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It's In the Music

Technological Thriller / Suspense
29,000 Words

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Anyway, happy reading. ☺

It's In the Music

Chapter One

"You've done this enough times, you won't need my help will you?"

"No, no I don't think so," I said, really unsure.

"You're one of my best, Nick. I trust you. I'm gonna take a nap. If you need something, wake me. If you're about to crash, just let me sleep."

Without another word, he reclined his seat, pulled his hat down over his head and went to sleep. He had more faith in me than I did.

Falling back to what now felt like instinct, I pushed the double-throttle to full, and when the twin engines reached full power I let off the brake.

The old 1972 Beechcraft "Twin Beech" H-18 rolled down runway 2R at Willow Run Airport in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Her twin engines had a low, muffled rumble distinct to the old Twin Beech. It was a sound that could lull me to sleep if I wasn't careful.

Her tail wheel lifted off the ground and I eased back on the yoke, sending the yellow-and-grey bird into the air.

Jack Noble, the flight instructor for EagleOne Aviation, often slumbered in the seat next to me. I'd completed the flight class three weeks ago, and we've been up in the Cessna several dozen times. He told me I could fly the thing blindfolded, but when he actually handed me a blindfold, I declined it. I was only 68 hours away from getting my pilot's license. I've spent 52 hours in the Cessna, and by now my instructor was feeling pretty useless.

Today, the Cessna was being overhauled. Jack let me use his own plane today, and there was no way in hell I'd turn it down. I'd flown this plane on the Microsoft Flight Simulator many times and I instantly fell in love with the plane's smooth maneuvering and the ghostly sound of its engines. It's a very easy plane to fly, especially for a Cessna novice.

Unfortunately, there's enough difference between simulator and real life that it worried me when my instructor simply strapped in and went to sleep. No instructions, no explanation of the vast panels of switches, knobs, buttons and lights. No, he just says 'Need help, wake me,' which's why he has more faith in me than I do in myself. This was only my second time flying anything but a Cessna.

This was Jack's part-time job. Full-time, he was Detective Jack Noble, of the Detroit Police. Jack had been a very laid-back person from the first time I met him, in front of a burning drug house in Detroit. At 26 years old, he took his job seriously -- when he was at work. Many cops love to bring their work (and attitude) home with them. Not Jack. He says he's seen too much blood and gore to take it seriously. Sure, he gets the job done, but he does it without the over-inflated ego of a rookie working his way up the ladder, and without the depression of a burnt-out detective with a drinking problem. Nope, Jack reminds himself that people die all the time, even at the hands of others. And so do cops, so don't get cocky thinking you're invincible. That can distract you and get you killed, as it has to so many others.

But right now Jack's full-time work was 3,000 feet below us and 30 miles to the north, as I followed the smooth outline of the Detroit River, floating over Belle Isle, and along the western shore of Lake Erie. With the help of the quietly thrumming engines, I let my mind drift off into a reverie of thoughts...

Laurie always comes to mind at times like this. Up until a couple months ago, my fiancée Laurie had just been a smoking buddy. Laurie has, uhh... *problems*, but please don't tell her I said that! She'll whoop my ass. She had a troubled childhood, an alcoholic mom that abandoned her at 16, and a sick and sadistic father that she killed with a cast-iron skillet when she was eight. I think it's affected her. After I tried to break up with her and she tried to air my

brains out all over the living room wall with the .38 I gave her for her birthday, I started entertaining the possibility that maybe she really *was* crazy. That incident made us closer, though I can't imagine how. I guess I realized that her thoughts of losing me made her snap. I didn't know she was serious about me, and her attempt to put a hole in my head showed me how much she loves me, and that I do in fact love her too. Screwed up, huh? We're thinking of auditioning for the Jerry Springer Show.

Since then we've smoked a lot of Jane, committed several felonies, bought a new house, watched it burn down after my best friend kidnapped Laurie, I blew up a casino and highjacked a Lear Gulfstream IV. Oh, and Nick Stone is about to become faithful husband and father.

But don't think that'll ever slow me down!

"Nick. . ."

"Yeah. . ." I said, still lost in thought.

"KayTall, Nick."

That got my attention. "Huh?"

"Just wondering if you were going to land at KTOL or just fly till we run outta gas."

Shit. I banked right, perhaps too hard for the old Beech. Jack either hadn't noticed or didn't care, because he'd already gone back to sleep. I throttled down, dropped the flaps and landing gear, and lined up for the approach to Toledo Airport. The wing wheels touched the runway first, and I cut the throttle. The tailwheel touched the runway and I tapped the brake.

"Over there," Jack said, pointing to an old steel hangar.

I taxied over and shut the engines down. In front of the hangar's huge door was a short, pudgy, grey-haired man, perhaps in his mid-forties. Jack and I got out and met him.

"Jack! Damn good to see ya boy!" he yelled.

"You didn't give me much of a choice!" Jack said. "Your message sounded urgent. Oh, this's my current aeronautical protégé, Nick Stone. Nick, this's Al Pross, retired gun-runner turned aircraft mechanic, and world-class pain in my ass."

"Retired, thanks to you Jack!" Al said with a smile.

"Would you rather I'd brought you in?" Jack asked, then turned to me. "I caught him last year bringing guns in through Detroit City Airport. I let him go, told him he owed me one. Besides, the FBI would've taken over anyway. Damn feebies."

"Good to meet ya Al, and when I'm in the market for an M-16 I know who to call," I said, only half-joking.

"So Al," Jack said, "your message said you have something to show me?"

"Oh, I do!" A little something I bought on eBay," Al said, hitting a button on what looked like a garage door opener. The hangar door slowly began to rise. As it did, I watched Jack's jaw slowly begin to drop. "I had it shipped over from Japan in pieces. The Japanese Army's had her in their possession since they captured it's pilot in 1942."

"Do you know what this is, Nick?" Jack asked.

I knew it was an old WWII plane. Aside from that, I had no specifics. "No Jack, how 'bout you tell me?"

"She's a P-22 Lightning. That double fuselage is one-of-a-kind, Nick. You should know what kind of plane this is!"

"Sorry to disappoint ya, Jack," I said with a smirk. "Damn she's gorgeous, Al. She fly?"

"She will. I just got her back together. A lot of the cables are corroded, rubber lines are rotted, just small stuff from sitting so long. She hasn't flown since she landed in 1942."

"Any idea what happened to the pilot?" Jack asked.

"Yeah. His name's written right there under the cockpit window. A lot of WWII pilots did that. A friend in the Navy looked through some records. Apparently this guy'd been in a bad dogfight with a Mitsubishi F-Zero. You know the P-22s can't dogfight, so he was escorted by gunpoint back to Japan. When he landed, he was captured and tortured for two straight weeks. He refused to give up information. He spit at them, they broke his fingers. He threw up on them,

they broke his legs. He eventually escaped and made his way back into U.S. hands. It's a hell of a story, Jack. Gave me chills every time I sat in the cockpit."

Jack's cellphone rang, and he walked off to answer it. It was likely his other job calling him. While he talked, I walked around the old P-22. It amazed me she was in such great shape. I didn't fail to notice the bulletholes in her rear left fuselage. She didn't give up without a fight.

"Nick, we gotta go," Jack said, pocketing his cellphone. "Sorry Al, wish I could stay. Work calls."

We quickly reboarded the plane, and I had us in the air in five minutes. He told me to floor it, so we did 220knots for KDET, Detroit City Airport.

"I don't have time to drop you at Willow Run, so you're coming with me. I'll give you a pen and notepad, and tell them you're my assistant."

"Sure. So what's the scene like?" I asked.

"They said it's bad. Really bad. Do you have a strong stomach?"

Aw hell. For a detective who's seen as much death as he has to say it's really bad, I was sure I'd need to prepare myself for this.

"I'd have to smoke first," I said.

"Smoke what ?"

I stared at him. "You know..."

"Oh," he said, giving me an understanding nod. "Well, if you're gonna smoke that stuff in my plane, I have one rule."

"What's that?"

"Puff, puff, pass."

In the tense atmosphere, I couldn't help but to laugh. Damn, I'm really gonna like Jack Noble.

Chapter Two

We landed at Detroit City Airport at 9:30am. We made good time, with the overspeed buzzer going off the whole trip.

"Roll your window down," Jack said, rolling his down.

"That's the first time I've ever clam-baked in a plane before."

"Yeah? First time for everything," he said, tossing a roach out the window. "C'mon, let's air out before our ride shows."

We stepped out just as a dark blue Crown Vic showed up. We got in.

"Who's the new kid?" the driver asked.

"My assistant, Nick Stone. Nick, this's Officer Milani."

Milani sniffed the air in the car, looked at us and shrugged. "Eh, whatever Jack."

Jack leaned over and whispered, "You're not holdin', are ya?"

"I left it in the plane," I whispered back, to which he nodded.

The apartment complex was in the area of Six Mile and Van Dyke. It wasn't a bad area, but it wasn't great either. At the moment, there were six police cars, two ambulances, over 150 gawkers and roughly 500 feet of police tape strewn about.

"Ready for this?" Jack asked me.

"No, but it really doesn't matter. Let's go."

The apartment was nicely furnished, for being occupied by a teenager fresh out of high school: a 55" TV, DVD Player and a rack of DVDs, two couches and pictures on the wall. I followed Jack into a rear bedroom. In the hallway I could already smell the heavy scent of copper in the air that I knew to be blood, and only got stronger when I reached the bedroom.

Inside, two cops and a photographer hovered over something I couldn't see on the other side of the bed. At the mere sight of Detective Jack Noble, they all fled the room.

"Good luck with this one," the photographer said on his way out.

The scene inside the bedroom was not one I'd been prepared for. Nothing could have prepared me for this scene. In the middle of the floor, 19-year-old Amanda Grace lay on her stomach in a pool of blood. Her once-blonde hair was now soaked in it. Her arms were tied behind her with rope. Her ankles had been tied together and pulled behind her, with another piece of rope attached from her ankles to a noose around her neck. The pressure of her legs, bent at the knees, was a sick attempt for the killer to make her hang herself.

But that hadn't been what killed her.

"What sense do you make of it, Nick?" Jack asked me. It was just us in the bedroom now.

"Haven't I seen this before? I mean...I think I saw something like this once."

Jack nodded. "Ever been to the Detroit Institute of Arts?"

I thought back, deep into my past. "Some chick took me to the DIA once. Sometimes a guy'll do anything to get laid."

"How was it?"

"The sex?"

"No, asshole, the museum."

"Boring! Nothing but a buncha sculptures and paintings and...that's it! It was a painting!"

"Good job, Sherlock," he said. "Hieronymous Bosch painting. He paints some twisted shit."

I looked back at the once very beautiful Amanda Grace. "That about describes this. It's sick fucking twisted torture shit. He couldn't just shoot or stab her. He had to make her suffer first."

"I was thinking a jealous boyfriend maybe," Jack speculated.

"No way, dude. No way she'd date someone this fucked up. Maybe some psycho that asked her out and couldn't handle rejection. I dunno. It'd take alot of anger to make someone do this."

Jack then noticed the seventeen stab wounds on the backs of her legs. "That's odd, why bother stabbing her?"

"Jack, didn't you once tell me you were a detective?"

"Yeah yeah, eat me. What're your thoughts?"

"I think the killer was impatient. Probably nervous and edgy too. He rigged this whole elaborate thing up and probably sat right there on her bed waiting for her legs to get tired and choke herself. When he got impatient, he stabbed her legs to speed things up."

Jack then took note of her throat. It was deeply cut, from ear to ear. He pointed. "Then why'd he do that?"

With a deep sigh I said, "She held on to her life with every ounce of willpower she had. I really admire her for her strength. He got impatient again and cut her throat."

Without a word Jack left the room, and I followed. I walked into the living room and studied the pictures on the walls and shelves. She'd been Prom Queen last year at Romulus High School and had plenty of pictures to show it. She also had several pictures with who I assumed was her prom date, and more with her parents when she was younger. I found a senior picture of her and pocketed it. Shh!

I sat outside on the balcony while Jack wrapped up his investigation. I thought about Amanda Grace, first in her prom pictures, then lying in two gallons of her own blood. What kind of person could bring themselves to do that to someone? I also thought about the fact that the killer had been impatient and didn't get to kill her the way he wanted her to die. With his anger still unsatisfied, would he strike again?

Officer Milani dropped Jack and I at City Airport. We sat in the cockpit, engines still off, smoking Jane and thinking about the scene we'd just left.

"I've never seen a murder this... bizarre," Jack said, after puffing and passing. "I'd like for you to continue being my assistant, Nick. I have a feeling I'm going to need all the help I can get."

"I figured you might. That's why I boosted this stuff," I said, handing him a photo of Amanda Grace, her personal phone book, diary and cellphone.

"Jesus, Nick! You can't just take evidence from a crime scene!"

"No, *you* can't, but I can. Besides, it does us more good here than in an evidence storage room."

"Alright, but take it home and look through it. If the department found that stuff on me I'd be out of a job."

We rolled couple more Lady Janes for the road...err, sky. Whatever.

"Alright, get us outta here Nick. The stench in this town is overpowering."

Chapter Three

After landing at Willow Run, Jack wasted no time getting in his 2004 Mercury Marauder and leaving. He obviously had a lot on his mind, and the flight back was quiet. I got in my black 2002 Pontiac Firebird, and made the long trip back home to Farmington Hills. Any other time, pushing this car over 100mph on 1-94 would make me feel better. Not today. I did five under the limit while trying to push the images of Amanda Grace from my mind.

At three p.m. I pulled up in the driveway. Laurie and I live with my dad now, since our house was torched. Dad's really in no hurry to get rid of us, so we've put house shopping on hold for a while. I walked in the door, and found Dad taking off a bong I'd made from an old Chrysler transmission. Laurie was laying on the couch, but she got up when I walked in.

"Nicky!" she yelled, attacking me and pinning me to the floor. She was three months pregnant now, and her hormones were kinda outta whack. The pills the doctor gave her didn't help, but the Jane does miracles for her personality!

"You're high, Laurie," I said, trying to get up from the floor. I took off my jacket and sat on the couch.

"How was the flight?" She asked. "Suck any birds into the engine again?"

"C'mon, that happened *once*! What're the odds? Damn pigeon shouldn't have been flying in an FAA-defined flight path anyway."

Dad looked up from the bong with bloodshot eyes and a confused look on his face. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm DEA, Dad. You're under arrest," I said sarcastically.

His eyes went wide. "Shit!" he yelled, crawling quickly to his bedroom on his hands and knees. "You'll never take me alive, pigs!"

Ignoring the incident, I went to the kitchen and grabbed a Budweiser from the fridge.

"Nick," Laurie yelled from the living room, "I wanna go shopping later. Where's your wallet?"

"In my jacket, you bloodsucking leech."

"Hey! It's not for me, it's for our daughter!"

"Our *son*, dear. Don't start that daughter stuff again."

I started my search for food. I knew none would be in the fridge; too much beer to fit anything else. I settled for some Cap'n Crunch out of the box, washed down with a Budweiser.

In mid-crunch I saw Laurie run into the kitchen outta the corner of my eye. Before I could turn to her, she punched me in the side of my head and knocked me to the floor. Ow. Instant headache. And I spilled my beer.

"Who is she, Nick?!" she yelled as she towered over me with two lethal fists aimed at me. I knew the wrong answer would bring more pain.

"Huh?" I asked stupidly. Wrong answer, but I already knew that. Pow! Another fist, this one in my stomach.

"Get up motherfucker! Be a man and tell me who your little bitch is!"

I decided to shut up. That was the only smart answer. I sat up and rubbed the side of my head. Blood. Oh yeah, from that damn engagement ring. Nazareth was right. Love hurts.

Laurie stormed out of the kitchen, and I thought I'd been temporarily relieved, till she came back.

"Who is she, shithead?!" she demanded, throwing the picture of Amanda Grace at me.

I just shook my head. There was no good answer for this. If I said anything, she may have kicked me in the teeth. I stood up before she got that idea, and walked to the living room.

"You're just gonna walk away from me, you piece of shit?" she asked as I turned on the TV.

"You're just gonna ignore me and watch TV?! You *FUCK!*"

I chose silence. It was safer. Any word outta my mouth would earn me a kick in a highly unfavorable place. I turned the channel to Fox2 News. Their late-breaking story was on.

Amanda's picture was on the screen; the same picture as the one she threw at me. I pointed at the screen.

She looked over the screen with some intense scrutiny. "Okay," she finally said, "what'd this girl do to get on the news?"

"She died."

Several quiet moments went by as she stared at the TV.

"Isn't that you?" she asked.

I opened my eyes and looked at the TV. They played a close-up video clip of Jack and I getting out of the Crown Vic and walking into Amanda's apartment.

"Yep, that's me and my flight instructor." She'd never met Jack before.

I explained the whole story to her, start to finish. I even told her about the P-22 in Toledo, even though it had nothing to do with the story.

She looked thoroughly disgusted with herself. Good! "I'm sorry Nick, I thought...damn, I didn't hit you hard, did I?"

I turned and showed her the blood on the other side of my head.

"Sorry Nick. Those pills don't help much."

"Don't worry about it..." I said grinning, "I'm use to it."

"Asshole."

"I love you too."

After Laurie blatantly stole my wallet and carjacked my Firebird to go shopping, I started going through the stuff I'd taken. I thumbed through Amanda's phone book. Mostly female names, a few guys. All had Romulus addresses except for one: a Melissa Stahl from Detroit that lived not far from Amanda. I wrote down the address and number.

I picked up Amanda's cellphone and flipped through the directory of stored numbers. I recognized many of the names from her phone book. I took a deep breath and hit Redial.

"Holy shit! Amanda??" the female voice asked.

"I'm sorry, no. My name is Nick Stone, I'm an assistant detective calling from Miss Grace's phone."

A deep sigh on the other end. "Fuck, dude! You scared the hell outta me! The last number I expected to find on my Caller ID is hers!"

"Sorry about that. So who is this?"

"I'm Melissa Stahl. I'm...was, Amanda's friend. How'd you get my number?"

"I hit Redial on her phone. Evidently you were the last person she called."

"I was? Oh! Last night, before she left."

"Left for where?"

"St. Andrew's Hall. They had a bunch of punk bands playing last night. She wanted me to go, but I can't stand punk music."

"She likes punk music?"

"She's obsessed with it. She doesn't dress the part, but she says she's 'Punk on the Inside,' whatever the hell that's suppose to mean."

"Did anyone else go with her?"

"Actually, I was suppose to, but I told her no, so I guess she went alone. Oh God! Was it someone from St. Andrews? Fuck! I knew I shoulda went with her!"

"No, Miss Stahl, I don't know who it was. I'm just checking out all the leads." Damn, I was sounding like a real cop! Scary.

"Amanda was a sweet girl," Melissa said, now referring to Amanda in past-tense, "I can't imagine anyone wanting to hurt her. She was nice to everyone."

"She was nice to everyone? Like over-friendly? Did she often bring guys home?"

"Ugh, no, dickhead, she wasn't that kinda girl! She had her guy friends, and they all adored her, so she didn't feel the need to date."

"She ever mention anyone trying to give her a hard time?"

"Nobody ever gave her a hard time. Everyone loved her."

"Okay Miss Stahl, if you think of anything else that might be of help, call Detective Jack Noble of the Detroit Police," and I hung up.

"Another girlfriend?" Laurie asked from behind me.

I turned around to meet her sarcastic grin. "No dear, I'm still trying to recover from my current one,"

"Give it up Nick," she said as she gave me a huge hug, "because you never will."

"So how much of my money did you blow?"

"I don't blow money, Nick. I invest."

"Oh that's right, you don't blow at all," I said, earning me a playful right hook to my arm.

"So who were you talking to?" she asked.

I told her about my conversation with Melissa Stahl.

"Aww, you're playing Sherlock! How cute!"

"Eat me Laurie."

"Not without LOTS of Hot Sauce."

"Funny. When you're not doing standup comedy, how 'bout reading through this?" I asked, handing her Amanda's diary.

Her face lit up as if she were just given the Hope Diamond. "Oooh! You're gonna let me read the dead girl's diary?"

"I'm sure you can translate a girl's thoughts much better than I can."

"Oh, this's too cool, Nick!" she yelled, disappearing into our bedroom. I distinctly heard the click of the lock, and I knew I wouldn't be seeing her again for a while.

I turned the volume up on the TV, still showing the news, and sparked up a Lady Jane. The ten-o'clock news had turned into the eleven-o'clock news, and they continued to show clips of Jack and I walking into the apartment, and the paramedics loading Amanda's covered body into the ambulance. They hadn't mentioned anything about the crime scene, or the fact that she'd been tied up like a pig on Thanksgiving. They only said she'd been stabbed. The Detroit Police thankfully kept the details from leaking to the media.

I picked up my cellphone and called Jack. He was still at work and starting Amanda Grace's case file. I told him about my conversation with Melissa Stahl.

"I think we should talk to Amanda's parents," I added. "Did Amanda have a car?"

I heard some papers rustling. "She's got an oh-two Pontiac Grand Am. It's here in the station's garage. The state's forensics guys will be coming down from Lansing in two weeks. They said they're backlogged. I say they're lazy."

"Could I take a look at it myself?"

"I'd have to sneak you in, but sure."

"Let's set it up for tomorrow. Around noon. I blaze up in the morning."

I hung up and continued watching the news. I thought about Amanda Grace. Adored by many friends, and had no enemies. Seemed no one *could* dislike her. There's no way the killer could have known her.

I must have fallen asleep thinking about that, because Laurie came out of the bedroom and woke me up.

"Nick, this girl was a 100% sweetheart!" she said. "Too bad she's dead, she'd have been cool to hang out with."

"I'm sorry for your loss, dear. Did you find anything that might help?"

Her face turned to a frown. "She did mention something strange." She opened the diary and flipped through some pages. "Here, three days before she died. She starts talking about a subject as if she already wrote about it before." She handed it to me.

"It still upsets me that they never told me. Why did they keep it a secret? I really wish they hadn't told me. I can't stand her! She won't leave me alone! I'd love to tell her to get lost but in my heart I know it'd be wrong. I'll at least try to make it work."

"So what do you make of that?" I asked. "Who's *they* and *her*?" Why doesn't she give details like that?"

"Girls sometimes do that, Nick. Someone dropped a major bombshell on her, and she doesn't want it written down. She herself is the only one who reads it so she doesn't need to give the details. Also works out so no one else could figure it out if they were to read it."

"So any idea who it could be?"

"Could be an old friend she doesn't like, but she feels like she owes her something. I have no idea about the rest. And that was her last entry."

"Maybe she told her old friend to piss off and she took it badly."

"Could be. So what do you want to do tonight?" she asked.

"Sleep. I'm gonna go to her parent's house with Jack tomorrow."

She gave me a pout. "Nickyyy..."

"Ohhh, I guess I can squeeze you in," I said. "Hang on a second." I went to the kitchen and came back. "I wanna try something," I said, holding a can of whip cream.

Chapter Four

It was a long drive to Amanda's parents house in Romulus. Jack showed up earlier at my house in his Mercury Marauder and insisted we leave by nine a.m. We did, despite my heavy protests. I even tried to take my Firebird instead of his Marauder. It still looked and felt like a cop car, which made me very uncomfortable. I lost that battle too.

At least I wasn't riding in the backseat.

Downtown Romulus is nothing like you might think. Though their city is the location of the Detroit Metropolitan Airport, their business and residential district look like a small town in Georgia. A string of tiny shops line both sides of Main Street. No signs of neighborhood decay, like you might find in urban Detroit. It was Smalltown, U.S.A.

Amanda's parents' house was a tiny, ranch-style, two-story house. A 2005 Ford Expedition was parked in their driveway. Since Jack phoned ahead, they were expecting us. An elderly man in his late forties, grey hair and well dressed, answered the door and invited us in.

"Good morning Mr. Grace. I'm Detective Jack Noble, this's my assistant Nick Stone."

He simply nodded and pointed us to the couch in the livingroom. A younger lady, perhaps in her early forties, sat on the couch. Amanda looked very much like her mother. Jack and I sat on the couch opposite from Mrs. Grace.

"Thanks for coming out, Detective Noble," Mrs. Grace began. "The police wouldn't tell us anything about our daughter."

"Well, I'm afraid I can't really tell you anything either. The investigation requires us to keep many of the details away from the public."

"We're not the public, detective. We're her parents."

"I understand, but should the details leak to the public, we would have a much less chance of finding her killer."

"But...I mean, they won't even let us see her!" Mrs. Grace explained, the tears beginning to flow.

"I'm really sorry, Mrs. Grace. We just came here to ask some questions," Jack said.

Clearing her eyes with her hands, she nodded. "Okay."

"Can you think of anyone who might have a grudge against her?"

"No one, detective. Everyone loved her. They all believed the sun rises and sets in her shadow. I can't imagine she ever had an enemy in her life."

"Do you know if she had any new friends? Someone she just recently started talking to?" Jack asked. I read to him the diary entry on the way over.

She seemed deep in thought. "There was that girl, Melissa. Someone she met after she moved out there to Detroit. She seemed like a nice girl, though I only met her once."

I was getting a little bored, so I stood. "Do you mind if I have a look around?"

"Sure," Mr. Grace said with a dismissive wave. "I don't know what you'll find, but go ahead."

I left Jack to the interview, walking slowly through the kitchen, toward the rear of the house. I really didn't know what I'd find either, but I knew Mr. Grace was giving off a strange vibe. He hadn't said a word during the interview, and at no point did he make an attempt to comfort his wife as she cried for her daughter. His face had not shown an ounce of emotion.

I quietly slipped out the back door. The single-car garage was detached from the house and placed toward the rear of the backyard. A glance through the side window, though the inside was dark, showed what I surmised to be an early-nineties Ford Escort. From the angle of which I viewed the car, I could see the front fender was dented, and the driver's-side backseat window had been smashed, and fixed temporarily with duct tape and clear plastic.

The side door of the garage was unlocked, and my natural curiosity forced me inside. I found an overhead lightswitch and took a closer look at the car.

The two front tires were bald. The rear were dry-rotted. A glance underneath showed a tiny patch of oil, only an inch in diameter, so the car hadn't been parked here very long. The hood was tied down with a rubber tie-strap. In the rear, another tie-strap held up the muffler, and the left taillight was made completely of red tape, but it was the license plate that grabbed my attention. I took note of the plate to pass on to Jack.

I walked over to the driver-side door and looked inside. It only took a second to see it, and when I did suddenly felt sick. I stood back, tried to slow my breathing and calm down before returning to the house. I no longer had a desire to play Sherlock Holmes. The situation just became so much more real. After a few deep breaths I left the garage, closed the door and went back to the house.

I sat back on the couch next to Jack. Mrs. Grace was talking about Amanda's academic achievements. Jack glanced at me but my eyes revealed nothing. I interrupted her verbal reverie.

"Mrs. Grace, who owns that car in the garage?" I asked.

Her mouth dropped open but no words came out.

"It's my wife's car," Mr. Grace answered for her.

I nodded as if it were the answer I was expecting. Jack looked at me but I said nothing. Jack stood up. "I think that's all the questions we have. If we need anything else, we'll call."

I stood and followed Jack out the front door. Mr. Grace followed and caught up to us halfway to the car.

"What are the chances of you finding her killer?" he asked Jack.

"Honestly, it's a slim chance. We can't find anyone who might've had a reason to harm her."

"So what happens to the case?"

"If we run out of leads, the case gets shelved until something new comes up."

I thought I saw him breathe a sigh of relief, but it was quickly replaced with a face of anger.

"And her killer walks away? He just walks up to my little girl, cuts her throat and gets away with it?"

Jack and I glanced at each other when we realized what Mr. Grace had just accidentally told us.

"We're sorry, Mr. Grace," Jack said diplomatically, "we'll do our best to solve it. We always do." And we turned and left.

Neither of us said a word to each other during our short trip to the McDonalds by the airport. We went through the drive-thru and ate in the parking lot.

"You realize what he said before we left?" I asked.

"Yep. He knows her throat was cut. Not even his wife knew that."

"Lucky guess?" I asked.

"I doubt it. The news said she was stabbed. That's a pretty big jump."

"You might have to have him picked up."

"No. One little crime scene detail isn't enough to hold him."

"I'm talking about for what I saw in the garage."

"His wife's car?" he asked.

"Bullshit. I had a close look."

"Okay, talk to me Nick."

"It was a '91 Escort. Beat up like hell. Looked like maybe a \$500 car. If it still runs."

"So? No law against that."

"Dad drives an Expedition, daughter drives an '02 Grand Am, and mom drives a broken-down piece of crap? It doesn't mesh."

"You're right, but there's still no law against it."

I took out my notebook and showed him the license plate. He looked down at it, saying nothing for a minute, then looked away.

"So it was a Kentucky plate," he said.

"Yep. And the tags were current, and there wasn't much oil on the floor. It was parked there recently."

Jack turned on the police computer mounted on the dashboard. It was connected via satellite to the police station's mainframe. He typed in the Escort's plate number and waited. In seconds, the information came back.

"Okay. Lindsay Grace. Must be her mom. But according to this, she lives in Lexington Kentucky. That doesn't make sense, but it's still not grounds for an arrest."

"It might be when there's blood all over the steering wheel."

Chapter Five

Three Romulus police cars and one Detroit police car were present to make the arrest. Jack and I pulled up just before Mr. Grace was brought out in handcuffs. He didn't put up a fight, but he held a stone-cold look and never said a word as he was read his rights, placed in the backseat of the Detroit police car and driven away. Mrs. Grace stood speechless in the front yard, watching the entire spectacle. Jack made a futile attempt to talk to her.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Grace. We did what we felt we needed to do. You must understand, the car in the garage; the bloody steering wheel; and your husband has details of the crime scene. This was our only choice."

"I'm a good Christian, Detective Noble. But if I wasn't, I'd tell you to go fuck yourself," she said, and went back into the house.

It was obvious we hadn't made any friends here today. Jack made the right choice, but something still felt a bit...out of place. I pushed this thought aside as Jack and I watched the tow-truck remove the bloody Escort from the garage, destined for a parking spot next to Amanda's Grand Am at the Detroit PD's forensics garage.

"Thanks for your help today, Nick. That car was a big break in the case."

"So the next flying lesson's free, right?"

He smiled. "The next three are."

We turned into the underground garage of the Detroit Police station at three p.m. Jack led me to the forensics garage and told me not to touch the Escort till the Homicide guys were done. In the meantime, I inspected the Grand Am while Jack went to his office to type up reports.

Donning a pair of talcum-free latex gloves, I opened the driver-side door. The car was somewhat dirty. Not as bad as my Firebird, but it was obvious Amanda didn't have maid service. Several granola bar wrappers were on the floor, empty bottles of Aquafina were in the backseat, and Wrigley's JuicyFruit wrappers were in the glove box.

Amanda looked to be a health nut. A glance in the trunk confirmed that, when I found a FitnessUSA membership card and change of clothes in a duffle bag sitting in front of a speaker box with 12" speakers. Must have a nice stereo system.

I opened the passenger-side door. Not much difference from the driver-side. The trash was identical. I looked under the passenger seat and pulled out a small red-and-white box. This didn't match the rest of the trash. It was an empty pack of cigarettes. Marlboro Reds. I pulled out my cellphone and dialed Melissa's number from memory.

"Miss Stahl. This's Nick Stone."

"Hey! Anything new?"

"Maybe," I told her, "we have a few leads to chase. I had a couple more questions."

"Shoot."

"Do you smoke?"

Without hesitation she said, "Hell no! I've never smoked!"

"How about Amanda?"

"She's even less likely to smoke. She was into, ya know, healthy things."

"That's what I figured. Hang on one second," I said and covered the phone and yelled over to the two detectives collecting evidence from the Escort.

"Hey, either of you guys a non-smoker?"

"I am," one of them said.

"Take a sniff inside the Grand Am and tell me if anyone's smoked in it."

He walked over, stuck his head in and took a deep breath through his nose. He paused and came back.

"Yep, someone smoked in it, but only a few times. It's not nearly as bad as the Escort. I almost gagged when I opened the door! Cigarette packs all over the place."

"Oh yeah? Would they be Marlboro Reds?" He paused.

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

I went back to my cellphone. "Miss Stahl. Did she know anyone who smoked?"

"I don't know all her friends," she said, "but I seriously doubt it. She can't stand to be around cigarette smoke."

"So what are the chances she'd let someone smoke in her car?"

"Hahaha...not a snowball's chance in hell! She was always real anal about that."

"Okay. Thanks Miss Stahl. I'll keep ya updated," I said and hung up.

My phone rang again within seconds.

"Nick," Jack said, "do me a favor and read me the VIN number from the Escort."

I looked at the Vehicle Identification Number stamped on a metal plate riveted to the dashboard at the bottom of the windshield and read the numbers and letters to him. After hearing keystrokes over the phone, he paused. "Hmm. That can't be right."

"What's up Jack?"

"I'll show ya later. Find anything in the Grand Am?"

I went over the Marlboros and my talk with Melissa Stahl.

"So Amanda had a new friend," Jack surmised.

"Maybe her mom smoked in the Grand Am when she rode shotgun? Your Homicide guys say the Escort reeks of smoke."

"That theory would work, but there's one problem with it."

"Which is?"

"That's not Amanda's mom's car. I'll be down there in a few. Do me a favor and roll up the windows on the Grand Am."

"Sure," I said and hung up.

I opened the driver-side door on the Grand Am. It had power windows, so I had to turn the key backwards to roll the windows up. When I turned the key I was assaulted from all sides by music. The volume was almost all the way up, so I turned it down.

Those 12" speakers packed a hard punch! The music was coming from a CD, so I hit the Eject button. The CD was from a local band I'd heard a couple times, called the Modern Idiots. Punk music. The music really wasn't bad, and I couldn't imagine why Melissa Stahl didn't like it. I turned the radio back up and waited for Jack.

Five songs on the Modern Idiots CD played before Jack walked through the doors to the garage. He stopped and listened to the music.

"What in hell is that? Sounds like crap."

"Open your mind a little, Jack. It's punk music."

"Sure, okay. Kill it, we gotta go."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Another homicide. This one's worse than yesterday."

Chapter Six

Rush hour in Southeast Michigan could not be described as anything but pure hell. Especially this summer. Interstate 94 slows down to a crawl during rush hour as a result of twelve separate construction projects stretching from the I-94/I-75 interchange, all the way to Detroit Metro Airport. Michigan drivers are well-known for constantly improving upon the dictionary definition of Road Rage. But this one just went way too far.

The Dodge minivan was in the ditch on the right side of I-94 West, just past the Pelham Rd. exit. The dents and fresh scrapes down the driver-side meant it had been forced off the road. Both side view mirrors were gone. Every window on the van was smashed out, except the passenger-side window which had been rolled down. All four tires were flattened by what seemed to be a two-inch-wide knife. Headlights, taillights and the grill were also smashed.

But the driver looked much worse. The man's body, or what was left of it, lay on the grass on the far side of the van, away from the freeway. The top of his head was smashed open with a tire-iron found not far away. The brain had been removed, and then impaled on the tire iron, which was stuck in the ground as if to put the man's brain on display. The eyeballs had been removed with a large pocketknife, and found later in his shirt pocket. The knife was found deeply embedded in his crotch, which made mine hurt for no apparent reason. The torso was cut open and the heart, kidneys, pancreas, liver and twenty-seven feet of intestine were randomly scattered about the area. As if that weren't enough, all eight fingers and both thumbs had been cut off with wire cutters. The fingers and thumbs were found in his mouth, and the wire cutters were crudely shoved up his nose. Jack and I surveyed the scene in silence till I spoke.

"Where we goin' for dinner?" I asked, to lighten the atmosphere.

"This's no road rage case," Jack said, ignoring my question. The dispatcher had used those words when calling Jack to the scene.

"Think Amanda's killer struck again?" I asked.

"If he did, then he's improving on his killing method."

A state trooper, who'd been first on the scene, approached Jack, notebook in-hand. "Detective Noble, I'm Lt. Pierce." He looked back at the grisly scene. "I don't envy you for this one."

"Any witnesses?" Jack asked.

"Two motorists pulled over to help when they saw the van leave the road. Apparently they both sat in their cars and watched this guy get hacked up. Really messed 'em up. Police psychologists took 'em, but not before telling us what they saw. They said a purple two-door with gold-spoked rims - one of those hoopties you see in the ghetto, ran this van off the road. The owner of the purple two-door pulled over to the shoulder, got out, removed some tools from the trunk and pulled the driver from the van into the grass on the other side of the van. That's when this nutcase started his Roadside Autopsy," he said, allowing himself a chuckle at his own joke. "When he was done, he beat the crap outta the van, as if that would make any difference...came back to the body, put the tire iron through the guy's brain and stuck it in the ground. He stood there for about two minutes, apparently admiring his work. But then...the two witnesses said he ran screaming to his car and drove off."

"I don't suppose they thought to look at the plate, did they?"

"Yup, sure did."

Jack looked up suddenly. "No shit??"

"None whatsoever, detective. But here's the good part. Four Taylor Police officers went to the guy's house...not far, over by Telegraph and Goddard. They said the guy freaked out and took his wife and kid hostage in his house. The officers haven't gained access to the house yet. but he's called the Taylor Police and told them he'd kill both of them if they didn't back off."

"So he's still there?" Jack asked.

"Yup. He's been holding strong for about an hour," Lt. Pierce said, looking at his watch.

According to Taylor Police, Tyler Donnell was a black 25-year-old male living in a small, one-story house in Taylor, where he recently moved with his wife and two-year-old son. No warrants, no prior arrests, a few traffic tickets, all were paid. Now Tyler Donnell had barricaded himself in his house with his wife and son held at gunpoint, according to the phone call he'd made to Taylor Police. Another computer check showed no firearms registered to him or his wife.

Mr. Donnell's purple 1986 Buick Regal, gold rims and all, was parked in his front yard, where he skidded to a stop, tearing up the grass. The driver's side door was still open, and covered in blood. More blood was found on the steering wheel, gear-shifter and the seats.

The entire street was filled with police cars, a few ambulances, news vans with huge antennas cranked into the air, and hundreds of on-lookers. Jack, being officially employed with the Detroit Police, was allowed under the police tape that lined the Donnell's front yard. I stayed back and observed from the street when my phone rang.

"I spy you Nicky..." Laurie said.

"Ooooh, are you stalking me?"

"Modern media, my love. You need to stop showing up on the news. It's bad for... ya know, *business*."

I'd realized then I'd walked in front of a news camera. "It didn't show my face, did it?"

"Don't worry, you're safe. So what'd that guy do?"

"He dissected a minivan and its driver on the side of I-94."

"Hmm. Welcome to Michigan."

"Hey, could be worse," I said. "We could be in Florida."

"So how was the interview with Amanda's parents?"

I told her about Amanda's dad and the bloody Escort.

"So her dad did it?"

"I don't know, but he definitely knows something he's not telling anyone." "Figures. Dads suck. Except yours, of course."

"Speak of the devil, how is he?"

"He still thinks the DEA is here. I tried to tell him you were kidding, but he keeps yelling something about conspiracies, the CIA and two-headed snakes running the oil industry. I slipped him some Lady Janes under the door, and he quieted down."

"Alright. That'll hold him till I get home."

"And when'll that be?"

"I'd really like to leave now, but my car's not here and Jack's kinda preoccupied."

"Well, try to hurry. I bought another can of whip cream," she said and hung up. Another fun night awaited me.

I looked up at the Donnell's tiny house. Jack stood in the front yard talking to two police officers, none of whom noticed the front door open and a young black woman standing in the doorway holding a toddler, until she began yelling at the crowd.

"You bastards! You all killed my husband, you pricks!"

In that very instant the media circus snapped to attention, video cameras were trained on the house, and camera flashes erupted from newspaper photographers.

Jack and the two Taylor police officers followed the lady into the house. They made a valiant effort to subdue her as she hurled four-letter words at them.

A half hour later, Jack came out to the car where I'd been waiting patiently for him, and gave me an update.

"I haven't been able to interview her myself yet. You and I will later. But I sat in on an interview with her and a Taylor PD detective."

"So I guess he blew his brains out, huh?"

"No, not quite. There was no gun in the house, and according to his wife there never was. He made up the story about holding his family at gunpoint so the police would back off. Yeah, that'll happen. She said he never threatened her in any way."

"But he's dead, right? I mean, she told the whole world that much."

"Yep, he's dead. He locked himself in his bathroom with a long kitchen knife. This one looked like it could be used to slice a watermelon in half. After his wife pleaded with him for two hours to come out, he used it on himself."

"I don't suppose he confessed, did he?"

"Not to killing Amanda, but he did confess to killing the guy on 1-94, in his own sick and twisted way."

"Oh? And how'd he do that?"

Jack took a deep breath. "Laying on his bathroom floor, he sliced his own abdomen open, exactly the same way. He removed his spleen, kidneys, pancreas and liver and dumped them in the bathtub. He then started pulling his intestines out, leaving them on the floor. He finally died when he ripped his own heart out. He died still holding it in his right hand."

"Jesus, Jack. That's a hell of a way to commit suicide!"

"After the scene dies down, you and I are gonna go talk to her."

"Ahh, can't wait," I said sarcastically.

"Hey Nick? I do appreciate everything you've done. These cases have been kinda playing with my head. I would've had to turn them down otherwise."

"More free flying lessons?" I asked.

"And your girl too, if she wants."

Mrs. Donnell was sitting on her couch in the living room, still crying, with her two-year-old son Deonté on her lap, who was smiling and drooling, and seemed oblivious to the chaos around him. I much admired him for that. A few Taylor PD detectives were still in attendance, but they were outside, looking at the bloodstains in Mr. Donnell's Buick Regal, and, I assumed, collecting samples. This left Jack and I alone to interview her.

"First, I'd like to know why you're angry with us," Jack said.

"Not with you," she said, "with those Taylor cops that showed up after my husband came home. Those bastards killed him! Why wouldn't they just leave? Tyler would still be alive."

"They were doing their job."

"Yeah, bullshit," she said, lighting up a Newport. "They cornered him. He was trapped. All he asked was for them to back off, give him a chance to tell his side of the story."

"The police would've given him that opportunity. Would you like to tell us what happened when he got home?"

She took a deep drag from the cigarette and talked while exhaling the smoke. "He ran in through the front door. He had blood all over him. He said some white guy cut him off on the freeway. He honked at the guy, and the fucker gave Tyler the finger and yelled 'Dumb Nigger' out the window. Tyler said he went nuts and forced the guy off the road. He said he didn't remember anything else except standing there with blood all over himself. He knew he'd done it, but he had no idea why. He's not a violent person! He said something took control of him. He blacked out, and when he woke up, he'd already killed this guy."

For several minutes, neither Jack nor Mrs. Donnell spoke. There wasn't much else Jack could ask. She broke the silence.

"What Tyler did to himself...in the bathroom...was that what he did to that guy on the freeway?"

Jack paused to form a response. "It was similar, but what he did to himself was very much small-scale compared to the other guy."

"Hmm. No love lost for that bigoted asshole," she said.

She glanced out her front window for a second, then she put her son on the couch and jumped up. She ran to the front door, opened it and yelled, "Get the fuck away from my husband's car you blue-suited sons-of-bitches!"

She walked back to us but didn't sit down. "Tyler wasn't capable of doing those horrible things. I understand he did them, but he just wasn't capable. He was a great husband and a hell of a father to Deonté. Something happened to him, like he said. And I believe him."

There wasn't much else for us to ask. We stood up and thanked her for the interview, and she walked with us out the door.

"Could I have a look in the trunk?" I asked, speaking for the first time. "The weapons used at the scene came from there, and I just wanted to see what else was in there."

"Sure," she said. She reached into the bloody Buick, and grabbed the keys, still in the ignition. She walked to the rear and popped the trunk.

Inside were a couple toolboxes, and piles of loose tools scattered throughout the trunk. In the back of the trunk was a stereo amp mounted on a carpeted box that housed two 12" chrome speakers. I'd just seen a similar setup in the trunk of Amanda's car earlier today. My eyes went back to the tools.

"What did Tyler do for a living?" I asked.

"He's...was, an auto mechanic. He worked at a little garage in Detroit, but he kept all his tools in the trunk because the garage gets broken into a lot."

I nodded and shut the trunk. Again we thanked her as she got into her husband's Buick and started it. Immediately Jack and I felt the blast of those 12" speakers playing rap.

I walked up to the driver-side window. "Who is that? On the radio?"

"Oh, that's a CD," she said, hitting the Eject button. She took the disc out and held it up.

"Reign Supreme? I think I've heard of them."

"I'd hope so. They're a Detroit group. They've had a lot of radio play lately, and they're building some recognition for themselves."

"I'll have to go buy their CD. Thanks Mrs. Donnell."

Jack and I got in his ear and sparked up a couple Lady Janes I'd brought with me. All the other cops had left, so screw it. We sat there and watched Mrs. Donnell. After reinserting the CD, she pulled the car out of the front yard and into the driveway. She didn't get out, or even shut the car off. She just sat there, rap music blasting, as Jack and I watched.

"She said he wasn't capable. Something took control of him. What do you think, Jack?"

After letting out a puff of smoke, he said, "It's bullshit Nick. Let me explain something. Everyone...you, me, your girl and your unborn child...we're *all* capable of murder, given the right circumstances. No one will think themselves capable of anything, till they try it. There always has to be a first time."

"So then what?" I asked. "You think this guy was a thread waiting to snap?"

"It's possible. It's more believable than something taking over her husband's body. I mean hell, should we be calling in an exorcist on this one?"

"Alright. Is there any connection to Amanda here?" I asked.

"I don't see one. Other than the horrific nature of the killings. How about you?"

"I don't know. I'm too tired to think about it. I just want to get home, get some sex and get some sleep."

Jack started the car and we made our way down the residential street. Waiting at Telegraph Road to make a right, I just barely caught a glimpse of the purple blur that breezed past us and out onto Telegraph, narrowly missing three cars. Reign Supreme still blasted from the trunk.

"Was that her?" I asked, but I already knew. There was no mistaking the gold rims.

"Where the hell is she going in such a hurry?" Jack asked.

A half hour later, we pulled up in my driveway, but I didn't get out. I'd just remembered something I'd forgotten about all day.

"Jack...back at the garage, you said the Escort wasn't Mrs. Grace's car. Whose is it?"
"Oh!" he said, retrieving a folded piece of paper from his pocket. "I ran the VIN on the Escort, and again it came up as Lindsay Grace, Lexington Kentucky. I pulled up Lindsay Grace's driver's license, and this's what I got."

He handed me the folded piece of paper, which I opened.

The driver's license photo staring back at me sent chills down my spine. It was Amanda Grace.

"Ooh...Miss Honesty had a fake name?" I asked.

"Looks that way, but Kentucky? I thought maybe Identity Theft, so I sent a copy of our picture of Amanda to the Lexington Police. They're going to go to the owner of the apartment building listed on her driver's license and see if it's her. They'll get back to me."

"So What's Amanda's dad saying about this?"

"Not a word. Literally. He hasn't spoken a single word since we brought him in. This new piece of information doesn't get us any closer to finding out if he killed her or not. But he knows something. Before we left the station I had the team type up a search warrant for his house and garage. We'll get a judge to sign it and go in early tomorrow morning. Hopefully we'll find something solid against him."

I yawned. "Okay Jack, let me know how it all goes," I said, getting out of the car.

"Nick! You're not coming with us tomorrow?"

"Sorry Jack. I sleep late. Let me know what you find." I got out before he could stop me. I couldn't help it, I was exhausted.

As I've grown accustomed to, Laurie attacked me like a leopard lunging at it's prey, as soon as I walked in the door.

"Nicky!" she yelled, pinning me to the floor.

"Damn Laurie. Miss me?"

"Not you, so much as your..." she said, grabbing me in a not-unpleasant location.

"...wallet?" I volunteered.

"Shithead," she said smiling as she got up from sitting on my legs. "I saw the news. Did the guy really kill himself the way they said?"

"Yup. Turned himself into sushi."

"Light me," she said, with a Lady Jane dangling from her lips. I took out my Zippo and did as I was told.

"How's Dad?" I asked. I didn't see him when I came in, so I'd assumed he was still barricaded in his room.

"After he smoked, he came out. He's in the backyard shooting squirrels."

"He's out there firing a gun?" I asked incredulously.

"No dear. Slingshot. I told you ya shouldn't have given him that thing."

"Fine, you were right, Your Highness."

"Damn straight. Anything new about Amanda?"

"Just that she's a world-class sweetheart with a fake ID."

"What would she need with a fake ID?" Laurie asked.

"I don't know, but she registered a car with her fake ID." I elaborated on the events of the day, and tomorrow's plans.

"What's Jack expect to find in the Graces' house?"

"Who knows? Maybe Amanda's blood with Mr. Grace's prints on it? If he even did it. He doesn't seem the type. It would take a raving psycho to do what was done to her."

"How come you won't tell me how she was killed?"

"Jack doesn't want anyone to know, for the simple reason that Mr. Grace does know how his daughter was killed, and no one else could have told him."

"Nick, how long are you gonna keep playing Sherlock? This's Jack's job. Your job is to keep me happy," she said, groping me in my not-unpleasant location again.

"I'll stop when I find out why these things are happening. Doesn't this whole thing make you just a little curious?"

"Alright. But Nick, you're MINE at night, got it? If you're not home by 8pm every night, I won't think twice about castrating you," she said with an evil grin.

Dad walked in through the back door, Lady Jane in his mouth, slingshot in his hand.

"Happy huntin'?" Laurie asked.

"We're having squirrel stew tomorrow night," he said with a smirk.

"Didn't we have that last night?" I asked, earning myself a slug in the arm from Laurie. Last night she made home-made pot roast. My stomach swore vehemently for two hours.

"It's no different than what your grandfather used to make when I was a kid," Dad said.

"We had squirrel, raccoon, beaver, and hell, anything with wings was a delicacy."

"Sure, but that was before they invented supermarkets," I said. "Hey, how is Grandpa anyway?"

"He's fine, last I heard. He's..." Dad paused to do the math, "85 now. Still gets around, too. Lives in a condo in Orlando."

"Give him a call and see if you can get him to come up for a visit."

"I'll try, but he's a miserable old fart," he said, standing up and walking to his bedroom.

Laurie stood and walked to the kitchen. Minutes later she emerged. "Nicky...," she said, holding a can of whip cream, a jar of maraschino cherries and a banana. Goodnight, everyone.

Chapter Seven

"Paydirt, Nick," Jack said after my cellphone woke me up.

I sat up in bed and looked over at Laurie's nude body laying next to me. "Jack, if you saw what I had next to me, you wouldn't blame me for hanging up right now."

"She can wait. I'm at the Graces' house. You really need to see what these guys found here. Get out here, like right now."

I reluctantly agreed and hung up. Laurie was awake now, and inserted a Lady Jane in my mouth and lit it. She knows me too well.

"Have fun, Sherlock," she said grinning. "Get some more whip cream on your way home."

I had to park the Firebird three houses away. The Graces' house was a circus of police. Romulus police were present, along with a Detroit police van in the Graces' driveway and several unmarked cars used by detectives. The Ford Expedition wasn't there.

Jack was standing in the front yard waiting for me.

"Glad to see you could make it," he said.

"You didn't give me much choice," I said with a smirk.

He leaned over to me, and started sniffing me. I found this to be rude and completely unacceptable social behavior.

"Nick...why do you smell like a banana split?"

"Ohh...you didn't give me a chance to take a shower this morning."

He shook his head. "Don't wanna know. Anyways, I hated to drag you away from a naked blonde, but I thought you'd want to see this."

We walked into the house, and I first noticed several objects laid out on plastic on the living room floor. Most I didn't recognize, but there was no mistaking the long, jagged-edged kitchen knife with blood on it's handle.

"Murder weapon?" I asked, pointing at the knife.

'Yep. The lab guys in that van out there already tested the blood on it. It matches Amanda's blood type. A DNA match will take a few weeks."

"So where'd you find it?"

He pointed at a white plastic bottle. "It was inside the bottle of bleach, to get rid of the bloodstains. That's why a little blood was left on the handle; the knife didn't fit all the way down into the bleach."

"Someone tried to clean up the evidence. Do we have Dad to thank for that?"

"Could be. There are prints of a thumb and index finger in the blood. We'll hear back about that soon."

I took a closer look at everything else laying on the plastic. A pile of clothing, a set of keys, and two small white pieces of paper. Jack caught my glance and handed me a pair of tweezers, which I used to pick up one of the pieces of paper.

"Concert tickets. For St. Andrew's Hall, to see the Modern Idiots, on the same night she was killed. The stubs are still attached, so she never went." I picked up the other one, which turned out to be identical. "So Dad stole her tickets?"

"I don't think he had them. Those and the keys were found in the pants pocket," he said, holding up the bloodstained blue jeans.

"Jack? Those are women's jeans."

"Yep, and that's a woman's shirt, socks and shoes. All with bloodstains."

"So Dad didn't kill her," I concluded.

"Maybe not, but the killer was here, and Mr. Grace knows who the person is. And he still isn't talking."

"Detective Noble," a man said behind me. "We faxed the prints from the knife to the station, and they came back a perfect match to Mr. Grace."

"Good. Have them send everything to the Wayne County D.A.'s office to start the indictment," Jack said and walked out the door. I followed.

"So I guess the keys belong to the Escort?" I asked as we stood in the front yard. Jack stared off into the distance as he spoke. "That's a possibility. There's a set of Ford keys on it. They look too old to fit the Expedition."

"Speaking of which, where's Mrs. Grace?"

"No idea. She and the truck were gone when we got here this morning."

Jack's pocket started ringing, and he pulled out his cellphone and answered it.

"Noble...yeah...she what?! When the hell did she... Yesterday?? Fuck, why am I just now finding this out? Well, thanks anyway," and he hung up.

"Bad news?" I asked. Nick Stone, Master of the Obvious.

"You could say that. Yesterday, when Mrs. Donnell tore ass outta the neighborhood in her husband's purple pimpmobile, she went to the Taylor police station. They said she attacked two cops with a screwdriver. They arrested her and social services took her son. They say the two officers will live."

I said nothing to this. There was nothing to say.

"What do you make of this, Nick?" he asked, pointing back at the Graces' house.

"You're the detective, Jack, but I'd say whoever was wearing those clothes killed her, and unless Dad's a cross-dresser, it wasn't him. But Dad did try to get rid of the evidence. Try and find Mom. She may know too, and she looks like the type to crack under pressure. "

"There's an APB out on the Expedition, and we're checking driveways of family. It'll take time. Oh, we heard back from the Lexington PD this morning. Our dear Amanda was living there only a month. She moved out two weeks ago. The owner of the building confirmed her identity with our photo."

"Sounds like Amanda had some kinda secret life," I said.

"Yep. Sounds like if Mr. Grace doesn't talk, and we don't find Mrs. Grace, we're at a dead-end. We have enough to convict Mr. Grace, but I know there's more to this story."

I looked back at the Graces' house. How did such a happy family get so incredibly messed up? Geez, even my own isn't this bad! We may be a family of gun-toting drug addicts regularly committing felonies, but we're happy. And we don't slice and gut each other.

"How about Tyler Donnell's wife?" I asked.

"What about her?"

"I think I'd like to talk to her."

"We got what we could from her yesterday. What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking she's the only one we can find who's flipped and gone psycho, and lived afterward."

"I like your thinking. Let's go."

Chapter Eight

After a call to the Taylor PD, we found out Mrs. Donnell had been moved to the psychiatric ward on the 10th floor of Oakwood Hospital in Dearborn for an evaluation. Since she tried to kill two cops and was now in police custody, she was heavily guarded.

"The nurse I talked to on the phone said Mrs. Donnell was sedated for the moment," Jack said in the elevator to the 10th floor. "We may not get much from her till the drugs wear off."

The elevator stopped and the doors opened to reveal a bulletproof glass enclosure around us when we stepped off the elevator. We stood there for several seconds watching the psych ward's foot-traffic. Men and women of all ages walked aimlessly, some carrying cans of Coke or Pepsi, eyes downcast and staring at the floor. An elderly lady sat on a couch, eyes transfixed on the TV mounted on the wall and was crying. The TV wasn't on.

A slightly overweight lady in a white coat came to the door of the glass enclosure, took out some keys, unlocked it and let us in.

"Good afternoon Detective Noble, Mr. Stone. I'm Dr. Baum, Mrs. Donnell's evaluating psychologist. "

"How is she? Can we talk to her yet?" Jack asked.

"You can try. Right now she seems to be mumbling incoherently; something about drugs and women. The sedative still has yet to wear off."

Dr. Baum led us down a long hallway. It dead-ended where two police officers stood on each side of a door. Dr. Baum took out her keys, unlocked the door and the three of us entered.

Mrs. Donnell was strapped to a hospital bed, bound at her wrists, ankles and forehead. She was thrashing around a bit as if trying to break free, but she wasn't giving it much effort, to suggest she'd been doing this a while and wore herself out. She was mumbling, and Jack and I stepped closer to hear her..

"...cruisin' in mah Benz with a joint I'm tokin', mah bizzle next to me and her tits are smokin'...mah homies can't find me cuz my cellphone's broken!"

"What's that, Nick?" Jack asked.

"That's Reign Supreme. That song was playing when she started her husband's car."

"She was listening to it too on her way to the police station last night," Jack said.

"Detective Noble?"

We both turned to Mrs. Donnell. She was no longer singing or thrashing around. She stared with wide eyes at Jack.

"Mrs. Donnell? How do you feel?" Jack asked.

"Like shit. Please, call me Penelope."

"Alright, Penelope. Do you know why you're here?"

"I snapped. I tried to kill some cops, right? I was so pissed at them. I just wanted them to die over and over. I don't know why, because those two cops weren't even there at my house."

Jack looked at me and nodded, a signal for me to continue the interview.

"Penelope," I said, and she turned her eyes to me, "do you remember what you were doing when this fit of rage hit you?"

She rolled her eyes up into her head. I thought she was lapsing back into rap mode, till she spoke. "I was sitting in the Regal in my driveway after you two left. After sitting there for a few minutes, I felt this anger burning in me. I don't really remember anything after that. Is that what happened to Tyler??"

I looked back at Jack. I didn't have anything else to ask her.

"Get some rest, Penelope," Jack said. "We'll be back later to check on you."

On our way out, Jack exchanged some words with the two officers guarding the door. They talked the usual shop-talk, and he asked about the two injured officers, who were coincidentally downstairs on the third floor.

At the glass enclosure, Jack asked Dr. Baum for a copy of her report when it was finished, to which she agreed.

In the parking garage Jack finally spoke. "Any thoughts?"

"Not really. Just some loose ideas."

"Think about it some. Go home, play with the little lady, and I'll call you if something comes up."

I agreed, found my Firebird and left. On my way home I pushed all my thoughts of Penelope Donnell and Amanda Grace from my head. My dear lady Jane helped.

Thankfully I had not been attacked upon entering the house this time. Though it was now 1pm, Laurie was asleep on the living room floor, arms wrapped around the tranny bong in a huge bear hug. It was a serene and peaceful scene, and I was more than a bit jealous. I went to the kitchen and grabbed a Budweiser from the fridge. Today's mail was laying on the kitchen table where I'd left it this morning. All our bills were deducted automatically from several bank accounts, which left very little in our mailbox each morning. Today was mostly junkmail; advertisements for nearby grocery stores, pizza shops, and a 'Have You Seen Me?' from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Today's depicted a young black girl, age six, along with an age-progression photo. Sorry Mary Lynn Dauber of Houston Texas, I haven't seen you.

Under the immense pile was a light brown 9x12 legal envelope I hadn't noticed this morning. On the front were four 39¢ stamps, and my name and address neatly typed. The envelope was devoid of a return address.

My brain suddenly reverted to a crime novel I'd read in which the investigating detective received a letter bomb in the mail, evidently sent by the bad guys. The envelope contained a sheet of C-4 plastic explosives, as thin as paper, attached to a watch battery and triggered by a spring when the envelope was opened. Unfortunately, the detective's wife opened the envelope when he wasn't home, which ultimately disintegrated the front of his house, not to mention his wife.

I took the letter into the living room and removed the lampshade from the lamp table near the front door. I held the envelope to, the light, allowing me to see through it.

It looked to be empty, except for a lighter outline around the edge, which suggested there was one sheet of paper inside. I found no outlines of a watch battery or a trigger device.

"Whatcha lookin' for, Sherlock?" Laurie asked from behind me.

"A bomb."

"Have you tried HBO?" she asked, and went back to the bong.

When I built up the nerve, I finally opened the envelope. I was right. It contained a single sheet of paper. It was mostly empty, but contained one neatly-typed sentence:

"It's in the music."

I studied the words on the single sheet of paper for several moments, almost expecting the words to change. It's in the music? *What's* in the music? I assumed it had to do with the Grace and Donnell cases, so I called Jack and told him of the new development, and agreed to drop it off to him later. I returned the sheet of paper to the envelope and wrapped it in a plastic bag.

"Nick, I wanna do some more shopping," Laurie demanded.

"Again??"

"Yes, again. Ya got a problem with that?" she not-very-sweetly asked while grabbing me in my frequently grabbed location.

"Laurie, don't expect it to work much longer if you keep grabbing it like that." "That's fine," she said, patting her stomach, "I don't need it anymore."

"Good, then I can use the can of whip cream with my other girlfriend," I said, which earned me another punch in my already-bruised arm.

We drove the 14-mile excursion to the Sears Dept. Store in Lincoln Park, whose parking lot contained, among many other things, an Old Navy, Babies-R-U's, Radio Shack and a Harmony House. We could have found some place closer to home, but I had a friend to visit afterward.

After parking the car near Old Navy, Laurie went first to Babies-R-U's while I walked over to Radio Shack and went in.

"Nick!"

"Afternoon, Gary," I said to the 400+lb. commission-earning salesman behind the counter. I've been coming here for many years, almost as long as Gary Bowman has been working here.

"Anything specific you're looking for?"

"Oh you know me, I'm always looking for new toys."

At those words, Gary's eyes lit up like a kid at Christmas as a thought popped into his head. "Oh! These came in a month ago! You'll love it!" he said, disappearing into the back of the store. While he was gone I looked around. I took a closer look at the display model of a Tandy computer. Tandy? Didn't they go out of business in the early 90's? Way to hold on to a lost cause.

"Check this out, Nick," he said when he returned. He was holding a plain plastic box that had a couple switches, a phone jack, and a six-inch phone cord hanging out.

"You plug it into a phone line, and it broadcasts the phone call on a 2.4GHz frequency. Say your daughter has her own phone line. Plug this in and find out what she talks about with that guy that picked her up in his '78 Camaro last night."

"Great analogy, Gary. So what's it run on? How often do you change the batteries?"

"Never!" Gary said with an evil grin. "That's the beauty of it. It runs off the 45 volts from the phone line. It broadcasts up to 2500 feet, and you just use a police scanner to listen to it."

"Sold. Guess I'll need a scanner too huh?" I asked, though he'd already grabbed a box from under the counter.

"It's from Uniden. Picks up everything from police to aircraft to cellphones. Might even pick up little green men from Mars, if you have the right frequency."

"You're a hell of a salesman, Gary," I said, handing him my credit card and topping off the order with ten rechargeable batteries.

I left Radio Shack and went next door to Harmony House with a morbid curiosity. It didn't take long to locate Reign Supreme's' only CD. It was this month's featured group, and was prominently displayed on a rack near the front entrance. I grabbed one and continued my search.

The Modern Idiots CD was a much harder find. I eventually found it falsely categorized under Rock/Alternative. The shelves were probably stocked by some trendy poseur who wouldn't know punk if it dropped in his lap and bit his tallywhacker off. And for this horrible injustice, it just might.

I made my way back to the front counter, which was armed with a blonde girl of maybe 16. She wore big gold hoop earrings and too much make-up. I interrupted her as she lip-synced to Blink 182's 'Small Things'. Probably thinks it's punk. She probably stocks these shelves herself.

I took a chance and posed my question to her. I handed her the two CDs and asked, "What would you say these two CDs have in common?"

After a good long look, she said, "Hmm. One's rap, one's rock?"

Slapping my forehead, I said, "Good girl! But no, that's a difference, not a similarity. Wanna give it one more try?"

She took another look, longer this time, as if the album covers might've changed in the last ten seconds. "They're both square?"

"Ahh, touché my dear," I said, handing her my credit card.

I hid the Radio Shack bag in the backseat and put the Modern Idiots CD in the CD player. I went through three songs waiting for Laurie to finish shopping.

"What in hell is that?" she asked when she got in the car.

"Modern Idiots. Punk music. It's what Amanda Grace listened to."

She glared at me. "You wanna fuck her, don't you..."

I shook my head. That's twice now I've been accused of being a necrophiliac.

It seemed like a long trip to the Mobil gas station in Dearborn Heights, though it was only a few miles away. Time seemed to slow down with Laurie's negative comments on punk music. Girls wouldn't understand anyway.

The Mobil gas station at the corner of Van Born and Pelham is owned by my old friend, Hamoud Bazzi. Since I lived only a few blocks from here for many years, Hamoud, or 'Moody' as everyone called him, was like a second father to me. He was born in Lebanon, moved to New York in the late 70's then moved to Michigan 15 years ago.

In my youth, I use to do 'odd-jobs' for him. Most of the time, that meant cutting the gas hoses from the pumps at the other two gas stations occupying that intersection for the purpose of subduing the competition. Now that I'm older, Moody has become a source for things I can't normally find anywhere else; anything from cable descramblers to explosives. He also likes to give me relationship advice, though I never really ask for it.

"Kaifhalak, habibi! [Welcome, friend!]" I said, walking into the gas station. I walked to the counter, where Moody stood staring at me. For several seconds he said nothing. He slowly broke into a smile and yelled at the top of his lungs.

"HOW DA HELL AH YOU NICK!!!"

I'd been ready for one of his usual outbursts, and already had my hands over my ears. He only does this when there's no one else in the store.

"Haven't you retired yet?" I asked.

"I'm never gonna retire. You told me that yourself."

"Yes I did, but damn, I thought I was kidding."

"I told you next to you bring Laurie, ah? You makin-a-babies yet?"

At that moment Laurie walked in. She said she wanted to wait in the car, but I knew she wouldn't. Moody had always treated her like a daughter, but Laurie wasn't use to having a dad -- not one that actually cared about her anyway.

With instant recognition, Moody ran from behind the counter and gave Laurie a huge bear-hug.

"LAURIE!! WUZZUP BEBBIE?!!"

Laurie said nothing; just smiled. She wasn't use to this. Arabic people have a fierce closeness to their family, and since Moody treated us like his own, that also included us.

"Laurie. When you gonna make bebbies, ah?"

She looked down and put a hand on her stomach. "In about six months."

A huge grin took Moody's face. "No shit?? You make-a me grandfather?"

"Aren't you already a grandfather?" Laurie asked, referring to his three biological grandchildren.

"Yeah! But I be grandfather again!" I'm pretty sure you can only become a grandfather once, but I knew better than to argue logic with a 50-year-old Lebanese.

"So, how's the police business, Nick? Moody asked.

"Eh? How'd you know about that?"

"The news, Nick! What, you think I don't watch anything but al Jazeera? Who's your buddy I saw you with?"

"He's my flight instructor," I said with a grin.

His face was one of confusion, that quickly turned to an evil grin. "Hey Nicky, you wanna uhh...take care of something for me?"

I knew what he meant. Another odd-job. "Sure, Moody. Want something blown up?"

"Oh nooo, This's bigger! Much bigger!"

Moody and I went over the plans in private while Laurie smoked a lady in the storage room and ate frozen pizza and Doritos. In the Arabic culture, women are not included in conversations of serious business. I didn't agree with it, but I respect the culture.

"He's here Nick," Moody said, pointing out the window. "Let me know when the job's done, aight?"

I looked at him incredulously. "If ya wanna know when it's done, watch the news!" I said with a smirk as Laurie and I walked out.

Abdo, one of Moody's many sons-in-law was parked next to my car. I went to his window and he handed me a dufflebag of the things I would need. I shook his hand and got in the Firebird, where Laurie was waiting for me, full of questions.

"What kinda job are you suppose to do for him?" Laurie asked.

I said nothing. She most likely wouldn't approve.

"Damn it Nick, are you gonna blow something up? Kill someone??" Still I said nothing. I really didn't want her to know.

I called ahead and told Jack I'd be outside the police station in fifteen minutes and to wait for me outside. I really didn't want to go inside a police station if I didn't have to.

From my car, I handed Jack the brown envelope, still wrapped in plastic. He looked at the envelope without taking the letter out.

"What did they letter say?" Jack asked.

"It's in the music."

"What is?"

"How would I know? I'm not a detective," I said with a smirk.

"Okay, I'll have it checked for prints, but don't hold your breath. Someone went to a lot of trouble to put it together, and probably used gloves."

"I dunno Jack, it sounds like someone's trying to help the investigation. Can't imagine why they would want to hide their identity from us."

"Let's hope so. It's a dead-end without prints."

"What about DNA? They could've licked the envelope."

"Possibly, but it would have to go to Lansing, and you know how long that takes."

"Do what you can with it and let me know," I said and left.

The drive home was a quiet one. Laurie was obviously still mad at me for not telling her about Moody's request. I'd soon fix that. I had several cans of whip cream at home.

Tonight would be a great night.

Chapter Nine

"Nick, I'm in prison."

I looked at the clock next to my bed. It was noon. "Jack?!" I said into my cellphone. Did he say 'prison' or did I dream that?

"Yep, it's me. I'm at the Jackson State Prison."

"Good God, Jack, what'd you do??"

"Nothing! Oh...no, I'm not incarcerated," he said, and took a deep sigh. "We got another one. A bad one. Feel like a road trip?"

Ugh. Actually I didn't. I really felt like wrapping myself around Laurie's naked sleeping body and going back to sleep. But that's not what I said.

"You owe me, Jack," I said, looking over at my naked Laurie. "You owe me big," and I hung up.

I felt Laurie rollover and slide her hand up my back. "Another one?"

"Yep, another bad one, he says. It's in Jackson."

"Oooh, can I go??" she asked.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah! Sounds like fun!" she giggled as she climbed out of bed.

The 175-mile stretch of 1-94 between Detroit and Jackson was traveled rather quickly, despite the freeway construction. Laurie and I argued about baby names, which actually made the time go faster. It's a fight we always enjoyed.

I'd passed the entrance to the prison twice before finally finding it. The guard at the main gate made a phone call when I told him my name. He opened the gate, then directed me to the visitor's parking lot. I had a creepy feeling passing through the double razorwire fences, and it almost made me think twice about my felonious habits.

Almost.

We were met at the prison's main entrance by Jack, and a very tall, well-dressed black man, who introduced himself as the JSP Warden, Bernard Tolson. We were led into the building and through the maze of hallways and stairs, finally emerging outside again.

"Why's it so quiet?" Laurie asked. "I always imagined prisons to be louder."

"All the housing units are on lockdown, since it happened this morning," Warden Tolson said.

"Since *what* happened?" I asked.

"You'll see, Nick," Jack said. "The recreation yard's this way."

We walked down a long sidewalk past what we were told were housing units. From the sidewalk we could see several faces staring at us through barred windows. Warden Tolson noticed us staring back at the faces.

"Normally you'd see more of them, but 70% of our population was at the yard this morning."

I still didn't understand what had happened. "Are they still there?"

The warden looked at me dumbfounded. "Of course they are! They're not going anywhere. Least not on their own."

I was beginning to see the picture the warden was painting for me, but it got much clearer when we entered the recreation yard's main gate. Laurie turned an even paler shade of white, though I didn't think that was possible. I clenched my stomach and remembered I hadn't eaten breakfast. Thankfully.

"How many?" I asked.

"The count's not in yet. Maybe 800," Jack said.

Laurie and I ventured off on our own, slowly meandering through the field of bloody corpses. They were everywhere. Thirty or so lay on the basketball courts, and hundreds more lay in pools of blood wearing soccer and football jerseys; others in shorts and t-shirts. Many clutched sharp metal objects covered in blood. The weapon-bearing inmates received the least of the damage. Those without weapons were horribly mutilated: abdomens were torn open, eyes ripped out, and a few had been completely stripped of flesh and organs, so that all that remained were blood-covered skeletons.

Laurie and I hadn't wandered very far before turning back.

"Nick, is this what those other scenes were like?" Laurie asked.

"Similar, but not on such a grand scale as this."

We found our way back to Jack and Warden Tolson, and I posed the question to him that was burning in my mind. "What were they doing before this happened?"

"Well, as you can see, some were playing basketball, others played soccer or football, the rest were walking or running the track. Then, for whatever reason, they all started attacking each other at the same time."

"In my short little walk," I said to the warden, "I counted 23 shanks, out of maybe 40 inmates. Are shanks prison-issue now?"

I saw the warden's eyebrows drop in a frown. "No, Mr. Stone, they are NOT prison-issue. We do what we can to control the contraband, but we can only do so much."

Another diplomatically bureaucratically bullshit story. What did he think we were, news reporters??

Within the recreation yard was a small building with a fenced-in patio. Through windows I could see exercise bikes inside, along with treadmills and weight benches. but What caught my eye was the mass of audio equipment and musical instruments sitting inside the fenced-in patio. Guitars lay on the ground, a keyboard was left on a stand, parts of a drum set were loosely scattered, and two towers of speakers, standing ten feet high, were still buzzing.

"Live music?" I asked, pointing at the equipment.

"They call themselves Razorwire. They were playing when all this happened."

I had already figured that by the disarray of the equipment. But I still had other questions.

"How long have they been playing outside like this?"

"They've played five times at the rec yard. Three times at a bar over by the Jackson Airport."

"You let them out for that?" I asked.

"Sure. They're given furloughs for it. They go out with eight guards, play for a few hours and come back. They've never given us any trouble."

"So they're doing pretty well then?" I asked.

"Oh, they're doing great. They just got signed a month ago."

"Signed? Forgive me Warden, I'm not up on the lingo."

He frowned. "They signed a contract with a record label, which got their music published."

"So they have their own CDs?"

"Sure do. First CD off the press was sent to them a week ago."

I looked at Jack, who shrugged. He knew about as much about what was going on as I did, which wasn't much.

"Can we talk to these Razorwire guys?" I asked.

"Sure, I can arrange that," Warden Tolson said, and went off to say some words into a walkie-talkie.

"What are you thinking, Nick?"

"It's in the music, Jack..."

We were led out of the recreation yard and back into the building we came in through. Down a few more hallways and through a steel door, we ended up in a room with a conference table, at which we sat.

"They're bringing them in now," the warden said.

Minutes later, four men wearing olive-drab prison-issue khakis entered the room and sat at the table. Introductions were made, and since I requested this interview, I started it.

"Mr. Mitchell," I said, addressing the singer of Razorwire, "What kind of music does your band play?"

"We play death-metal. Y'know, like Cannibal Corpse 'n shit."

"Death metal. Interesting choice of words, considering what happened today." He glared at me. "What are you talkin' about?"

"Nothing," I simply said. "Do you play the same songs all the time?"

"We have 12 of our own songs, and we do some covers."

"Did you play anything today you don't normally play?"

He thought for a moment. "Nope. We played five songs this morning, all our own, and we've played 'em before."

"Okay. Is there anything...at all, you did differently today?"

For the first time during the interview, Joey Mitchell of Razorwire broke eye-contact with me, and looked down at the table. "No, we didn't do anything different."

I turned my attention to the drummer, Paul Alberts, who had not looked up from the table since he sat down. "How about you, Mr. Alberts. Anything different?" Without looking up at me he said, "No sir."

Sir? We were probably the same age. Finding Razorwire's weakest link, I pressed on. "Why don't I believe that?" I asked.

He said nothing, so I let a couple minutes of silence go by. The four inmates looked nervous so I slammed my fist on the table. Everyone jumped, including Laurie.

"Three words, guys, Obstruction of Justice."

After more silence, Alberts spoke. In barely audible words, he said, "There was one difference."

Joey kicked Paul under the table, to which Paul yelled, "Fuck you Joey! I ain't catchin' a new charge!"

I waited through their rants for Alberts to continue.

"We lip-synced it," Alberts said. "We got sick of playing the same stuff over and over."

I looked back at Joey Mitchell. "That's it? What's so bad about that, that you couldn't tell me?"

Mitchell looked visibly angered now. "What do you think those dudes would do to us if they knew we lip-synced? You saw what they did to each other today. It doesn't take much to get shanked."

I looked over at Warden Tolson, who reminded me, "Hey, we do what we can, Mr. Stone." Back to Mitchell, I asked, "I guess that would be a problem. So if you weren't really playing live today, where was the music coming from?"

Joey's eyes back to the table, he said, "It came from our CD."

The ride home was quiet. Laurie tried to sleep, but the Firebird didn't make a good bed, and she said she kept seeing those sliced-up bodies from the recreation yard. I tried to sleep too, but cars kept honking at me when I drifted off onto the shoulder. So it seems everyone who flipped was listening to music. Didn't they have some big scare back in the 80's and 90's about music brainwashing the youth? Was there ever any truth to that? Sure, teenagers were committing suicide after listening to Ozzy Osbourne, but hell, back then teenagers were committing suicide listening to anything! The teen suicide rate was staggeringly high back then, but it had nothing to do with the music.

I broke from my morbid reverie to find Laurie staring at me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I dunno. You were talking to yourself."

"Okay. I do that sometimes, when I'm deep in thought. Which isn't often," I said with a grin.

"Sure, but this time you were doing it while pounding on the steering wheel." I looked down at the wheel. "I was?"

"Uh huh. You hit the horn three times. That's what woke me up."

"Wow. Sorry, okay, go back to sleep, I'll try not to do that again."

"I'll try, but how about turning this shit off?" she asked, pointing at the radio.

"Modern Idiots? You don't like 'em?"

"Well, let me put it this way..." she said, as she rolled down her window, pressed the Eject button on the stereo, and tossed the CD out the window like a frisbee. It hit the windshield of the car next to us, who's driver hit the horn and gave us the finger. Laurie returned the gesture.

"Was that necessary?" I asked, when the shock finally wore off.

"We listened to that garbage all the way here. Yes. It was necessary."

"Can we listen to something else then?" I asked. "Without you throwing it out the window?"

"I don't give a fuck," she said, and went back to sleep.

I reached under the seat and pulled out the Reign Supreme CD. I pulled the plastic off the case, which wasn't easy at 80mph. I finally inserted the CD, and turned the bass and volume up. If it wakes Laurie up again, screw it. I'll buy another CD.

The rest of the trip back to Farmington Hills was silent and uneventful. It grated on my nerves that Laurie would toss the CD out the window like that. When she did it, I had this uncontrollable urge to slap her, but luckily I caught myself. I have never and would never hit Laurie, and it really bothered me that I would ever think a thought like that.

We pulled up in the driveway in the middle of the last song on the Reign Supreme CD. It was the same song I'd heard playing from the Donnells' Regal in their driveway.

I left Laurie in the car to continue her slumber. I walked into the house and found Dad curled up on the floor in the fetal position, sucking on a 9-volt battery. "I found a new high!" he said.

I said nothing, and went to the fridge for a beer. I sat on the couch, cracked the can open and laid my back on the couch and closed my eyes.

Two hours had passed, I think, when Laurie finally came in. She had a dumbfounded and hurt look on her face.

"Nick? Why'd you leave me out there?"

"I was afraid to wake you up," I said. "Afraid of what else you might throw out the window."

"Huh? What the hell are you talking about??" she asked, confused.

"After the little show you put on with my Modern Idiots CD."

"Damn, Nick! What the hell did I do to your CD??"

I jumped up. "You threw it out the window somewhere west of Ann Arbor! "

A pause. "I did? I don't remember doing that."

I shrugged. I didn't care anymore. I looked down at Dad, still on the floor. He took the 9-volt battery from his mouth and declared, "It's dead!" and started crying.

Laurie sat down next to me and closed her eyes. "Did I really throw your CD out the window?" she asked.

"Yep. Launched it like a frisbee at a VW Bus full of hippies. Nice shot, by the way. Do you remember *anything* of our trip back?"

'I remember sleeping. I went to sleep right after we left the prison, and I woke up outside in the driveway.'

It's in the music, I thought to myself. But three different music groups? They weren't even the same genre of music. What's the common denominator of the three? My thoughts were interrupted by my cellphone. I picked it up and turned it on, but it rang again.

It rang four more times before I realized it wasn't my phone, but Amanda's, that was sitting next to me on the table. Reluctantly, I answered it.

"Hello?"

Nothing but silence, and the barely audible sound of breathing. Then, "Mr. Stone?"

"Melissa??"

"Yeah, I...it's me."

"What's wrong? You don't sound too good."

I heard her take a deep breath. "I...no, I'm fine, I just...I got a phone call today. A few minutes ago."

"Okay. Who was it?" I asked.

"Well, I dunno, I uhh... I think it was Amanda."

Laurie and I pulled into the parking lot of Melissa Stahl's building. Even though I was convinced Melissa had lost her damn mind, I didn't waste any time driving to her apartment. With Laurie by my side, I knocked on the door of apartment #182. Seconds later the door was quickly jerked open, and I suddenly realized who Melissa was. Out of habit I looked away, then down to the ground, before I remembered Melissa hadn't seen my face that night in Allen Park.

She invited us in, and Laurie and I sat on a couch while Melissa sat in a chair on the other side of the room. I tried my hardest not to stare at her. I was still afraid she might recognize me, even though I was wearing a ski mask that night.

"So what did this person say to you?" I asked, avoiding eye-contact.

"It was Amanda!" she yelled. "You don't believe me??"

"I'm not really in a position to believe or disbelieve. I'm just not jumping to conclusions. What did she say?"

Melissa had been giving me a sideways glance while I talked. Uh oh.

"She just said she was fine, and don't believe the news...and that her dad is innocent. Before I could ask her anything, she hung up."

"Couldn't it have been a prank call?" I asked.

"Nick, I know Amanda's voice! It was her!"

I still didn't believe a word of it, but the last thing I wanted to do was piss off someone who could identify me in court. I switched gears instead.

"Do you know if Amanda ever spent any time in Kentucky? Like maybe Lexington?"

She thought for a minute. "I've never heard her mention it. No, she said she was born and raised here in Michigan. Far as I know, she's never been out of the state."

"There's no way she could've left without telling you?"

"No way. We hung out almost every day! She couldn't have left without me noticing."

I noticed she was still giving me that peculiar sideways glance. I was going to leave when she spoke. "Have we met before?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't think so."

"No? Never been to a Sunoco in Allen Park? That's where I work."

Still shaking my head, I said, "Nope, not a chance. C'mon Laurie, let's go."

"Hey Nick," Laurie said, "isn't that where we..." and she cut herself off.

I looked back at Melissa. Her mouth was open and eyes wide open. "That was YOU!"

I sat back on the couch, my head in my hands, burning with embarrassment while Melissa the Cashier recounted the whole Sunoco robbery to Laurie. Damn! And I swore I'd take that story to my grave.

"He was so cute!" Melissa was telling Laurie. "I practically had to force him to take the money!"

Laurie looked over at me. "So that's what took you so long that night? Geez Nick, maybe you shoulda left armed robberies to us women!"

"Bite me, sweetheart!" I said with a huge fake grin.

"So you went from pulling jobs to playing Detective?" Melissa asked.

I quickly explained to her my friendship with Jack Noble and how I became involved with the case. Melissa and Laurie continued to talk about the night at Sunoco while I called Jack and told him about the alleged phone call from Amanda.

"Sounds like a hoax," Jack said. "Amanda's dead. You and I both saw that for ourselves."

"Melissa seems convinced though. Can you get the phone company to tell you where the call came from?"

"Doubtful. Her cellphone provider is infamous for keeping their information private. We'd need a warrant, and that would be difficult, because as far as everyone else knows, Amanda's dead. Oh, that envelope you got in the mail...it was covered in prints."

"Oh yeah??"

"The envelope and the sheet of paper were both covered with them. It really looked intentional. Maybe someone wants to be identified after all. We should have an ID by tomorrow."

"Good, let me know," and I hung up.

"You really don't believe her, do you?" Laurie asked while we were driving home.

"I believe she's convinced the call came from Amanda."

"But you think it was a prank?"

"I don't think, Laurie, I know. I was there in Amanda's apartment. I saw her tied up, cut up, and swimming in two gallons of her own blood. Now I'm suppose to believe she miraculously came back to life and picked up a phone?"

"Okay Nick, I'm just saying...girls know their best friends' voices."

Chapter Ten

It was 7pm when I dropped Laurie off at home. I told her I had to work on the favor for Moody. As usual, she gave me hell for not telling her what I was going. She'd find out soon enough.

After a long drive of listening to my Reign Supreme CD, I pulled up to the east security gate at Detroit Metro Airport. I entered the six-digit code and drove through the gate.

I turned left onto the maintenance road and followed it to the south end of the airport. I parked next to a set of hangars and entered through a side door. A security guard sat in a cubicle watching a baseball game. I knocked on the desk. "Yo," the guard said, never looking up.

"I'm here to do a pre-flight checkup on the Gulfstream," I said with feigned indifference. Without looking up he asked, "What in hell's a gulfstream?"

"Uhh...big plane," I explained.

"Ohh, okay. Have fun," he said, waving me away. Moody had given me an ID badge from Detroit Aerosystems Inc., as an aircraft mechanic. Guess I won't be needing it.

I walked through the five hangar bays. The first three were empty. The fourth one held an old McDonnell-Douglas MD-85 from Northwest Airlines. It looked like it still flew, but hadn't been in the air in a long time. Seconds later I recognized it as the same model as Northwest's Flight 255 that crashed after take-off only an eighth of a mile from here in 1987. One survivor.

The last bay held a Lear Gulfstream V. It was almost identical to the one I'd highjacked last month somewhere over Indiana. No really, true story. This one was newer and nicer, and had more on-board toys. Rumor has it Bill Gates has four of these.

I climbed the stairs to the fuselage that had still been connected. I was tempted to give myself a little tour inside, but I had work to do. I went inside to the cockpit. I put the duffle bag down on the seat and opened it. I took out the folded piece of paper, on which was printed the instructions for this task. I read at it carefully, grabbed a screwdriver and opened a panel on the right wall. I found a large silver box with a set of wires plugged into it. As per the instructions, I unplugged it.

I went back to the duffle bag and pulled out a small black plastic box with a set of wires attached to it. I plugged the black box into the Lear's silver box, and plugged it's wires into the black box. Confusing, huh? Now this black box, whatever the hell it was, was hooked in-line to the silver box. No idea what the hell that is either, but I'm sure I'll find out tomorrow night When I read the second set of instructions. I reattached the panel cover, wiped my prints off everything, including the Lear's staircase, and walked back to the car. I passed the guard but didn't say anything.

On the way home I listened to Reign Supreme While thinking about the plane I'd just sabotaged. I had a basic idea of what was going to happen, but I didn't know how. I wasn't allowed to read the second set of instructions yet. I didn't know who'd be on the plane, but Moody assured me they're very bad people. He didn't elaborate on who they were. I was dying to know the details, but I knew I would find out soon enough.

Chapter Eleven

"Morning, Nick," my cellphone said.

I looked at Laurie's nude body next to me. "No, Jack! Noooo!"

"Don't worry Nick, I'm not pulling you away from your woman, I just wanted to fill you in on the new developments."

"Okay Jack ya got two minutes!"

"Mr. Grace's arraignment was this morning. I sat in on it. He pleaded guilty to Murder One, against his attorney's advice. He never spoke a word during his arraignment."

"That's messed up, Jack. He didn't do it!"

"Yeah, try telling him that. He's about to get life in prison to hide the identity of the person that killed his daughter."

"So he likes the killer more than his own daughter?" I asked.

"Could be. Sounds like some real Jerry Springer stuff. Also, those fingerprints came back. They belong to a Dr. Harold Vorsch. He's a science professor from Wayne State University."

"Great! Have you talked to him yet?"

"Nope, can't."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because he was abducted from his home in Bloomfield Hills over a year ago. No one's heard from him since."

I was speechless. Why was a missing college professor sending me a letter? When my voice came back, I asked, "What happened with the investigation?"

"Bloomfield Police handled it. They chased dead-end leads for two months before abandoning the case. No one had a motive, and he didn't have a significant amount of money. He just disappeared for no reason."

"Nicky...!" Laurie said in a sleepy, seductive voice while running her hand up and down my back. I didn't need any further prompting.

"Jack, I gotta go. Keep me posted," and I hung up, devoting my full attention to my Bedroom Goddess.

"I see you're still a junkie, Jerry!" Grandpa said after he walked in the front door completely unexpected and unannounced. Sure, we invited him, but he never said when he'd be coming, nor did he call when he got here. He just showed up. Oh, let the games begin!

"I see you're still a miserable bastard," my dad said to his, in between tokes from the bong.

Dad stood up and gave his dad a bear hug. They joke like this, but they don't mean it.

"Nicky-mah-boy!" Grandpa said, giving me a bear hug that I swear felt like it crushed three ribs. Despite Lawrence Stone being 85 years old, he was in great shape and great health. He'd lived most of his life on chicken and fish, worked out regularly and ran five miles every morning. He once rode a Schwinn 12-speed from Detroit to Orlando Florida. He was 78 when he did this. When he got to Orlando he bought a condo, and has been there ever since.

"When did your flight get in?" I asked.

"Flight? The only flying I do is when I'm in the cockpit. Commercial flying is for pansies!"

"Then how did you get here?"

He went to the front door and opened it. "That lil baby right there. Damn she was fun! I believe they call it a crotch-rocket. For good reason, too. Eleven-hundred miles on that thing and my balls are still vibrating!"

I looked to the driveway. A Suzuki TL1000. Bright yellow. Go Grandpa!

I shrugged. "Beats the hell out of a Schwinn!"

He walked over to Laurie, who'd taken over the bong when Dad got up. She stood. "And who might this creature be?" he asked, kissing her hand.

"That creature," I said, "is your soon-to-be grand-daughter-in-law."

"I see. And I take it this," he said, pointing to her slightly protruding stomach, "is my soon-to-be great grandson?"

"Great grand-*daughter*," Laurie corrected, which was becoming habit now.

"Damn Nick," Grandpa said, turning back to me, "what else haven't you told me?"

I shrugged. "Some things are better left unsaid."

"C'mon Jerry, we got ourselves a mission!" Grandpa said.

"Where we goin'?" Dad asked, confused. "When was the last time you got laid?"

Dad thought for a minute. "The neighbor lady gave me a house-warming present. And before her was Sally the Dead Stripper."

A pause. "You screwed a dead stripper??" Grandpa asked with obvious disgust.

"Noooo! She was alive at the time...I think."

Grandpa shook his head. "Jesus. I can't let you outta my sight for a minute, can I? Let's go Jerry. Ever ridden on the back of a motorcycle doing 110mph?"

Laurie and I crawled back into bed for an afternoon romp, when my cellphone rang.

Jack again.

"Got another one, Nick."

"Crap. Do these people only slice each other up when I'm getting laid?"

"I'm sure they're sorry to interruptus your coitus, but don't worry, I'm not making you come down here."

"Elhamdelillah! [Thank God] Okay, give me the details."

"Twelve girls in the basement of a house in Sterling Heights. They gutted each other with kitchen knives the same way Donnell did to the guy on 1-94 and to himself. The last girl left alive put a gun to her head."

"Was there music involved?" I asked.

"Very much so. Five of these girls, between the ages of 18 and 24, were in a band called the Van Dykes -- both because they lived at 8-Mile and Van Dyke, and because they were in fact dykes...lesbians. The rest of the girls at the house were their friends."

"Oooh, cute play on words...Van Dykes. So they were in a band. Was there music involved in any other way?"

"They were having a record release party. They just signed with a label, and they just received the first CD off the press. Sounds a lot like Razorwire, doesn't it? When we arrived, their music was playing on the stereo on repeat at full-volume."

"It's in the music, Jack."

"I see that. But how?"

"That's what we need to find out. I'll call ya later," and I hung up.

I looked over to find Laurie out of bed and getting dressed.

"Going somewhere?"

"Melissa's on her way over. We're going shopping."

"Okay. Try not to spend all my money."

"I make no promises," she said, as Melissa knocked at the front door. It didn't surprise me she became friends with Melissa. They're a lot alike, and Laurie hasn't had a close friend since her sister Andrea was murdered last month.

I decided to do a little shopping of my own. I found a little music shop in Farmington Hills, and I went in. I quickly located Razorwire's and the Van Dykes' CDs. I also found another Modern Idiots CD to replace the one that went airborne. This time I found it correctly categorized in the Punk section.

I brought the three CDs to the counter. This time the counter was armed with a girl of maybe 17, black clothes, black lipstick, black nail polish on three-inch nails, and a black dog collar. Had the lights been out, I may never have found her.

I decided to try my experiment again. I laid the three CDs face-up on the counter and asked, "What do these three CDs have in common?"

She looked at me as if I were mentally handicapped, then looked at the CDs. Her face brightened as if she'd just comprehended Einstein's Theory of Relativity.

"Oh! These are all local bands!"

I was honestly floored. I think my jaw dropped. From the mouth of this death girl came the first real connection! I do recall Reign Supreme was a local band too.

"You know these bands?" I asked.

"Sure. I listen to all three. I saw Modern Idiots last week at St. Andrews Hall. They rocked the place. I saw the Van Dykes at the Wired Frog last month. Didn't know their CD had come out yet."

"Do you notice any other similarities?" I ventured.

"Hmm...not really, except that they all came out within the last few months."

I thanked her, paid for the CDs and left. This new information gave me something to think about, but it would have to wait. Tonight needed my full concentration.

As the sun began to set, I drove 1-696 to the Southfield Freeway. Dusk set in when I exited Southfield to Michigan Avenue and pulled into the first driveway on the north side of Michigan Avenue.

At this late hour, there were only a few cars left in the parking lot. Cleaning crew, I'd surmised. I parked in a side lot used by neighboring buildings, next to a few other cars. I took the duffle bag from the back seat. I'd read the second set of instructions this morning, and I was a bit nervous as to whether or not I could pull this off. I pulled out a laptop, plugged it into the cigarette lighter and booted it up. This computer didn't run Windows. Lines of text scrolled across the screen, too fast to read, then a graphical program came up.

I reached into the bag and pulled out a magnet-mount antenna and cord. I plugged the cord into the laptop and stuck the antenna to the roof of the Firebird. I tapped a few keys and lines began to appear on the screen, that eventually drew the layout of Detroit Metro Airport. A flashing dot appeared in the lower-right corner of the airport. The Lear had not yet left the hangar. I inserted the Razorwire CD and waited.

At 9:20pm the fifth song had just finished and the laptop started beeping. I looked down at the screen and saw the Lear was out of the hangar and taxiing to the runway. I turned the radio off and picked up the laptop. There were numbers at the top of the screen now that showed heading, airspeed, altitude, flap and gear position, nose pitch and climb rate. Suddenly I felt like I was back in the Flight Simulator. While waiting for the Lear to take off, I looked up at the huge, looming building at the other end of the parking lot. It looked like a deck of cards stood up on its end. It was tall and wide, but very thin. This was one of the most prominent buildings in Dearborn. The Ford World Headquarters Building.

I turned my eyes back to the laptop. The Lear was rolling down the runway, and at 110knots it lifted off and banked to the east.

When it reached 2,000 feet I used the laptop to engage the autopilot, and sent instructions for the Lear to level off at 2,000 feet and drop airspeed to 130knots. The map on the computer showed the Lear flying over Romulus and then Taylor. When it reached Allen Park, I sent instructions to bank north and drop to 400 feet.

I looked up at my rearview mirror. I could see the lights of the Lear coming closer. I checked the numbers and adjusted the heading." In my rear-view I saw the plane tilt slightly to the left. It was now leveled off at 400 feet. Seconds later it flew over the roof of my car in a deafening thunder, and I watched the Lear Gulfstream V plow into the 24th floor of the Ford World Headquarters Building.

Halfway through the building, the plane erupted into a white fireball. Most of the debris from the plane was ejected out the back of the building, leaving a huge, gaping hole that stretched over seven floors.

I looked down at the front doors and saw people running from the building, out into the parking lot. I counted about 20 of them. I'd hoped there weren't any more. A few at a time, cars started pouring in from Michigan Avenue and parked in the lot I was in. In minutes it was full of spectators watching the now-blazing building. Most stood outside their cars and watched, but I remained inside and pulled the antenna down, closed down the laptop and packed it all away. I then rolled down the windows, started the Modern Idiots CD and cranked up the volume, and got out to join the others.

Within a half hour, a total of sixteen fire trucks from Dearborn and neighboring cities formed a circle around the building to battle the inferno. I watched as sections of the outer walls of the building fell to the ground, and floors collapsed onto each other. The scene reminded me of September Eleventh.

After about two hours of fighting the blaze, I watched the sixteen fire trucks pull away from the building, making a mad dash for the other end of the parking lot. I knew what was coming next.

At 11:39 p.m., I and hundreds of other people watched the Ford World Headquarters Building collapse. The impact of hitting the ground shot smoke and ash into the air, along with millions of glowing embers that brightened the night sky. It was a sad and beautiful sight.

It was after one a.m. when I walked in the door. Again, Laurie attacked me and knocked me to the floor. This time, it seems, it wasn't for sex. "Where the hell were you??" she yelled.

"Why? What's wrong??" I asked, avoiding the question.

"Didn't you hear? Al Qaeda attacked again! Right here in Michigan!"

It struck me like a punch in the gut, and I realized who was on the plane. I feigned shock. "No shit? What happened??"

"Some sleeper cell flew a plane into the Ford building in Dearborn! According to the news, these guys rented a Lear, something like 20 of them, and flew it into the building around 9:30 p.m. They said no one but the cleaning crew was in the building, and they all made it out okay. Only casualties were the terrorists."

"Elhamdelillah", I said out loud. "So where were you?" Laurie persisted.

"I had some things to take care of," I said, avoiding eye-contact and sitting on the couch. She sat down next to me, and I could feel her eyes on me, though mine were closed.

"The favor for Moody?" Laurie asked with obvious suspicion.

I nodded. "My dear, you can see right through me..."

A long silence, then she asks "Can they trace this back to you?"

"Not a chance. No one saw me," I said, which was true. The guard at the hangar never looked up at me.

"How much did he pay you for this?" she asked.

I took out a folded piece of paper Moody had given me earlier. I unfolded it and handed it to her. She stared at it in disbelief for several seconds.

"He's giving you this??"

"It's not here yet, but yes."

"Oooh, Nick! That's gorgeous! Can we live in it?"

"You mean permanently? You'd really do that?"

"Hell yeah!! That'd be too cool!"

"Sure, I guess we could."

She gave me a smirk. "Do you know how to drive it?"

I snatched the paper from her. "I can learn! How hard could it be?"

"Sure Nick," she said condescendingly. "So Moody gave you this thing for what you did tonight?"

"Yep. I thought it was a bit much."

"Hell, maybe you should do more favors for him!"

"Don't expect him to ask me for favors that big all the time. This was a one-time thing, and for this kinda payment, I'm sure he had a good reason for it."

"Nick, you could make a pretty good living working for him." she said.

"So where's Dad?" I asked. I just noticed he wasn't here when I got in.

"He hasn't come home yet."

"Yeah, probably fell off Grandpa's motorcycle."

"Find out anything new with the music murders?" Laurie asked, handing me a Budweiser from the fridge. She knows me too well.

"Actually, yeah," I said. I went to the car and grabbed the four CDs -Modern Idiots, Reign Supreme, Razorwire and Van Dykes.

I laid them out on the coffee table. "They're all local bands, and all came out in the last few months, as I was informed earlier today. Do you see any other similarities?"

She looked at the CDs for a long time. "There's nothing else I can see. Did all the groups get together and decide to put brainwashing shit on their CDs? Not likely. Those dudes from Razorwire didn't seem to have enough braincells between them to pull it off."

I picked the CDs up off the table, stacking them in my hand. "They all have something else in common," I said, handing the CDs to her. "We're just not seeing it."

I got up and went to the kitchen. I hadn't eaten all day, but all I could manage to find was Laurie's leftover pot-roast. I ate some cautiously, washing it down with the rest of my Budweiser.

I walked back to the living room and found Laurie staring at the spines of the CD cases.

Her eyes were wide, as if she'd just seen a ghost.

"Laurie? What's wrong?"

For several seconds, she said nothing. Then, "I think I just found the common denominator."

She stood up and walked over to me, pointing at the edges of the CD cases. I looked. At the bottom of each spine was a symbol. A triangle with an eye inside it. The logo for E. Pluribus Records.

Chapter Twelve

"Jack, I found the common denominator," I told him over the phone the next morning. That statement earned me a swift kick in the leg from Laurie. "Err, I mean Laurie found it. The groups' music was all published by E. Pluribus Records."

"Can a record label do that? Put extra stuff on their CDs?" he asked.

"Why not? I'm sure they have access to the master recordings before they're sent out to the presses."

I could hear him breathing deeply on the other end of the phone, apparently deep in thought. "We need to get those albums out of circulation," he finally said. "And any other groups under the E. Pluribus label. I'll call ya back," he said and hung up.

Laurie was already on the computer doing a Google search on E. Pluribus Records. She informed me the company had only been around in the last two years, and was run by Everett Pluribus. According to several stock-trading forums, Mr. Pluribus owned several businesses under the name Pluribus Group. Mr. Pluribus had started out in Los Angeles running a string of nightclubs. That lasted a year before going belly-up. Something to do with his liquor license.

He then operated a publishing firm in Palo Alto, California for video games. After the night club fiasco, very few bought stock in his firm, and it didn't last six months before closing down. His firm never produced a single game.

The Pluribus Group bought up its shares (dirt cheap, of course) and went private. Not much was mentioned in the forums of Pluribus' actions after that. No one could find a single operation run by the Pluribus Group. The rumor was that Everett Pluribus was broke.

Nothing was heard from him for four years, until he resurfaced two years ago here in Detroit as a music publisher. He started off signing a band called Iron Coffin. They did Goth music. For six months Iron Coffin was their only client, until the band sued E. Pluribus Records to get out of their contract. They won, and went to another label. It wasn't mentioned why Iron Coffin wanted out.

A month later they signed another Goth band, called Backyard Cult. They did well for six months, then their popularity died. E. Pluribus Records continued to promote them diligently for months, to no avail. Backyard Cult was done.

Nothing was heard from E. Pluribus Records again until a few months ago. When they signed Modern Idiots. It went very well. Their popularity skyrocketed, and E. Pluribus Records finally started making money. They continued their efforts by signing Reign Supreme to their label with similar results.

Sudden unexplainable success? I don't believe in that kind of dumb luck.

Laurie and I had been searching the internet for over an hour when Jack showed up.

"The Detroit P.D. issued press releases to the media, to tell people not to listen to any music under the E. Pluribus label. We also got a court order to pull the CDs off store shelves all over Michigan. Other states are doing the same."

I told him about what Laurie and I learned about E. Pluribus Records.

"Sounds like they had a sudden stroke of good luck. Wonder why?" he said.

"I keep thinking about that science professor that got kidnapped. What was his name?"

"Dr. Harold Vorscht."

"Yeah. What kind of science did he study?"

"I don't know. I'll have to find out," Jack said.

I looked Jack in the eyes and I could tell our minds were in-sync. "Want to go pay E.P. a visit?" I asked.

"Hell yeah I do..."

We took Jack's Mercury Marauder. Laurie was in the backseat programming the police scanner I'd bought at Radio Shack. Laurie also got the idea to bring a mini-cassette recorder. See? She's not some dumb blonde.

The listed address of E. Pluribus Records brought us to a small, two-story office building at Woodward and 8-Mile. Laurie waited in the car while Jack and I went inside. According to the plaque on the wall just inside the building's double doors, E. Pluribus Records was just one of eight offices in the building. E.P. Records was in #104.

Jack opened the door marked #104. To hell with knocking. A man in his mid-forties with graying hair, wearing a shabby-looking suit was on the phone in his chair behind the desk. He was facing the window behind his desk, so he couldn't see or hear us come in. We sat in two fold-out chairs in front of his desk and waited for his phone call to end.

"Do you have any clue what the fucking Detroit Police are doing to my sales figures??" Mr. Pluribus was saying into the phone. "I don't give a damn! Just keep things under wraps till I get there...What?? Oh, fuck Detective fucking Noble and his piss-ant little sidekick!"

He finally hung up and turned around. "Who the hell are you two??"

"Hi! I'm Detective fucking Noble, and this's my piss-ant little sidekick, Nick Stone."

"Good morning!" I said cheerfully.

"And what the hell are you two doing here?"

"Oh I'm sure you know Why we're here," Jack said.

"Well I hate to tell you detective, but I have no clue What I can do for you. The Detroit Police has effectively just shut me down and cleaned me out, just because you think my clients' music is killing people. There's nothing left for me to give you!"

Jack stared at him in silence. I glanced under the desk at the phone jack in the wall.

"How 'bout you tell me about the subliminal stuff on your clients' albums?" Jack asked.

"Go to hell detective, my clients wouldn't know a damn thing about how to put subliminal messages into their music. Most of them are morons!"

"No, but you know a little about it, don't you?"

"How in hell would I know?? I just make records!"

Jack and Mr. Pluribus had another staring contest. Jack won.

"I don't know a damn thing about that subliminal shit!" he yelled.

"Do you know a Dr. Harold Vorscht?" Jack asked.

His face turned white, just for a second, but he quickly recovered. "I don't believe so. Why?"

"Dr. Vorscht was a brilliant science professor at Wayne State. He studied something called E.L.F. -Extremely Low Frequencies."

"Well good for him. So?"

"He theorized that the human brain emits E.L.F., frequencies from 5 to 59Hz -too low for the human ear to hear it. He theorized that with the right translation equipment, a low-frequency receiver could read our thoughts. Can you imagine that, Mr. Pluribus?"

Mr. Pluribus sat back in his chair. "Well I'd love to read *your* thoughts, detective, because I still don't know What you're getting at."

"Dr. Vorscht also believed the process would work in reverse. Instead of using a receiver to read one's thoughts, a transmitter could be used to *put* a thought into one's head. According to him, all it would take is a fluxuation of frequencies from 5 to 59Hz that forms the thought, then broadcast it via audio with enough wattage to overpower one's own thoughts."

"That's fascinating," Mr. Pluribus said, lighting a cigarette. Though he managed to keep his cocky attitude, I could see Jack was getting to him. His hand was shaking badly. "Might work to your advantage, wouldn't it? Did you mix some E.L.F. messages in your clients' music? What were the messages? Maybe tell the listener to buy more CDs produced by E.P. Records? Might explain why business has been doing so well."

"You have no clue What you're talking about. There is nothing like that on these CDs."

"Well, I suppose that might be true," Jack lied. "There is just one thing that would clear all this up."

"And what's that?"

"Get us the digital masters of your clients' albums. We'll have them analyzed for ELF's."

He thought about this for a second, and nodded. "Okay. If it'll clear this mess up, I'll go get them." He stood and went through a side door to another room.

Jack tapped me. "Be quick."

I already had the phone tapper from Radio Shack in my hand. When the side door closed behind Mr. Pluribus, I went to the floor, unplugged the phone line from the wall and put the phone tap in-line. It plugged in much the same way as the autopilot tapper on the Lear. I was back in my chair when Mr. Pluribus returned with a box in-hand.

"There are six discs here. One for each group under the E.P. label. They're my only copies. Please guard them with your life and return them when you're finished."

"Thank you Mr. Pluribus, we'll have these back to you as soon as possible." Jack and I stood and we walked out.

On the way back to the car, I asked, "What are the chances there's anything incriminating on those discs?"

"Absolutely none. He wouldn't have given them up otherwise. I just asked for them as a distraction while you tapped his phone."

When we got to the street I asked, "What about the discs? Are you gonna return them?"

"Oh, these?" He opened the box, pulled out the six gold CDs and tossed them out onto Woodward Avenue. I was now growing use to seeing CDs taking flight.

We got in Jack's car, and immediately noticed Laurie holding the tape recorder to the police scanner. She said "Shhh!" and we shhh'd.

Everett Pluribus was in mid-conversation with a very gruff voice on the other end. "I think they know about the subject," Mr. Pluribus said. "We need to move him."

"Bullshit. He's safe here. They won't find him."

"Is the farm secure?"

"Always. Perimeter patrols on three shifts."

"Well double it! He's the only thing left that can link us and sink us."

"Us?? This's all you, buddy-boy. I just work for you."

"Tell that to the judge if we're busted."

"Hey, we won't get busted! Keep your fucking head straight and keep up appearances. Let me worry about keeping the farm secure. Come up here in a week or so when the dust settles and we'll tie up loose ends."

"Fine, but if the shit hits the fan I'm coming sooner," he said, then the phone was hung up and the signal was gone.

'Damn Nick," Jack said, "that was a great idea."

"Thanks. So he has a farm up north?"

"How do you know it's up north?"

"His friend told him to come up here in a week."

"We can find out for sure by getting the phone company to get the number from his records and have them trace it."

"I know a quicker way," Laurie said.

We turned to look at her in the backseat. "Oh yeah?"

"Sure! What, you think I'm just some dumb blonde? Find me a payphone. This won't work from a cellphone."

We drove only a few blocks down Woodward to find a payphone. We got out of the car and Laurie brought the tape recorder.

"Your phone tapper picked up the tones from him dialing the number," she explained.

After rewinding the tape, she hit Play. I heard a series of tones I recognized as coming from a phone.

"Great," I said, "but how do you know what number to dial?"

"Because I don't need to dial the number. There were 11 tones, so it's a long-distance number. Gimmie some change, Nick."

I gave her a handful of quarters, some of which she fed to the phone. After rewinding the tape again, she hit Play and held it to the phone. When the tones finished, she held the phone to her ear.

"This won't work," I said.

"Shh! It's ringing."

After several seconds Laurie began her speech. "Good afternoon, sir! I'm calling to remind you the city's elections are right around the corner! Don't forget to cast your vote to re-elect Mayor Nick Stone for mayor of Alpena!...Oh, you don't? I see. I'm sorry, I have you listed as living in Alpena. Oh, okay! I'm very sorry to bother you then!" and she hung up.

"He's in Flint."

Chapter Thirteen

Flint, Michigan is about 300 miles north of Detroit. Jack, Laurie and I flew Jack's Twin Beech to Flint Municipal and landed around 3pm. We rented a little Honda Civic and proceeded to drive aimlessly around Flint.

We weren't really sure what to look for. The man on the phone referred to the place as a farm, but as far as I knew, there were no farms in Flint. But we looked anyway.

A thought then occurred to me: what if it wasn't really a farm?

By 7pm we'd finished covering nearly every road in Flint. We'd seen a few farms, and stopped to observe them. One was a stud farm that offered tours, which we took.

We dropped the car off and took a cab back to the Twin Beech, still parked on the tarmac in front of a group of hangars. The three of us sat in the plane, and discussed what to do next.

"It's probably not a farm," Jack suggested.

"Then it could be anything," I said.

"The only thing left to do is trace the number. But it'll take time."

"We don't have time. You know he has Dr. Vorscht, and he's looking to tie up loose ends." I looked over at Laurie, who had found some binoculars under the seat, and found something of interest on the other side of the airport. "Where'd you get those?"

"Under the seat," she said.

"And what are you watching?"

"See that little building over there?" she asked, pointing.

I looked. Without the binoculars it was hard to see the small white one-story building with no windows and one door. "Yep, I see it. Why?"

"There's a green pickup that keeps circling it. Once in a while he stops, goes inside the building, and someone else comes out and drives the pickup in circles." "Could be security guards," I suggested.

"I guess so," she said, putting the binoculars back under the seat, "but I can't understand why security guards would be carrying M-16s."

Jack jumped up from one of the rear seats and grabbed the binoculars. He watched the circling pickup for several minutes, and watched the driver get out, M-16 in-hand.

Jack put the binoculars down. "I think she just found the farm."

"What's the plan, Jack?" I asked.

"Plan?? There is no plan. We shoot. We find Dr. Vorscht. We get out. And we try to do it without dying."

The sun was starting to set. In another hour or so it would be completely dark. Jack and I changed into black clothing and armed ourselves with .45s and silencers. Jack had only his .38 Police Special, so he was using Laurie's .45. He promised to buy one just like it when he got home.

After much protest, Laurie would not be joining us. I didn't want our unborn child in this kind of situation.

At 9:30pm we left the plane and walked to the other end of the airport, using hangars and other small buildings for cover. We got as close to the "farm" as possible, hiding behind a hangar that sat 50 feet away. We watched the green pickup make its rounds, passing less than 15 feet from where we were hiding. Every fifteen minutes the driver would switch off. There seemed to be three guys rotating as drivers.

"Nick, I just thought of something," Jack said.

"What's that?"

"The sleeper cell that flew the Lear into the Ford building. Think maybe they were listening to music at the time?"

The subject caught me off-guard, but I recovered. "Sure, anything's possible. Did E. P. Records produce any Arabic music? Focus, Jack! How are we gonna do this?"

He told me of his half-baked plan, and since I didn't have a better idea, I went with it.

When the pickup made it's last circle around the building, I ran to the corner of the building and waited for the driver to get out. When he did, I used the laser sight to put a single shot in his head. Before his body hit the ground, Jack was already running over to him. He dragged him behind the building, arming himself with the M-16.

A minute later one of the other drivers opened the front door and poked his head out. He looked around for several seconds, then stepped out. As he walked toward the empty pickup, I put a shot into his head. A big thank-you to whoever invented silencers! Jack ran up and dragged the second body behind the building as well. On opposite sides of the building, Jack and I waited.

For several minutes nothing happened. We knew there was at least one more guy inside. Everything was silent, save for the idling engine of the pickup.

Then I heard a thud. It came from the opposite side of the building, where Jack was hiding. I left my hiding spot and crept quietly past the front door, which was now left open. When I turned the corner I saw Jack's unconscious body being dragged to the rear of the building. At lightning speed I ran up to the guy dragging Jack, and kicked him in the chest, knocking him to the ground. I drew my gun and aimed it at his head.

"Where's Dr. Vorscht?" I demanded.

Fighting for his breath, he asked, "Who?"

"The subject! Where the hell is he?!"

Coughing, he reluctantly answered, "Basement..."

I clocked him in the head with my gun, dragged him behind the building with his dead buddies and put Jack's handcuffs on him. I couldn't kill him since he told me what I wanted to know. It wouldn't have felt right.

I ran back over to Jack, who was already starting to wake up. "Where'd the M-16 go?"

"Over there, in the trashcan," he said, pointing.

"Good thinkin'. He coulda killed us both with that."

I helped him to his feet and we walked to the rear of the building, where we found another door. We entered, and found a dark hallway, with several doors on each side.

It looked to be an old office building. At the other end of the building was the front door, still open. We stood in the shadows and listened. Music was coming from the other end of the hallway. We slowly walked to the other end of the hallway, listening for the room where the music was coming from. We found it. Last door on the right.

Catching me off-guard for the second time that night, Jack kicked the door open without first informing me of his plans. He charged into the room, gun drawn, and I instinctively followed.

Two men sat in folding metal chairs at a card table. They were, of course, playing cards.

"I'll make a deal with you two," Jack-said. "One of you will take us to Dr. Vorscht, and the other will catch a bullet. I'll leave it up to you two to decide who does what."

The two men, who looked wired on caffeine, just stared at us. Finally, the one on the right began to twitch, and his right hand came up with a 9mm. Before he could aim, Jack put a slug in his head.

"Nice shot," I told him.

Our guns were now aimed at the one remaining bad guy. "So what's it gonna be?" Jack asked.

"He's uhh...downstairs...basement, in the basement."

"Anyone else here?"

He shook his head.

"Okay. If there is, we'll shoot you first."

He continued to shake his head. "No no, just...just me."

He stood and we followed him out of the room. He led us down the hall, four doors down. He opened the door and turned on a light. The room was empty.

"What the hell is this? Are you fucking with us?"

"No...no sir." He walked to the corner of the room, pulled up a square section of carpet, and opened a trap door in the floor.

"You first," Jack said, pointing the gun at him.

Jack and I followed him down a small staircase, which led immediately to a thick steel door. The man entered a four-digit code into a keypad next to the door. When it popped open, Jack and I followed him in, guns drawn and ready for anything.

We stared in amazement at what looked like the inside of a house. We stood in a living room; small but well-furnished, with a couch, reclining leather chair, plasma TV on the wall and a stereo system.

We walked down a hallway, past a bedroom, bathroom and kitchen, to a closed door at the end.

Our tour guide knocked, and a small, frail-looking, balding man with thick coke-bottle glasses opened the door.

"Good evening, Joe," he said. "You didn't tell me we'd be having company."

"I uhh...they came unexpected," Joe said.

"Are you Dr. Harold Vorscht?" Jack asked.

He looked at us puzzled. "Of course I am," he said with a nervous smile. "Who else would I be?"

We walked into the room, into what looked like a giant recording studio. There was electronic equipment on every wall, floor to ceiling.

"What is it you do here, Dr. Vorscht?" Jack asked.

He gave Jack a close look, as if seeing him for the first time. "Aren't you one of Mr. Pluribus' men?"

"No we're not."

A pause. "Who are you then?"

"Detective Jack Noble, Detroit Police."

Dr. Vorscht's eyes grew wide as he sank into his chair in front of an audio mixing board. He was silent for several minutes, staring at the floor. He finally looked up and asked, "Does this mean I'm finally going home??"

On the short flight back to Detroit, Dr. Vorscht filled us in on the details of what was on the CDs.

"Mr. Pluribus wanted to brainwash people into buying music under his labels. The thoughts projected in E.L.F. mention specific band names. For example, on the Van Dykes CD, it says 'Buy Modern Idiots' or 'Reign Supreme is cool.'"

"Then why did people start killing each other?" I asked.

"A side-effect. With some people, if a person is angry, or even slightly irritated with another person, it's magnified by thousands! Especially when the E.L.F. is played at high volumes."

I thought about that. That explains why Laurie threw my CD out the window, and why I wanted to beat her ass for it. It's why Mr. Donnell butchered that guy on 1-94 for cutting him off. He was then angry at himself, so he cut himself up too. Then his wife attacked two police officers. Anger times a thousand.

"How did you write me that letter?" I asked.

"That nice boy, Joey. He's not too bright, but he knew holding me against my will was wrong. He gave me four stamps, and I made sure to put my fingerprints all over everything."

Then he sent it out. I'm sorry I couldn't be more specific in my letter, but I couldn't take any chances. And thank you for letting Joey go," he said to Jack. He'd told the kid to turn and leave and don't come back. He took the green pickup and left, taking his friend in the handcuffs with him.

"I had no choice, Dr. Vorscht," Jack said. "I'm out of my jurisdiction in Flint. When people ask you what happened tonight, you can just say two unknown people freed you from your captors and let you go. When you found a phone you called the Detroit Police and talked to me."

"I'll say anything you want, Detective Noble."

"Good. Will you testify against Mr. Pluribus?"

"I'll do anything to put that evil little shit away!" Dr. Vorscht said. "He took a year of my life from me, not to mention entire lives of so many others."

We landed at Willow Run at two a.m. Jack drove us back to Farmington Hills and dropped us off.

"Sleep fast, Nick. We're going after Pluribus tomorrow."

I wasn't looking forward to it. I was dead tired, as I'm sure Laurie was. I just wanted to crawl into bed and sleep for a week. But it was not to be. I walked in the front door and found my dad in the embrace of a young Asian woman.

"She's from Singapore!" Dad said, with a balloon animal made from condoms on his head. "Her name's Ming Li. She's my new best friend..."

"Wonderful. Where's Grandpa?" I asked.

"In my room. He's in there with Ming Li's sister, Sung Li."

"Me seestah!" Ming Li said with undue enthusiasm.

"Great, Dad. Laurie and I are going to bed. Try not to wake us."

"We make no promises," Dad said.

"No promise!" Ming Li blurted out, evidently familiar with the term.

Laurie and I wasted no time going to our room and locking the door. Elhamdulillah that our room is at the opposite end of the house.

Chapter Fourteen

I didn't sleep well that night. I hadn't been sleeping well at all since this whole mess started, but tonight was worse. I found myself back in Amanda's apartment. She lay in a pool of her own blood, and tied up like a hog. As I looked at her face, her eyelids flew open, and her topaz-blue eyes stared at me. "Don't believe it, Nick," she said. "My dad is innocent."

That woke me up.

It was 8am. Too early for me to get out of bed, but after that dream I didn't have a chance in hell of going back to sleep.

I crawled out of bed, leaving Laurie's naked body behind (something I don't usually do), got dressed and dared to venture into the living room. Grandpa was asleep on the couch, arms wrapped around a Singapore hooker. Sung Li, I'd assumed. I had just sat down next to Grandpa with a cup of coffee when the phone rang.

"Morning, Nick. Did I wake you?"

"For the first time, Jack, I was already up."

"Good. I'm sitting next to Mr. Pluribus' building with your scanner. He's been calling that number in Flint all morning and getting no answer. I'm thinking he might run."

"That was inevitable. What do you want me to do?"

"Be ready to roll. He may decide...hang on."

I heard a voice in the background, one I recognized to be Mr. Pluribus over my Radio Shack scanner. When the voice stopped, Jack came back.

"He's running, Nick. He just rented a Cessna from AirCharter at Detroit City Airport."

"Can't you nail him when he walks out? I'm sure Dr. Vorscht's testimony is enough to arrest him."

"I plan on it, Nick. Get your gun and get up here."

I hung up and armed myself with my Desert Eagle. 45, loaded some extra clips and grabbed my keys. I didn't wake Laurie. I didn't want her along for this.

At 9:30 a.m. I found Jack's Marauder in a parking lot next to Mr. Pluribus' building. I parked next to him, got out, and slid into the Marauder's passenger seat. "So what are we waiting for?" I asked.

"He hasn't left yet. That's his car over there," he said, pointing at a silver Lexus. "And he hasn't made any more calls."

I sighed. "Jack, I think he figured you out."

"What do you mean? You think he left?"

"Call AirCharter," I said.

He took out his cellphone and dialed the number. "Good morning, I'm Detective Noble from the Detroit Police. Has a man named Everett Pluribus showed up to rent a Cessna?"

A pause, then he shut his phone. "He took off an hour ago. Shit! How did he get out?"

"Where's his office, Jack?"

"Other side of the building. Why?"

"Drive over there."

Jack drove into a McDonald's parking lot, located on the opposite side of the building. He looked up and punched the steering wheel. "Dammit!"

"Wow. You'd think someone with his money would've had a more elaborate escape plan," I said, pointing up at a knotted rope dangling from a second-story window.

"It's fine, we both know Where he's going."

"Yeah, but he's got an hour jump on us. And Where's he gonna go when he finds out Dr. Vorsc.ht is gone?"

Jack looked at me with sudden realization. "He'll disappear..."

He dropped the Marauder into Drive and hit the gas. Doing 80mph on Woodward, Jack put the magnet-mount siren on the roof of his car and pushed it over 100mph. I made a mental note to look for one of those at Radio Shack.

We took 1-75 to 1-94, bound for Willow Run, topping speeds of 145mph. I can't recall ever going this fast in my life! The speed was due to the Marauder's six-speed transmission, intended for police cars. We pulled into the west gate of Willow Run at ten a.m. and pulled up to Jack's Twin Beech. It took five minutes to warm the engines, and four minutes later we were in the air, doing 220knots, on a course for Flint.

A Cessna is much slower than the twin-engine Beechcraft we were in. It would take a Cessna two hours to reach Flint, and it takes us an hour and fifteen minutes. It took 20 minutes to drive to Willow Run, (even at our speed), which means we'll land 35 minutes after he does. The odds weren't in our favor.

As we approached the outer marker of Flint Municipal, we saw on the local radar a small plane leave the runway and climb into the air. At full-throttle it didn't take us long to catch up to the plane. As we closed in, we could see it was a white Cessna with the tail number N94J35 - the tail number given to us by the AirCharter dispatcher.

When we pulled up next to Mr. Pluribus' Cessna, Jack tuned the radio to talk to him.

"You might as well land, Everett. You have nowhere else to go."

Pluribus turned to his left and saw us evidently for the first time. I could see the shock on his face that suggested he never expected to find us here.

"Screw you Noble. I didn't get where I am by giving up."

"Where are you gonna go? You can't outrun us."

"Well Noble I guess you're right. But how much fuel do you have left? How much longer till your bird drops from the sky? I was at least smart enough to refuel in Flint."

I saw Jack look down at the gas gauge, and an ashen look took over his face. "Damn, Nick. We have about an hour left. Fully-fuelled, he has five."

I took out a Lady Jane and sparked her up. She'll come through for us. She always does.

"Crack the window, Nick. I can't have my plane smelling like that stuff. And remember: puff, puff, pass."

I took a deep drag, held it and passed it. I let it out, and an idea began forming in my head. I took out my .45 and inserted a full clip.

"Nick? I know the situation looks dark, but offing yourself won't help."

"It's not for me," I said.

"What, are you gonna shoot me?" he asked with a grin.

"Nope. I'm gonna get him outta the sky." I pointed the barrel and aimed at the Cessna.

"Jesus, Nick! You hit the Cessna's gas tank and we're all dead!"

"Trust me, Jack."

This shot wouldn't be easy. Since we were doing 140 knots, I'd have to aim ahead of the plane. I aimed the barrel about ten feet ahead of the plane and fired. Nothing visibly happened. I fired again, a little closer, and saw a spark as the lead hit the Cessna's propeller. I managed to fire off five more rounds in the same spot before the Cessna banked to the right.

"You're fucking insane, Noble! You'll kill us both!" Mr. Pluribus said over the radio.

"Don't matter to me," Jack said, "as long as you're dead too."

Jack banked to the right and tailed behind the Cessna. I felt a strange vibration in my chest as we closed in. I felt it resonating through the Twin beech's fuselage.

"What the hell is that, Jack?"

"You fucked up his propeller. Congratulations. He's doing 110 knots and slowing."

Jack slowed the Twin Beech to keep pace with the Cessna, that had slowed down to a steady 90 knots.

"Wanna shoot it again?" Jack asked.

"Sure! I brought four clips. That oughtta do it!"

Jack pulled the plane up next to the Cessna and gave Pluribus another chance. "Are you gonna put your plane down, or shall I?"

I watched as Pluribus stared back at us. He didn't answer.

"Hit him again, Nick." Jack said.

I aimed again in the same place and fired, but I didn't hit the propeller this time. Since we were flying slower now, the bullet shattered the side window of the Cessna. I could see blood on the side of Pluribus' head, but he was still alive.

"You won't take me alive, Noble," he said as he extended his left arm out the window and gave us the finger. Wow, that's real First-Class.

What he did next shocked me. It almost made me ruin my underwear. Before I turned away I saw the Cessna roll left, straight toward us.

"Bank left Jack!" I yelled, already too late. The collision knocked me out of the copilot's seat and to the floor. At the same second I felt a rush of air and a new light shining in through the rear of the plane.

I got up from the floor and climbed back into my seat. I looked out the window, but I didn't see Pluribus or his Cessna.

"Where is he??" I yelled over the thunderous rush of air. Jack hooked a thumb over his shoulder, pointing to the rear of the plane. I turned to where he was pointing, and I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

The nose of the Cessna was now embedded into the side of Jack's plane. The Cessna's one-piece wing had snapped off on impact, ripping away a section of the Twin Beech's roof. Jack now had a convertible.

Through the twisted and shredded tin of the fuselage, I could see Everett Pluribus. He was staring at me through blood-covered eyes. His expression was not one of fear or shock, but of anger and pure hatred.

"Grab him, Nick!" Jack yelled. "I can't keep her in the air like this!"

It was then that I noticed the Twin Beech jerking and bucking side to side. Each time, I heard creaks and groans coming from the plane's frame. I pulled a toolbox out from under Jack's seat, and pulled out the largest object I could find: a wrench, over a foot long. I got as close to the Cessna's windshield as I could, and smashed it out.

"Grab my hand!" I yelled, reaching into the cockpit of the Cessna, though I couldn't reach in very far.

"Fuck you, Stone."

The fuselage of the Cessna shifted and slid-out a foot. I couldn't reach into the cockpit anymore.

"C'mon, asshole! Grab my hand or die!"

"I told you!" he yelled. "You won't take me alive!"

"This isn't worth dying for, you stupid fuck!"

He coughed a few times. "Tell your buddy Noble I said to go fuck himself."

Before I could respond, the Cessna shifted again, and this time it dropped free from the Twin Beech. The sudden rush of air would have sucked me out, but I grabbed on to a steel bar over my head.

Standing there hanging on to the bar, I watched as the wingless Cessna dropped like a rock, 3,000 feet below us into the dense forest of evergreen trees. It disappeared through the treetops; its grave marked by a tiny plume of dust rising into the air.

"Nick, we got a problem!" Jack yelled.

I made my way back to the copilot seat, which wasn't easy, with the air pressure in the cabin trying to suck me out.

"The Cessna's gone, Jack. Now what's wrong?"

"He smacked the stabilizer wing When he hit us," he said, pulling back and forth on the loose yoke to demonstrate he had no ability to gain altitude. The nose of the plane was barely tilted down, and we were slowly losing altitude.

"Can we turn?" I asked.

"Only with the rudder, which isn't much. We can't do a damn thing but fly straight till we crash."

I gave him a somber look. "I guess that's what we'll have to do."

We flew on in silence. We had dropped to 2,100 feet and were still descending. Jack radioed the tower at Flint Airport, told them of the Cessna crash, and informed them of our situation and position.

They wished us the best of luck.

At 1,200 feet, the dense forest below us was beginning to thin out. A little over two miles ahead were fields only dotted with trees. It was a clearing - sort of -but it was still a risk.

"Can we land in there?" I asked, pointing.

He sighed. "We can, but I'll have to kiss the plane goodbye."

And he did just that. He leaned over, kissed the dashboard, and said, "It's been fun, baby. You and I will fly again in the Great Beyond."

At 500 feet we strapped in and braced for the inevitable. Jack used the rudder to line the plane up to fly between two trees. At 60 feet, we flew between the two trees, effectively ripping the wings off the Twin Beech. This prevented the fuselage from exploding since the fuel is stored in the wings.

We dropped like a stone the rest of the 60 feet. When the plane hit the ground, the middle of the fuselage, already weakened by the Cessna collision, ripped away, splitting the plane in half. Both of us, with our eyes closed, slid over 200 feet across a field in our half-a-plane, finally coming to rest not far from a barn.

I was first to open my eyes. I looked over at Jack and saw his hands gripped tightly around the yoke and his eyes tightly shut. I tapped him on the shoulder and he came back to reality.

"We lived, Jack."

Jack took out his cellphone and told Flint Police where we crashed. When he hung up, we sat back and sparked up a couple Lady Janes while an old bald man, who I assumed to be the owner of the barn, stood in a field staring at us.

"So much for a conviction," Jack said.

"Doesn't matter. Justice was served. Saves tax-payers from paying for a trial."

"I wanted him in prison...not dead. He took the coward's way out. The easy way."

I didn't care. In my eyes, justice had been served. Lady Justice doesn't always work the way she should. Innocent people go to prison while slimeballs like Everett Pluribus use their money to get acquitted. I believe God and Satan have their own System: *death*. And it works flawlessly.

I drove back to Detroit after renting a car from Hertz, not far from where we crashed. I drove back alone, because Jack stayed behind answering a list of questions for the Flint and Saginaw Police.

Once again my thoughts returned to Amanda Grace. Her dad was facing life in prison to protect whomever killed his daughter, even though the killer was possessed by the music and wasn't at fault. Wasn't the Modern Idiots CD in her car? Had the killer been driving her car? It was a question only Mr. Grace could answer, and he still wasn't talking.

I broke from my thoughts when my cellphone rang.

"Where the hell are you, asshole?" Laurie asked.

"Nice to hear from you too, sweetheart. I'm on 1-75, just south of Flint."

"Where's Jack?"

"In Saginaw."

"What the hell's he doing in Saginaw?"

"That's Where our plane crashed.

"Crashed?!?" she yelled. "What the--"

"Don't worry, we're fine. But Jack's Twin Beech is now resting in pieces."

"I'm glad you're okay Nick. You had me worried, you shit! So Where's Pluribus?"

"Dead. His plane crashed too."

"Geez, Nick. So it's over? You're done with this Sherlock stuff?"

"Yes! Elhamdulillah. I'm leaving this job to the police."

"Well, before you retire, Detective Stone, there's one more thing you need to investigate."

"Ahh, now what??"

"You'll see When you get home," she said and she hung up. I hate when she gets my curiosity going and leaves me hanging.

I pulled into my driveway and saw a Buick Century I remembered to be Melissa's car. I then remembered I'd have to take Laurie later to go get my Firebird, hopefully still parked in the lot next to the late Mr. Pluribus' building.

I walked in the door and found Laurie and Melissa on the couch. They were laughing, I assume, at something that was said before I walked in.

I looked around. "Where's Dad and Grandpa?"

"At a motel with their hookers. I kicked 'em out for the night."

"So...what is it you want me to investigate?"

Simultaneously, Laurie and Melissa pointed past me to something behind me. I turned around, and the image I saw shocked me to the core so badly I got dizzy and passed out. I only faintly felt my head hit the floor.

When I woke up, the same image was staring down at me. I sat up and realized I wasn't dreaming.

"No...you're dead, I saw you!"

"I'm sorry Mr. Stone, but I'm not dead," Amanda Grace said.

My head was starting to clear, and I looked up into Amanda's face again and saw those same topaz eyes staring back at me. No, she definitely wasn't dead. The same girl I saw bound up in blood was now standing before me in my living room.

"Okay... I can see you're very much alive," I said, sitting up on the floor. "Can you tell me who it was we found in your apartment that's been giving me nightmares all week?"

Amanda walked over and sat down next to Melissa, who put her arms around her.

Amanda began shedding tears as she spoke.

"That was Lindsay Grace. My sister."

I was speechless. Sister? Twins, obviously. I never saw *that* coming. Sherlock my ass, I'd never make a good detective.

"Do you know who killed her?" I asked.

The tears started pouring. "I did."

When she calmed down, I asked for the whole story.

"My parent's never told me about her," she began. "Mom and Dad gave Lindsay up and kept me. My grandmother raised Lindsay in Kentucky. My parents kept her a secret from me until last month. Then she came to visit. She annoyed me sooo bad! She smoked, she cursed, she was foolin' around with guys. She was my opposite! But she was my sister, God rest her soul. I had to be her sister too."

I waited for her to continue. When she didn't, I asked, "So what happened that night?"

"I wanted to go see Modern Idiots. I'd bought their CD and was listening to it the last couple days. I asked Melissa to go, but she hates punk music. I finally gave in and asked Lindsay. When she showed up I...I blacked out I guess. When I saw her face, that cigarette hanging from her lips, I couldn't control my anger! Then everything went black. I woke up with the knife in my hand. I knew what I did, but I couldn't believe I did it! How could I have done something that...sick and twisted? Finally I left my car keys and took hers. I drove her Escort to my parents' house and told them what happened. Dad tried to soak the knife in bleach...to protect me. I was hiding in the basement when you and Detective Noble showed up that morning. I decided to come out of hiding when I found out the music made me do it."

I sat back on the couch and closed my eyes. "I'll call Jack and tell him everything. He'll get them to let your dad go, but the Detroit Police will want you to repeat this whole story to them."

She frowned. "They won't arrest me, will they?"

"No, they know it wasn't your fault."

Melissa and Amanda stood to leave, and I walked them to the door. "Thank you Mr. Stone," Amanda said, giving me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. I quickly looked at Laurie to see if she was about to hit me.

They left, and Laurie came up and put her arms around me. "Congratulations, Detective Stone, you solved the case. What's next for ya?"

I gave her a seductive look. "Oh, I dunno, I'm kinda hungry..."

She returned the look. "Good! We can make use of this stuff," she said, leading me to our bedroom. Spread out on the bed were twelve cans of whip cream, eight jars of maraschino cherries, two jars of peanut butter, three jars of strawberry jam, a bowl of banana pudding and a huge cucumber. Good night everyone, and see ya next week!