She had gorgeous brown eyes that matched her hair, which was shoulder length, not pulled back. Her skin was slightly olive and her makeup was light but exquisite.

"Well, you can tell me whether there's been any chatter about an Islamic sleeper cell in Colorado."

She sat forward. "First, we're not the CIA. We're not privy to 'chatter.' Second, I don't know you. Why should I tell you anything?"

"I wish Sammy was still here," I muttered.

"Sammy Bryant?" Sizemore lit up. "He was my mentor."

"Great! Call him up and ask him about Patty-boy."

She dug out her cell phone and punched a button. In moments she was talking to Sam. They went back and forth for a bit, and mentioning my name seemed to do the trick. Hanging up, she said, "Sammy says 'hi'... and to call him."

"That's it?"

She grinned. "No, he said I could either lock you up as a conspiracy nut or to tell you anything I can. I'm guessing I'll do the latter."

"I like Sammy... good man."

"Yes he is. Now, about sleeper cells. I'm sorry to waste your time, but we haven't heard anything about that type of activity here."

"Then why hold it back?"

"Don't you think terrorists would like to know when we don't know what they're doing? No news is good news."

"Oh, right." I felt foolish.

"What's this about?"

I sighed, and began, "I'm investigating the disappearance of a woman, her sister hired me. The

police don't believe she's missing, but I'm pretty certain she is."

"I see... and the Islamic connection?"

"In the last few months she was converting to Muslim and was being groomed by the Muslim Community Center for big things. She started carrying a Quran and was a student in the Center before disappearing."

"And some people say she was recruited by a sleeper cell?"

"Yes, in a nutshell."

"I should tell you about the Muslim community here in Denver... Over lunch?"

What did she just say? I shook my head in disbelief. What's going on? "Lunch?"

"Let me freshen up and I'll meet you at Nadyne's Cottage at twelve-thirty. It's about twenty minutes from here."

I balked. "I'm not exactly sure where that is..."

She didn't take the excuse. "You're an investigator. I'll bet you can find it." She got up and led me out. "I'll see you in a little bit."

She shook my hand firmly and walked back past her office and around the corner, with me watching her every step.

I got to Nadyne's easily enough, but I was nervous. So much female attention was unusual, to say the least. I hadn't dated in over thirty years, and was darn lucky to have found Ellie when I did, or I might never have attracted anyone. A cop's life isn't for everyone.

I didn't have much time to dwell on it because the moment I walked into the entryway of the over-sized chalet, Agent Sizemore called out from one of the interior rooms, which was just inside and to the left of the hostess stand.

"Over here, Pat!"

I followed her voice and saw her waving. I looked around as I walked over to her booth. I hadn't been here since the renovations- it was Mom's Café just two years earlier. Nadyne's was much classier. Outside the restaurant looked like a huge country cottage with a long narrow patio deck outside on the second floor. Once inside, the room was practically glowing amber, with ivory tablecloths on all the tables, each sporting silverware and water goblets awaiting patrons. In this dining room there were booths with extra-tall, carved wooden dividers lining two walls and tables and chairs aligned down the center.

"Been waiting long?" I sat across from her.

"Just got here." She pushed one of the leather-bound menus across the table. "I recommend the Cristo, oh, and I'm having an ale. I hope you don't mind."

“Not at all, but I’ll stick with iced tea.” I opened the menu and decided to take her suggestion, closing it again. “So, Agent Sizemore...”

“Amanda,” she corrected.

“Amanda... why are we here?”

“Because they make a great sandwich!”

When the server brought Amanda her apple ale, I read ‘Jennifer’ on her name badge. She looked my way and raised her eyebrows, asking me what I wanted to drink. “I’ll have iced tea, Jennifer.”

“Unsweetened with a lemon slice?”

“Perfect,” I replied and the 20-something redhead scurried away. Watching her leave, I had a thought that her figure wasn’t very flattering.

“I mean,” I continued. “What did you want to talk about, away from the office?”

Amanda smiled. “Well, a couple of things.”

My iced tea was delivered and it taste-tested okay. We both ordered the Monte Cristo and fries, and we were alone again.

“First,” Amanda continued. “Sammy reminded me of some things he told me a few months ago. He talked about you.”

“Me? Why?”

"Sam was impressed with you, I'm not sure why. He told me about your wife. I'm very sorry."

"That's okay. It's been a while now." I thought about how to describe my marriage. "We had a great relationship; we had our ups and downs, like any other couple. But we didn't have kids. My job... we agreed to put it off and never did get back to it."

"I can understand that."

"When she got sick, everything took a backseat for a while." I was finding it easier to talk to this woman than I expected. "We didn't have much time after we found out."

"That must've been difficult. I can't even imagine."

"Like I said, it's been a while. Ellie wouldn't want me moping around forever." I decided to change the subject. "What else did Sam say?"

The agent seemed to blush. "He said I couldn't do much better and I should play my cards right." Now I was blushing. "You can see why I didn't want to finish our meeting in my office."

"I guess so." I thought about what to say next, but this was so unexpected, nothing came to mind.

Neither one of us spoke for a few minutes and Amanda took a couple of swigs from her bottle. I contemplated starting a new relationship and then thought about ordering something stronger than tea. Thankfully, Jennifer broke the silence with our order.

The plates were purposely-mismatched china, but my eyes widened when she placed them in front of us—the Monte Cristos were enormous. She set a couple of ivory cloth napkins to the side and asked if we needed anything else. We declined politely.

After a couple of bites, Amanda leaned over and asked, “Did I offend you?”

“No, no,” I replied. “You just took me off-guard. I feel sort of like a fish out of water.”

We continued to eat and a sly grin came to Amanda’s face. I soon felt a soft foot rubbing my leg. I tried not to jump, but probably did, because her grin grew, but we kept eating.

I was definitely distracted. “What do you do for fun?”

“I love photography, and I’m into fishing.”

“Fishing? Really.”

“There’s something about it, I can’t describe. I cast out to an interesting spot with a lure and if I’m good enough, the fish bites and I wrestle it in. I eat what I catch, by the way.”

“You’re not going to believe this, but I have a casting course in my backyard. I really like casting to a target. When I get to a lake, I can cast sixty yards into a circle the size of a marshmallow.”

“I’m impressed,” Amanda replied. “We should go fishing together. Have you been to Granby Lake?”

“Yes, but I prefer smaller lakes, like Bear Creek or Barker.”

“I know what you mean, but I like catching my limit.”

Interesting, I thought. What are the odds of meeting a good-looking woman who liked fishing? “I think I would like fishing with you.”

“I’m sure of it.” She seemed satisfied, like she just finished a hot fudge sundae.

I decided to get back to the subject at hand. “What were you going to tell me about the Muslims in Denver?”

Footsie stopped, to my relief. “It’s just that, out of all the larger cities in the U.S., this is probably the place least likely to have a sleeper cell, or at least activating one.”

“Why is that?”

“The Muslim leadership here has been very vocal about peacefully coexisting with other religions. Other regions of the country are starting to follow suit. It’s working. We have the lowest hate crime rate of the largest fifty cities in the country, largely because of the Muslim Prayer Center’s efforts.”

I nodded, in thought. I wondered about where the sleeper cell angle was coming from. Footsie began again.

“Who is telling you about a local sleeper cell?”

“You read my mind,” I replied. “I was just asking myself the same question.”

The bill came and she grabbed it. “Expense account,” she explained.

I relented. “This has been interesting, to say the least.” I pulled my legs away from her bare feet and sat up a bit. “I really appreciate your frankness. I don’t often get that in first meetings.”

“I hope we can meet again soon. Can I cook you dinner? Tomorrow is Friday, perfect timing.”

“I can’t, I have some pressing issues to figure out. Rain check?” I wasn’t completely against the idea of an actual date with this smart and beautiful federal agent who loved fishing.

“Absolutely. Give me your phone.” I gave it to her and she started punching buttons. “This is my number — if tomorrow frees up, give me a shout.”

I took back my phone and walked her out to her car. “Thanks for lunch.”

She turned and kissed my cheek, wiping off lipstick with her thumb. “Call me.”

I got back in my car and sat for a couple of minutes, my nether regions still excited. In fact, I wasn’t entirely sure how I managed to walk to my Camaro without a limp.

Chapter 16

It had been a long day and it was only 3 o'clock. I parked my Camaro in the back of Jimmy's Morrison house and unpacked it. There would always be some gear I'd take, no matter what I was going to do, even grocery shopping.

The TV was on in the living room and the girls were crashed on the sofa watching some entertainment show. I carried my stuff in and dropped it on my bed, which was made. In fact, the room was completely clean. I needed a shower and went to pull some fresh clothes from my overnight bag. It was empty. I opened the top drawer and there were my socks and underwear, each rolled neatly. The second drawer had t-shirts, and I found golf shirts and slacks hanging in the closet. That was nice of them, I said to myself.

I gathered what I wanted to wear and carried them into the bathroom, being careful to lock the door. No interruptions.

I got the water temp just right, undressed and stepped in under the water. The shower was a bit cramped, made more clear when I closed the door. The water, however, felt great.

I heard some rattling outside and thought, now what? The bathroom door opened and I saw the shape of Anna through the nearly-opaque shower door. What I assumed, correctly, was clothing dropping to the floor preceded the shower door opening. Anna stepped in before I could even cover up.

“Hi, honey, you’re home!” she exclaimed and closed the door behind her, which immediately popped open. She pulled it closed again.

“But... I had the door locked...”

“The privacy key was on the door frame, silly, just waiting for me.” She took the soap from my hands with me in dumbfounded silence and lathered her beautiful chest. My hands didn’t take much coaxing to help.

While my hands were full, she reached down and scrubbed my now-erect member. “Now, that feels good doesn’t it?” It did.

She turned around and my butt popped the door open again. I quickly closed it while Anna moved to the inside wall. Facing away from me, she grabbed my hands and once again placed them on her large sudsy breasts. I didn’t resist.

The door juttet open again. Irritated, I abruptly released Anna and stepped out of the shower, grabbing her arm. I pulled her out of the bathroom and onto the bed, soaking it with sudsy water. I didn’t care. The next half hour wore me out.

“That was spectacular,” she sighed as she moved to lay beside me. “I’m glad you were up for it.”

“In your line of work...”

“That was never for pleasure, it was ... acting.” She grinned. “Well, almost never ... but this ... believe me, this was good, real good.”

We stayed in bed for a while, then Anna got up and headed to the shower. "Round two?"

I shook my head, obviously exhausted.

"That's okay, Patty. I was just kidding ... I'm going to be sore tomorrow!"

When she finished her shower and left for her bedroom, I finished mine. The clothes I had set out were wringing wet, so I threw them in the wicker hamper and found some replacements.

When I joined the girls in the living room, I found Lola sitting among several small piles of paperwork. Anna was on the sofa, drying her hair with a towel.

"What's going on?"

Lola looked up. "Finally! I've been callin' 'round and I found us a great office."

"Office?"

"We need a office. Ya didn't plan for Anna and me to be live-in maids and sex toys, did ya?"

"Of course not, and I don't see you that way."

"Well, we need to be a legit business. I got good rent on a couple of 'em. And we don' need no deposit either. I got us a business phone, too." She handed me a paper. "That's our new numba. We're 'PAL Investigations L-L-C 'in da new phone book."

"How did you know to do all this?"

“We’re not stoopid, you know. My dad was a baker with three locations when I was growin’ up. He baked bread and rolls, and cakes, and stuff like dat. I did the books for ’im when I wuz in high school.”

“I’m not saying you’re stupid. Not at all. But, how did you pay for it?”

“We haven’t yet. We got some money stashed away, Anna and me. I figure dis way we’ll all be partners. ‘PAL’ ... Pat Anna Lola. Tomorrow we can go to da bank and get an account. Then we’ll go look at da offices.”

Once again I was dumbfounded. This was a surprise I was going to have to sleep on.

Sleep found me easily. In the morning Lola and Anna were up before me, ready to roll. I put on a robe and walked gently into the living room. I was sore, too.

“‘Bout time, sleepy-head. We made breakfast.” Lola pointed to the kitchen, where coffee and toaster strudels were waiting.

“That smells good...” and I sat at the dinette and had a nice relaxing breakfast. I’d better not get used to this, I said to myself.

I got up from breakfast and headed to my bedroom to get changed, Anna rushing past me, I assumed to clean up the kitchen. I came out and asked to no one in particular, “What’s the agenda?”

Lola replied, “Bank, office, then another office. We takin’ the Chevy, si?”

I nodded and the two of them grabbed paperwork and started to herd me out the back door. I guess my mind was made up for me. Partners are better than employees, I sighed.

“Wait! I have one thing to say before we move forward.”

The girls stopped and both turned toward me.

“You guys are killing me. I’ll say yes to all of this if you promise, no more ambushes, no more seducing me at every turn.”

“But we love ya and love what you done fo’ us,” Lola pouted. “We want you happy. We make you happy, si?”

I thought for a moment. How was I going to explain myself? “Yes, you do, both of you, but that’s not the way. If we’re business partners, we can’t be having sex together. It’s a recipe for disaster. Trust me.”

There were a few seconds of silence while it sank in. “If you’re sure...” Anna conceded. “We won’t bother you anymore.”

I knew it was going to go there. “You’re not hearing me. It’s not ‘bothering me’ at all. I’m more than twice your age, and you deserve a relationship, both of you. But not with me. I’m old, you’re not.”

The girls both nodded and I hoped that they were okay. They still helped me carry gear out to the car and seemed cheerful enough.

The bank wanted ID, and somewhat to my surprise, the girls both had drivers' licenses. I added mine to theirs and the clerk, who looked like a throwback from the tellers of the 1920's, made copies and handed them back. His long white sleeves were rolled up, he had a gray vest and short blue tie- it might as well have been a bow tie- and his receding red hair was wispy and somewhat uncombed.

He asked for the incorporation papers and, sure enough, Lola had those, too. I reached to intercept them. "Can I see that?" The papers said the LLC had been applied for and approved on-line from the State of Colorado's Secretary of State website. Reading on, I saw that the corporate name was 'PAL Investigations, LLC' and I was the 'registered agent,' whatever that was. All 3 of us were listed as 'members.' The corporate address was my home. Very impressive. I had to give Lola some credit.

I handed them to the clerk, who promptly began typing the info into his computer. Eventually he asked, "How much are you going to deposit?"

"Twenty-two thousand," Lola replied, matter-of-factly. She and Anna each brought out an envelope and started counting bills until reaching \$11,000, pocketing the rest. I sat back and watched, content to let my new staff do all the work.

The temporary checks were still blank, so she asked the clerk to fill in our corporate name and address on them. After we each signed a dozen or so papers, Lola chose the check types and patterns, like matching paint

to furniture, and collected the printouts. She had an armful of paper when we left for the car.

As we settled in the Camaro, Lola's phone rang. "P-A-L Investigations," she answered, and had a discussion with what sounded like a realtor. She hung up and directed me to 34th and Broadway.

"Dis use ta be a bank," Lola announced as we pulled in the parking lot.

The 4-story building was old, probably from the 50's, dark brown wood and concrete covering its exterior, and most of the building was sitting on a pedestal base. It looked to me like it could topple at any moment, but then, it had been here for over 60 years without collapsing.

The agent in the emerald realtor's jacket was short and stocky, and the jacket was a bit over-sized, making him look like a large kid. He greeted us near the entrance and we followed him in. "It's on the second floor," he explained.

We had two options, the stairs or the elevator. I chose stairs and the others followed. The door opened out into a hallway and we were facing a glass wall and entry. It looked like the office took the entire floor.

The agent unlocked the door and said, "not bad for 800 a month, huh?"

Not bad at all, I repeated to myself. The entire front was tiled, including the reception and waiting areas. The front counter was tall and had character, with hand-

carved wood and teak, but was very worn. In fact the whole office was worn.

It looked like 4 large, unfurnished offices connected to a central hallway, all carpeted in a heavy forest green cross-pattern, and in the rear were bathrooms and a kitchen-slash-break room. Throughout incandescent bulbs were dim or flashing, and I could see some slight water damage on a few of the walls and false ceiling tiles.

“Will the landlord fix these?” I pointed up to the ceiling tiles and broken lighting.

“Not for 800 a month,” was the reply, somewhat expected.

I walked in the back and saw a rear entrance, which definitely piqued my interest. I called out to the realtor, “Where does this go?”

“Oh, it has its own staircase outside. It’s a fire escape, really.”

I opened the door and, sure enough, there were two sets of metal stairs, one left, the other right connected by a landing. The door was hefty, I noticed, and the stairs themselves were solid.

“Can we add our own locks and security system?”

The agent nodded.

“We’ll take it!”

Lola jumped up and ran to me when she heard that. “Wait, we ain’t negotiated yet,” she said, somewhat under her breath. “And we got another one ta look at.”

“It’s okay, this place is perfect,” I replied, matching her low voice. “Eight hundred a month for 2,000 square feet and our own emergency exit? No way we’re gonna pass this up.”

Lola regained her composure and shook hands with the agent. “Looks like we gotta deal. You got the contract?”

I let them finish the paperwork and wondered what we were going to look like in a year. Then I remembered why we were together in the first place- Elena.

Chapter 17

Over the weekend we moved out of Jimmy's house and into our new office. I made sure my ex-partner's house was cleaner than when we arrived and left a rather expensive bottle of wine- a 2010 Aubert Ritchie Vineyard Pinot Noir, one of my favorites, and I knew Jimmy's wife, Erin, especially liked red wine.

I just didn't think it was safe at my home. We did have to stop by a Big Lots so we could pick up some cheap sofa beds, futons, bedding, and an assortment of pots, pans and tableware. We also visited a used appliance store to get a stove, refrigerator, coffee maker. An extra hundred got them delivered on the same day, and the fridge got cold just in time for the supply of groceries we showed up with. We decided to hire a laundry service for the time being.

Anna and Lola were troopers, getting everything in and organized and even shopping for office furniture. Anna arranged for some used office furniture to be delivered by midweek, some pretty nice stuff, I was told.

In the meantime, I did quite a bit of thinking about my case at hand.

On Monday morning, I called our first official meeting as PAL Investigations, LLC. We sat around a small cherrywood table they had picked up and assembled, along with the laptop and notepads.

"First, we have a bit of a pickle. There's no shower here and it's not safe yet to go to my home. Any ideas?" I looked to Lola, who seemed to be full of ideas lately.

"We could go to Elena's for showers, and even sleep there if we wanna."

"That's a good suggestion, Lola. I think I'll shower at the gym, but you two could definitely go to Elena's. One thing, you'll need to take the Dart for a paint job, something darker like black or blue." Anna raised her hand. "This isn't school, just speak up."

"I can do that today."

"Excellent, I'm really proud of you guys." They both smiled and Lola stood up and bowed. "Back to business. I'm ready to say that Elena was not abducted or coerced by a sleeper cell. But, I don't seem to have any leads for other possibilities." I turned to Anna. "I want you to dig into Angel and anyone else you can turn up." Then to Lola, "You are doing a helluva job managing our office." Lola was still smiling. "I know you have a lot more to do, so do what you can."

"What are you going to do?" Anna inquired.

"I'm going to do what I do- put my nose on the ground and sniff for a scent."

"You can't smell that," Lola said, laughing, as if it was a joke.

“What I mean is I’m going to go back and retrace her steps, the mosque, her apartment, her friends, until I figure it out.”

The new office phone rang. Lola hurried to the front desk and answered in a great office voice, “P-A-L Investigations, how can we be of assistance?” She paused and replied to the caller, “Yeah, Paul, we can do that. Can you come by the office?” Another pause. “3410 Broadway, second floor... all of it.” She said goodbye and hung up the phone.

She came back to the table and announced, “We have our first client.”

We waited for more information, but none seemed to be coming. “Well?”

Lola returned to her normal voice. “Remember dat agent we rented dis place from?” Anna and I nodded. “His bruthuh owns dis building and I offered our services for a problem he’s havin’.”

I asked an obvious question, already knowing the answer. “Is that why rent was so cheap?”

“Uh, *yeah!*” She rolled her eyes.

When Mr. Colucci arrived he didn’t look anything like his brother. Tall and thin, noticeably Italian, Colucci was pleasant enough. Sitting across the desk from me, and with Lola and Anna sitting behind him in our largest office, he began to explain his difficulty. “I own a storage unit complex. Someone has been breakin’ into units and my customers are starting to leave.”

I asked the obvious question. "The police can't help you?"

"Well, they sent a few extra patrols around, but nothin' changed. I'm sure the bastards know when the cops are going to be there before the cops do. These guys are organized."

"How can we help?"

"Tony said he thought you can set up some cameras and surveillance, get me some footage to take to the cops."

"You don't have cameras now? How is the place laid out?"

"It's mostly garage-type units, all access is outdoors. I got a couple o' cameras but haven't got anything... useful. They've been hitting a couple, three times a week. I just can't get 'em on tape."

"Have you tried waiting for them?"

"Yeah, did that, too. They seem to know when I'm there and don't show. I can't live on-site..."

I had an idea. "Any office space we can use?"

"Sure, in the front, by the gate. But the thieves don't use the gate."

"Internet?"

"Yeah..."

I caught Lola's eye. "You and I will be working tonight. That okay?"

"You know it, Boss!"

Back to Colucci, "Give me the keys and access codes and we'll try to get you something tonight. It'll cost you a bit, a couple of grand in equipment cost, no other fees, since your brother made a deal with us. Lola has your phone number?"

"Yeah." Colucci stood up, reached for his wallet and pulled out twenty crisp C-notes. "Let me know if this don't cover it."

Lola stood and eagerly accepted the cash payment. "We'll let you know, for sure."

Anna and I stood up and each shook hands with the lanky Italian. Lola escorted him out to reception desk, pausing to receive the keys and info we needed.

Before he left, I called out, "Mr. Colucci! Don't tell your employees anything about us!" He nodded, hopefully understanding why. If it was an inside job, we would be wasting our time. He continued out and Lola closed the door behind him.

Once he was gone, Anna asked, "What about me, Boss?"

"Do you have to call me that? How about 'Patty'?"

"Okay, Boss, but what can I do?"

“Well, I’m going to need backup here in the office for what I have planned.”

“What do you have planned?”

This time it was my turn to smile.

Chapter 18

Lola and I made a couple of stops before heading to the Colucci Storage lot. Open until 7, we wanted to make sure none of his staff were on-site when we arrived. The office door had a deadbolt, which we unlocked, and a keypad, which opened with the right code, 14776.

I had Lola hold the door open while I unloaded the car. One of the stops was an electronics store I frequented, and we had picked up 4 wireless cameras with roof-edge mounts and battery packs.

The next stop had been to a local hobby shop. I knew the owner and called ahead to make sure he stayed open for me. There I grabbed a decent radio-controlled helicopter that had about a half-hour flying time on a single charge. I had hoped Angel was correct about using a copter this way — I didn't have time to learn to fly a drone, but I'm pretty good at copters. This one was black and gray camouflage, excellent for nighttime use.

The laptop, a couple of burner smartphones, an electric screwdriver, some electrical tape, a flashlight, and a few bottles of Lipton Pure Leaf Iced Tea rounded out the unpacking. This cost me quite a bit more than the \$2,000 that Colucci gave us, but most of was reusable.

When everything was ready, I took some time in the remaining daylight to install 3 of the cams, one in each driving aisle, and set them to be available to the laptop.

Testing proved all was working well. These particular cameras had small telephoto lenses, not powerful, but helpful.

Darkness arrived and we focused on the helicopter. I attached the burner phone to the underside with the electrical tape, being careful not to cover the lens, and set it to send the recorded video to my VidMartin account. VidMartin's cellphone apps allowed multiple streams, which was ideal. A duplicate feed went to my spare computer, which Anna was manning back at the office.

I dialed her and asked if she was receiving the feed, and with some help, she was. On that side, my stream was saving to the cloud drive.

"Now's the hard part," I confessed to Lola. I was really impressed how businesslike she had become — no joking or tom-foolery. She helped me take the copter and its controls out front.

"Can I fly it?" she asked.

"Not tonight, but it would be a good idea for you learn how." I handed her my live cell phone, took the controls from her and turned the "on" knob. The copter, which had been sitting on the walkway on the cell phone, engaged and lifted off, weaving back and forth wildly. It landed hard on a grassy strip and I inspected for damage, none this time.

"Get me the tape?" I pointed to the office. Lola nodded and ran in, retuning a moment later with it. In

the meantime I found a small rock in hopes of stabilizing the contraption. Lola tossed it gently into my outstretched hand and I bound the rock to the structure, moving the phone to a more forward-looking position.

“Let’s try this again.” I turned the machine on and gently guided it up about ten feet. Much better, I thought.

“You’re good at dat, Boss.”

“Thanks, it’s been a while, but I think I got the hang of it.”

I directed the machine up and out, turning left, reverse, then right, up higher, maybe fifty feet. “How’s the video?” I called out.

“Anna says its coming fine. How’s it gettin’ pictures in the dark?”

“Special app on the phone. It’s a little grainy, but it’ll do.” I brought it in after about 10 minutes of practice and easily found the grass, this time landing with a lighter touch.

I brought the copter back in with me and hooked up the charger. We sat in front of the laptop and brought up a screen with 3 camera images of the lot. I told Anna, still on the line, to leave the software running and to hold tight. “This might be a long night.”

Ten o’clock came and went with no activity on my monitor. Lola wasn’t as expressive as usual, so I asked what was on her mind.

“Jus’ thinkin’ ‘bout mi seesta. Ya think she’s awright?”

“I hope so. I’m pretty certain she didn’t get brainwashed by a sleeper cell. It is good that she asked you to keep her place rented, but I’m concerned she hasn’t reached out to you.”

“I know! Why’s she not called me?”

“She’s going to be proud of you when she sees what you’ve accomplished.”

“That’s nice a you, but I’m really worried.”

I put my arm around her shoulders. “As soon as we finish with this job, we’ll find her.”

She leaned her head against my shoulder and sighed. “I hope so...”

“How did you get into... partying?”

She sat up. “Da usual reason. Drugs. I really liked sex an’ coke... I dropped outta community college when I needed cash for more coke, couldn’t afford mi place anymo, and tried ta get some money fast.”

“I thought it might be something like that.” I reached for my bag, and pulled out a white plastic medallion. “My cousin earned this at N.A... Narcotics Anonymous. He’s dead now.”

“He didn’ make it?”

"The last time he fell off the program, he ran a red light and killed a newlywed couple... and himself. How'd you get off coke?"

"I saw some stuff an' just decided. Ronnie didn't like it, but he liked my money."

"I'm impressed. You could've moved to crack... or worse. When did you hook up with Ronnie?"

"I got beat up once an' a friend, anotha ho, she said Ronnie would'n let that hap'n."

I nodded — it made perfect sense. "And you wanted out?"

"Hell, yeah. I'll be ova the hill and thrown away at 30. And ... I didn't get ta see Elena too much." She paused and sighed again with the reminder.

I picked up the cell phone and dialed Anna. "Just checking in. You awake?"

"Not really. I just had the best dream about you and Lola..." She laughed.

"You're incorrigible."

"You can't outrun a tsunami. Just go with the flow."

"That's not a good idea ... Keep the live streaming up and I'll test it again in a little while."

"Okay, Boss. I'll be waiting."

I ended the call thinking that the saying was that you can't fight a tidal wave. I saw it in an old movie.

Just a moment later my phone's ringtone sounded, "C-C-C-Come on!" and brass followed. It was from George Michael's "I Want Your Sex." I didn't have to wonder how that happened, just which one did it. I was leaning towards Anna.

I answered the call, "P-A-L Investigations."

"Pat?"

"Angel?"

"Yeah, Pat. I need to talk to you. Gotta minute?"

I thought about how to answer. He wasn't exactly on my good side at the moment. "I don't know. Seen Eduardo lately?"

"That was a misunderstanding, I promise you. But I have some news."

"What news?"

"I just saw Elena."

Chapter 19

I sat down. “Where did you see her?”

Lola came over and grabbed the phone from my ear. “You saw my Elena? Where you see Elena?”

I wrestled the phone back with a gentle back-off motion of my hand. I put the phone on speaker. “Go ahead, Angel. What did you see?”

“Downtown, just this afternoon. She was walking up 16th Avenue near the churches. I tried to turn around to talk to her but she was gone.”

“So, you didn’t talk to her?”

“No, sorry. I think she went into the Hostel or one of the churches.”

The ‘Hostel’ was the Denver International Youth Hostel, a dorm for teens visiting from all over the world. If she went there, she would be easy to find. You have to have a portfolio of identification and authorizations to stay there.

“Why didn’t you call me? I could have jumped in the car and looked for her.”

“I wanted to, but my phone died. I just got a new one tonight.”

“What was she wearing?”

“I only... I think she had on a white... no, white and gray... long dress and black shoes, not high heels. I don’t remember seeing a purse.”

"And it was definitely her?"

"I'd bet my life on it."

"Okay." I thought for a minute. "We need to talk about Eduardo."

"What about him?"

"He tried to off me."

"I don't think he would do that ... He hasn't mentioned you to me at all."

"Well, I know it was him."

"What happened?"

I looked at my watch; it was almost midnight. "I'm busy with a thing right now. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Sure thing, Patty. Good luck with your 'thing'." He hung up with a loud click and I looked at Lola.

"I'm not sure he saw Elena..."

"But he said he saw her. It was her!"

"I know what he said, but..."

Some movement on the screen caught my attention. Five guys were busting open a garage.

I put on my Bluetooth and connected to the conference call with Lola's and Anna's phones. "Lola, can you hear me?" I asked as I rushed out the door.

"Yeah, Boss. Com'n in good."

I started the copter and lifted it off. “Annie, getting a picture?”

“Video is streaming okay,” was the reply.

“Lola?”

“Yes, it’s good. I see the gang, but it’s a little far away.” Lola’s screen was split between the wireless cams and the copter-cam, so I didn’t worry about her view.

I was a little nervous, not having done this with a camera before. I knew line-of-site and distance were both going to be issues and I positioned myself at the corner of the building, half over the wall. They brazenly had rap music blasting, so I was pretty sure they weren’t going to hear our homemade UAV.

The craft was at about 75 feet and hovering over the garage units, and I slowly maneuvered toward the gang. A little hazy from here, I asked Anna how it looked and she confirmed the picture was pretty clear. I dropped it about 10 feet to see more detail and hovered there for a few minutes.

I wondered how they got in and swiveled the helicopter to see around back of the storage building. Lo and behold, the chain link fence had been parted between two metal posts, wide open.

“They’re bringin’ sumptin’ out,” Lola informed, and I strained to see with my own eyes. “It’s an ol’ chair, like my papa had.”

I couldn't see the chair, since it was mostly still in the garage and I pointed the copter at it. "Can you see it better now?"

"Si... yes! Right there!"

Just then I noticed them bringing someone from out back and they threw him in the chair with some force. What was going on? "What do you see now?"

"They're tyin' a guy to th' chair. Three of 'em are doin' it... Wait! There's someone else!"

I strained to see but couldn't. "Who is it?"

"I don' know but he jus' pulled out a gun. He put it in sumphin', a pillow or sumphin'."

"He's going to shoot the guy." I took the copter down and was going to distract them, maybe chase them away, but the gun fired, muffled by the pillow. I was able to get in close, right in front of the 4 of the gang members and then the shooter. He looked up, took aim and my copter was hit, point blank.

The gang scattered. "Did you get the video?" I asked Anna as I hopped down from the fence and began running to the body. "Call 9-1-1!"

I heard the click of the phone and I approached the limp figure, shot in the chest. I checked for a pulse, none, and pulled him on the ground. I hesitated to do mouth-to-mouth, especially when this man was probably shot in the heart, but I decided to anyway.

Sirens in the distance grew closer and paramedics finally arrived to relieve me. I stood back while they strapped him on a gurney and slid him in the ambulance, just as police pulled up. The ambulance left and I was there, again facing policemen with guns. "I know the drill!" I shouted and reached carefully for my Ruger, slowly placing it on the ground, the other hand reaching in the air.

"On your knees!" came the command, and I was already doing it, lacing my fingers together behind my head. That's when I was tackled.

The melee broke up with a familiar detective's voice. "Patty? What the hell?"

"I can explain, Jim, as soon as I see the video."

"You got video of the shooting?"

"Yup," I pointed to the mangled helicopter laying nearby. "I got the shooter's face." I started to put my hand behind my head and Jimmy slapped it down.

"Stop that crap! What's goin' on?"

"The owner of the facility hired me to find out who's been breaking into storage units." I looked over at the wreckage. "I decided to try to make a spy cam — we've been talking about it for a while — and we caught them with it." I looked back at the bloody recliner. "We didn't expect a shooting."

"Do you know them?"

"I never really saw them up close. I was busy flying... Wait..." I dialed Anna back up. "Did we get it all?"

"We sure did," was the reply.

"Great! I'll see you in a while," and I hung up. "Lola!"

"Si, Boss?" She was still on my Bluetooth, but scared.

"It's okay... Can you bring the laptop out here?"

After a few seconds of silence, she asked, "It's okay?"

"Yes, I promise."

"Okay, I'll bring it."

The video was a bit jerky from the cloud site, I figured because we were somewhat of a distance away from the wireless router, but there it was. The gang was clearly visible, going in and out of the garage, the new guys showing up with a struggling hostage, bringing out the old sofa chair, tying the guy up, and the shot. Jimmy and the police were fascinated, and really, so was I.

Then came my close-ups, which were really clear, considering. One by one, 6 or 7 came into view and got fuzzy again, and then, my jaw dropped. The shooter, gun in hand, was Eduardo. The video stopped in a white flash when he raised the gun to the camera and squeezed the trigger.

Chapter 20

I woke up in my own bed feeling alone. The girls were back at Elena's apartment and I was here.

It had taken a couple of days to round up Eduardo and his crew, but once in custody, I felt safe to return home, the girls, too.

I didn't think it would be so damn lonely. Fixing my own breakfast... I got used to being taken care of again, like before Ellie got sick. Just like my shower, breakfast strudel was definitely lacking this morning. I didn't see my dad staring back at me from the mirror this morning, just an older version of me. That feeling intensified as I got dressed, with yet new aches and pains that would probably become my new normal. I decided I needed a stunt double and chuckled to myself as I wondered if Tom Cruise was available.

I checked my cell phone and found two voice messages. I hated voice mail. I checked the call log and saw it was Lola. Instead of calling for the message, I just called Lola, who informed me, rather nervously, that the feds were at the office. Of course, I thought, the one morning I had decided to sleep in. "Hang tight, I'll be right there," I reassured her.

I was reminded that my Camaro still needed body work when I opened the garage door. The 20-minute drive to the office was too quiet, so I turned on the comedy channel. Emo Phillips was performing... mistake... I pressed 'SEEK' a couple of times and found some 80's rock, but drove up and parked just as the first decent song started up.

Lola was right — there were about 6 large, black cars and vans sitting up front. “Some stereotypes are based on truth,” I said aloud. I walked up the stairs and there seemed to be a lot of nothing happening, just a group of well-dressed people looking in each room, evidently hoping to find something and not succeeding. There was a man in a brown suit with a white shirt and a tan and bronze tie. He had a medium-build and dark complexion, and was talking to Anna. This gentleman seemed to be in charge.

“How can I help you?” I directed it at the suit.

“I’m with the government.” His credentials popped out and back in his pocket. “You Patrick Ruger?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have a place we can talk?”

“Sure,” I replied and he followed me to the second office back. Once seated, I asked, “What’s this about?”

The suit sat on the corner of the desk. “You have been looking into a sleeper cell here in Denver Metro.”

“But I haven’t found anything.”

“Where are all your records?”

“You must know we just opened our doors. There are no records yet.”

“Someone tipped us off that you were investigating Elena Soto, and so are we. She appears to be missing. Any progress?”

"Before I go any further, do you mind if I see your credentials. You just waved them at me before."

The suit seemed a bit annoyed, but reached in his inside jacket pocket and handed the leather holder to me. I opened it and it looked authentic. "Peter Franks, born- September 17th, 1956, weight- 190 pounds, eyes- brown..."

"Okay, you satisfied?"

"Yes, Mister... Agent Franks?"

"Senior Field Agent, but just call me Franks. I was asking if you've made any progress."

"Actually, I don't believe the sleeper cell theory. It doesn't add up." I wondered about telling them about Angel's sighting but decided to hold that for now, especially since I had my doubts about it. "I've been looking for her for just over 2 weeks, but there's been no evidence of foul play- that's why the police didn't take the case."

"Her sister, Agata, works with you?"

"Yes, that's Lola. She hired me, but has since become part owner of our new venture, P.A.L. We were just going to begin more street work today, as a matter of fact."

Franks stood up and looked at his cell phone. "Go ahead," he seemed to direct at the ceiling. I figured he had a hidden earpiece. He pointed his finger up at me

as if to say 'just one minute' and turned away. Indeed, after a minute, he said, "I see. I'll tell him, thanks."

"Anything wrong?" I asked.

He wasn't happy. "No, that was Agent Sizemore. She wants you to call her this evening."

"And?"

"Never mind. I wouldn't want to bore you."

I followed Franks out and he gathered his crew near the elevator. "Nothing here, for now," he announced. "Head out."

In five minutes it was eerily calm, though we were left with a sizable mess.

"Boss?" Anna shared Lola's look of concern.

"Looks like I have another date."

Lola beamed.

I gave the task of getting my Camaro fixed to Lola, and instructed Anna to get back to her Internet research, reminding her that the feds probably were watching her browsing.

Later that day, I took the Dodge and headed to the FBI. I wondered about Amanda's phone call to Special Agent Franks, and thought she might shed some light on the office invasion. I found a space in the parking lot across the street and once again made my trek through security. This time, I had to empty quite a few gadgets and other metal objects out of my pockets, along with

my handgun. It took a while, and they kept some of the stuff, and my gun, to be returned when I exited. They handed me a numbered tag as if I had checked a coat, and I threw it in my shirt pocket as I walked into the main lobby.

"Excuse me," I said to the same Wal-Mart greeter as before. "Can you tell Agent Amanda Sizemore that Patrick Ruger is here to see her?"

The greeter sighed heavily, as if I interrupted his carefree day, and got her on the phone. "She'll be right out," he said as he hung up the phone and pointed to the hard wooden bench.

I stood and waited. In about five minutes I saw Amanda and went towards her. Instead of a handshake, she leaned in for a hug and I accommodated her. "You could have called," she said as we stepped into her office. "I was going to ask you over for dinner. Rain check, remember?"

"Oh, I remember a lot about our lunch." I couldn't hold back a smile. "But business first, if you don't mind. What's with the cavalry searching my office?"

"I'm really sorry about that. I told them it would be a waste of time."

"You told me there wasn't any chatter about a sleeper cell."

"Yes, and there wasn't, until Monday. Then someone jumped the gun and raided your office without

consulting me.” She looked really annoyed. “That’s going to cost them.”

“What chatter?”

“I can’t say, you don’t have clearance.” I must have made a scowl, because she added quickly, “but I’m getting you read in soon.”

“What can you tell me?”

“That a friend of yours, Adam Farzaid, has left the country in a hurry.”

“He’s not a friend, but a close friend of mine vouched for him.” I thought for a moment. “What do you think it means?”

“We believe he’s meeting with Iranians in France. That’s all I can say, for now.”

“That’s really difficult to believe... I have some news for you, too.”

“What’s that?”

“Someone reported seeing Elena Soto in town recently.”

“Who saw her?”

“Angel Mercado, a couple of days ago.”

“That’s interesting...” She picked up the phone. “Eric? I want surveillance on Angel Mercado. Yeah, his address is on file. Get a warrant for his place and for

tapping.” She hung up and said, “Let’s see what that brings us.”

“You don’t believe him?”

“Not too much. We haven’t seen her, seems odd that he did.”

“I don’t think I believed him either. Angel’s... not himself.”

“Well, maybe we’ll get this figured out.” She stood and came around the desk, pulling me up until I rose from my chair. All of a sudden, we were standing close, holding each other. She leaned in and whispered, “dinner tonight?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not really.” She actually giggled.

Chapter 21

My Camaro practically looked brand new, proudly sitting out front in my driveway, never before shining as brightly. Not great for surveillance work, I thought, but I loved it. It'll be a shame to dirty it up again.

Lola was sitting on the front porch, speaking to someone in Spanish on her cell. "Ha sido muy agradable escuchar de usted... Mi jefe está aquí... Hasta pronto, bye."

"You don't have to hang up because of me."

"Ees okay, Boss. That was my old boyfriend from school. He's back een Amereeca."

"My car looks great! Thanks for getting that done."

"It made me happy to do it for you," she was smiling broadly. "I'm glad you like."

"I do like. Let me take you back into the office."

"Okay, Boss." She was still smiling.

On the way back, she was more serious. "Do ya theenk Angel saw mi seesta, Elena?"

I thought about giving her hope, but she was my business partner now and needed to hear the truth. "No, I don't believe him. There's something going on with Angel right now and I plan to get to the bottom of it. The FBI, too."

Lola was quiet most of the way to PAL. Just before we arrived, she said, "Gracias, thank you for da truth. I always believe you."

I parked and she went up ahead of me while I gathered some paperwork. She was a little frantic when I got upstairs. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"I can't find Anna. She was here..."

"Maybe she went to the store or something. Try calling."

Lola dialed the phone and waited- no answer.

"She woulda told me..."

"Well, I wouldn't worry just yet. Let's give her some time."

Lola sadly sat at her desk and still had a worried look on her face.

A couple of hours went by and still no word, and no answer on Anna's phone. Lola came to my office and stood in front of my desk. "I think I know where Anna went to."

I looked up from the Eduardo video I was studying. "Where?"

"I saw her laptop. She found sumphthin' about Angel, sumphthin' about kids."

I got up and followed her to Anna's desk. Sure enough, there was an Internet search on her laptop listing some articles about Angel Mercado. I clicked on

one and the information showed someone had dropped charges for statutory rape, forcing the D.A. to do the same. I clicked back and found another, then another. Three times Angel had been charged, then released, for sex with a minor.

Was this the Angel Mercado I knew? The third article had his picture and that of the alleged victim, a young Mexican girl. I was taken aback.

Lola said what I was thinking. "I think Anna went to Angel's house."

"You stay here and wait for my call." I wrote down a number on a note pad and handed it to her. "If you don't hear from me in two hours, call Agent Sizemore.

"Be careful, Boss."

I raced into Angel's driveway, skidding to a stop partly on his lawn. I jumped out and pounded on the front door. "Angel!" I yelled. "It's Pat! Let me in!" I pounded some more.

When I didn't get an answer, I looked in the windows and saw all was dark. I went around back and tried the door there, which was also locked. Looking past the pool I noticed the shed door was cracked open.

Before looking further I decided it would be wise to get my gun from the car, but as I turned, Angel was standing in front of me, pointing my Ruger at me.

"I had to hide your old Dodge, my friend." Angel said, very calmly. "Then I see you trying to break in my house? That's not what a friend would do."

"We are friends, Angel. What have you done?"

"You shouldn't have sent that whore to spy on me."

"Anna's not a whore," I answered, trying to stay collected. "She's a perfectly normal young woman who happens to be my business partner." I pointed my chin up and at the shed. "Is she in there?"

"She's fine, you don't have to worry about her."

"I want to see her."

"You'll see her soon enough."

I started to put things together. "Why were you meeting with Eduardo?"

"Because of you... you and your investigation. I told you Elena was in a sleeper cell. Why wouldn't you leave it at that?"

"She wasn't."

"Yes, she was. I found her with a bag of fertilizer and nuts and screws and batteries, walking home like it was nothing. Those are bomb-making materials, you know."

"She was shopping, that's all."

Angel laughed. "You don't believe that, do you?" He shook his head and stopped laughing. "No, you're not that naïve. You know how they make bombs."

“Why didn’t you call the feds? Why Eduardo?”

“I was quitting the business and Eduardo was going to pay me very well. As part of the deal, he said he could help me with you.” He lifted the gun up at my face. “I didn’t know he was going to off you, just make you go away.”

“You never cared for money all that much. Why now?”

“You see my house? I deserve better, a better life. I want to travel, to have nice things...”

I interrupted. “Everyone wants those things. I want those things. But I wouldn’t sell out to a thug and a drug dealer. What would my father think? Remember why we met?”

“I remember. I did some good in my life.”

“So, why did I have to go away?”

“Because...” he looked over at the shed. “You were messing everything up.”

“Is she in there?” I pointed at the cracked shed door. “Anna, too?”

“That shed has a basement. They’re both okay. Elena’s been taking care of Jules.”

“Jules?”

He cocked the gun and pointed more forcefully.

“Too much is at stake. I’m sorry, old friend...”

Just then a pair of red dots appeared, one on Angel's forehead and the other on his chest. My instincts made me wave my arms up and yell "no!" but it was too late. Both bullets found their mark and Angel was on the ground, bleeding out.

Chapter 22

It had been three months since Angel was killed. I had been moping, so Jimmy invited me out to cheer me up.

“What’s it like working with two smokin’ hot women every day?” Jimmy sounded like a school kid hitting puberty. “Ever have a three-way?”

“A three-way ain’t as great as it sounds. I remember Burt Reynolds once said in a movie, ‘one divided by two is one-half.’ I didn’t really get it... now I know what he means.”

“Ah, come on Patty-boy. Don’t break the illusion. As a married guy, I’m living vicariously through all my single friends. This would make the highlight reel.”

Frankie’s was unusually quiet this morning, probably just a slow Tuesday in the diner. Nancy freshened our somewhat-bitter black coffee. She chuckled as if she had overheard the last part of our conversation, but she went on her way without commenting.

“Sorry, but it’s true, even with...” I did air quotes, “smokin’ hot women.” My hands went back to my coffee. “You can’t concentrate on any one thing and everything sorta suffers. I have to admit, though, it was different from anything I’d ever done before... and fun.”

“You liar... it was great and I know it.”

I smiled widely and probably blushed. “It was awesome!”

"When did you have your ménage à Pat?"

"Cute. A few weeks ago, right after everything happened with Angel and Lola's sister, and Anna."

"So they were grateful?"

"A little of that, a little celebrating, but also I had just lost a good friend, even under the circumstances, and I was down. As usual, the girls really picked me up."

I looked around and something seemed off. Then I noticed that the Elvis record was missing from its long-held spot on the wall, and was fairly certain that it fetched a pretty penny.

Jimmy ignored my wandering eyes. "Man, you've got it made."

"Yes, I guess I do, but that was the last time I did... anything... with the girls. When I started dating Amanda, they respected my wishes, thank God."

"Agent Amanda... How's that working out?"

"Almost too good to be true. We've been out fishing several times. You know, she always catches more than I do, but I don't mind, since then she cooks them for us. Last time out we rented a boat at Grand Lake. It was great."

"Been hittin' that?"

"A gentleman doesn't talk about such things." I couldn't help smiling, though.

Jimmy seemed to get serious. "How is the other girl they found, Julia, is it?"

"Jules. The feds still have her, but I think she's okay... traumatized, naturally."

"And Lola's sister?"

"I wish I could tell you. Elena hasn't said a word since we found her, except to Lola. She's not saying what happened, why she told Lola to keep up her apartment, where she was going, nothing."

"Strange. What do you think?"

"Well, something is going on with her. I wish I knew. But I'm glad we didn't find her up in Copper Canyon somewhere, in pieces."

"Amen."

"I wanted to thank you again for letting me use your Morrison place. I owe you, brother."

"No, it's not even close. I still owe you about half a dozen. I was happy to help... And thanks for the wine. It was great! We just had it on our anniversary... twenty two years..."

"See, now I'm living vicariously through you! What's it like having sex anytime you want?"

We both laughed a bit and finished our lousy coffee.

Chapter 23

"She escaped." Amanda seemed frantic.

"Elena?"

"No, Jules. I'm not sure how but she had help."

"Pretty tough escaping from a federal facility. I thought she was just a victim. Why would she have to escape?"

"It's complicated."

"Just a minute, Mandy," I said, and I called Lola into my office. "How's my day shaping up?"

"Just one meeting, a landscaper wanting his wife followed."

"See if you can postpone it."

"Sure thing, Boss." She started back to her desk.

"Hold up," I interrupted her. "It's uncanny how you've improved your English. Your classes are paying off."

"Thanks, Boss, I guess I'm getting culture." She smiled and walked away.

Back to Amanda, "I'll see if I can come over... say, in about an hour?"

"As soon as you can, please."

We both said goodbye and hung up, still not at the "love you" stage of ending phone conversations. I

wondered what the heck would make a kidnap victim want to escape protective custody after three months. I assumed it was protective custody.

I went to Anna's desk and sat down. She was busy on the computer, like always. "What's up?" she asked.

"I'm going to the FBI. Jules took off and they're pissed. Want to come along?"

"Yes!" There was no hesitation, and she anxiously led me downstairs to the car.

"You got to speak with Jules, didn't you?" I began once we were under way. "Do you know much about her?"

Anna thought for a moment. "Not really... but she was a little weird."

"What do you mean?"

"She kept talking about some group she belonged to, the Children of Bartholomew, I think."

"I've never heard of them. What did she say about them?"

I had to slam on my brakes before she could answer. "You had a stop sign!" I yelled at the idiot that was still alive due to my driving abilities. "Idiot," I repeated under my breath.

We were getting close to the FBI building, so I held Anna's answers off until we parked.

“So, you were saying that she talked about the ‘Children of Bartholomew’...”

“Yeah, she talked like they were her family and would come and find her. Of course they hadn’t, and she was at Angel’s place for a while, several months, I think.”

“What do you make of it?”

“A cult? I don’t know, Boss.”

I emptied my pockets of non-essentials and suggested to Anna to leave her purse and just bring her ID. She didn’t argue, to my surprise. I locked the Dart and set the silent alarm-slash-lo-jack device, one of the reasons I drive the Dodge around town.

We got through security much easier, now that they knew me and my relationship with Agent Sizemore, who met us in the lobby. We followed her to an interrogation room and sat at the lone desk in the chamber. The upper half of one wall was a mirror, meaning we might be watched. The other three and a half walls were institutional green. Amanda closed the door, sat across from us, opened her laptop and logged in.

“How are you doing?” Amanda directed the question at Anna. “Getting better?” It wasn’t her interrogation voice, which could be unnerving.

Anna nodded. “Every day it’s a little easier. I can’t believe I was stupid enough to go to Angel’s house alone. My uncle was a cop and I thought I could handle it.”

This revelation surprised me, but Amanda opened an inquiry page on the laptop and read, "Officer John Dreissen." She briefly looked back at Anna and continued, "22 years a beat cop, retired with honors and a nice pension. Never fired his weapon on duty."

"Yeah, Uncle Johnny was a great cop. He taught me a lot."

"But not to wait for backup?"

Anna blushed. "I guess not."

I cut in. "Anna was just telling me about the... what did you call them?"

"The Children of Bartholomew," Anna replied. "Jules couldn't stop talking about them."

"I think they're in our database." She changed screens a couple of times and typed in the name. "Here it is... Children of Bartholomew, a cult in Nevadaville, founder and leader is Reverend Bartholomew Christian."

"Where's Nevadaville?"

"It's a ghost town in the foothills above Black Hawk. There's been some growth there recently."

I was concerned. "How big is this cult?"

Amanda read on. "As of 2010, there were 212 members. There are 8 in their Board of Directors." She paused. "These guys are flagged for violence."

"You had to have known this before now... what's really going on?" I was getting impatient with my girlfriend, who had evidently been holding out on me. "Why were you holding Jules?"

"I'm sorry, Patty. It's classified. I know you understand."

"Not really." I was pouting. "Why are we here?"

"The FBI would like to hire you."

"Excuse me?"

"P-A-L Investigations is in a unique position, one the FBI would like to take advantage of."

"Can we do that?" Anna leaned over and quietly asked me. "Can we work for the FBI?"

"No reason we can't," I answered. Then, to Amanda, I inquired further. "What exactly is the FBI hiring us to do?"

"I can't say until you've agreed to the contract. It's 50 grand, plus expenses."

"So, we can't know what we're signing up for until we sign up for it?"

Amanda chuckled. "You could put it that way... what do you say?"

I turned to Anna. "What do you think?"

"Let's do it. I think we should help, if we can."

I tuned back to Amanda. "I guess we're in. Now, what's the story?"

"Not yet. You'll both need to sign these security statements... Lola, too."

I skimmed through the documents and found them to be similar to non-disclosure agreements, but with federal consequences. We signed them and handed them back. Amanda popped them into a manila folder and reiterated that Lola needed to sign it. Then she began to come clean.

"We think the Children of Bartholomew are working with a splinter group of the Denver Muslims. The secular leader who went to France, Adam Farzaid? He was there at the same time as one of the board members of Bartholomew's clan. The CIA said Farzaid was meeting with Iranians. Chances are, they were each meeting with Iran, or with each other, or both."

There were a few moments of silence while we digested what was just described. "Wait," I interrupted the quiet. "I've spoken to Farzaid. He is very close to one of my best friends in the Denver PD. I can't imagine he's a terrorist."

"Well," Amanda replied. "You'll have your chance to prove it. But, first, you should find Jules and investigate Bartholomew. See if you can find a Muslim connection."

"Well, we know of one connection. Jules Rice and Elena Soto shared a captor." I thought for a moment. "What exactly are we being hired to do?"

“Officially?” After I nodded, Amanda continued, “Locate Jules Rice and determine whether the Children of Bartholomew are working with any Muslim or Islamic group to spread terror or violence, especially here in America.”

“And unofficially?”

“Stop terrorist plots by any means necessary.”

Chapter 24

Amanda briefly stopped fellatio to moan. “Uhhhhhh, that’s it, that’s it!” I loved sixty-nine. I had found the “spot” Amanda loved most, though it took some time while trying not to climax myself. Eventually, I did.

Sweaty and breathing hard, we both laid back in the darkness on the lacy pillows and tried to recover. I preferred darkness in Amanda’s bedroom, which sported an extremely feminine décor—frilly curtains, doily-laden nightstands, mauve walls with abstract cat art, and stuffed animals all around.

She reached over into her nightstand and pulled out two washcloths, handing me one.

I wanted to tell her how great she was. “That was...”

“Wonderful!” Amanda finished my sentence with a wild grin. “What got into you? Did the girls turn you on before coming over?”

Sometimes that did happen, but not this time. “No, I just wanted you since I saw you at the Federal Building today.”

“Funny, I had the same reaction. What do you think that means?”

“I wouldn’t analyze it, just enjoy it.”

“Mr. Ruger?”

“Yes, Special Agent Sizemore?”

"I have a very special mission for you."

"I can't wait to hear it."

"When you can, I want it doggy-style."

"Mission accepted."

I found it to be too soon and I briefly wished I was back in my 20's. "The mission is on hold, baby."

"You could say that. I guess we need to regroup and try again in the morning."

I laid my head on her chest, her right breast making the perfect cushion. She put her right arm around me and made me stay right there.

Thoughts wandered and I had some questions about the afternoon's events. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, Patty."

"Why me? Why PAL?" I had begun pronouncing it like the word, "pal."

"Easy. You're not cops, so you can do mostly what you want, how you want. You have been investigating and know some of the players already. And Anna has some incentive."

"So, this..." I patted her other breast. "This wasn't part of the plan..."

She grabbed my hand. "This is the only time I'm saying this. Understand?" Her voice had become harsh.

I nodded. "I love you dearly and would never use you like that."

"I understand. I had to ask."

"I know," she sighed. "It comes with the territory." Her voice got more caring. "What do you plan to do?"

"I'm not sure. We know where to look for Jules. If the Children are in Nevadaville, they must do their fund raising nearby- in the casinos in Black Hawk. I thought about infiltrating, but I'm too old. Most of these cults use women to lure younger men in. They wouldn't try that with me."

"How about an agent?"

"Who?"

"I know just the man. Luke Marquette. He looks seventeen, but he's twenty-eight and fully engaged in undercover work already, mostly drugs."

"Is he available?"

"He is now. This project is the highest priority for the local office of the Bureau until the threat is neutralized."

Chapter 25

"I'm going." Anna's statement was meant to avoid argument.

"I would love to use you, but they already know you. Jules may be there."

"But I can help."

"I need you here. I'll tell you what, I'll let you do some camera surveillance work you've been asking about."

"Really?" Her demeanor completely changed to excitement.

"Really. I've taken you on a couple of jobs. The 'Brady' case is really straightforward. Just pics of the husband at his second apartment."

"I can do it!"

"I know you can. But, remember, no improvising, no taking chances, no 'accidentally,'" I used air quotes, "meeting the subject. No risk. We're just being paid for photos, that's it."

"Got it. Just photos."

"Take the Camaro this afternoon and canvas the block, make sure you can get a good camera angle. You know the drill."

"Will do, boss!" She gleefully kissed me on the cheek and left for the parking lot.

I turned my attention to Lola. "You think you're up for a little undercover work?"

"It's about time I got to do somethin' besides answerin' the phone."

"You do way more than answer the phone. If it wasn't for you, we wouldn't have all these cases to work on, and get paid for. And no one says 'no' to you when you collect."

"I do have a way, don't I?" She chuckled and did a fake "Vogue" pose. "My feminine ways."

"Well, I need someone to watch the compound and let me know who comes and goes. We'll head up after lunch. I'm just waiting for Luke."

"Okay with me."

An hour went by and finally a young man came through the office doors. "Mr. Ruger?" he asked Lola.

"Come with me," Lola answered and led him to the conference room where I was waiting. Luke's eyes were transfixed on Lola's features.

"Over here," I interrupted his gaze and reached out to shake hands. "I'm Patrick Ruger. Call me 'Pat.'"

"Pat, Luke Marquette. Glad to meet you." He shook my hand and offered his hand to Lola. "And you are?"

"That's Lola Soto. She's one of my partners and will be working with us."

"Pleased to meet you, Luke," Lola struggled a bit to say it properly, then gingerly shook his hand and sat down. We followed suit.

Amanda was correct. This did look like a teenager. A white Anglo, probably five-foot-five, Luke was dressed in torn blue jeans and a faded orange Aéropostale tee shirt, with a dirty, beige-colored rope for a belt. He had three tattoos that I could see, one of which was a name, "Lucy." The others were a spider and a dagger. He had one earring in his left ear, a gold stud, and a bronze ear cuff on his right. No other piercings were evident.

"Luke, I assume Agent Sizemore brought you up to speed? I know it took a couple of days to get you off your assignment."

"Yes," he replied, tearing his eyes away from Lola. "Amanda... Agent Sizemore was very thorough. I'll be attempting to be recruited by Bartholomew's people and find out what I can. Infiltrate."

"Also, Amanda wants to get Jules back into custody for more questioning. You may need to lure her out."

"Yes, absolutely. I understand. Mr. Ruger?"

"Pat..."

"Pat, I appreciate the confidence you've placed in me. I'll do whatever it takes."

"Yes, I believe you will."

We left soon after. Lola, Luke and I drove to the casino region up in the front range and decided to spend

the night at the Mother Lode Hotel in Central City, a small gambling town adjacent to the much larger, Reno-like town of Black Hawk. The Lode was well-known to Coloradans as a small, clean, comfortable place to stay, and it had no casino to compete for your attention, just an excellent small-town restaurant. We had 3 rooms.

Friday in Black Hawk is a tale of two cities. Up until about 8 o'clock in the evening, at least in the summer, it was practically deserted. After 8, the narrow streets got crowded with both cars and pedestrians.

We toured the town and looked for places the Children might set up. After finding a couple of possibilities, such as on the connector streets between the two largest casinos, we diverted our attention and took a drive about four miles up the hill to Nevadaville.

A true ghost town, there had been a resurgence of interest in Nevadaville because of its proximity to the casino towns. Several houses were either very recently occupied or under construction. A ramshackle antique store had a faded "out-of-business" sign in the cracked front window, but there was obviously some work being done on the interior. The gravel road continued up and around the hill where lots were sectioned off for sale. A brand new, colorful sign promoting the future hillside development was prominently placed near the dirt entrance.

We continued another mile, past a few gold- and lead-mine tailings to find a group of old houses and travel trailers circled up like a wagon train on the prairie. This has got to be them, I told myself.

"This is it," Luke announced, echoing my sentiment. "The GPS coordinates match up." He put away his smart phone.

It was hot, so we found a small grove of aspens within view of the compound that Lola could sit within, with some large shrubs giving line-of-sight cover. We left her a lounge chair and cooler we had filled with ice and bottles of Lipton mango-flavored tea. There was no accounting for taste.

"One bar," Lola said. "I only got one bar."

"Try it."

She did and my phone eventually rang, though the ring wasn't steady. "Can you hear me okay?"

"Yes, Boss. It's kinda scratchy but I can hear you."

"We'll have to come up and check on you, just in case."

I went over the instructions and the few photos we had of certain people of interest, such as Jules and Bartholomew himself. I grabbed the binocs and showed her how they worked. Lola was to watch and report, nothing more. She agreed and Luke and I left for the center of Black Hawk.

Luke provided me a tiny two-way earpiece and placed his in his own ear, almost undetectable. "Testing, one, two, three ..."

"Loud and clear," I replied. "Let's go."

He bought himself a Mountain Dew at a convenience store inside the casino a short walk from one of the spots we had decided on. He then loitered at the corner, waiting to be approached. I sat in the Camaro in a covered garage, my space overlooking his cross streets, giving me a perfect view.

Luke was well-versed in surveillance and patience was not a problem. After about three hours of hanging out, he decided on the alternative side street a couple of blocks away. I drove over to the casino garage across from that intersection and found a good spot to watch.

I dialed up Lola and got no answer. I tried again and this time she picked up, the signal weak and her voice mixing with static. No action yet at the Children's compound.

I noticed a couple of teenage girls selling flowers a block away from Luke, and they headed in his direction. I notified him of the coming opportunity. Sure enough, they stopped and began a conversation with the obviously bored teen, asking about where he lived and what he was doing in such an adult town.

Luke was smooth, I had to admit. He sounded bored but interested in these young ladies, as any boy would be. They asked him if he wanted to join them in selling flowers and he allowed himself to be talked into it. Off they went, and the discussion began to turn toward spirituality.

"Boss?" It was Anna.

As I watched Luke and his new friends walk away, I was somewhat annoyed to be interrupted at this moment. "What's wrong?" I tried to keep Luke in sight.

"I'm in a little trouble."

My attention was really taken then. "What trouble?"

"I was watching the subject's house, waiting for him to leave and a drug bust happened nearby."

"And?"

"And they searched me and the car and found weed."

"Weed's legal now. What's the problem?" My tone was getting harsh, I noticed. I needed to tone it down. "What else happened?"

"They found some 'ludes, too."

"Quaaludes? I haven't seen those since the 70's."

"They've made a comeback, just like LSD. I used them all the time when I was pimped out. Lola, too."

"Where are you?"

"In a cell, in the 6th Precinct."

"Ask for Detective Jimmy Stewart. He should at least help you make bail and get your car back. I can't come right now."

"Thanks, Boss." Her voice seemed puny.

"I didn't do anything."

"Thanks for not yelling."

"We'll talk about this later." I hung up feeling like the parent I never was.

My attention returned to the street, where the kids couldn't be seen any more. I hurriedly drove out of the garage and began cruising north. I turned around at the end of town and headed back south. No Luke.

I had a hunch and called Lola. "Watch for any cars arriving with a couple of teenage girls and possible Luke."

"They're just pulling in." Her voice was scratchy on the limited signal. "I see him in the back seat."

"I'm on my way. Let me know if they leave again."

"Okay, B..." The call disconnected.

I found Lola seemingly enjoying her stake-out, lounging comfortably in the lawn chaise, sipping her tea, fanning herself with a flattened six-pack carton. "Comfy?"

"Sure am, Boss. This is what-chou do all day?"

"Something like that." I reached for the field glasses and searched the windows for movement. "I need to get closer to get in range of the earpieces."

I gave her back the binoculars and set my phone to vibrate, then left, sneaking over to the eastern-most

trailer. Nothing. One by one I passed by the trailers until I heard Luke's voice.

"Colorado sucks. It's still the Bible-belt, you know?"

One of the girls agreed, "I hated going to church until Bartholomew found me. Now..."

The other girl interrupted, "Now church is all we want to do!" They giggled. "And sex up boys."

My phone buzzed and it was Lola, but I couldn't hear anything, just static, then silence. I looked but couldn't see her any longer, since I had moved half-way around the circle of trailers and was behind one of the old cottages. A couple of minutes later there was a lot of commotion in the compound. In my earpiece I could hear the girls stop their recruiting session with Luke because someone important had arrived. Then I realized it was Bartholomew.

I heard footsteps behind me and turned around in time to see three thugs, and then the lights went out.

Chapter 26

The back of my head was throbbing when I woke up. I tried to get up but found my wrists and ankles were tied to metal bedposts. I realized then I was lying on a bare single mattress sitting on a bed frame, but at least I was still fully clothed.

My earpiece as still active and I heard one girl say, "Papa Bartholomew, Luke would like to join us. His family has abandoned him."

The other girl said, "We think he will thrive with us."

A man's voice said, "Let me take a look at you, boy." It was a friendly tone.

Luke said, "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Bartholomew."

Bartholomew replied, "It's Mr. Christian. Is this true? You have been abandoned?"

After a pause, Luke responded, "Yes... I guess it is. Can I stay here? I can work off my room and board."

"Yes, my child. We let all who enter here be at peace with us. Have you shown Luke the rhapsody?"

"We were just getting to that," one of them answered.

"Come back and see me when you have had the experience. Very good to meet you, Luke."

"Thanks, Mr. Christian."

There was silence for a minute or two, some clatter, then more silence. After a while I could make out Bartholomew's voice, probably on the phone. Luke had apparently planted the earpiece in the old man's office. I could hear Bartholomew, weakly, in the distance, but could make out some of the conversation.

The door to my room opened and someone came in. "You're Angel's friend, aren't you?" I recognized the voice, it was Jules. She closed the door and walked around the bed. "Pat, isn't it?"

Jules wasn't well dressed. In fact she had torn brown slacks and a red blouse that obviously hadn't been washed in a while. Her brunette hair was dusty and ragged. Her face and hands were clean, however, and she had been brushing her teeth. It was quite a contrast.

"I haven't seen you in a while." I lifted my arm against the bindings. "A little help?"

She didn't walk to my ties. Instead she sat on the edge of the bed and said, "A shame about Angel. I liked him."

"I did too, but I didn't know he was an abductor of young women."

"He wasn't, at least not before he met me."

"What do you mean?"

"We needed a way to contact the Islamic radicals here in town. I paid him a lot to get us together."

It didn't compute. "I don't understand."

“Look, it worked out... except for Angel. We didn’t foresee that.” She began unbuttoning my shirt. “He was perfect. He had that hidden storage space for his ‘business’, and once I told him what we would do if he refused, he was all in.”

“What are you doing?”

“Relax! Ever hear of the ‘Rhapsody’?” She finished with my shirt and flipped it open. “We believe that if a man and woman climax simultaneously, a miracle can happen.”

I tried to move away from her and pulled against my bindings. “What about Elena? That was you?”

“Sort of. We knew she’d been involved with the radicals we wanted to talk to and insisted on Angel picking her up. She’s been most helpful.” She reached for my belt and unbuckled it. “Before Papa Bartholomew decides what to do with you, he said I could introduce you to the Rhapsody.”

“Wait. How did you get Angel to do these things?”

Jules’ hand paused. “He has a sister and nephew in Aurora. He knew what we were capable of.” She reached into my pants and pulled my manhood out.

“Wait, wait!” I tried to think of something. “I have Hepatitis B. We can’t have sex. It’s dangerous!”

“That’s okay.” She pulled out a condom and tore open the package.

“But...” I was thinking hard. “It’s so contagious, you can’t risk it.”

That didn’t deter her. With some physical persuasion, I got hard and the condom was slipped on. She stood up and dropped her slacks. She climbed back onto the bed, covered my mouth with one hand and guided the now-placed condom with the other.

The door opened up and I heard the distinct click of my 9 mil being cocked. I assumed it was Luke, but Lola’s voice said, “Get off him!”

Jules didn’t oblige, instead looked up to the ceiling and slowly moved up, then down on me. She closed her eyes and started lifting up again.

“I said...” Lola clocked her with the pistol in the back of the head. “Get off him, bitch!” Jules fell to the floor, knocked out.

“How’d you get in here?”

Lola smiled. “There’s a lotta girls in here. I just threw some sand and dirt on my outfit and messed up my hair. Then I walked in like I owned the place.”

I noticed then that her look was indeed similar to Jules. Lola looked over at my condition and asked, “Want me to take care of that?”

“No, thank you, Lola.” She was already untying me. “I really owe you one.”

“Who’s keepin’ score?”

We tied up Jules in the bed, then kept quiet and laid low for a bit since we could hear followers passing by the room with some regularity. I continued to listen to the hidden earpiece.

“The dual threat will work in both our favors.” Bartholomew was talking to someone, and I wondered what he meant by “dual threat.”

“Uhhh...” Jules was coming to.

I put my hand on her mouth. “We can gag you if you start making noise.” I nodded toward Lola. “I wouldn’t recommend it.”

Lola flashed a confident smile and it looked like reality was dawning on our new captive. She remained silent.

Another male voice came over the earpiece. It was Arabic-accented English. “When the Arab world sees the terrorist act on Egyptian soil carried out by Americans, we will be that much closer to ousting the infidels from our continent.”

Bartholomew seemed to agree. “Anarchy in America will not be far behind. You taking credit for the bombing here will help accomplish that, when fear takes its toll.”

“Two bombings,” I said aloud. “One here, one in in Egypt.” I grabbed my phone and dialed Amanda. Nothing happened. I looked and saw that I had no bars. Looking around, I saw no phone in this room.

The Arab voice continued. "Money doesn't hurt your cause either, I suspect."

"You are correct. We can't prepare properly without it."

"Lola, I need you to get to the car."

"What do ya want me to do, Boss?"

"Go down the mountain until you get a signal and call the FBI. Tell Amanda that we found Jules and that there's a double bombing planned." I put my hands on her shoulders. "This is important." She nodded. "Then wait for me at the office."

"Okay, Boss." Lola went to the door and paused, quickly re-examining her clothing. She sighed and slipped out, softly closing the door behind her.

"Is the timetable accurate?" It was the Arab.

"We are only one day behind. It's not easy gathering these particular ingredients."

"So, Friday?"

"Yes, indeed. Can you have yours ready by next Friday?"

"Yes. It will be a remarkable day."

I turned back to Jules. "Did you know what they were planning? Bombing the town?"

Jules stayed mum.

“No more contact unless it’s absolutely required,” the Arab was saying. “Praise Allah!”

“Good day to you, sir,” Bartholomew replied. The Arab was leaving.

I thought about my options and decided to find Luke. “Sorry about this,” I said as I stuffed a hand towel deep into Jules mouth. “Don’t struggle with it and you’ll be able to breathe okay. Otherwise, you might choke.”

I was hoping Luke was nearby since he had been in Bartholomew’s office. I peeked out the door and no one was immediately nearby. I quietly left the room and hurried into the next room over. It was an empty replica of the room I had just left. I moved to the next room and found Luke in bed, alone and not bound.

I motioned ‘quiet’ with an index finger to my mouth and Luke obliged. I got closer and gave him my earpiece. “Brilliant idea to leave the earpiece as a bug,” I whispered. “They’re planning a double bombing.”

Luke’s eyes got big. “When?”

I brought him up to speed. “Stay as close to Bartholomew’s office as possible to keep eavesdropping.” I looked around and saw there was a phone in the room. “You’ll have to use that to call me — cell phones don’t seem to work here.”

“I think all calls require a code. I’ll try to get Pam and Page to make some calls until I get it.”

“Good thinking. You know, you’re good at this.”

“Yes, I am.”

Looking back into the main hall, I returned to Jules. I took out my gun and put it to her head. “I don’t want to kill you, but I will. It’s national security. Do you understand?” She nodded. “I’m going to take the gag off. No noise, no calling out, got it?” She nodded again.

I made sure she heard the click of my cocking the hammer and slowly pulled the towel out of her mouth. Jules stayed silent.

“Now,” I continued. “We’re leaving. You’ll be dead before you hit the ground if you try anything, make any noise. Do you believe me?”

She briefly nodded again, this time with some fear on her face. I carefully untied her, one rope at a time, and helped her stand up. I had her turn her back to me and tied her hands behind her.

“This is how it’s going to go. I have a hair trigger on this thing, meaning that if I even trip on a floor board it could go off. We’re going out together and we’ll head for the east trailer, where there’s an opening.” She was beginning to shake. I had made my point and evidently Jules wasn’t ready to become a martyr. “Everything will be fine if you cooperate. Now, let’s go.”

We went to the door together, me right behind her, the gun barrel touching her back under her blouse. Fortune was with me as there was no undesired interruption all the way to Lola’s spot. Untying her hands, she was seemingly subservient while we walked,

and it took about a half-hour to get to a car I could hot-wire. Central City was just too far on foot.

Chapter 27

I spent the weekend contemplating strategy, as had the FBI, who had sent over a couple of agents to relieve me of Jules.

I had only two calls from Luke since I left the compound Friday afternoon, both disappointing. There was no further talk about bombs, and they might have been spooked about my appearance and disappearance. Perhaps Amanda had some news. She was due to arrive in Central City soon.

Monday mornings were quiet in the casino towns, with barely a whisper of traffic. A knock at the door caught my attention and I went to the corner of the room where I had a sliver of view of the sidewalk outside my door. It was a woman. I opened the door slowly, my Ruger drawn. Thankfully, it was Amanda, and she was alone.

"I wanted you to know that we're rounding up the Children this morning." She stepped in, hugged me firmly, then kissed me. "I missed you."

"Me, too. What's going on?"

"We have a time problem and there's been no more talking at the compound about the bombs. The bug..."

"Luke's earpiece?"

"Yes, it ran out of juice and we had to either plant another one and hope something came up or just take down the whole cult and take our chances with

interrogation. We decided on the latter.” She sat on the office chair at the built-in desk and faced me. “We couldn’t have done this without you.”

“Oh, I think you could have just fine.”

“Not as easily, then. The Bureau wants to show its appreciation. You not only picked up Jules, but uncovered the plot.”

“I’m not done here. If they haven’t planted a device in Black Hawk yet; they’re going to. I plan on finding it.”

“We have experts for that, dear.” It was only slightly condescending. “Like I was saying, the Bureau’s Midwest Regional Director is taking us to dinner tomorrow night. A really fancy dinner.”

“That’s not appropriate. The bombing hasn’t been prevented.” I was getting very irritated with the typical bureaucratic smugness. “I’m not celebrating until it’s over and everyone is safe.”

“That’s a formality now. They’ve already found the explosives in Egypt and disarmed them. We just pointed the Egyptian army in the right direction and they moved in and took care of it. We earned some points there, too.”

“We’re missing something.”

“What do you mean?”

“Bartholomew went to a lot of trouble to get together with the radical Muslims. He coerced one of my best friends into kidnapping their new poster child

so they could make the offer of cooperation. Why would he do that?"

"So there would be no evidence of the meeting."

"Exactly. Someone who would employ a thought-out strategy like that is no ordinary scum, wouldn't you agree?"

"I think you're giving him too much credit."

"I don't think so. 'Never underestimate your suspect.' Isn't that Law Enforcement 101?"

"We have him in custody, and the plan will unravel. It always does." She stood up to calm me, but I wasn't having it.

"Mandy, we're missing something, I can feel it. Can I get in a room with him?"

"I don't believe so. You're not authorized for interrogation."

"How about a jail break? Let me break him out. I'll bet I can get him to tell me where it's going to happen."

"You're being foolish. We'll handle it."

"Just the same," I replied rather tersely. "I think I'll stick around and see what I can dig up."

"I was really hoping for a little reunion tonight..."

"I'm sorry, babe, there's just too much at stake."

“Okay, I understand,” she sighed. “I’ll give you the week.” She opened the door. “Please let me know what you find.”

“Ditto.” I kissed her like I missed her, which I did. I walked her out to her car, predictably a large black Escalade with darkened windows. “Consider my offer. I know can get Barty-boy to confide.”

“Honestly, I don’t think it will come to that. I’ll let the director know you’ve been through an ordeal and would rather postpone dinner.” She climbed in, leaned over and kissed me goodbye. It took a couple of tries to get the heavy door closed fully.

She drove off and I couldn’t shake my feeling of impending doom.

Back in my room I decided I needed to talk scenarios with someone and Jimmy agreed to come up to Central City. We had just three-plus days to find the explosives. That wasn’t much time when you’re starting at ground zero.

I let him in my room and offered the office chair. I sat on the bed.

“Jimmy, I’ve got a hypothetical.”

“I’m game.”

“You are a cult leader wanting a large amount of cash and some notoriety. You make a deal to swap attacks with extremists in the Middle East.”

“Like the people who agree to kill each other’s spouses... ‘Strangers on a Train’.”

“Exactly. You need materials to make a device, and don’t want to be seen.”

“The Boston Marathon bombings might be a blueprint. They used pressure-cooker bombs.”

“I thought of that, but those were mainly for killing a lot of people in a large, open, crowded area. I would think this might call for something more dramatic... maybe take out a building.”

“You might be right.” Jimmy grabbed the laptop and began browsing. “Try... fertilizer?”

“Well, a fertilizer bomb would definitely be dramatic. Fertilizer, especially ammonium nitrate, is somewhat regulated now, and always tracked in large amounts. It’s really difficult to obtain in bulk.”

“How about small amounts over time?” Jimmy read further. “This article says you can make a bomb with fertilizer, propane and gasoline or diesel fuel.” He stopped and closed the laptop. “Are we being watched? I’m searching the web for bomb-making ...”

“Let me worry about that.” I stood up and began pacing. “So, small amounts of the right kind of fertilizer ... they ... you ... would probably pay cash and use different cult members to buy it. How would we find them?”

“Hmmm....” Jimmy sat way back in his chair. “The FBI computers may be able to find a pattern of cash purchases of fertilizer, especially by non-farmers.”

“Yes, that might work...” I picked up the phone and called Amanda. I told her our theory and she promised to get Data Analysis on it immediately, but she brought up a good point. “Small cash purchases will be hard to detect via computer. Not all purchases are cataloged, and without a credit card transaction to follow, it will be even more difficult.”

“That’s why they would have used cash. We’ll have to do it the old-fashioned way, knocking on doors. Can you email me a list of probable fertilizer outlets to visit?”

“Sure, but who’s ‘we’? Is Lola helping?”

“No, I sent Lola back to work on a couple of surveillance cases we have pending. I didn’t want her or Anna anywhere near Black Hawk when this goes down ... I hope you don’t mind, I’ve recruited Detective Stewart to assist.”

Amanda chuckled. “Tell Jimmy I said hi. I think bringing him in is a good idea.”

“Glad to hear it. What else do we need to know?”

“The minimum amount of ammonia nitrate in a fertilizer considered usable for terrorists is 30 percent. Lower concentrations aren’t effective and aren’t regulated.”

I glanced at the Internet page that Jimmy had up on the screen. "Thanks, this site doesn't say anything about regulation."

"Wait ..." She paused and I heard papers shuffling. "Anyone buying 25 pounds or more of 30-plus concentration must register with the government. Even if you buy less, you still have to show ID. Non-farming consumers don't usually need this type of application, so they keep track of it ... periodically."

"That helps. We're looking for someone buying less than 25 pounds of 30 percent or more of ammonia nitrate. How much would they want for a bomb?"

"I'm guessing 200 pounds or so would make quite a noise."

"Would that take out a building?"

"Yes, if it was placed right."

"Two hundred pounds would fit in a van."

"Yes it would."

"We're going to be busy for a couple of days."

Chapter 28

“Good cop, bad cop?” Jimmy offered with a chuckle.

“I’m not a cop,” I replied. We were heading down the valley road to the first of four possible suppliers of fertilizer. “Besides, for this I think we need good cop, good cop.”

“You were a helluva good cop once. I wish you hadn’t retired... my success ratio really took a hit.”

“Sorry I was so inconsiderate. Besides, you just needed as good a partner as I had.”

“Don’t I know it. You know, one of the gals they assigned to me broke a heel running after a perp. A heel!”

We both laughed. It was good to lighten the mood with so much at stake.

“This first one is ‘Henley Soil and Fertilizer.’” Jimmy was reading from Amanda’s email from my smartphone. “She says that John Henley is the owner and they deal with pure ammonium nitrate and lesser concentrations.” He scrolled down the remarks. “Also,” he continued, “his son, John Jr., goes to Colorado State in Boulder and has been picked up a few times on some lesser drug charges. Nothing ever stuck.”

“I suppose we’ll have to talk to the son.”

“It’s a big jump from minor drug possession to supporting terrorism.”

"I know, but we can't rule anything out at this point."

"We may have to... not much time left."

I let the last statement go, since it was already weighing on me. The feds should be doing this, I thought, not us.

We pulled into the driveway at the large yellow and white sign, which was weathered and stained. The parking lot was dirt covered in gravel, and there were large ruts dug in by what must have been enormous truck tires. The building was built with cream-painted steel panels, and looked to be about 40 years old. Rust and peeling paint at the edges of each door and window completed the look.

To the right of the office door was an open metal gate and inside you could see the piles of various materials in outdoor cubicles. You could just make out the labels on the cubes, one of which said, "Amm. Nitrate \$626/ton"

I parked and we both went to the office with Jimmy leading. "Excuse me, m'dear," he asked the young cashier, reaching for some Irish charm. "Is there a John Henley here today?" He pulled out and flashed his Denver PD badge.

"Just a moment." The teenager went to a side office and yelled, "Dad, the cops are here!" Then she returned and calmly stated, "He'll be right out." She picked up her Game Boy from the counter and phased out.

Jimmy and I looked at each other and held our tongues. A couple of minutes went by and just as I was going to interrupt the young lady's game, we heard from the back, "Gentlemen. What can I do for you?" The man appeared from an aisle of bird seed and feeders, and he almost completely filled the space. He seemed to be at home in his faded coveralls and Rockies baseball cap, and he hadn't missed a meal in a while.

"Mr. Henley?" Jimmy and I shook hands with him. "I'm Detective James Stewart from the Denver Police and this is a special consultant, Patrick Ruger. Do you have a few minutes to talk about ammonium nitrate?"

"Sure thing. Another bomb threat? The F.B.I. calls me about every other month."

I spoke up. "Sir, there is indeed a bomb threat and we need to know if one of your customers may have spent cash for some ammonium nitrate recently."

"No, sir, they have not. I know the law and wouldn't think of breaking it." He stepped closer. "Can we take this into my office?" The wide business owner waved us to follow and stayed at the door to close it behind us. "This kind of talk is bad for business, you understand."

"We got it."

Henley sat at his desk and we took the metal folding guest chairs. "None of the fertilizer outlets would do that. But, feel free to look through my books and interview anyone here. I've got nothing to hide."

I believed him. "So you've got no ammonium nitrate missing?"

"Nope, none at all."

I stopped a moment to think. "Let's say you are right. There is a bomb. Where would they get the ammonium nitrate in large enough quantities without attracting suspicion?"

"Well..." he brought his hand up and rubbed his chin. "I'll bet they could get it from Wyoming, large quantities, too. From..."

Jimmy interrupted. "Wyoming? Why there?"

Henley had an irritated look. "I was about to say... from a farm supplier. Wyoming is still the 'Wild West.' The government don't have no say in what they do half the time."

"Just how would they get it?"

"Easy. Pay a farmer some dough and have them buy a ton. There's no way of knowin' how much a farmer puts down on his crops."

"Well, then," I cut in. "If no one knows, what's to stop a farmer here from doing that?"

"Nothing, really," Henley replied. "It's just that here in Colorado, we don't take money for nothin' foolish..."

I finished his thought, "...so why pay a fortune to try to corrupt the Colorado supply when you could do it cheap in Wyoming."

“Talk to the wrong farmer here,” Jimmy added, “and the heat would be on you. Makes sense.”

“I know a place... Encampment, population 200, give or take. Just about 4 hours’ drive from here. There’s an ammonium nitrate supplier there on Highway... 230, I think... no security, nothing.”

We all fell silent, contemplating the possibilities. I decided to backtrack. “You have a son, John Junior?”

“Yes, JJ ... why?”

“Where is he now?”

“JJ is at Stanford in California.”

“The FBI shows him here at Colorado State.”

“Well, officially he is still enrolled here, but for the last 5 months or so he’s been staying with friends at Stanford. He’s helping them organize an anti-gay-marriage protest.”

“So, he’s not attending classes there.”

“No, sir, just livin’ with friends.”

“Before he left, how much time did he spend here at the business?”

“None. He hates fertilizer. He’s never worked here, not even when he was a kid.”

Jimmy interrupted us. “Can we get a couple of names of those friends of his in California?”

“Sure, I’ll check my emails from him.”

Chapter 29

“Yeah,” I replied. It was Amanda on the phone, telling me that Junior’s alibi checked out. “I thought that would be the case.” I put her on speaker so Jimmy could be in the conversation.

“There’s no way, as far as we can tell, that the kid has been anywhere but Northern California for the last several months.”

“Amanda, this is Jimmy....” He said, raising his voice in the direction of the cell phone.

“Enjoying the drive?”

“Not really... I was wondering if the kid’s activities at Stanford tended towards violence.”

“No, nothing even close. He and his friends seem to pop up at social events with signs and generally make a nuisance of themselves. That’s about it.”

I spoke up. “My gut is telling me that this Henley dude is right. They wouldn’t risk getting caught here local. That’s why we’re on the road.”

“Take me off speaker... bye, Jimmy!”

“Bye, Mandy!” Jimmy edged back straight, no longer leaning towards the phone.

Privately, Amanda said, “What’s the plan? Am I going to see you tonight?”

"Probably not. We're going to check out a couple of fertilizer suppliers near the Colorado border and go from there."

"I miss you."

"Me, too... I'll call when we're headed home. Love you." I realized then that we must be at the "love you" stage after all.

"Love you, too. Hurry back."

I hung up, or 'disconnected' was the better term for these gadgets. I turned on the radio and got nothing but static.

"You should get satellite radio, it works everywhere. You get five comedy channels, too."

"I know, I just haven't gotten around to it."

"You've got partners now, so let one of them do it."

I sighed aloud. "You don't understand. They're my partners, not my kids. You remember the first year we hooked up?"

"Like it was yesterday."

"I didn't make you do anything I wouldn't do myself."

"Except the 513's..."

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah, I know."

I thought about some of our cases over those years. "You remember the circus clown that was holding up people downtown?"

"The one where the Springs D.A. thought he was going to lose the bust because no one could recognize him without clown makeup?"

"Yeah... you really came through on that one, Jimmy."

"I got a lot of grief from the squad on that one. Never bust a clown if you want to retain your sanity, that's what I learned."

"Yeah, but the way you got the perp to confess was genius."

"I always remembered what they taught in the academy. 'If criminals were smart, they wouldn't be criminals.'"

Yeah, but pretending to use a photocopier as a face recognition machine was priceless." We both laughed as we recalled the guy fessing up. "I wonder if he ever figured out we tricked him."

"Someone probably told him. Come to think of it, he probably took a lot more flak in the can than I did in the office." We laughed for quite a while, which trickled into silence once more.

A bit later, we were about two hours into the drive, running northwest, a few minutes out from Laramie, and getting bored with the silence. Jimmy was playing a

game on his phone and I was trying to come up with Plan B, in case we didn't find what we were looking for.

"Patty, I got a question for you."

"Shoot."

"Why'd you retire after just 20? You never even talked to me about it."

I thought about how to answer and decided the truth could be told. "I promised Ellie I would get out as soon as I could retire. She couldn't take the stress of not knowing if I'd come home safely each night. I told her I wouldn't let anyone think it was her fault, so I went to the company shrink and had her recommend retirement."

"That makes a whole lot more sense than what I was thinking."

"What were you thinking?"

"That you couldn't look after your partner anymore."

"What?"

"I had had that bout with pain meds, remember? I wasn't doing so well. As soon as I got off 'em, you left. I thought..."

"Thought I was fed up? I'm really sorry," I said, not sarcastically. "I didn't think of it from your perspective... not at all. I should have."

"I'm just glad you're telling me now."

“I guess that explains some awkward dinners over the years.”

“Hey, you saved my butt more times than I can count. The least I can do is give you the benefit of the doubt.”

Laramie arrived in the distance and I pulled into the McDonald's, one of the two fast food places on this thoroughfare. We both got out and stretched, took a piss and got some road food. We still had an hour and a half or so of driving ahead of us, plus the return trip. McDonald's isn't great, I thought to myself, but it's consistent.

We made a left at Highway 70, just before hitting Encampment, and drove a mile through its tiny suburb, Riverside. In another mile east, we found a local fertilizer supply on the right. It was basically a shack on a dirt lot, surrounded by an old buck-and-rail fence, with a couple of ten-foot-tall piles of chemicals on the side. The gate was open and I pulled in.

The shack was just that, weathered and mostly unpainted. There was faded signage painted above the door of the building that you could just make out, “Jake's Feed and Fertilizer.” We got out and knocked on the door, to no avail- the place seemed deserted. Obviously there was no security in place, just as Henley had said.

After wandering around the lot, I decided to push the issue. I pulled out my handgun and pointed it straight up into the air, but Jimmy pushed it back down before I could shoot.

He pointed to a dirt road that went south up to the foothills from the back of the property. In the distance was a dust trail that was heading our way. When it got within about a half mile, we could make out 3 red 4-wheelers, speeding at what was probably full throttle. We waited.

A couple of minutes later they pulled into the lot and each grabbed a squirrel rifle before coming to confront us. I held up and showed my pistol, and cautiously put it back in my holster. "We aren't here to make trouble."

One of the dudes was older than the others, perhaps the father of the two younger riders, each either in their late teens or early twenties. The dust they had kicked up was all over them, but otherwise they were well-dressed for farming- no tattered or worn out clothing. The father lowered his rifle and the other two followed. "What are you here for? You're not farmers."

"No, were not," Jimmy answered, pulling out his badge. "I'm Detective Stewart from Denver and this is Mr. Ruger. We're here following a lead on some illegal ammonium nitrate sales."

"You don't have jurisdiction here."

"You are right, but we can get the F.B.I. here in two hours, if you'd rather ... We believe a lot of people are going to get killed if we don't find out about it quickly. Can you help?"

"So, it's in a bomb, this ammonium nitrate you're tracing?"

I joined the conversation. "Yes, that's right. Have you sold any pure nitrate in the last month or so to strangers, or maybe to a farmer that bought more than usual?"

"Since you don't got jurisdiction, I don't have to talk to you, unless ... you got binoculars?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I could really use some binoculars."

I went to the car and found them, then handed them to the older gentleman. "These are pretty expensive..."

"Perfect. We gotta deal?"

"If you can tell us something useful."

"Fine. We don't have pure nitrate. The stuff you see here," he pointed to the taller of the two piles, "is 22 percent ammonium nitrate, blended with other chemicals. It don't make good bomb material."

"Damn," Jimmy said under his breath. "Do you know where the pure stuff is around here?"

"Well, there's only one place in these parts that sells it. That would be Carl's Farm Supply in Centennial ... Centennial, Wyoming, not Centennial, Colorado."

"We passed right through Centennial on the way here," I replied. "It's a one-horse town on the 130 ... not even a stop sign. I didn't see any farming supply stores there."

The younger men laughed. "You wouldn't if you didn't know where to turn," one of them said. They all got back on their Quadrunners. The father said, "There's a gravel road that goes north from the restaurant. Follow that about a mile and you'll see the place." They started up the vehicles and he turned back towards me, holding up the binoculars. "Thanks for the field glasses, fellas!" They left in single file, the father in the lead, each leaving a choking dust cloud around us.

Once the dust had settled, Jimmy smiled in my direction. "Did you keep the receipt on those binoculars?"

Chapter 30

The hour-long drive to Centennial went from monotonous to spectacular, with the high-altitude valley funneling into the light gray, sheer cliffs of the Snowy Mountains. Small mirror lakes were sprinkled about up against the mountainside, reversing the tall peaks' images in the solid glass surfaces. The sun was setting and the long shadows and faint orange hues enhanced the view even further.

When we pulled into Centennial, it was obvious that the sidewalks had been pulled up. There were no signal lights on the main highway through town, and calling it a 'town' was being kind. We had passed a regional school, most likely the K-through-12 variety, just as we entered city limits. In the dimming sunlight you could see old houses scattered both close to the road and farther away. A two-story convenience market and a trading post, both made up in western décor, were on one side of the street, and a restaurant, the "Bear Creek Café and Hitchin' Post," was on the north side.

There were lights on in the restaurant and a couple of dusty pickup trucks in the dirt parking lot out front. Nothing else seemed open, so I pulled alongside one of the trucks and we got out. An old geezer dressed in a grubby western shirt, dirty jeans and a tattered cowboy hat came out the door just then, passed by us without a word or gesture, got in one of the pickups, and spun his wheels on the way out of the lot. He did, however, leave some of his cow-dung smell behind.

We both suppressed coughs long enough to enter the café and stood at the “Please Seat Yourself” sign, sizing the place up. Not a spot in the café was less than 40 years old, with the lone exception of the server, though the floors and counters were unexpectedly clean.

“We’re just about ready to close,” the waitress informed us as she appeared from out of the kitchen in the back. “And we’re just about out of food. I’m sorry.”

“You got any coffee?” Jimmy asked in a hopeful tone.

“A little. Sit here ...” she pointed to the counter in front of us, “... and I’ll get you some.”

Another gentleman was sitting at the far end of the counter. He was middle-aged, unshaven, and sported a black and silver Raiders cap, a loose denim shirt with a white tee showing in its unbuttoned opening and some well-worn Levis. He seemed to be finishing up his meal.

I spoke up in his direction. “Good afternoon.”

“It’s almost night, but it has been a good day.” He stood up and reached out his hand. “Jacob Johnson, but call me Duke.”

“I’m Pat Ruger,” I said, shaking his hand, “and this is Detective Jimmy Stewart. We’re here from Denver.”

Duke took a step towards Jimmy to shake. “Jimmy Stewart?”

Jimmy reached past me and shook hands. "Duke," he acknowledged. "No relation to the actor."

"There's no lodgin' here since the motel closed. My wife would insist on ya'all comin' over and lettin' us put you up. Don't say no, it'd get me in all kinds a trouble."

"Much obliged, Duke. I think we'll take you up on that. We don't really want to drive on over to Cheyenne just to drive back tomorrow."

"Hold that coffee, Suzy," Duke's voice carried to the back. "They're coming home with me."

Suzy reappeared from the kitchen with an empty pot in her hand. "That's nice of ya, Duke. I was just about to apologize- we're all out." She held the pot upside down without a drop falling out.

"Thanks, anyway," Pat said, and Suzy smiled.

We followed Duke out to his twenty-year-old Ford pickup. "I'm just up the street," he pointed north up the gravel road. "I think your car'll make it okay, if'n we go slow."

"I'm hopin' you're right." We got in the Camaro, backed out and waited for Duke to pull out. We trailed him about a mile and a half up the road and he turned left into an opening in a tall hedge. As we followed him onto the gravel driveway, a large rustic farmhouse came into view.

Duke's house was on the edge of a plot, and even in the waning sunlight, there were ankle-high crops

growing green as far as I could see. An occasional patch of yellow sunflowers dotted the field, all facing west. The two-story house had a covered porch wrapped from the right, across the front, and half-way around the left of the building.

Jimmy tugged my sleeve and nodded toward the garage, an apparently long-standing, barn-shaped 3-car structure, detached, and a brick-laden path connecting it to the house. The third door of the redwood-and-white-painted garage was extra tall and open, revealing a fairly new motorhome resting inside.

Duke opened the tan storm door, then the red wooden front door, and yelled inside, “Martha, we got company!”

Soon we were sitting in their sitting room. An anxious feeling came over me, and maybe a little guilt. Here we were, enjoying pecan pie and great coffee while a bomb might literally be ticking. Our hostess, Martha, must have noticed my uneasiness because she asked me what was wrong. Martha was modestly dressed, in her late 50’s, and had let her hair go white, which she kept in a wrapped paisley scarf. Her voice was motherly and sincerely concerned.

“I’m sorry, Martha. This case is bothering me a bit.” We hadn’t mentioned why we were looking for missing fertilizer, letting them believe it was a Homeland Security request. “We shouldn’t be out bothering nice people like you.”

“No bother, really. It’s our civic duty. Besides,” she continued, “we don’t get big-city company very often.”

“This is good pie, Nana.” Two grandkids were staying with the Johnsons. This one was the 10-year-old Kaitlin, and also sitting with us was her big brother, Randall. “Can I have some more?”

“Just a little,” Martha said, bringing over a second helping.

Suddenly, a loud crash erupted from the front room. We all hurried out see what happened and found a brick was laying in the middle of the living room floor among a thousand shards of glass. Wheels spun out in front and I could hear some laughter fading away with the truck leaving the scene.

“Sit tight,” I ordered the family as Jimmy and I ran outside. We jumped into the Camaro and began the chase.

Jimmy took out his cell phone by habit but tossed it in the back seat in disgust when he realized we still didn’t have a signal. “Don’t lose ‘em, it’s just us tonight.” He pulled his pistol out and cocked it.

“Got it.” The dust in the distance was getting thicker, meaning we were getting closer. The half-moon was giving some visibility on both sides of the road, and I wondered how far north this path continued.

We reached 70 and started fishtailing, so I backed it off just a bit until the car was under control. It seemed

like the car we were chasing was pulling away, and I thought we might lose it.

Jimmy must have been reading my mind because he said, "Just stay back, they'll make a mistake. They always do."

"You're right... isn't that something I told you?"

"Yep."

After several minutes, the dust was faint and we could barely see the car as it went up the slope, about a half-mile ahead. The road was nearly straight for most of the chase, meaning the other driver didn't really have to do anything but floor it to get away. My Camaro wasn't made for gravel.

I decided to make one last run at them and pushed down on the accelerator. Perhaps the other driver thought we had broken off the chase, because he seemed surprised when we closed in. He stepped on the gas and spun the truck clockwise while leaving the right side of the road. To our relief, it didn't flip, but settled quickly in the newly-plowed ground.

We pulled up nearby and hopped out to check on everyone. It was pretty dark but we could see adequately by moonlight and with the headlights of both vehicles. Near the road, off to the left of the truck, a couple of teenage boys were laying prone in the dirt, moaning and holding different parts of their bodies. Jimmy holstered his piece and went over to check on them while I went to the driver's side of the pickup. The

driver was slumped forward, a bit groggy, but seemed okay. The passenger was the only girl among them and she appeared to be fine.

I opened the driver's door and grabbed the dude by the jacket shoulder and pulled him out. "You okay?" He nodded. "Tell me what's going on here."

"What the hell?"

I grabbed him again. "What's your name?"

"Josh... Josh Bradford. Who the hell are you?"

"I'm the guy that's going to put a bullet in your head if you don't start giving me some answers." I reached for my gun and visibly rested my hand on its holster.

"Hold on, mister! We didn't hurt no one."

"How do you know that? You throw a brick into someone's home and who knows who gets hurt? There were grandkids in that house!" I looked at the other kids. "Who are they?"

He pointed to one of the guys on the ground. "One's my brother, the other two are friends." He turned back to me. "Listen, we were jus' bored and wanted to shake this place up, that's all. We didn't mean no harm."

"So you throw bricks into everyone's houses?"

Josh didn't reply.

Another pickup pulled up and Duke got out. "Who's that down there?" he called out. "Richie, is that you?"

"Yeah, sorry, Mr. Johnson," said the brother.

"What's your dad gonna say?" Duke walked over to the girl in the passenger seat and opened the door. "Brenda? What's gotten into you kids?"

Brenda bowed her head and sobbed.

"Do you know these guys are police? You know how much trouble you're in?"

"They've had quite a scare, but I think they're okay," Jimmy offered. "I think we better get them to their parents."

"Good idea," Duke replied. "I'll take Brenda and Jake, over there, you guys can take Josh and Richie."

I added, "Jimmy will drive the truck with one and I'll take the other... assuming it starts back up." I reached into the cab and turned the key. The engine turned over and it roared for a moment, quieting down to a purr.

We all got into our respective vehicles and drove south, back towards town. It took almost a half hour at the speed limit to get back. Josh, riding with me, had me turn left before reaching the Johnson's house, then immediately right into a driveway. Jimmy followed me in with the pickup and Richie.

We got out and I realized we were at a house next door to a fertilizer supply shack. I walked toward the building and finally saw what I was looking for, a sign that faintly said "Carl's Farm Supply."

Chapter 31

Jimmy and I were invited in and we sat around the Bradfords' kitchen table, a large aluminum model with a marbled yellow top. There were 8 chairs around the table, each with the same yellow texture in the vinyl covers as on the padded seats and backs. Four of the chairs were being used now by us and the Bradford parents. Two others had the two sulking brothers.

Carl and Jenny Bradford were typical, slightly overweight, middle-aged parents, and might have been mistaken for farmers in Kansas or Nebraska. Their clothing was also the result of their occupation. Working on and around farms precludes anything but jeans and other western wear. However, Mrs. Bradford did splurge on her boots, a pair of pink Justins, heavily detailed with swirls and rhinestones.

Jimmy laid out the probable charges, such as assault, destruction of private property and malicious mischief. "If you turn the boys into the county sheriff's office tomorrow, and they promise to pay for the damage, I'm sure the Johnsons will be reasonable and not press formal charges."

"Yes, sir, we will," Jenny promised. "I don't know what came over them. They're good boys."

An eye-roll by Josh almost made his father jump out of his seat, but I put my arm out and tried to make him relax and sit back down. "You boys go to your rooms," he said sternly. "I'll deal with you later."

Josh stood up fast, sliding his chair back across the room to the far wall. "I can't wait to leave this God-forsaken place." He and Richie left and climbed the wood stairs, slamming their doors once inside their rooms.

"I'm sorry," the father continued. "They have never liked being on a farm. Most kids love it, but not these two."

Jimmy spoke up. "Mr. Bradford... Carl, we have something else to talk to you about... about your business. Do you mind?"

"Not at all, detective. What can I do for ya?"

"Well, it's like this," Jimmy replied. "We're working on a federal case that involves pure ammonium nitrate. We were led here by those who think a Wyoming supplier might be involved, either actively or unknowingly. Have you had anyone buy large amounts of it from you, more than usual?"

"No, I can't say that they have."

"Any new customers wanting a couple hundred pounds or so?"

Carl paused. "Well, there was this one younger couple about three or four months ago. They wanted 300 pounds for their farm but didn't have a permit from the Feds. I told 'em no way. They did have some cash, though. I saw a wad of it in her purse."

I chimed in, "Can you remember what they looked like?"

"It's been a while... they were dressed plainly, I remember that. "

"Tattered slacks and an old blouse? Was she a brunette?"

"Yeah, I think so. Why? You know her?"

I pulled out my photo of Jules and showed it to him. "Is this her?"

He took it from my hand and squinted at it. "Yeah, that's the girl."

I took the photo back and turned to Jimmy. "Jules." Back at Carl, "What did you tell them?"

"I said I didn't want no trouble with the Feds, so they should go apply for the permit. It takes a few weeks, though, and they said they didn't have time."

Jimmy asked, "Then what?"

"I think I told 'em they could use less concentrated chemicals without a permit and I could hook 'em up with that. They said, no thanks. Then they left."

There was silence while Jimmy and I thought about the consequences of this chance meeting. We could go on checking farm after farm, supplier after supplier, but we'd run out of time.

Jenny broke the silence. "Carl, tell 'em about your losses."

"What losses?" Jimmy replied.

Carl hesitated.

"I assure you, we aren't interested in reporting infractions," Jimmy informed him. "Anything you said would stay between us."

Carl seemed relieved. "I think we've been getting hit by thieves at night, but they don't just take ammonium nitrate, they take manure and other fertilizer, too." He stopped, then added, "They haven't hit us in a while, maybe for a month or so."

"Forget the other fertilizers," I intimated. "That was just to confuse any investigation. How much ammonium nitrate, the pure stuff, did they get all together?"

"I think we're missin' about 500 pounds all told."

"Do you have a phone?"

"No, sorry," Jenny responded. "It's been down for the last 3 days. We've been waiting for Ma Bell to come out to fix it."

"I've got to get to a phone. Is there a pay phone at the restaurant?"

"Sorry, it's been broken for a while."

I turned to Jimmy. "Let's head out towards Laramie until we get a cell signal or can find a pay phone."

"My goodness," Jenny sobbed. "Did we help a terrorist?"

"It's not your fault. They would have stolen it from somewhere else if they couldn't get it here." I put my hand on her shoulder to calm her. "Really, it's not your fault."

A gas station on the outskirts of Laramie had a phone booth and I turned in and parked in front of it. Neither of our cell phones had signal yet, so I grabbed some change from my ashtray and jumped out. Closing the folding door behind me, I dropped a quarter in the slot and dialed Amanda. The recording told me to drop four more quarters, which I did.

"Hello?"

"Hi, babe, it's me."

"Pat! I've been trying to get a hold of you."

"We've been out of range and all the local landlines seem to be broken. We've just found a working pay phone in Laramie." I wondered what she wanted to tell me. "Something happen?"

"Well, yes. We were able to get enough info about the device to find it, a car bomb in Black Hawk. The bomb squad has been trying to diffuse it for the past four hours..."

"Just a sec." I opened the folding door and hung out to yell at Jimmy, who opened the passenger door and stepped out. "They found a car bomb; it's being disarmed as we speak."

"That's great! How'd they find it?"

I talked back into the receiver. "How did you guys find it?"

"Luke got Jules to tell us some things about the bomb and a few places Bartholomew had discussed placing it. We swept all these areas and found it at the Silver Coast Casino's parking garage- in a van like we suspected."

"Jules gave it up? That doesn't make sense."

"I told you, Luke is good."

"Ammonium nitrate, then?"

"Yes, and it's a big one."

"We found where they got the nitrate. Jules was here in Wyoming a couple of months ago with a partner, masquerading as a young couple. When they couldn't buy any, they stole it in the middle of the night. That's why I was calling you."

"That's a loose end we won't have to tie up."

"Guess so. I think we'll head back tonight. No sense trying to find a room this late."

"Okay, honey. Call me when you hit town. I'll wait up."

We said goodbye and I filled Jimmy in. I hopped into the passenger seat so Jimmy could drive.

"Hope you don't mind, Jimbo. I'm beat."

"We do have make allowances for the elderly..."

“You’re a funny guy.”

The road toward Cheyenne from Laramie was dark this time of night and mostly straight. If it wasn’t for the half-moon, you wouldn’t be able to see past the headlights.

“So our wild goose chase was for naught... I guess I’m glad, but we’ve wasted a lot of time.”

I tried to look at the bright side. “I think we’ve found holes in national security that can be closed, make it harder to acquire the pure stuff.”

“True enough, but it seems like they should have already known that...”

I had to agree. It didn’t take us long to figure it out, let alone a group like the “Children.”

With a lull in the conversation, the hum of the engine and tires, and country music on the radio, I fell into a sound sleep. Dreams came quickly, and there was Ellie, standing on a street corner in downtown Denver. I walked towards her and she smiled. I took her hand. “Ells, you’re here.”

“Not really, silly. But I’m glad we can talk for a few minutes.”

I reached in and kissed her, trying to remember every touch, every sound. A few moments later she pulled away to talk to me.

“I want you to know I’m very happy that you’ve found someone to spend time with, someone who can

take care of you.” A sly smile came over her face. “And I’m glad those girls got you out of mourning.”

“I have to tell ya’, I sure feel guilty about that. They kinda ambushed me, but I sort of let them, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did, and it was about time. I was so pleased!”

“I miss you, Ellie.”

“I know, dear.”

She started walking toward the tall office building nearby and I found I couldn’t move. She waved goodbye just as a tremendous explosion overhead made the building come crashing down in front of me, burying Ellie.”

I jerked up in my seat and cried, “Ellie!”

Jimmy swerved a bit and got the car back in a straight line. “Nightmare?”

“You could say that. We’re missing something.”

Chapter 32

I had the expected greeting when I walked in the door the next morning. "You're back! Am I glad to see you!" Anna ran over and hugged me, hanging on a long time. I gently broke free and she looked around to see if someone was with me. I was alone. "Isn't Detective Stewart here?"

"No," I replied. "Evidently the pressure is off since they found the bomb. Jimmy took the day off to be with his family. I came here."

"How's Agent Amanda? Did you guys have a nice reunion?"

"It's only been a couple of days... No, she worked all night on follow up. They have to put the case to bed, and that's going to take some time." I continued into my office and Anna followed. "Where's Lola?"

"She's been on surveillance all night. She'll be calling in any time now."

"Problems?" I could hear it in her voice.

"Well... it hasn't been easy."

"What happened?"

"I signed up this woman who thought her fiancé was cheating. She gave us his description and where she thought he would be and Lola took the gear and went to look for him."

"So?"

"So... she couldn't find him."

"Did you get a home address and work location?"

"Yes, but he didn't show in either place."

"So what did you do?"

"Last night she staked out the house. She checked in at midnight and is going to call at 9 this morning when she was back home."

"How much did the client pay?"

Anna rifled through some manila folders stacked neatly on my desk and pulled one out. "Five hundred up front and 750 when we finish."

"And Lola's spent, what, 15 hours looking for him?"

"Yeah."

"And she hasn't found him yet?"

"Nope."

I shook my head and sighed. "That's not good business, is it?"

"I told her that, but she said she wanted to do it, something about not charging the client for her training."

"Well, she's right about that, but she can't get on-the-job training without a teacher. Transfer her in to me when she calls." I looked at the clock, it showed 8:45. "Did you make coffee this morning?"

"Sure did... I'll get you some."

"No," I grabbed her arm to stop her. "I'll get it. Want a refill?"

"I'm good." Anna went to her desk and watched the phone, perhaps willing it to ring.

I went into the kitchen and poured the hot coffee into a fresh ceramic cup. It was navy blue and had bold white capital letters: "FBI." There were about a half-dozen more in the cupboard. "Where'd we get the FBI mugs?" I called out.

"Amanda stopped by on Monday and brought them, along with some carrot cake and M & M's," Anna called back. "She said she needed a break and thought she'd see how we were doing."

The phone rang and Anna answered. A moment later, my phone rang. I picked up the receiver and said hello, then asked, "How did the night shift go?"

"Not good," Lola replied meekly. "I never found the... subject."

"Did you have the client call him and find out where he was?"

"I didn't think of that. I wished you was here."

"I'm sorry, babe, but you know what I was doing."

"I know, but you know how selfish I am..." There was a bit of a smile in her voice now. "What do we do now?"

"Let's not waste time on this today. Go home and get some sleep. We'll catch up tomorrow."

"Wait, you're back, so everything's okay?"

"I guess so. I'll know more when I get to talk to Amanda tonight."

"Okay, Boss, see ya tomorrow."

"Sleep tight." I hung up the phone and Anna was nervously hanging on my door. "What?"

She hesitated and replied, "We've kinda got this messed up a bit here. We couldn't call you, so we tried to get things done." She sighed. "I guess we're not as good at this as we thought."

"If it was easy, anyone could do it. *Then* where would we be?"

"You're right, Boss. Do you mind looking these files over?" She stepped to the desk and picked up the folders, opening the top one. "If you tell me what to do, I'm sure we can do it."

"Okay, but sit down, will you?"

Anna took a note page from the file she was holding and sat down with it. "This one, this is the creditor case. The client wanted to get his credit cleared at a county office and we didn't know where to start."

"I took the paper and quickly read it over. "This is Boulder County? I have a friend in the auditor's office there. Get me a meeting with Roger Mason and have all

the notes ready.” Anna was writing in a legal pad. “I trust there’s a good reason for the client to hire us?”

“If you see here,” she pointed at a figure on the form, “they say he owes \$17,400 in taxes. He doesn’t. If he had a house on his Boulder property he might owe that much over a couple of years, but it’s a vacant lot outside of the city.”

“Go get photos of the lot, along with the street facing and any address numbers nearby.” I put the paper back in the folder and handed it back.

Anna set that file down and opened the next one. “This guy wants us to get back a cell phone that was stolen from him.”

“He’s been watching too much TV... Send him to the police station. If it was worth what we’d charge him to locate and retrieve it, there’s no way we want to be involved. What’s next?”

She set that folder aside and opened the last one. “More surveillance. This guy wants us to catch a guy and turn him in, a sex offender that moved into the neighborhood, breaking his parole. He’s offered 25 grand to do it.”

“Whoa, that’s good money, let me see that one...” I looked at the notes and recognized the client’s name, Brad Harper. Brad was once a circuit judge that fell on hard times. He was accused of bribery, which had never been proven, but the stink of the perception never faded away. He eventually accepted an early retirement, a

generous offer from the D.A. "I'll take this one; I know the client."

"Just one more..." she picked up the last folder. "A former model wants us to pick up some nude photos from a photographer."

"Anyone I know?"

"Well, she's the wife of a local councilman, Bob Eggert. I guess he didn't know about this part of her past or this particular shoot and she wants the pictures paid for and destroyed, along with the negatives. The photographer is..."

"Freddie Moore?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"This is the third time I've dealt with him on this type of case. Call Freddie and tell him it's my case. He'll meet with me... set it up for next week."

Anna flashed a broad smile as she gathered up the stack of files. "Awesome! I'll get these on computer and get on your recommendations. I'll send you the sex offender file when I get it entered."

"That sounds great." I looked over and noticed the sofa in the reception out front. "Nap time."

Chapter 33

I was already at Amanda's place when she got home that night. I met her at the door with a kiss and the smell of enchiladas, which I had thrown together a few minutes before.

"Smells yummy," she said after sniffing the air. She kissed me back and gave me a bear hug, almost lifting me off the ground. "I sure missed you."

"Me, too." I struggled to reply through the clinch.

She let me go and apologized. "I miss my home, too. Seems like a month since I've been here."

"Dinner will wait ... go take a shower and I'll get you a glass of merlot."

"Sounds wonderful." Amanda disappeared down the hallway and I found the appropriate bottle.

I grabbed the battery-operated corkscrew and placed it on the top of the blue bottle of California red wine. Pressing the button upward wound the screw into the cork until it was extracted. When the bottle came loose, I pressed the button downward, which expelled the now useless cork. I took the semisphere-shaped glasses and poured about three fingers of wine into each.

Soon Amanda re-emerged, clearly relaxed, and wearing a cute, grandmotherly pink robe and slippers. We enjoyed a delicious Mexican dinner and nearly emptied our open bottle. I didn't often cook, but my

enchiladas were legendary, a family recipe handed down from grandfather to father to me. Perfect with red wine.

Although I had other plans for after dinner, Amanda decided to make oatmeal cookies. She was in a good mood, so I didn't complain. This hard-hitting special agent seemed very much at home in the kitchen, I noticed. All the ingredients were lined up, just so, and eventually lumped together and mixed, squished by her bare fingers.

"What are you doing?" I asked when she separated the dough into two distinct piles.

"There's just the two of us, so I'm saving half of the dough for tomorrow. Fresh cookies..."

I dropped my wine glass and it shattered on the floor.

"What's wrong? You're as white as a ghost."

I grabbed the counter with both hands to steady myself. "How much ammonium nitrate did they find in that bomb?"

She hesitated, looking up as if doing math in her head. "There was about three hundred pounds, but it was soaked in diesel fuel. I'm guessing two hundred, give or take. Why?"

"The farm supply that we found? The one that Bartholomew's people stole it from?"

"Yeah..."

“There was over five hundred pounds stolen.”

There was silence while the fact sunk in. Finally, Amanda said, almost in a whisper, “There’s a second bomb.” She caught herself from dropping her own wine glass and set it on the counter. We both stood there in desperate contemplation.

Chapter 34

Amanda went into FBI mode and rushed to her home office, having already dialed her boss. “Danny, we’ve got a big problem,” I heard her say as I followed her in. “They gave us the location of the bomb because there’s a second one... Yes... Yes... I understand... I’ll bring him along.” She hung up and turned to me. “You’re needed, too. Do you mind?”

“Damn.” Obviously I was in panic mode, too. “How could we miss this? How could the FBI...”

Amanda held her hand up to my mouth to stop me from saying something I would regret. “We missed it, that’s all. Let’s forget about fault, let’s find the damn thing.”

“You’re right; I’m sorry. What can I do?”

“We’re going into headquarters and meeting with my emergency assessment group. They’ll help us with strategy.”

“This is Wednesday. Didn’t we hear that the explosive would be set off on Friday... this Friday?”

“Yes.” Amanda fiddled with her cell phone. “We have less than two days to find the device and disable it.”

She grabbed her keys and we left in a hurry. Neither of us spoke a word the entire drive to the FBI building. She pulled up to the guard shack at the underground garage, which I hadn’t seen before. She handed over her

ID and badge to the older guard, who asked for today's password. "Mannix," she replied and the security gate was opened.

"Mannix?" I asked, not holding back my chuckling. "From the 60's?"

"Yes, the FBI sometimes has a sense of humor, too." She pulled her green Subaru around the corner and down the ramp, parking in an open space between two black Escalades. "There is a computer program that takes names, words and phrases and chooses one each day at random, always a different number of words."

"I loved that show," I said, realizing I had just dated myself. "How do you know the day's password?"

"All agents have a dongle."

"A what?"

"A dongle. It's a little device that you plug into your PC, sort of like a thumb drive. When we log in and are vetted, we see the passcode for four seconds. Then it signs us out. Each agent has their own daily passcode."

"You better have a good memory."

"Yeah, but it's a part of our job, so we get used to it."

"You won't get in trouble for telling me your secret?"

"Not this one, it's well-known technology. I just can't give you the dongle. If we lose it ... well, let's just say we never lose it."

“Impressive.” I *was* impressed.

We climbed a couple of flights of stairs and entered the FBI building proper. The incandescent lighting was dim in the hallways, and various offices had brighter lights on. We eventually came to a secure door, which opened when Amanda swiped her badge. Another door was opened from the inside.

A group of 6 was waiting for us and Amanda took her seat at the head of the table. I sat on the opposite end on one side.

She pointed to me and made an introduction. “This is my P.I., Pat Ruger.” She turned to her left and gave names to those sitting around the table. “This is Mark, Rob, Mary, Josh, Trey and Valentin.” She looked at Mark. “What do we know?”

Mark looked about my age but with a full head of brown hair, assumably dyed. “Both Bartholomew and Jules have stopped talking. It appears they aren’t happy about our questions.”

“Definitely not,” Mary interjected. She was the youngest one in the room, a redhead, and looked like she came from a vice sweep. “Luke sat in with Jules for an hour and tried to get her to say something... not a word. We put her on suicide watch. I think if Bartholomew told her to break her own neck, she’d figure out a way to do it.”

Rob, the elder agent, probably retired and in his 70's, spoke up. "We've tracked down the locations on the list a second time. Nothing suspicious."

"The list?" I asked.

Amanda answered, "The list of targets we made during the Jules interviews."

"Ah, right... So, what's next?"

Silence.

Valentin spoke up. He looked like he should be speaking Italian. He was well dressed and sported a gold necklace with a shark's tooth, visible in his partially unbuttoned designer shirt. "Well, we must become them. Where would we put a bomb if we wanted to make a statement?"

Amanda answered with a question of her own, aimed at Mark. "What public events are planned this weekend in the city?"

"A couple of pre-Octoberfests," Mark summarized from a printout. "The Aquarium is having an animal cruelty awareness fundraiser, the Denver Post is hosting a writer's conference, the Denver Art Museum has a Van Gogh exhibition, and... it looks like the Dodgers are coming to town to play the Rockies."

"Does anyone have any idea about Bartholomew's history?" I asked. "It's my experience that, all things being equal, a target is chosen on the basis of history... a grudge, someone to blame for something."

"That makes sense," Josh piped up. He was in a suit and tie, an FBI poster boy pushing 30. "Trey and I will get on that. We'll work all night if we have to." Trey nodded and stood up to leave, a man of few words. "As soon as we find something ..." Josh continued, on his way out, "... we'll call."

Everyone but Amanda left the room but I stayed seated. She sat back down with me. "What are you thinking?"

"Something's been bothering me." I looked at the ceiling, not really seeing it. I looked back at her. "There seems to be a lot of ... intelligent planning ... in this whole bombing scenario."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at the manipulation, the deception, the misdirection. Hell, Bartholomew is a magician."

"So?"

"Does Bart seem capable of all of this?"

"Not really, no."

"I think someone else is pulling the strings."

We both sat in thought. After a minute or so, Amanda said, "Let's assume you're right..."

"I usually am."

"Well, who would want to go through with such an elaborate scheme? Who would benefit, if not the 'Children'?"

“That’s exactly what I was asking myself. Then it came to me. How exactly did the cult meet up with the Islamic extremists in the first place? Bart isn’t exactly a world traveler. I’ll bet if you check, you won’t find any trips where he went to the Middle East.”

“So,” Amanda leaned back and rotated her chair. “You think the extremists contacted the cult, and they’ve been feeding instructions to Bartholomew’s group. How?”

“That’s what we have to find out.”

“I’ll make a call to the CIA. Let’s see what they think about your theory.”

Chapter 35

I sat at my desk in the P.A.L. offices and stared at the paperweight Lola had given me as a homecoming gift. It was a dull rock with a purple crystal sticking out at an odd angle. It probably came from Antero, the mountain that had become famous for prospectors mining gems. Lola had a way of getting things she wanted.

We still have a time limit, I reminded myself. Two more days and we would find out the hard way just where the other bomb was planted. The FBI was scurrying all over the city to find it before then.

I decided to speak with Lola's sister. She had spoken to Jules in private, one on one. I thought that she might remember something useful. I dialed Amanda. "Can you arrange a meeting with Elena?"

"No, I'm afraid that's not possible. She's disappeared."

"Kidnapped again?"

"We don't think so. She slipped our tail a couple of days ago, on purpose."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"I was going to. We just didn't know how it fit in. Now that we have a working theory, it seems that she might have been the conduit."

"I knew something wasn't right. I'll call you if I get anywhere. What about the search?"

A moment of silence, then Amanda replied, "It's not good. We're grasping at straws at this point."

"I still think there has to be something personal in the choice of target. You didn't find anything at the ballpark?"

"No, not yet. We're checking all the obvious places, D.I.A., the art museum, Pepsi Center, anywhere where there might be a crowd on Friday."

"Okay, you should keep checking into Bart's life. There's something there."

We didn't say goodbye; it was just too intense. "Lola!"

Lola came running and I had her sit down. "What can I do, Boss?" She sounded concerned.

"I need to speak with Elena. It's really important."

"I don't know how to find her. She's missin' again."

"She wasn't kidnapped. It was a set up."

"What do ya mean?"

"I mean, she was in on it from the beginning. She wasn't kidnapped. Angel didn't do it. They set him up."

"No, Boss," Lola began to sob. "I know my sister. There's no way Elena would do dat."

"Elena changed, Lola. I know that's hard to see. But she did, and she can save a lot of lives if she'll help us."

"What can I do?" she repeated, this time in tears.

"Do you know where she might be hiding?"

"No, Boss, I don' know. If I did, I'd find her."

"Okay, okay," I came around the desk and put my arm around her. "I believe you, but let's talk about it."

"Okay." Her sobbing calmed down a bit, but she was still upset.

"When you were kids, did you ever have hiding places?"

"We useta pay hide 'n seek, in the neighborhood. We'd go into back yards, garages, everywhere."

"Show me."

Chapter 36

Lola and I arrived in the barrio of Northeast Denver, a stone's throw from Thornton, and she directed me to a community just off 88th Street. It was a clean but dilapidated neighborhood and I was impressed to see an otherwise rundown section of town devoid of trash and junk cars. We pulled up to an apparently abandoned house and I parked.

Lola sat for a minute as if she dreaded what she would see inside, but opened the door and joined me. The front door was boarded up, as were several of the windows, so we went farther up the driveway, opened the back yard gate, and knocked on the back door. No answer. I tried the knob and it was locked.

Lola called out, "Elena! So yo, tu hermana!"

Still no answer. I looked in the bay window next to the door and saw fast food wrappers and drink cups on a crate next to a torn sleeping bag. After feeling for my gun, I tensed my shoulder and slammed the door in, and we cautiously entered. I decided to pull my pistol, just in case.

There wasn't any furniture and even the appliances were missing from the kitchen. Bare wires hung from the ceiling where light fixtures were once suspended. It was an obstacle course of debris and trash to get from one end of the room to the other.

“Over here,” Lola called out from a family room. She opened a door and started down a staircase to the basement. I followed.

“Elena?” Lola’s voice was barely above a whisper. “Are ya down here?”

The lower level was in as bad a shape as the main floor. I lifted a large box off the floor, and was surprised to see a woman crouched beneath it. Lola ran to her and hugged her sister, who was almost unrecognizable. Her dirty black hair was matted and her clothes filthy. She was barefoot and looked like she hadn’t bathed in a few days.

“What happened to you?” I asked, helping her and Lola up from the floor.

Elena didn’t reply, but she looked scared. I put my arm around her and started up the stairs. We got out of the house and into the Camaro, both sisters in the back seat. I left the neighborhood and drove to a nearby city park. Lola found a bottle of water and Elena took a couple of big drinks while I finished parking in the secluded parking lot.

I didn’t push, and after a few minutes, Elena began to open up. “Thank you...”

“Pat,” Lola added. “This is my Boss, my business partner. You can trust ‘im.”

“The Children... Bartholomew... they are looking for me.” Elena didn’t have the pronounced Hispanic accent that her sister was trying to lose.

“Why?”

She didn’t answer me immediately. She seemed conflicted. “They think I’m going to spoil their surprise.”

“What surprise?”

“You see? You think so, too.”

“Elena,” I thought about how to ask. “We know about the second bomb. Do you know where it is?”

“I can’t say. The prophets would be angry.”

“Tell her, Lola. Tell her what’s going to happen.”

“A lotta people, innocent people, are gonna get hurt, get killed.”

“I can’t help that.”

“Why? My sister would never hurt anybody!” Lola began sobbing and hid her head on Elena’s lap.

I turned around to partially face the back seat, looking Elena in the eye. “Something else is going to happen. I’m taking you to the FBI and you’ll be classified as a terrorist, an enemy combatant. You’ll never see your sister again. Is that what you want?”

Elena quickly reached for the door handle, but it was locked from the front. Lola sat back up and looked shocked. “What happened to you?”

“I found my way, Agata.” She took Lola’s hand. “It’s a sacred road. I cannot wander from it...”

"It's not sacred if you're killing people," I interjected. "It's evil masquerading as sacred."

"The prophets were clear," she replied. "I cannot reveal it."

I changed my tack, but not before flipping on my recorder. I had it installed with the sound system and there were ten mics throughout the car. "How about Bartholomew? Is he a prophet?"

"No, he is an instrument of the prophets."

"Then you can talk about him?"

Elena paused, thinking. "Yes, I believe so."

"How is he involved with your sect?"

"Bartholomew isn't 'involved' with us. We knew of him and his wish to be heard and feared. We used that to secure his... services."

"You mean to make the bombs?"

"To secure the supplies. We gave him the plans and the shopping list. And yes, to make the bombs."

"How about the I.E.D. they found in Egypt? That wasn't Bartholomew."

"No, we had agreed to place that one and let the 'Children' take the credit, just as we would take the credit for the bombs here." She seemed impatient. "I don't want anyone seeing me. Can we go somewhere?"

"Of course, in a little while. But first, tell me more about Bartholomew. Did he choose the locations for the bombs here or did you?"

Elena hesitated, but relented. "Bartholomew did. He thought the casino device would be found and you would be done, unsuspecting. How did you know about the second one?"

"It doesn't matter," I replied. "Did you give Bart any suggestions for where to put them?"

"No, we left that up to Bartholomew. We just said to find a big crowd and set it off."

"The first one, the one we discovered at the casino- it had a cell phone attached as a trigger. Is that your design?"

Elena didn't answer.

"One more question. Did Bart ever play organized baseball?"

"What?"

"Did Bartholomew ever play baseball? In high school or college?"

"I have no idea."

I started up the car and punched "dial" on the dash.

"Where are we going?" Lola asked.

"To the FBI."

The phone dialed and Amanda answered, "Hello? Patty?"

"We found Elena. We're coming to you."

"Excellent, babe. See you when you get here... come to the underground lot, I'll meet you there."

"Wait, I need you to call someone."

"Who?"

"The Rockies G.M. Ask him if they have paper records of tryouts at Coors Field."

"Okay. What am I looking for?"

"Bartholomew."

Chapter 37

We pulled up at the FBI Building, I was passed through the gate by the guard and I drove into the garage. Around the corner, Amanda and about ten agents were waiting. The group ascended when I stopped and unlocked the doors.

They grabbed the girls and I leapt in to retrieve Lola. "She's with us..."

After a nod from Amanda, they gave her up, and in a moment the gaggle of agents and Elena were gone.

Amanda came over and gave me a big hug and kiss. "Thank you for finding her."

"I couldn't have done it without Lola. She knew right where to go."

Amanda turned and lightly patted Lola on the back. "Then, thank you, Lola." Lola was stoic.

I asked Amanda, "Did you find out anything about the Rockies' tryouts?"

"We're working on it," she replied. "It's all on paper, not on computer, so I sent someone over to their office."

"We're running out of time."

Lola tugged on my arm. "What's gonna happen to my sister?"

"Elena's complicit in a terrorist act," Amanda answered. "I'm sorry, Lola. She's going to be in prison

for a long time. But we'll take care of her in the federal system, I promise. And you'll be able to see her."

I put my arm around Lola's shoulder and tried comfort her. She was sobbing again.

"Please find it... find the bomb. She didn't mean to kill anyone, I just know it."

Back to immediate concerns, I asked, "What can I do?"

"We have about a hundred agents searching through downtown, and we're still looking in Black Hawk. The ATF is standing by in case we find something."

"I'm going to hang out at Coors until the game tomorrow night, or unless we find something somewhere else. Can you get Lola home?"

"She can stay here until it's over, if she likes."

Lola nodded.

"Let's get her up there and we can get an update," I agreed. "We're running out of time." I was really nervous about that.

The three of us went upstairs to what appeared to be a lounging room, complete with wet bar, mini-fridge, microwave, comfy sofas and a big flat-screen TV. "Guest sitting room," Amanda explained. "We often have to accommodate special guests. I think this qualifies."

I looked in the refrigerator and found a couple of Coors Lights, throwing one softly to Lola. We sat down on separate couches and Amanda found the side chair.

Amanda's phone rang and she quickly answered it. "Uh-huh, yeah... you're kidding me! ...Yes, thanks. Send over copies of both." She hung up and had a slight smile on her face.

"What?" I asked. "Copies of what?"

"That was Jacobs, my man at Coors. They found Bartholomew's tryout application."

"I knew it! You said 'both copies.' What else did he find?"

"Another tryout record."

"What other record?"

"Yours. From 1993. You were a pitcher."

I was shocked. There was actually proof that I had tried out for the Rockies after all. All those stories and all those people who humored me, now...

"He's sending you the app?"

"Yes, and there's scouting notes, too."

"They had a call for tryouts; the club was just starting out. I'm sure it was just for publicity."

"You weren't a kid in ninety-three, just a couple years away from having twenty in on the force."

“True, but I had a good arm, and thought, ‘why not?’”

Amanda’s phone chimed and she swiped her finger on the screen. “Here they are...” She pressed a button and did another swipe. She spread her fingers open to enlarge the text. “Bartholomew Christian... infielder. Here’s the scout’s notes... Played ball at Stanford, good skills, hits the average fastball well, can’t hit a curve or slider, may have an attitude problem. Recommendation... Too old for professional baseball, no hope to make team.” She read some more and paused. “This is interesting.”

“What?”

“1993. You were there when he was.”

I strained to remember, but realized I didn’t pay attention to anyone else when I was there. It was all I could do to not make a fool of myself.

“I don’t remember anyone at that tryout, except the scout.”

Amanda flicked her fingers on the phone a couple more times. “Allen Renfro. That’s who signed your form.” A few more strokes and she added, “Signed his, too.”

“What else does mine say?”

“I’ll forward it to you so you can read it yourself.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Not really. Let’s see if Mr. Renfro is still around.”

He was. The address was south of the city, in Castle Rock, about a half hour drive from Denver proper. The Rockies had been forthcoming about Renfro’s whereabouts, which saved time, and fortunately he still lived in town. Amanda was in the driver’s seat, having grabbed an Escalade from the motor pool. She turned the flashing lights on once we were on the freeway and we did the trip in about 17 minutes.

We found the house and parked out front, then walked through the gate of the white picket fence and up the flagstone path to the front door. The house looked like it was built in the 50’s, but was well-kept. I pulled open the screen door enough to knock and the door sounded heavy- solid wood. I released the screen and waited. The door opened to reveal a short, elderly gentleman.

“You the Feds?”

“Yes,” Amanda answered. “Can we come in?”

He swung the screen door open for us and we entered the quaint home. The living room screamed mid-century, with flowery patterns on the furniture and drapes and avocado-colored carpeting. We each picked a spot and sat down.

“Mr. Renfro,” I started.

“Al,” he corrected.

“Al... I think I remember you. It's been many years since I tried out for the Rockies.”

“Did we sign you?”

“No.”

Al broke out in laughter. When he finally took a breath, he added, “Sorry, we didn't sign anyone in those tryouts, at least not as players. We did get a couple of assistant coaches...”

Amanda chuckled and began introductions. “Sir, I'm Special Agent Amanda Sizemore, and this is one of our investigators, Pat Ruger.” She pulled Bartholomew's photo up on her cell and held it up. “Do you recognize this man? He tried out the same year as Mr. Ruger.”

Al held out his hand to bring the phone a little closer and Amanda helped steady his hand. “He was younger, of course, but I think I do remember him. He was an asshole.” He stopped and drew back his hand quickly as if he realized he might have offended her.

“He's still an asshole, I can assure you,” she replied and Al seemed to relax. “Do you remember anything else about him?”

“He wasn't a happy person, especially when we told him he wasn't moving on to a private tryout.” Al sat back and closed his eyes. “I can still see him yelling at everyone. ‘I'm way better than anyone here,’ he kept saying. Boy, he was angry.”

"Did he ever calm down?" I asked. "Did he apologize?"

"No, I think he stormed off. In fact, he sent a complaint to the league office about how we conducted the tryouts, as if that was going to mean something... The league laughed it off."

"Was he better than anyone else?" Amanda asked.

"Well, he might have been, but in the bigs, if you can't hit a curve ball... hell, even in A ball, you have to hit a curve. A lot of good college players get rejected by scouts, usually because they can hit a fastball but not a curve."

"Can't they learn that in the minors?"

"Honey," he replied to Amanda, "if they didn't learn it in college, they ain't gonna learn it in the rookie league. It's a waste of time. Besides, he was too old, if I remember... late twenties or so."

I returned to the point. "So, do you think he could hold a grudge?"

"Oh, yeah. Definitely."

Amanda and I stood up, and she waved him back as he went to stand. "No need to get up," she told him. "Thanks so much. We'll let ourselves out."

Al sat back and smiled. "Anytime, pretty lady."

We left the house and got back in the Escalade. "What do you think?"

I didn't have to think about it. "It's going to be Coors Field."

Amanda nodded and left the curb. "It sure looks that way..."

Chapter 38

Amanda and I, along with about 30 agents, wandered the stadium grounds. I had a restless night and Amanda stayed at her office, helping oversee the enormous search operation. She was looking pretty ragged by this afternoon.

I was getting anxious. Fans were beginning to arrive and vendors had been coming and going all morning without anything suspicious arising. I was positive that the stadium would be the target this afternoon, but until we found the device, we were helpless.

“How about bomb-sniffing dogs?” I asked.

“We do have a couple of them here,” she answered. “But they work best finding solids... plastics like C-4, TNT, or even stabilized nitro. Diesel masks the nitrate, and with so many trucks coming and going, there’s plenty of diesel around.”

The under-stadium vendor area for loading and unloading was the most obvious place for a bomb-laden van to be stationed and armed. That’s where Amanda and I were patrolling, with Amanda on her cell almost constantly. As we crossed the inbound lane, a white van with a North Star Beer logo on the side stopped right in front of us, forcing us to turn and go around the front of the vehicle to reach the curb. I looked over my shoulder and watched the young driver run around the van and open the side doors. He had a full-length light-blue uniform and cap, his blonde hair sticking out the back, and he struggled a little with the hand-truck before

loading it with two aluminum kegs. He closed and locked the doors and quickly took the loaded hand-truck towards the vendor's elevator.

Something seemed off and I took a step towards the van. Amanda grabbed my arm and stopped me.

"We found a van at the Pepsi Center. It looks like it's loaded with a device. We're heading over."

"The first one was set with a cell phone to detonate it. Are you jamming the cell signal?"

"No, sometimes the trigger can be set to detect the jamming signal."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"When we get ready, we're going to have the power shut down on the 3 closest cell towers. There'll be no cell calls to the Center."

I thought for a minute. "Wait, is there an event at the Pepsi Center? This isn't hockey season, or basketball."

"There's an art festival this evening."

"What'll that have, two, 300 people?"

"Maybe they decided they couldn't get the device in here with all of us looking for it."

"Maybe... but I think I'll stick it out here for a while."

"I'll send someone back to let you know we've got it handled. I can meet you back home later tonight." She

grabbed my hand, pulled me closer and kissed me. She must have read my face, because she said, "I'll be okay, I promise."

"I know," I said back, but was trying to convince myself. I let her go and she climbed into the black SUV that had just pulled up. Then she was gone.

I climbed the stairs to the field level and watched for a while. Fans continued to pour into the stadium, black and purple of the home team and bright blue of the hated Dodgers made for a colorful crowd. The Rockies were on the field shagging fly balls and taking whacks in the batter's cage. A foul ball was hit in my direction and a fan gloved it about ten rows below me. Vendors shouted out to those seated, promoting pop, peanuts, cotton candy and beer.

Beer. I wondered about that van. I retraced my path back down to the vendor loading level and saw that the North Star Beer van hadn't moved. Vehicles down here weren't supposed to be parked more than 15 minutes, and it had been almost an hour since the kid had unloaded and left it behind.

I nonchalantly walked over near the van and tried to look inside without drawing attention. I couldn't see much and looked around to see if I could tell if anyone was watching. They didn't seem to be, so I edged closer to the windshield and peered inside. It was dark except for a faint flashing light in the far inside.

I took out my mini-flashlight and pointed it in. The first thing I noticed was that there were no kegs, hoses,

wrappers, beer racks, or anything else that should be found in a vendor supply truck. Then, to my horror, I saw a pile of something covered by a plastic tarp.

I backed away a few steps and gathered myself. I grabbed my phone and began dialing Amanda, but I had no signal. The towers are down, I told myself, which made me feel better about standing next to a car bomb. They couldn't detonate it by cell phone.

What to do. Before starting a panic, I needed to confirm it was indeed a bomb. I remembered being told that the van they located in Black Hawk wasn't boobie trapped, so I decided to go ahead and try to get inside. I took out my multi-tool and my pick set, tools I always carried. I surmised that the passenger door was the least probable to be rigged and picked the lock. It took help from the multi-tool's pliers to turn the pick hard enough to raise the door lock. I took and held a breath it while I slowly opened the door. It opened without incident.

I took back out my flashlight and climbed in. I turned towards the back and crept out of the seat and toward the rear. The smell of petroleum permeated the vehicle. I carefully lifted a corner of the tarp and saw what was most probably ammonium nitrate wrapped tightly in clear plastic. I could see wires farther in.

I shined the light to the back door and all around its perimeter to try to find wires there, meaning they could be connected to the device, but it was clear. I double-checked, then cautiously crawled back and unlocked the rear doors. I crept backwards to the front seat and

carefully got out through the passenger door. I still needed to see what we were dealing with, so I went around to the rear doors and gently opened each side.

I flipped the tarp back to reveal the device itself. I've seen a couple of bombs in my career and this one was similar, to my relief. The signature cell phone was wired in, just like Amanda predicted, but instead of idly waiting for a call, it had a digital display counting down. The timer was down to "23:18" and seconds were diminishing.

My choices were now limited. There was a 4-foot cube of explosives here that were going to blow in 20 minutes, give or take. No time to clear the stadium, no time to wait for the bomb squad, and Amanda couldn't be reached by cell. As my police instincts kicked in, I took a couple of deep cleansing breaths, and decided to determine if I could drive this thing out.

I did a full 360 review of the van and device, as best I could, and decided that starting the van probably wouldn't affect the device. The van was driven in, I reasoned, so that's probably why it hadn't been wired up to the engine. I lightly closed all the doors except for the driver's. Another deep breath and I climbed in. I started the engine and was glad to still be aware of my surroundings- it hadn't blown.

I had 15 minutes now, thereabouts, and headed out of the under-stadium lot. As I approached the city street, I wondered how I was going to get this out of the city in the Friday afternoon traffic. Time was running down.

A siren nearby caught my attention and I pulled out onto the street in time to block a squad car. The officer wasn't happy about that, but I exited the van with my hands up, made eye contact with him and moved to the rear. I motioned him over, and he angrily joined me at the back of the van.

"I'm working with the FBI, this is an emergency!" I opened the right half of the rear door and let him lean in. He turned white when he realized what he saw. "I need an escort, due east."

The officer tried to reply but nothing came out. He ran back to his car and turned on the lights and siren, I jumped back in the van and followed at full speed. We turned east and continued out of the downtown area.

Traffic was heavy but was accommodating the siren, pulling over. When we began crossing Colorado Street, a yellow Volkswagen, one of the new, remade bugs, came from behind stopped traffic on the right and the squad car clipped it, both spinning in the intersection. They came to a stop, the police car started back up, and we continued east.

Another mile or so later we pulled up behind long stack of cars stopped at a red light. Cars were also stopped in west bound lanes and there was a center divider between the two lines. We were stopped and moments felt like hours with the clock still running down in the back. Traffic had nowhere to go, even with the lights and siren complaining.

The cop drove onto the center divider, sparks shooting out from its undercarriage. He continued to the "No U-Turn" sign and knocked it down, and made it to the intersection. I had no choice but to follow his path. I held my breath and hoped the bomb, and I, survived. I finally exhaled when I also made it past the front car and through.

We made it to Aurora in another 6 minutes or so and I knew we had to find a place to dump it. I saw a vacant, plowed field on the right and made a beeline for it. I turned onto and off of the shoulder and into the dirt, kept going for a minute, and stopped the van. I jumped out and ran as fast as I could back to the street, jumped in the police car, and we sped back west until the explosion happened. The deafening shock wave hit and lifted us off the ground. It flipped us on our left side and shoved us into the side of a brick wall surrounding a mechanic's lot.

I was laying on top of the policeman, who moaned when I moved. "You okay?" I asked, trying not to hurt him further.

"Yeah," he gasped. "I think so."

I wasn't hurt anywhere that I could feel, so I reached up to the passenger door handle and pulled myself up. Standing on the steering column, I opened the window and climbed up and out. I held my hand back down to the officer and helped him out of the wrecked vehicle.

We let ourselves down to the ground and got our first look of ground zero of the blast. There was a 20-

foot wide crater where the van had once been, and no van to be found anywhere. I assumed it had disintegrated. For a quarter mile around the field there were broken windows, caved in walls and fences, and half-standing buildings.

"I'm Pat," I said to my compatriot. "I can't thank you enough for escorting me out of town. I wouldn't have made it..."

"I'm Dillon, Fred Dillon." He reached out and we shook. "This was meant for the Rockies game?"

I nodded my head; he shook his. "We've been looking for this for several days..." I looked back at the squad car. "Think the radio works?"

He grabbed for his microphone, once attached to his shoulder strap, but now missing. He climbed back up and disappeared into the window, and came back up with a microphone. He depressed the button and spoke, "This is Lincoln-7-7-2."

"Go ahead, Lincoln," was the reply, barely audible from the car's dashboard.

"Nancy, this is Fred. There's been a large explosion just east of the city, inside Aurora's city limits. Send first responders to the neighborhood around Highway 65 and Julian. "

"Already on it, Fred. Are you hurt?"

I reached for the mic with a look of request. Fred replied, "I think I'm okay... Nancy, I've got someone here

who needs to talk to you.” He handed me the microphone.

“This is Pat Ruger, an investigator working with the FBI. I need desperately to speak with Special Agent Amanda Sizemore. She is on-site with the bomb squad at the Pepsi Center.”

“I’ll try to patch through to a police vehicle there. Please stand by.”

After an eternity, which was probably more like 5 or 6 minutes, I heard her voice. “Pat? What’s happened?”

“Remember the van that almost ran us over? There was a bomb in it.” Silence on the radio. “There wasn’t time to do anything but drive it out of the stadium, and with an escort from Officer Dillon, here...” I grabbed his shoulder and shook it. “I managed to get as far as a field in Aurora before we ditched it. What an explosion!”

“Are you okay?”

“We’re both pretty shaken, but no broken bones.”

“Thank God!”

Chapter 39

I laid down on my sofa, throw pillow under my head, and flipped on the TV. The news was on.

“An incredible series of events took place today,” the anchorman was saying. “First, cell phone services were lost downtown, leaving tens of thousands without coverage. During that time, a swat team was sent into the Pepsi Center and a popular arts show was evacuated. Then, a short time later, a large explosion rocked the east side of Denver, just inside of Aurora city limits. Miraculously, no one was killed. Here is footage of that scene from SkyCam 4...” Video began playing of the devastated Aurora field. “Fortunately, there were only 15 moderate to minor injuries, none life-threatening, and estimated damage to buildings and property was in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Police are blaming a propane tank as the source of the explosion.”

I was tired. My eyes could hardly stay open and I was somewhat relieved that Amanda had to stay and work the aftermath. I decided to go to my own home and not wait for her at her house. That meant something, I thought to myself, but I wasn’t sure what.

“I’m told we have Dale Duncan on location at the Pepsi Center with special agent in the FBI, Amanda Sizemore, with more details. Are you there, Dale?”

I sat up and looked, and sure enough, there was Amanda standing next to the field reporter, with her signature staid look she unveils just for the camera.

“Thanks, Jim. Agent Sizemore,” he said, turning toward her. “What can you tell us about the events today?” He put the large microphone in front of her face and her hand lowered it a few inches.

“The FBI has had an ongoing investigation, in conjunction with Homeland Security and local law enforcement, for the last several months. We located a terrorist sympathy group and determined that they had a plot to detonate two large devices. The first one was found in Black Hawk and disabled. We found the second one today at the Pepsi Center, in time to disarm it as well, thanks to the quick thinking by one of our investigators...” I swear she winked at me into the camera.

“So, what about the explosion this afternoon?” he followed up.

“I’m told that this was unrelated- a large underground propane tank and I’m sure more details will follow soon. It’s important to know that we are confident that all threats are now neutralized. We thank local police here in Denver and in Aurora for their assistance and cooperation tonight.”

She backed away from the mic and the camera went back to the reporter. “And there you have it. The FBI has found and disabled two explosive devices in the Denver area and no further threat is expected. Back to you, Jim.”

I didn't want to hear any more from Jim, so I turned off the TV and laid back down. I had to admit, the peace and quiet was enjoyable.

My thoughts went to Angel. I couldn't shake the vision of the laser points on him just before being taken out by the sharpshooters. I think I could have talked him down ... but who knew?

My guilt would stick with me, no matter how I could justify events. I tried to take solace in the college fund I set up for his nephew in Angel's name. After his nephew used the funds, it would revert to an annual scholarship at Angel's high school. His name would live on.

The sounds of motorcycles interrupted my reflection. They got louder until they seemed to be on my doorstep, then went silent. A minute or two later, the door swung open and Lola and Anna rushed in.

"You okay, Boss? We were worried!" Anna helped me up off the couch and into her arms. The hug was a bit too tight and I managed to loosen her grip.

"I *am* okay, I promise..."

Anna released me long enough for Lola to take her place.

"Really, I'm fine."

"Amanda told us what happened," Lola said. "You could have *died*."

"But I didn't," I said as I pulled away gently and rubbed her upper arms. "Did you guys buy motorcycles?"

"No," Anna replied. "We're on a date, a real date! Aren't you proud of us?"

"Sure... let me meet these guys of yours." I stepped outside to see the gentlemen courtiers. Suddenly, I felt like a protective father. I didn't mind the feeling.

Both biker dudes were actually well-dressed, in their early 30's, and devoid of tattoos, all to my relief, though the shorter one had red-tipped spiky hair. I reached my hand out to shake with the taller of the two. "I'm Pat..."

"Ruger... I know. The girls never stop talking about you."

"I'm sorry about that. You are?"

"Ted Carl and this is my best friend Robbie. We're in futures."

"As in stock futures? Like petroleum?"

"No, we don't do commodities," Robbie chimed in. "We do currency futures."

"You trade money?" I paused, thinking about the girls. I shook my head. "Never mind. You fellas take good care of these ladies or I'll hunt you down. Got it?"

"Yes, sir, we got it."

Lola and Anna rescued their dates, picking up their helmets and putting them on. Anna struggled with hers,

but she eventually got it on. The new-wave bikers started up their Harleys and the girls hopped on, Lola joining Robbie and Anna riding with Ted.

I watched as they rode away, and again, I was alone. I was happy for them both- my partners deserved good lives. In fact, it seemed they were going to have somewhat normal lives after all, which was very satisfying. I walked back in my house and locked the door. Hot chocolate sounded good.



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About Me

I was born in Southern California but as of this printing, Nadyne, and I now reside in an RV, traveling the country with our Cairn Terrier, Lucy. I truly enjoy writing in the detective/mystery/crime/ thriller genres and now have several Pat Ruger mystery novels now released.

I also have several books of poetry and photography on the market and have been a Staff Writer for Poetic Monthly Magazine. My first poems were published when I was just 10 years old when two pieces submitted by a teacher were accepted by a literary magazine. I have since enjoyed writing poetry throughout my writing career.

Being able to weave mysteries was unexpected but understandable, considering my influences growing up. I have always had a penchant for telling stories and I really admired this quality in my uncle, Pat Wombacher. No, Pat Ruger was not modeled after my uncle...



Excerpt from “Pat Ruger: Caribbean Shuffle”

I slowly became aware of a quiet but insistent knock on my front door. Groggy, I looked at the glowing digits on the nightstand alarm clock, which read, “5:11 a.m.”

“Great,” I said aloud and exited the warm covers with some annoyance. “Just a minute!” I yelled toward the living room and grabbed my robe. Bare feet on cold wood floor wasn’t going to be pleasant.

When I reached the door, grumbling under my breath with each step, I peeked out the peephole and saw a Hispanic teenager. I opened the solid wood door to see someone vaguely familiar. “Juan?”

“Yes, Mister Ruger. You remember me?”

“Yeah ...” I was still shaking off the cobwebs. “Aren’t you Angel’s nephew?”

“Yes, we met at Uncle Angel’s funeral. You said if I needed help to come see you.”

“Come in,” I said, standing aside. Juan hesitated but stepped in. I closed the door and followed the diminutive teen into the living room. I’m only 5’8” but I was a good 6 inches taller than Juan. The room was dimly lit only from the light coming out of my bedroom’s open door. Somewhat unsteadily I switched on a lamp next to the sofa.

Juan stopped and turned back toward me, not sitting down. “I need help.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s ... I’m ... Someone’s been beating me up at school, and no one won’t do anything about it.”

“You don’t look beat up ...”

“Wait,” Juan said as he unbuttoned his shirt. He lifted up his right arm and greenish bruising was very visible, along with some nasty purple contusions. I was awake now. He buttoned back up.

“Who’s doing this to you?”

There are two boys on the basketball team that just won’t leave me alone. I didn’t do anything to them, except I refused to join the team.”

I sat down and Juan followed suit. “Why are you here at 5 in the morning?”

“I got a text before I left for school ... said they were going to get me today ...” He pulled out his phone and brought up the message.

I took it from him and read, “juan gonna gt beat 2day cant wait.”

“That’s from James, one of the two dudes. I just didn’t want to go to school so I jumped on a rat and came here.”

“A what?”

“A rat ... a bus. ‘R.T.D.’ ... rat ...”

“I get it. What about your mom?”

"She doesn't know. I can't tell her."

"And the school?"

"They said to come back when they did it again. I did that 3 times and they haven't done nothing."

I thought for a minute. Angel, a long-time friend, was shot by the FBI right in front of me. Unbeknown to me or the feds at the time, he died trying to protect his sister and her kids, of which Juan was one. I couldn't let him down.

"What's James' last name?"

Juan looked anxious and didn't answer.

"It's okay, we'll take care of him," I tried to assure.

"Lovell."

"And the other boy?"

"Leon Jordan, he's a brother."

"You mean he's black?" Juan nodded. "And James is white?" He nodded again. "Go home and tell your mom that you're sick. If she hassles you about it, have her call me."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure, but I have an idea. I'll call you tonight. Text me your number." I paused to consider ramifications. "Can you take the bus home or should I drive you?"

“I’ll get home okay. Thank you, Mr. Ruger.” He reached out to shake my hand.

I took it and shook, and replied, “Call me ‘Uncle Pat.’”

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