

SUPERSIZED BLUES

by

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We do not recommend this as a “how to” primer on illegal activity. The conditions described pertaining to unlawful gunrunning, have significantly changed where the Federal Government has cracked down, foreclosing the described avenues of such pursuits, and/or have drastically increased the penalties. The same applies to stock manipulation and insider trading. Nor is this book intended to impart medical advice of any sort. The depiction of problems with medical devices is based on lawsuits regarding past conditions that, presumably, no longer exist and should be approached with the advice and assistance of your doctor. The subjects of diamorphine and SV-40 are fundamentally factual but are very controversial and the author does not vouch for the veracity of the claims regarding them. For more information on the carcinogen, SV-40, read “Dr. Mary’s Monkey” by Edward T. Haslam, which alleges on page 300 that a genetically altered compound bio-weapon of SV-40 was tested on a prisoner who died within 28 days.

Diamorphine is a combination of heroin and morphine. It is illegal in the United States but is used as a painkiller in Britain. Believe it or not, heroin addicts have a blog wherein a contributor stated that a combination of heroin and

morphine would obliterate the pain of even a gunshot. Being an addict does not necessarily make him a liar, so I ran with it. More information is available through Wikipedia. Again, the purpose of the description of these two substances is solely to advance the plot of the book.

“Happiness always looks
small while you hold it
in your hands, but let it
go, and you learn at once
how big and precious it is.”

—Maxim Gorky

IT'S HER

2004

A Mercedes S430 screeched to a halt in the drive of a mini mansion in the heart of Beverly Hills. It disgorged three men who walked with a purpose, their heads down. Silently, the door swung open and, with just a nod to acknowledge her, they swept past the maid into the marbled halls of Hal's new digs. "He's expecting us." One of them said in passing.

Hal, a man in his early thirties, approached. He was tall, slightly overweight, with a beefy build. A broken nose, deep brown eyes, and dark, close-cropped hair gave him an aura of determination that was the hallmark of his character. His eyes mirrored concern as he searched the faces of his friends. "Are you sure it's her?"

The shorter, older man and the burly black man answered in unison. "It's her." The third man, a detective, who made a successful living by fading into the background, just nodded in agreement.

"Come on back..." Hal spoke just above a whisper. They all retired to his office where he took a seat behind a large oak desk. Deuce, the large black man, complained, "Why did you have to move to Beverly Hills? Do you know how hard it is to drive from anywhere to get to Beverly fucking Hills?"

It was just a rhetorical question, but it reminded Hal of the remorse he felt ever since he moved in. As small as his house was, by Beverly Hills standards, it far exceeded his needs and he felt like a lonely pinball bouncing from room to room. "Where's the file?"

The older man, called Big by his friends, smacked the file down in front of Hal, and took the only seat on the opposite side of the desk; the other two men stood behind him.

Hal stared at the file, rubbed his face with both hands, and then stared at it again. His stomach did a flip-flop as

he turned over the cover to find her face looking up at him. He removed the picture from the paper clip and tried to keep his expression from reflecting the pain he felt. "Four years, four damned long years..." He whispered.

Ray, the detective, made his presence felt in an unobtrusive voice as he softly droned on with the facts. "She lives in Sonoma County...and she's married to a..." He flipped a page in the notepad he held. "...Ed Baker...their address is in the file..."

"Married." Hal spoke the word as if it was the only thing he heard.

Big scrutinized him with sympathetic eyes magnified by horn-rimmed glasses into large, dark pools. His thin face sported a mixed gray, well-trimmed, beard and his hands danced with each word to accentuate and give fullness to their meaning. His high pitched, raspy voice waxed philosophical. "Son...though you are not the fruit of my loins...you are the progeny of my creation...an adoption of the heart, if you will...and I feel it is incumbent upon me...more of a demand of the soul to share the mysteries of the universe to enlighten you upon the vagaries...nay...the perversities of life. Whatever your expectations may be...the fantasies of your mind and heart...your plans, your will, your most precious desires...life will not only disappoint...but it will bugger you!" His gesturing hands finished choreographing his speech by pointing a bony finger at Hal.

"My advice to you...mind you, just a strong suggestion, proposal...counseling...perhaps more of an admonition...a plea to your better senses...do not charge like the proverbial bull in the china shop into whatever the situation may be...pushing your way amongst the bric-a-brac...overturning porcelain art...creating shards in your path." He leaned back and turned his head as

though he envisioned the wreckage. He quickly turned back again. "Create a plan...plan 'A'...plan 'B' and 'C, D, E, and F' if need be for every contingency...every possibility...every eventuality...and even...I know you don't want to hear this...a viable picture of correctness...an exit plan if things do not pan out your way. Life...being the perversity that it is...the ugly, wretched, deviant thorn in man's soul...it is more likely than not that life will not hand you what you want...so you must acquit yourself with all due propriety, alacrity, and propinquity to the approximation of your goal. In other words; to put it in what I would call a legal term of art...DON'T FUCK UP!"

PART ONE

STILL GOT THE BLUES

“Still Got the Blues for You,” blared out of the car speakers from a CD he usually played when he was alone, as the night crushed in on him, burying him in reminiscences and regret. The guitar solo struck every nerve, reverberating in the depth of his emotions. It had been so many years—four and a half to be exact—since he had seen her face. The lyrics picked at his wounds. He wondered if she still remembered, or cared, how it used to be between them, or if she only remembered the last, vile things he said to her. The thought could still make him cringe with self-loathing.

He opted to take Highway 101 instead of I-5. With I-5, once he was past the Grapevine, he knew he could stomp on the pedal and fly at 100 miles per hour to eat up the distance between them. But he needed to slow everything down, slow his excitement, his rampant anticipation, and his racing imagination. Deliberately, he took his time. He had mapped out a plan and it was already in play to make sure he could see her alone. Tomorrow, her husband was to keep a business appointment, to review a deal Hal had furtively arranged through one of his front companies. It was an offer he was prepared to finance if it was accepted, but one that would have served its purpose, even if it was rejected.

Rehearsing different scenarios in his head, the thought occurred to him, *Dear God...what will I do if she won't see me...if she slams the door in my face?* It was a real possibility and he couldn't blame her, but the very idea made his heart hurt and he dismissed it. He fixed his attention on her as though his mind could will the outcome of his intended supplications. He envisioned her smiling, running to him, and wrapping her arms around him. *Reality check...that's not going to happen...you had better get down on your knees and beg forgiveness. Married. What did you expect? Of course,*

she would be married. His brain paced back and forth like a caged animal and he hit the steering wheel with his fist in frustration, causing his car to swerve to the right. He almost overcorrected as he maneuvered out of a fishtail. He cautioned himself; *Stay focused or you will instantly solve your problem...the hard way.* Then he settled in for the long trip ahead.

His hand involuntarily moved to almost touch the right side of his head as his recollections invoked the feel of her. Visions played back in his mind as if on a looped tape. Every morsel of memory had to be chewed and digested before he started again from the beginning...

THE NEW GIRL

1997

Angel City Magazine's headquarters occupied the sixth and seventh floors of the Salter Building skyscraper in downtown L.A. The gossip mill was always grinding at Angel City, since news, trends, and opinions were what they did, but it was not limited to the production of their magazine. Hal Golan, at twenty-eight years old, was the youngest and most able contributing editor at the magazine. However, being well respected did not keep the flotsam and jetsam of office tittle-tattle from washing up at his door.

Martin stuck his head inside Hal's office, "Man oh man...did you see the new girl?" He shook his hand up and down. "Smokin' hot!!" He had the face and personality of a demented court jester, with his lively eyes a bit off kilter, his mouth slightly askew.

Hal looked up, annoyed at the interruption, "Yeah...yeah...yeah. You guys are always going on about some chick and they turn out to be nothing special."

"Not this one. Come on...she's in the lunchroom. Go take a gander." Martin cupped both hands to his chest and slightly bounced them. "I said smokin'..."

"What are you...a tenth grader? I'm busy. I'm sure I will run into her eventually and I'll try not to act like a leech when I do." He turned back to his work. "Calm down or you'll be accused of sexual harassment."

"OK...it's your loss, buddy. I just wanted to be there when your tongue hits the floor."

"Too bad you won't be there to see it."

Later that day Hal passed what could only be the new girl in the hall. *Goddamn, Martin was right!* He thought. Her white suit, with a fitted blazer, perfectly set off her figure. Under masses of long, pale yellow curls, she had a face that was the envy of angels. Her bosom was full, but not grotesquely so, which in L.A. was often seen as

the mark of a boob job. With a tiny waist and delicate ankles, she had been superbly sculpted from top to bottom. She smiled and said “Hello.” Her voice was as soft as a kitten’s. He nodded and averted his eyes as she passed him. A light floral scent emanated from her and he feigned going into the lunchroom to get a glimpse of her behind. His eyebrows went up. *Nice...really nice!* She walked without affectation, but with the sweet undulation of a choice little ass. *I’ll be damned if she doesn’t look like she just stepped off the silver screen!* Hal laughed at himself. *As if it matters to you...you’ll never get near that!* He instantly felt sorry for her. *Too bad the women in this place will tear her apart.* He decided to pour himself some coffee, since he was there anyway, and forgot all about her.

The hierarchy at Angel City was clear-cut. The patricians’ executive offices and reception were housed on the seventh floor along with the secretarial pool. The executive editor had a separate suite and conference room. The rest of the editors’ offices were strung along the edge of the hallway.

The sixth floor held the plebeians, with numerous desks in the open space of a common area. One step above in the pecking order were the research analysts who were afforded cubicles. The managers of each department had separate offices. The rest of the drones that keep an office running, such as those in the mail room, were kept out of sight. Hal, being one of the patricians, only had to pick up the phone to summon his research analyst to his office. “Cora, please come up here. I need to run something past you. I think there may be a mistake.” Hal replaced the phone on its cradle and continued to read.

A few minutes later Cora strolled in. She was a round faced brunette with aspirations of being pretty. “What’s up, Hal?”

“This has got to be wrong.”

Cora glanced at the paper. “Oh that...that’s Mari’s work.” She shifted the blame.

“What’s a Mari?”

“Oh...that’s the new girl. Her name is actually Marie, but she spells her name with an ‘iiii’ instead of an ‘iiii-eeee’...” She dragged out the vowels valley girl style. “...pretty corny if you ask me...kind of pretentious...” She rolled her eyes. “That is why I call her Maaar-i...to kind of annoy her.”

“OK...I just want to know who did the work. Isn’t she assigned to Dirk?”

“Yes...but for some reason she gave it to me...to give to you...”

“Please send her up so I can talk to her.”

Hal reviewed the Mitchem file that had just landed on his desk. The facts and conclusions were off the mark from what he understood about the recent, sensational, murder case. *What am I supposed to do with this mess? It is total speculation all the way down the line. Vee would fry my ass in boiling oil if I gave him a piece based on this crap.* He referred to Mr. Vougiouklakis, or Vee, as he was called, who was the Executive Editor. *This new girl has made a mess of this thing. I hate to take her down a peg when she is just starting, but she can’t get away with submitting sub-par work! No wonder Dirk turned it down...even he wouldn’t run with this shit.*

“Cora said you wanted to see me.” Mari Carlson walked into his office but left the door open.

“Please close the door.” Hal did not like to reprimand an employee where others could hear. “About this Mitchem case...where did you get this information? It is

completely contrary to the police report and the prosecution's case."

"Yes, I know. Through a friend of a friend I was able to get copies of the witnesses' depositions. I went through each and every one of them and they tell a different story. It looks as though Mitchem could be innocent. You see right here?" She leaned over to show him the point she was trying to make. The faint floral scent drifted to him and he turned in her direction and got a face full of her hair. "Oh...I'm sorry." She flipped her hair out of the way, over her other shoulder, and continued. "I cross-referenced witnesses' statements that contradict some pretty important evidence..." Abruptly, she stopped and walked over to close the blinds of the glass partition that looked out on the rest of the office. "Dirk will have a hissy-fit if he sees me talking to you."

"If you are right about this...it could be a bombshell." He gave her a quizzical look. "Why didn't you give this to Dirk?"

"I did. But he didn't want it. So, I thought I would do Cora favor and give it to her."

"You were doing Cora a favor...?"

Mari shrugged. "It wasn't doing anybody any good sitting on my desk..."

"I want to see more of this. What do you have?"

"Just the depositions...and that's it. But Mr. Golan...I can't be seen talking to you. I'll get fired..."

"It's OK to call me Hal."

"Alright."

"Can you meet me...at a coffee shop or something...say around sevenish tonight and bring those depositions?"

"I guess so. Where?"

Hal grabbed a slip of paper, wrote down the address and handed it to her. "Is that anywhere near you?"

She looked at the paper and nodded. "I'll be there."

“By the way...I hope you don't mind my asking you this...that perfume you wear...it's quite nice. I can't quite figure out what it is.”

“Oh, that's not perfume. I make my own shampoo and conditioner...” She smiled. “The scent is plumeria. Perhaps you know it as frangipani.”

“I don't know it as anything. It's new to me.”

“Have you ever been to Hawaii where they put fresh flower leis around your neck?”

“No.”

She laughed. “Neither have I...but I heard they are made with plumeria. Do you have a special lady?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Aw...I was going to give you a set from the batch I made to give to your girl...”

“My mother might like it...” He felt like a dork a soon as he said it.

She seemed pleased. “That's sweet. Then I'll bring some for your mother. I hope she likes it. See you tonight.” She opened the door and gave him a tiny conspiratorial wave as she left.

Hal was no sooner handed the menu when Mari breezed in carrying a large, green tote bag and a smaller black shoulder bag. Wearing casual jeans, a bulky knit sweater, and a floppy hat, she looked like she was ready to knuckle down to the job at hand. He walked over to her and carried the oversized bag the rest of the way to the table. “Thank you so much for coming. Have you had dinner yet?”

“No. I only had time to grab a muffin on the way out...”

“Well, we'd better order something or they'll kick us out of here.” He waved for the waitress to bring another menu. When she did, she fairly sniffed at Mari and tossed the menu on the table. Hal was taken aback. “What got into her?”

“She’s probably just having a bad day.” Mari studied the menu.

“What...in the last five minutes? She was all smiles just a while ago.” He considered broaching a subject about women that made him curious. At first, he decided against it, and then changed his mind. “Mari...women don’t like you very much, do they.”

She looked up, met his eyes, and then looked back down at the menu. “I don’t know. Some do...some don’t, I guess. I can’t be everybody’s flavor of the month.”

“Well, I just wondered. I mean, like our waitress...some of the girls in the office seem to be a little catty when it comes to you. I don’t mean to talk out of school...but does it seem like that to you?”

She put the menu down and made a little grimace. “Mr. Golan...”

“Call me Hal.”

“Hal...they haven’t had a chance to get to know me...but when they do...” She thought for a bit. “...they’ll still hate me.” She laughed and then sighed. “I’m just there to earn a living...not to win a popularity contest...but thank you so much for thinking of me. No one else ever seemed to notice, or care.”

“Tell me something else...if you don’t mind my asking...your eyes are such an unusual shade of blue...sort of a richer, darker blue. Are you wearing contacts?”

“Contacts?” Her hand flew to her mouth to stifle a snicker. “Mr. Golan...”

“Hal.”

“Hal. Are you having fun at my expense?” She chirped. “No...I’m not wearing contacts. Yes...most women hate me. And you, my dear sir, are snapping my panty-girdle...aren’t you?!”

“Snapping your what?”

“Panty-girdle...that’s something my grandma used to say.”

“No...no...” He tried to refute it but succumbed to laughter as they both got a case of the giggles.

They tried to settle down when the waitress came for their order. Hal got it together long enough to order. “The lady...my friend and esteemed colleague...not to mention comedienne ...will have the corned beef on rye with a side of coleslaw. I will have the same along with a well-deserved smack on head.” He rapped the side of his head for emphasis.

By the time the food arrived they had the contents of the tote bag spread across the table. She brought three depositions, which were Xeroxed copies, and a legal pad. The pièce de résistance was a new laptop she removed from the black bag. She set it out on the table and flipped it open. Hal watched with fascination. “That’s really cool.”

“It’s the latest model...just released...and it has a lot of innovations. Windows 95 is preinstalled on it, so you don’t have to go through that dreaded installation process. Are you familiar with Windows 95?”

“Yes. But I never used a laptop before. How does it work without a mouse?”

“By touch...watch.” Mari turned it on, waited for it to boot up, typed in her password, and then lightly dragged her fingers over the touch pad to direct the cursor. “Here...I’ll show you. She reached over to take Hal’s hand and placed his index finger on the pad. Gently holding his finger, she slid it over the surface of the pad. “The right and left click are below the pad.”

Her fingers were gentle on his, almost like a caress. He felt a slight tremor in his hand and withdrew it. “Before we get started, let’s eat.”

“Good idea...I’m starving.”

Mari took a hungry bite out of her sandwich and studied Hal while he ate. He was casually dressed in a pullover shirt, but still had on the slacks from the suit he wore earlier in the day. With his earnest dark eyes, and compelling smile, she thought he had a pleasant face. Curiously, she did not feel wary around him as she did with most men. He seemed direct, unassuming, and honest. Moreover, he listened. *I hope my intuition is right about the Mitchem case. I think he can do the story justice and show up that no talent stinker, Dirk.* She laughed to herself. *It would also go a long way to expose what a fraud Dirk is and that he had his head way up his ass when he asked me, "What kind of dumb blonde bullshit is this?"*

Hal focused on his sandwich as he tried to get the soft feel of her fingers out of his head. *That's not what she's here for and she will flounce right out of here at the slightest hint of what you are thinking. Bad Hal! Corned beef...yes...bad thoughts...no...corned beef...yes...bad thoughts...no...*

Mari's soft voice interrupted his self-condemnation. "As soon as we are through, I want to show you my method of cataloging the contents of the depositions according to relevance. My summaries are quicker and easier to use, but I still think you should read the actual depositions for yourself in order to catch something I may have missed."

After their meal, Mari turned the computer screen to face Hal and went into the Mitchem file. "You see...I have listed the volume, page numbers, paragraph numbers, and a brief summary of each statement. I have also cross-referenced the pertaining statements of the other witnesses." She looked up, searching Hal's eyes. "When you put it all together, you will see that the police report and the prosecutor's version of the case do not exactly fit what the witnesses said. The witnesses do not

necessarily disagree with the prosecutor's conclusion...but some very salient points of their testimony do."

"This is a lot of work you did." He scrolled through the pages.

For the next hour Mari walked Hal through the anomalies and conflicting evidence. Three different witness statements agreed on a timeline that differed from that of the prosecution. Moreover, it appeared as though there were other witnesses that were never engaged or questioned to any degree. "Hal, do you think that things were overlooked on purpose? I mean...to the casual observer it looks like Mitchem is guilty...but the prosecution is not a casual observer...at least they shouldn't be. If I could ferret out these inconsistencies...you would think that the prosecution would have done so, too."

"Or, Mitchem's attorney." Hal observed. "Believe me...it is not that unusual for this type of thing to happen...unfortunately."

"Not unusual? But this is a man's life..."

"Tell me about it. There is one thing we must not do when we write about this...and that is to publicly accuse the powers that be of malice in this 'oversight' because we will really have a fight on our hands...and it will be daunting enough as it is to point out these 'glitches' in the case."

"But...these are more than 'glitches.'"

"You know it...and I know it...but we must write it as though they were 'understandable errors' so that we will be listened to. No one wants to think that a governmental entity, especially one that is supposedly meting out justice, would intentionally draw the wrong conclusions or chalk up a case as solved to rack up brownie points."

"Brownie points?"

“Yeah...their ‘win-loss’ score. Prosecutors’ careers are made on wins...not losses...and the defendant be damned.”

“That’s a scary thought...please tell me you’re being cynical...”

Hal’s dark eyes grew somber. “I wish I could. I have a friend from college who went on to law school and became a prosecutor. It was a revelation to him how many things determine the outcome of a case that could result in a wrongful conviction. He categorized wrongful convictions in three ways. The first is an honest mistake, where all the available evidence points to one person. The case has been efficiently investigated...honest and straightforward in its prosecution...and in spite of best efforts...the wrong guy was nailed.

“The second is hunch prosecutions. That is where the investigators have a strong sense of the suspect being the perpetrator...and there is some evidence pointing in that direction...but not enough. Depending on the suspect...they can let him go or prosecute. If he’s rich he will walk until there is more or better evidence. If he’s poor or a minority...they may help the evidence along, with a gut hunch that they have the right guy. If they are wrong...and they have been habituated by innocent people going to jail behind an honest mistake...they tell themselves it was only slightly less than honest...and they really believed the suspect was guilty. Or they can rationalize that the suspect was a bad guy and would have ended up in jail in any event.”

Mari was confused. “How can they ‘help the evidence along’?”

“By drawing an inference or conclusion that is different from what the evidence suggests. For example, testimony of friends and family might be ignored, while tentative facts are favored. Or, like in the Mitchem case, where they assume the witnesses’ time frames are

mistaken because they do not comport with the prosecution's theory of the case."

"Oh...how awful."

"The last is truly frightening...the intentional framing of a suspect. Where there is public clamor to solve a case...or a conflict of interest...or a vendetta...where the evidence is phoned up. It can include pressuring the suspect into a false confession...pressuring witnesses into changing their testimony...planting evidence...changing the characterization of evidence in what it is purported to prove and ignoring or concealing exculpatory evidence."

Mari sat open mouthed at the idea that such things could happen, and yet she had before her in the Mitchem case, the strong argument that it did. "Unbelievable..."

"Getting back to my point...this is going to be a tough slog. In the Mitchem case...I think what we have is a 'hunch' situation...but we are going to treat it as though it was an 'honest mistake' in order to have a prayer. From what you have here...it may be a case of the cops were lazy and that Mitchem was convenient...so they ignored the discrepancies."

Mari was hopeful. "So, you are going to take it on?"

"Yes...I think so. I think you have something here. It will take a lot more work...but it's worth it because this is a huge story. Dirk is really missing the boat on this one."

"Dirk the jerk."

"Awww...Mari...that was too easy..." He chided her but his eyes crinkled with humor.

"That's what everyone in the office calls him."

"What if his name was Harry?"

"What if he wasn't such a jerk?" She countered.

"Good point." He looked back at the screen. "This is really impressive. I would like to read it in detail."

“Oh, you can take my laptop home with you. The password is taped to the bottom...you can take it off once you know it. Be sure to plug it in...the battery is pretty low...” She wrinkled her brow “...and, please...please...please...don’t go into my picture file...”

Hal squinted and stroked his chin. “Well, I wasn’t planning to...until now...”

She leaned her head into her palm. “My boyfriend took a picture of me that’s not so nice. It’s of me getting into the shower...”

“...and you think I’m not going to look at it? Why didn’t you delete it?”

“I didn’t think I would be lending my computer to anyone. It’s not a bad picture if it’s just between me and my boyfriend. But I wouldn’t want to go showing it around to other people...” She sighed. “I just thought that this case was more important.”

“OK...OK...I won’t look at it.”

“Liar.” She half smiled. “Just don’t tell anybody...OK?”

Hal leaned forward not quite suppressing his merriment at her discomfort. “What if Dirk had taken you up on this story angle. Would you have loaned him your computer?”

Her mouth flew open. “Not just ‘no’...but ‘hell no’.” She screwed up her face. “Besides...if that were the case, I could have just used the computer at work. But even if I couldn’t...like now...I wouldn’t have that jackass touch anything of mine...and the thought of him seeing that picture gives me the creeps...”

Hal’s eyebrows raised and he chuckled. “...and the thought of my seeing it doesn’t?”

“Well...no...sort of...not exactly. I don’t see you as being a cretin...you know...going berserk at the sight of a bare butt. I mean you’ve seen butts before...and if you see

mine, I don't think you're going to go all wacky doodle..."

Hal held up his hands and laughed out loud. "Don't count on it!"

She put her head down on her arm and laughed as hard as he did. "Well, at least you're not Dirk."

"He thinks he can score with you...you know..."

She looked up. "What an arrogant putz!"

"I'll tell him you said so..." Hal teased.

"Swell...pick a fight with my boss for me."

"Nooo...I wouldn't do that. But I have to admit I would love for him to know what you think of him."

"Before I forget..." Mari handed him a gift box. "...this is for your mother."

"Thanks." He looked at the box that was decorated with ribbons and tiny silk flowers. A small card was attached. He smiled. "This is really sweet of you. I'm sure she will love your gift. You know, you're not at all like I expected you to be."

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know. Sort of wrapped up in yourself...superior...looking down at us mere mortals..."

"You've got to be kidding me. Do I come off like that?"

"No...not when I talk to you. I think you are down to earth and rather nice. It's just that you are such a drop-dead looker. Most people who are extremely attractive act as though they are God's gift..." She looked away and didn't seem to take the reference to her looks as a compliment. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you..."

"No offense...I just thought you liked me as a person." Her blithe mood had changed.

"I do...I really do." Hal hoped he could restore her lighthearted spirit, but as time passed, they both became engrossed in the research. By ten o'clock it was closing time and Hal was ready to call it a day. He helped her pack

everything back into the bag and then he reached across the table and took both of her hands in his. "I must tell you two things." His dark eyes studied hers. "First, I want to apologize. People are always labeling and stereotyping other people...and I hate that. Labels allow them to put others into a mental cubbyhole where they don't have to think...or do the work of learning about a person's character. If it had been race or religion...I would never do such a thing...but I labeled you for your looks and it was unthinking and unkind. I am truly sorry..."

She shrugged it off. "I don't think you really meant it that way..."

"The other thing is...I want to thank you for the work you did and entrusting it to me. You've shown a lot of gumption...intelligence...and you did a lot to clarify the issues. I couldn't have done as good a job. You may have saved a man's life." He put her hands back down on the table and grinned at her, "And I am honored that you trust me with your picture...now I am not saying that trust is deserved..."

She blushed. "Oh my God...I've created a monster."

"You know, Mari, this has actually been fun. One of the best evenings I have had in a while. I hope you will continue to work on this project with me...I will pay you extra."

"No you won't. We're in this together...and I won't take a dime. I just hope we can save this guy."

Hal checked the messages on his voice mail. His mother had called, but he would see her this weekend and it was too late to call her back. He took the tote and the computer bag to the spare room that served as his office and off loaded them onto his worktable. His desk, on the other side of the room was sacrosanct. It held the novel he was writing, related notes, and was used

exclusively for that purpose. He was bushed. All he could think of was to fall into bed. Then he looked back at Mari's computer. He scrunched up his face. *Yeah...I want to take a look.*

He peeled off the password, memorized it, walked over to the desk, and stuck it to the bottom of his top drawer. When he got into her computer he went into "Documents" and briefly perused the names of the files. Her files were clues to who she was, and he made a mental note to look at them later. Then he went to "Easy Photo" and into the stored photos it contained. What he saw was breathtaking. While there were photos of a good-looking guy, who looked like he considered himself a stud and used any excuse to pose without a shirt, most of the pictures were of Mari. Mari at the beach, stunning in a bikini; Mari at home working at her computer; Mari in the kitchen cooking, Mari looking adorable in a robe and slippers, eating popcorn, Mari, Mari, Mari, and yes, Mari entering the shower. Her full, naked back was toward the camera and she was looking over her shoulder, smiling at the fortunate photographer. He felt a tremor run through him. *She was wrong...I have seen butts before...but none quite so splendid...so beautiful. It should be on canvas...framed. Her body is pure poetry...and it does make a man go 'wacky doodle.'* When he finally went to sleep, the delectable image drifted in his dreams.

Benny's was a neighborhood bar that, unlike most things in L.A., had existed for years. It had a long bar with a mirror and the ubiquitous televisions strategically placed. In an attempt to become more than it was, it had a pool table in the back room, a bowling machine, and a jukebox that all went unused. Those that went to Benny's did not want to play the golden oldies on the jukebox that made them remember times they were

drinking to forget. Those seeking music went to other places where they created memories and could dance to the music that would become the soundtrack of their regrets. Most of the customers were regulars, each with a claim to the seat they inhabited at the bar. The tables, of which there were many, were generally eschewed until Hal and Deuce made Benny's their habitual meeting place at a window table, opposite the middle of the bar.

Even though Monday Night Football would not commence until the end of August, Hal and Deuce continued their habit of meeting on Mondays to have few beers and chew over the past week's events. Deuce was a big man in both height and weight and his dark eyes looked at you in a steady non-evasive gaze that said, "I don't take or give bullshit." His brown face was half covered with a beard that was a little more than a five o'clock shadow. A thin mustache lined the edge of his upper lip. The ever-present skinny brimmed hat covered his shaven head, and his broad, toothy grin was reserved for his friends.

Out of desperation, as a young man, he started a plumbing business that mushroomed into a thriving success but had consumed most of his life. "There are times when I think I am getting too old for the plumbing game." Deuce grumbled. "I put in two weeks straight, including weekends, and now I am going to take off for the next couple of days and do nothing!"

"Quit your bitchin'...you make more money than God."

"That's 'cause He ain't into money...it's not His thing. He's into helping the poor...helping those that help themselves...taking care of fools and babies...listening to all those prayers...you know...all that God type stuff."

“Yeah.” Hal sipped his beer. “He really should start charging for it!”

“What you been up to?”

“I think I’m on to something special. There’s this girl at work...”

“Oh...you got a new girl.”

“No. Nothing like that...” He chuckled. “...I only wished it was like that...” He thought of her picture.

“Yeeaahh?” Deuce eyed Hal. “What does she look like?”

Hal nodded his head up and down. “Oh...she’s a knockout alright...but that’s not it.”

“A knockout huh?” Deuce held out his hand and rocked it. “Where is she on the scale of one to ten?”

Hal snorted. “A fifteen.”

“Wha...wha...wha...! What you doin’ with a fifteen, man? You have to stand on your tippy toes to be considered a five...and you want to go after a fifteen? You gotta be shittin’ me...”

“I’m trying to tell you...it’s not like that...” Hal paused. “...and I’m at least a seven...”

“I hate to break it to you man...but you a five...”

“The point is that she works in research and she came across some interesting stuff that could blow the lid off a murder case. She’s assigned to Dirk the jerk and he nixed it...so she gave it to me. I took a look at what she had, and I think she’s right. For the past couple of days, we’ve been working on it in our spare time.” Hal held up his hands. “But really...that’s not even it. She did something so...I don’t even know what to call it...” A look of puzzlement crossed his face. “...thoughtful...kind...unusual...”

“Well?”

“She gave me a gift for my mother...”

“Your mother?” Deuce made a face.

“It’s a long story. Anyway, she put a card on it and you’ll never guess what it said.”

“OK. See this face...” Deuce drew an air circle around his face with his finger. “This is me not guessing.”

“It said, Dear Hal’s Mom...da-da-da-da...about how she hopes she likes the shampoo...etc....and then it went on to say...‘Everyone thinks that Hal is the nicest man in the office. That speaks well of you. You must be very proud. Best wishes, Mari.’ Who does that sort of thing out of the blue?”

“Nobody I know.” Deuce was puzzled. “Shampoo...?”

“Another long story. I mean it was very sweet of her to do something like that... but she hardly knew me when she wrote it.” Hal shook his head with incredulity. “It’s kinda weird...”

Deuce scratched his forehead. “You know what’s peculiar is that we live in a world where a random act of kindness is considered weird.” He shrugged. “Well, at least you know she likes you.”

Hal drained his beer mug and held it up to order another and then took a sip out of Deuce’s mug while he waited. “I like her too...she’s a good kid.” He sat Deuce’s drink down between them to share. “You’re right though. She wouldn’t look twice at me. But I’ll have you know...I’m a seven...”

“Dream on Bro’...dream on. What does she look like?”

“A walking dream. She has this mass of crazy blonde hair...long...real long...all curlicues and ringlets. On her it looks fantastic! On anyone else...not so much. Her eyes are the most beautiful shade of blue I’ve ever seen...and when she looks at you...you feel like an ice cream cone that has been dropped on a hot Sunday sidewalk...all melting with nothing left but your hard sugar cone...”

Deuce pointed at Hal with his pinkie finger, waving it back and forth, signaling he sensed bullshit. “I see...it

ain't like that...she means nothing to you...not the least bit interested.” Giving him a knowing smile, he reached over and cuffed him on the shoulder. Hal cuffed him back. In unison they both exclaimed, “BITCH FIGHT!” and started air-slapping at each other and then fell back laughing.

“Look man, I'd be lying if I said I didn't want her...but like you said...I'm a five...”

“No...I was just shuckin' with you. You're a straight up seven.”

YOU'RE ON CANDID CAMERA

Hal frantically searched for his file. He was sure he had laid it on his desk and now it was gone. GONE! But how? He felt like he was losing his mind. He double-checked his briefcase and his desk drawers, as well as the trash can. Even so, he knew he couldn't have absentmindedly placed it somewhere else. It was too important.

For weeks he and Mari had worked on the Mitchem case. They had moved from the coffee shop to Hal's place, spreading the paperwork over his living room floor. When they had put together a comprehensive argument that Mitchem was innocent; Hal wrote the proposed article.

When the project was finished, they allowed themselves a little celebration. When Mari stood at the door to leave, she looked at Hal with admiration. "Your facility with words is amazing."

He took both her hands. "This, my little one, is yours. You saw it...you put it together...and you kept me going. If anything comes of this...it is all your doing." He kissed her upturned face on the forehead. "Scoot along home and I'll see you tomorrow."

Now when everything was set for Hal to make his presentation, the file was missing, and the pit of his stomach was up in his throat.

Mari knocked on his office door, "Hal...follow me to the elevator." She said in a hoarse whisper.

"I can't right now. I can't find our file..."

"I knew he was up to something! Follow me now!"

Hal looked both ways out of his office door and then followed Mari into the elevator. While they were collaborating on the Mitchem case, they had taken to using the elevator to communicate at work. As soon as the doors closed Mari started talking animatedly. "I was in the supply room when I saw Dirk coming down the hall. I've been avoiding him ever since you said he had a

thing for me...and I certainly did not want him to catch me alone in the supply room so I hid behind a stack of cartons...you know those big cartons of copy paper...and you'll never guess what I saw him do. He climbed up on a chair and put a file on top of that huge cabinet...you know the one that holds toner, paperclips, and stuff and such."

"That's got to be our file. That rat bastard!" Hal punched his fist into his hand. "I just stepped out of the office for a minute. He must have taken it then. You know the editor's meeting is right after lunch. He wanted to steal our stuff and leave me flatfooted in front of Vee...and probably present it as his own work."

"He can't do that..."

"Sure he can. He can say I stole it from him..."

"No he can't. I'll tell Vee it was your project..."

"And you work for Dirk. He can say you were the one who took it and passed it on to me. Now that we know where it is...let's go get it. But don't let on that we have it. I'll just keep on acting like I'm going nuts looking for it until I spring it on him by presenting it at the meeting."

"Can he still claim it is his...?"

"Maybe...but I don't think so. Without the file he has nothing else...no notes...nothing in his computer...to back it up. If he doesn't present it...it's not his. You said the supply room on top of that cabinet?"

"Yes. I'll go with you."

"No. You keep Dirk distracted. Tell him you've got a problem with something but keep him busy."

"Yuk!" She twisted her face. "The things I do for you!"

Mari softly knocked, "Dirk...may I see you for a moment?"

"Yes...what is it?" He was annoyed that she had interrupted his contemplation of flushing Hal down the

porcelain fixture. It was all too easy. *Let Hal do the work and I'll will take the credit.* For weeks now he had suspected something was up and he wheedled it out of Cora that she thought Hal was looking into the Mitchem case.

Mari strolled into the room and, instead of taking the chair, she sat on the corner of his desk, crossed her legs, and handed him a paper.

Is she trying to sucker me into a sexual harassment suit? Flashed through Dirk's mind. It had finally dawned on him that Mari could barely tolerate him. That didn't deter him, but just made annoying her all the more amusing. His gaze shifted from the paper to her legs. "Well...well...what's all this?"

Mari leaned over and drew his short attention span back to the paper. "It's the eminent domain scandal." She gently removed the paper from his hand, put it on his desk, and gazed into his eyes. "For a pittance the state took more property than necessary to build a freeway. You know about this...right?" She wanted to drag out her explanation as long as possible.

"Well of course...some of it. But you tell me what you have."

She got up and paced slowly around his office, mainly because she couldn't stand sitting that close to him and because she knew he would watch her walk. *Hal owes me big time for this.* She thought. "You see the state...you know put all those families out of their homes..." She put one hand on her hip and faced him. "...practically on the street. I mean all those little children. The story practically writes itself!" She sank into the chair with her face in her hands. "I'm sorry whenever I think of the children I just tear up." She took a breath. "After taking their homes...and for years..." She put her head in her hands again. *Hurry up Hal!* When it looked like Dirk might get up, she started to walk around the room again.

“...for years those homes sat empty. The state didn’t need them...and the children suffered...”

There was a knock at the door and Hal stuck his head in. “Have you guys seen a file lying around anywhere?”

“No.” Dirk could barely contain a grin.

“Me neither.” Mari feigned.

“OK...just thought I’d check on the outside chance.” Hal was out the door and down the hall, biting his lip with a worried look on his face for all to see.

Dirk turned back to Mari. “Go on.”

“Well...now that I think of it...the story sort of sucks. The children are all grown now, and they probably give less than a fig. Not that the state didn’t make out like a bandit...because now it is selling those houses at today’s prices. What do you think?”

“No.”

“OK...that’s all I needed to hear.” She fairly skipped out the door and down the hall when a perverse idea occurred to her. *Oh...this will make Hal’s day.*

When the meeting commenced Hal sat at the conference table with a concerned look on his face. He had asked Vee if he could make his presentation last. *I’ll stick it to Dirk when he realizes that he’s got nothing and his asshole puckers. It wouldn’t be the first time he’s come up empty handed, and Vee is getting impatient with him.*

Hal looked around the table. You could sniff out those who had something and those who did not. Dirk looked supremely smug. *He looks like he has it dicked. He hasn’t gone to get it yet.* Hal bit his lip to keep from grinning.

After the first two presentations, Dirk excused himself to go to the men’s room. When he was gone for quite an interval, Hal gained Vee’s attention. “While we’re waiting...I may as well make my presentation. It seems that Mr. Nelson is going to need more time.”

Someone muttered under his breath. "I hope he didn't fall in."

Martin quipped, "I do."

When Dirk returned to the conference room, Hal had just come to the end of his proposed article. "We do not impugn the prosecutors, or investigators, of the Paul Mitchem case with purposeful, or even negligent, conduct. Even with the best of intentions and diligence; human error, misconceptions, misinterpretation of the evidence, and false impressions, can come into play to distort the conclusions and the outcome of a prosecution. We believe that is the circumstance in the instant case. As a result, justice has been perverted. Paul Mitchem's life will be wrongly confiscated; his wife will be left without a husband, and his children without a father, all to the detriment of justice." Hal paused for affect. "From the Magna Carta to the Bill of Rights, the goal of mankind, and the promise of America, is justice. When we have justice for the least of us, we have justice for all." He closed the folder and his colleagues started to applaud.

"Great work, Hal. That is the best I've heard in quite some time." Vee beamed, "I can tell you right now, that is a winner and we're going with it just the way you wrote it...no changes. I want to review everything you have on it in my office tomorrow."

"Yeah...you've got some great big brass ones to take a slap at the county like that!" Martin said, while still clapping.

Dirk looked flattened and forlorn. With his brow furrowed, he crept to his seat, his face was flushed, and his jacket was ripped. Having no mercy, Martin jibed, "Tough ride on the toilet, Dirk?"

Vee turned his attention to Dirk. "Are you ready to go?"

"I'm a little rattled. I just slipped and tore my jacket."

Vee's raspy voice took on a high-pitched tone of faux commiseration. "Aw, gosh...we're sorry. We've all had bad experiences. But you said you had something big. Let's hear it."

Dirk stood up. "Back in...well. When the state built the freeway...the poor little children suffered. The state took away their homes through eminent domain and threw the children out on the street. Now they are selling those homes for a lot of money..."

Vee screwed up his face, "Am I missing something here? What freeway...whose homes?" Vee looked around the room. "Wasn't that thirty...forty years ago?"

"I think we did that story back in....ummm...the early seventies...or so. In any event the 'poor little children' are all grown up by now." McMurray idly tapped his pencil on the table.

Vee clasped his hands together. "I know you have had a bad day, Dirk, or this would have been unforgivable. You can't tell me you have something big and then come up with this drivel. It would have been better if you had nothing at all." He looked around the table. "Well I guess that's it. Great work Hal. See you tomorrow."

Briskly walking back to his office, he passed Mari in the hallway and gave her a barely perceptible nod to let her know the project was on. To his surprise she quickly slipped a note into his breast pocket and kept moving down the hall. Back in his office, he locked the door and read her note. *I'll drop by your place at seven. Please, please, please be there. I have something to show you.* There was a knock at his door, and someone tried the door handle. Martin yelled through the door. "Open up Golan...I know you're in there. What are you doing? Whacking off?"

Hal opened the door. "You could have at least waited until I came. Have you no decency, sir?"

Martin gave Hal a sly look. "Come on Golan...give it up. What went on in there...?" He gestured back at the conference room. "...you ripped Nelson a new one and he won't be able to sit down for a week! What did you do...and how did you do it?"

"No...you got it all wrong. Nelson fucked himself...as usual."

"OK...then tell me what's going on between you and the Carlson girl?"

Hal puffed up his chest. "You think there is something going on between me and that gorgeous girl? Thank you!" He laughed, "What makes you think there is something going on?"

"Just about every time she gets on the elevator...you dart in right behind her."

"So, I'm a pervert...I like to look at her ass...so sue me."

"Oh...OK. I can understand that." Martin shrugged, and then turned back to Hal. "Then why do you look like the cat that swallowed the canary?"

Hal leaned forward and grinned. "One of these days I will tell you a little fairytale that will get you all a twitter. But for now...get out of here, Martin."

Martin pointed his finger at Hal on his way out. "I know you are up to something..."

Mari showed up in western garb. She wore a black fitted blouse with mother of pearl, snap closures and tight, black jeans with studs down the side. Her high-heeled boots and a velvet ribbon around her neck, to which was pinned a red rose, completed the outfit. She carried a camera bag and an evening purse. Hal regarded her with open arms. "And you are dressed for...?"

"I'm supposed to meet Zack at the Country Barn. We're going line dancing. Isn't that swell?" She rolled her eyes. "But before I go anywhere, or do anything, I

have to give you this.” Mari handed him an envelope. “It is the name and address of Mitchem’s attorney. You have an appointment with him on Monday...I also had copies of everything we have couriered to them...so they will have it all when you get there.”

“Good work, kiddo!”

“That’s not all.” She broke into a broad smile. “I had to show you this! Let’s go into the kitchen so I can put this on the table.” She slung the camera bag from her shoulders and marched to the kitchen. Once there she saw two New York steaks on the counter and two place settings on the table. “Oh...am I interrupting something?” She looked nonplussed. “You were expecting someone?”

“Of course. I was expecting you. Whenever you come over...you never get a chance to eat...so instead of ordering Chinese I thought I would try my hand at cooking something for you.”

“Awww...Hal, that is so sweet. You did all this for me.” She walked over and hugged him and that was enough to make it worth it to him. She backed away and stared at him. You could see her mind weighing her choices; she could leave early to meet Zack for an evening of line dancing or stay here with Hal to share the satisfaction of their success. She pursed her lips, “You know what Mr. Golan...?”

“Hal.”

“Hal. I’d rather spend my evening with you. I’d rather eat your lovely dinner...show you what’s in this bag...and gloat over our success. Trust me...Zack will find some chick to dance with and he will be just fine. Besides, I’m sick of country. I used to like it, but that is all Zack plays and I have country overload. I mean what about opera...jazz...blues...or even rock? Sometimes I think if I hear one more twang, I’ll scream. So being able to spend a scintillating evening schmoozing with you is a

godsend.” Her beautiful eyes sparkled, and he was beginning to get that ice cream cone feeling again.

“Wow...I beat out Zack, country music, and line dancing? Let’s hope I don’t burn dinner!”

“Do you want to see what I have for you in this bag now...or later?”

“I guess now!”

“Bring the other chair around and sit next to me.” She cleared one place setting from the small table and stacked it on the other. Taking the camcorder out of the bag, she flipped open the screen, sat down, and motioned for Hal to sit next to her. They both hunched over the tiny screen and watched as the camera whirred.

Within a few seconds Dirk came into view. He took a chair from one of the worktables, dragged it to the cabinet, and climbed up on it. Reaching over the top he felt around for the file. Not finding it, he felt around again. He paused in confusion and then tried again. Frantically, his hand jumped all over the top as far as he could reach. He stopped, got down, and moved the chair to the front, climbed up again and, started feeling around once more. The chair was not quite high enough for him to see the cabinet top, so, in desperation, he tried to both leap and pull himself up to see where the file was. The chair toppled beneath him and he fell, ripping his jacket on the handle on the way down, landing hard on the floor. He laid there for a moment staring up at the ceiling and then slowly got up, righted the chair, and sat down. You could see the realization creep across his face that someone found that file and probably gave it to Hal. But who—how did they know?? He got up and slammed his fist into the cabinet and shoved the chair across the room. Defeat cowed his head and shoulders as he brushed off his suit and surveyed the rip. Realizing there was nothing he could do about it now; he slinked from the supply room.

Throughout the video they both watched intently. When it was through, Hal howled, "Oh God...play it again!" Now there were shrieks of laughter and they both whooped it up and repeated the playback again and again.

"Mari, how did you get that?"

"Well, I figured he had to go back for the file...so I sort of set up a nest by rearranging the cartons of paper. I stacked them so I couldn't be seen and opened up enough space between two boxes for my camcorder to get a view of the cabinet. Then I turned on a fan to cover the camera sound and voilà! Once it was set up, it didn't take too long before he came into the supply room and I nailed him."

"How is it that you had a camcorder at work?"

Her brow furrowed. "I'd rather not talk about that now. We are having too much fun. Maybe I'll tell you later before I go home...it's probably nothing."

"OK...but you will tell me?"

"Sure." Her mood brightened. "So, tell me what happened in the meeting!"

"We got it...we got the project."

"Yes...I know. I picked up on your little signal."

"It looks like they may want to turn it into a series...like a campaign to free Mitchem."

"Really!?!"

As he cooked dinner, Hal related to her the events of the day. Soon they were laughing again. When he finished, he added, "If it's alright with you...I'm going to ask Vee to trade Cora for you so that you will be working with me. I plan to let him know that the Mitchem project was your baby and that you helped to develop it. It is all the more reason for you to continue with me."

Her mouth dropped open. "If it's alright with ME!?!"
She threw her arms around his neck almost knocking

him over. "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you for getting me out of Hell."

"My pleasure. Now sit and eat."

The hour was late and as she turned to go; she became somber. "Hal...?"

"Mr. Golan," He teased.

She laughed and wrinkled her nose at him. "Hal. Would you mind keeping my camcorder for me?"

"What...the fastest camcorder in the west? I already have your computer. Why do you want me to keep your camcorder too?"

"That's what you wanted me to tell you." She took a deep breath. "I'm not sure and perhaps I'm wrong...so please don't say anything...but I think Zack may be stealing from me."

"Come on back and sit down." He sat with her on the couch and took both her hands and looked directly into her eyes. "Tell me why you think so."

"I had a small TV...you know the kind you put on the kitchen counter? One day I came home and went to turn it on while I cooked...and it was gone. I asked Zack what happened to it and he said he accidentally knocked it over and it fell on the floor and broke...and he threw it in the trash. I figured...oh well...and didn't think anything more about it. Then my digital camera goes missing. He said I must have misplaced it...but that camera was expensive, and I am meticulous about putting it away...but it is not as though I couldn't have forgotten where I put it. Then one day I caught him going through my purse...and he said he thought he saw me put his lighter in there. I don't smoke...and I don't do hoot. Why would I want a lighter?" Her eyes started to tear up. "My camcorder and my computer are the most expensive things I own...and I just want to keep them safe until I can find a place and move out."

“Do you think that you are safe with this Zack fellow until you move? Are you sure he will just let you go peacefully?”

“I think so. He’s never been violent with me...or anything like that. You know he used to be the picture of respectability. He had a good job at a brokerage firm, nice car, good manners, his own place...and then everything went downhill for him. That’s why I let him move in with me...to help him get back on his feet. I don’t believe in leaving someone for a run of bad luck...but now I am thinking that it is more than just bad luck. I think he is on something or why else would he steal? If that’s the case...I don’t want to be anywhere around him. That’s something I can’t fix in him...and I am thinking at this point...why should I try?”

“Do you love him?”

“No...not now.” She shook her head. “I’m not sure if I ever did. I thought I did at one time...but it could be that I just liked him a lot. You know being lonely is a terrible thing and it sometimes makes you accept people into your life without giving it the critical consideration you should. He was sort of witty...he was smart enough...but now...we hardly talk.”

“Does he love you?”

She quickly shook her head, “No. I don’t think so. There may have been a time when he was infatuated with me...but I think that is a different thing from love. A friend once told me that he wanted me as a trophy on his arm. I didn’t believe her at the time...but now I do.” She lowered her head. “Now I feel like I am just one more girl...just another notch...” Her voice took on an edge and she didn’t finish the thought.

“I find it hard to imagine that he has you right there in the palm of his hand...and he doesn’t love you to pieces.” Hal sighed. “I can’t stop you from going back home...I would if I could because...” Hal felt desperate,

but he had no right to control her life. “Look Mari...you know you can stay here. I’ll sleep on the couch...I would never ever bother you. I have such a bad feeling about your going back.”

“Hal, I’ll be fine. I’m probably overreacting anyway. I just think it’s time to move on with my life...because I feel I’m going nowhere.” She slipped her hands from his and her face brightened. “I really had a wonderful time, Mr. Golan.”

“Hal.”

As she got up to leave, she handed him the camera bag and kissed him on the cheek. “Hal.”

THE TWO-BIT MAFIA

For several days Hal was at loose ends. At the office, Mari only passed him in the hallway with a tiny, furtive wave. The transition to being reassigned to Hal was a slow process, made more so by Dirk holding things up. With the project on hold, Mari had no reason to come to his house and he sorely missed her. He returned again and again to her pictures and, yes, he went “all wacky doodle.” Picking up his desk phone he started to call downstairs to her cubicle and then put the receiver down again. He wanted to ask her to dinner but had no excuse to do so. He picked up the phone again. “Hey kiddo...you want to go to lunch and chew the fat?”

“Yeah. Things are crazy here and I could use a break.”

“OK...meet me at Waldo’s”

“Where is Waldo’s”

“It’s at...”

“Silly...I know where it is. It was a joke.”

“OK...smarty. See you there at one.” He put down the phone and breathed a sigh of relief. *“Now that wasn’t so hard...”* He told himself.

Mari was already waiting at one of the outdoor tables when Hal arrived. “Hope I didn’t keep you waiting too long.”

“No.”

Her usual smile at seeing him was absent so he asked her, “Is something wrong?”

“No...just everything...”

He took both her hands, “OK, little one, tell me what’s wrong...”

“At work or at home...where shall I start?”

He wanted to find out about what concerned him most. “At home...”

She slowly shook her head back and forth. “Zack crashed my car...totaled it.”

“When?”

“Last night. I gave him the keys so he could go visit his...‘mother’...” She made air quotes. “He wasn’t hurt or anything...”

“How did it happen?”

“He said he hit a big rain puddle in the middle of the street, hydroplaned, went into a skid, and hit a tree.”

“Do you have insurance?”

“Not for the car. You know it was just an old beater...but it was paid for. I didn’t think it was worth the extra premiums...”

“Is there a police report?”

“It usually takes a few days before they are available...but there should be. He said the cops had the wreck towed. I’ll go get the report next week.”

“How did you get to work?”

“I did something nobody ever does. I...took...the...bus!” She looked heavenward. Bus transportation in Los Angeles is notoriously slow, even during rush hours, and the passengers were sometimes questionable.

“Oh...how horrifying for you.” Hal sympathized. “Perhaps there is something I can do to help. You’re dead meat in L.A. without wheels. I’ll see if I can arrange to get a company car for you. Meanwhile, I’ll give you a lift home after work.”

“You don’t have to do that.” She changed the subject. “Now let me tell you what is going on in research. Cora is purposely being a slow learner because she doesn’t want to work for Dirk...and he is throwing a monkey wrench into the whole transition process by insisting that we trade the projects we started, rather than carry them to our new assignment.”

“He’s not trying to get the Mitchem project...?”

“No...that is a lock for you...but with everything else he is insisting that we walk each other through it so that he

keeps the projects I started working on and you keep Cora's. It would be a lot faster if I just brought my work to you...instead of trying to bring Cora up to speed on what I'm doing...and vice-versa."

"How do you feel about chucking it all? Cora can work on what she has in the pipeline while she is figuring out what you were doing. Maybe Vee can kick some ass and speed things up."

"I don't know. There are a couple of juicy stories..." She squinted in thought. "...but Dirk doesn't know about them..." She smiled. "...I'll take them with me."

"What's for lunch? Hamburgers...chili dogs...burritos...?"

"I'll have a chili cheese dog...and a Coke."

They ate in silence, without etiquette, wolfing down their hotdogs and licking the dripping chili off their fingers. Mari paused, wiping her mouth with an overused napkin, "You know...I really miss you. You're so easy to be around and talk to...about anything."

Hal found it hard to swallow his food past the lump in his throat. After a pause he said, "I miss you too."

At the end of the day he looked for Mari to drive her home, but she had already left.

A woman boarded the bus late at night. There were only three passengers on board. She limped and her face had been battered. "I can't pay." She whispered with an unspoken plea in her voice.

The driver's jaw tightened as he looked away. "How far you goin'?" He spoke softly.

"I want to go to Silverlake."

He reached over and took a transfer, punched it, and handed it to her. "You gonna need this. Now, you sit right there where I can look out for you."

"Thank you."

When the door buzzer sounded, Hal was waiting for the start of the “Tonight Show.” He was going to watch the monologue and then go to bed. He looked at his clock. It was almost half-past eleven. *That can only be Deuce. His wife probably locked him out...again.*

As he approached the door, he heard a soft mewling interspersed with sobs. “Hal...Hal...”

“Mari?” He yanked the door open to find Mari bracing herself against the door jam. Her head was down and her hair covered her face. The sleeve on her blouse was torn and she was holding her right foot slightly off the ground. “MY GOD WHAT HAPPENED!?!” He went to her and she slumped in on his chest. He lifted her up and her hair fell back revealing her face. He heard himself cry out between his teeth as his heart exploded. Carrying her inside, he gently laid her on the couch. “Did he do this to you?” Tears were now openly running down his face.

Every bit of her physical resources had been used up trying to get to Hal. Now that she was there, she was exhausted and on the verge of passing out. “The pink slip was gone. I looked for the pink slip and it was gone. He sold...my car. I told him I knew what he had done, and I was going to call the police. He...he...pinned me down and I couldn’t move...and he kept hitting me.” She broke down sobbing. “He threw me out of my house with nothing...no money...no place to go. I didn’t know what to do. I thought if only I could get to you...you would know what to do.” She started to cry again.

He moved onto the couch with her, lifting her onto his lap he held her to his chest and rocked her back and forth. “You did the right thing. I’ll look after you. You’re safe here. Shhh...don’t cry...I’m here.”

After a while she fell asleep with only spasms of sobs between breaths. He carried her to his bedroom and tucked her into his bed. He looked at what Zack had done

to her beautiful face and for the first time in his life, he wanted to kill.

Hal called Deuce in the middle of the night. When he arrived, Hal checked on Mari to see that she was soundly sleeping and then signaled to Deuce to follow him outside. They went into the garage where they could talk in private. "I want to kill that motherfucker...I want to tear his cock out by the roots and make him suck it! I'm going to stomp that piece of pig shit into a grease stain...I want to shoot him full of holes...I need a gun...I really need a gun!" Hal paced up and down in the garage while his friend interspersed his pronouncements with, "Naw, man...no you don't...that's not the way...you ain't supposed to touch pork...I ain't getting' you no gun...forget that."

Deuce could see that Hal was not going to calm down, but he tried to talk sense to him. "Look...by everything you say...she ain't even your woman...!"

"She came to me, Deuce...she came to me! Are you going to help me or not?"

"Of course I'm going to help you. I've been sitting here for half the night watching you walk in circles talking like a crazy man. All I'm saying is we can't go throwing our weight around like some two-bit mafia. We have to work out what we're going to do...make a plan and stick to it. Now, she has to get her stuff out of her apartment...right?"

"I haven't discussed any of this with her...but yeah...she's moving in here." Hal pointed to the ground to indicate that he had made up his mind that's how it's going to be. "If she wants to leave later...that's up to her. But until then...I'm looking after her."

Deuce raised his eyebrows and stared at him. "OK. What you said. Now, when we go to get her things, you can take care of some business there...and tune him

up...but you ain't goin' to kill nobody. Are we straight on that?"

"Yeah."

"Promise?"

"Yeah...yeah...I promise..."

"Good! Now, here's how we're going to go about it."

A week later the Two-Bit Mafia got rolling in Deuce's van. Deuce and Hal sat in the two front seats and were dressed in coveralls to appear like hired movers. Mari sat on the bench seat behind them. At the hospital it was discovered that she had a lateral malleolus fracture and wore a walking cast on her right leg. Dressed in cut-offs, a sweater, and one sandal she was only there to identify her property. Since she had rented a reasonably priced, furnished apartment in Hollywood, with no furniture to move, all they had to do was to collect her clothing and other belongings. Around ten in the morning they pulled up to the Rosewood, a California modern apartment building, with a pool as its central feature. It was painted a light gray with Sago palms decorating the front. "Is there an alley to the back of the building?" Deuce turned to Mari.

"No...there is only the one driveway."

"Well, that's it...we're parking out front. Let's go."

Armed with tape guns, flattened cardboard boxes, and a dolly, they proceeded up the stairs. Hal assisted Mari as she gripped the wrought iron railing while slowly making her way along the second story walkway that overlooked the pool. Approximately halfway down the passageway, she approached a door and knocked. "Zack...it's me. Please let me in."

They heard movement inside the apartment, and they helped Mari to move to one side of the door. When the door opened, Hal and Deuce rushed Zack, bowling him over. "This is your surprise party...motherfucker." Hal

had his fists up and danced like a boxer while waiting for Zack to get up. “You like beating up on women...huh? Come on...come on you pussy!” Zack scrambled to his feet, swung and missed. Hal’s fists were a blur as he put him down again. That wasn’t enough for Hal. He half lifted him by his shirt and whaled on him some more.

“Whoa...whoa...come on man...you promised...” Deuce intervened.

Hal backed off. “Ok...bring Mari in and let’s get this show on the road.”

As Mari walked into the room, Zack moaned, turned over, and cleared his head enough to glare up at her. Now that the tables were turned, he could not intimidate her. “How does it feel, Zack?”

“You bitch.” Zack spat out the invective, along with a tooth, as blood streamed from his mouth and nose.

“What did you expect...for me to be a good sport about your stealing my stuff and beating the shit out of me?”

Zack made a move toward her and Hal had him down in an instant with a knee on his chest. The man couldn’t move or breathe. “Calm down, cowboy, or I’ll put your lights out for good.” He lifted Zack by the hair, like a rag doll, and threw him in a chair. “You stay right there and don’t make a move until we’re gone.”

The first thing Mari did was to look for her purse. Just as she thought, her credit card and cash were missing from her wallet. *Thank God Hal had me cancel my card.* She was also glad that he had her give notice that she had moved. Hal cautioned her that Zack was probably into drugs and she should take her name off the apartment immediately. She decided not to mention the missing money with Hal on the rampage. *If I can get out of here with my things...I’m good.*

From the bedroom the sound of Mari taping boxes, and of Deuce dumping the contents of drawers into them, could be heard. Next came the rattle of

kitchenware. Before long Deuce had the dolly loaded with several boxes and made the first of several trips downstairs. Then came her clothes, unboxed and still on hangers. When all was packed in the van, Deuce came up and said, "That's all of it...we're ready to go."

"Take Mari down and get her in the van. I'll wait here and give you ten minutes, and then I'll be right down."

Hal checked the clock. It was almost time to leave, and then looked back at Zack. He saw a tight little smile cross his face. It annoyed him that this little shit had the nerve to be arrogant about his situation. As Hal went outside the door he turned. "Look you fucking prick...if you ever come near Mari again...I will kill you. That's a promise."

"You think she's worth all this? I'll have you know that for the last month that little whore has been fucking her boss...and she will play around on you too."

"She's been fucking her boss, huh? I'll bet you'd like to have a piece of him."

"Yeah...and I'll kick his ass into next week!"

Hal laughed and gave him a broad grin. "Yeah...well come on..." Hal motioned for him to come over. "...the man she's been fucking is me!"

A look of uncontrolled rage crossed Zack's face. "YOU!" He jumped up and charged full speed at Hal to tackle him. As he came flying through the door, at the last split second, Hal sidestepped him. Zack went sailing, headlong, over the railing, landing splat on the poolside cement below.

Hal's eyes went wide with shock. He quickly looked around and then it took him two seconds to realize he needed to get out of there fast. *Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit! Don't run...don't run. Try to look normal.* He walked briskly to the van and once inside he started yelling at Deuce. "GET US OUT OF HERE NOW!! GO...GO...GO!"

Deuce started the engine and stepped on the gas. "What's going on? Are you nuts?"

“Not too fast...not too fast...don’t draw attention.” Hal tried not to look back.

“What do you mean?” Deuce’s eyes darted back and forth at Hal.

“Something happened back there. Something so wild and crazy I can’t believe it. I was getting ready to leave...and I said a few things...you know like leave Mari alone...and he came at me. You know...hard charging...and when I realized what was happening...in the very last moment I stepped to one side...and he went flying over the railing!”

“You...you...you...threw that man over the railing?” Deuce screwed up his face.

“I DIDN’T THROW HIM...HE JUST WHIPPED PAST ME AND OVER THE SIDE HE WENT!!”

Mari looked back in the direction of the apartment. “Zack fell over the railing?! Maybe we should go back!”

“NO! We’re NOT going back! We don’t want to have to answer any questions!”

Deuce shot Hal a look. “WE?! What do you mean WE! I ain’t answering no questions...I WASN’T THERE!! I KNEW YOU WERE GOING TO KILL THAT MAN...I JUST KNEW IT!”

“I DIDN’T KILL HIM!”

“Deuce...if Hal said he didn’t kill him...I think we should believe him. Besides...we don’t know he’s dead.”

“That’s right...that’s right. Very good point, Mari.”

“Hal you said you were going to kill him...and now look what you did. I didn’t sign up for this...” Deuce squinted at Hal.

“It was just a figure of speech! I didn’t mean *kill*...kill!”

“Did anybody see you?” Mari whimpered.

“I looked around and I didn’t see anyone. You know I think Zack was just as shocked as I was when he went over that railing...because all the way down he didn’t

make a sound!” Hal made a downward motion with his hand.

“I think we should all calm down right now and just go home.” Mari nervously nodded her head up and down. “Yes...that’s it. We...we will just all go home like this never happened.”

The Two-Bit Mafia made their escape.

JUST THE FACTS MA'AM

Two men in suits stepped off the elevator on Angel City's seventh floor and went directly to reception. What differentiated them from the rest of the suits in the office was the holster bulge in their jackets, their coiled-spring demeanor, and the unmistakable L.A.P.D. swagger.

Hal started down the hallway and immediately spotted them and knew in an instant exactly why they were there. He turned, went back to his office, and picked up the phone. "Mari, you know what we talked about? They're here. I'll be right down to wait for them to buzz you." He grabbed some papers to look as though he was taking them to Mari.

She was surprisingly calm and in control when he got there. She spoke sotto voce. "Hal, let me handle this. I know exactly what to say. You're just with me to help me walk...and you know nothing, and you say nothing. Agreed?" She was adamant. "Besides, it was my name on the rental agreement...they will only want to talk to me. No matter what happens...don't say anything." Her phone rang. It was Vee. "I'll be right up."

The two detectives were standing next to Vee's desk, when Hal assisted Mari into the office. Vee rushed to her other side to help steady her. As he did, he explained why he sent for her. "Mari...these gentlemen are from the police department and they would like a little of your time to answer some questions."

Mari looked bewildered. "Ask me questions?" She gazed in the officers' direction and then fidgeted against the attempts to seat her in a chair. "It's easier for me to sort of lean against the desk." Vee and Hal accommodated her, and she half sat on the desk, leaning back on both arms. To be as inconspicuous as possible, Hal retreated to the chair at the far end of the office. Her

eyes fixed on the officers once more. "In what way may I help you?"

The older one asked the questions, while the younger one regarded Mari as a hungry man regarded a pork chop. "We found your name on the rental agreement of apartment fifteen of the Rosewood Apartments."

"Yes?"

"How long did you live there?"

Mari looked as though she was searching her memory, "For about ten months or so."

"Do you know a man by the name of Zachary Allen?"

"Mari's face turned dark in a perfect combination of angst, anger, and embarrassment. "I am ashamed to say that I do. He was my boyfriend." She looked at Vee. "I know I said that I fell...because I was too ashamed to say what happened..." She turned back to the officers, "...because Zack did this to me..." She made a sweeping gesture with her hand to indicate the vestiges of injuries to her face and the cast on her leg. Although her face was still marked by some bruising and a cut, it was on the mend and she had the look of a battered angel. It tugged at the heartstrings. "...needless to say, I left him. Is he in some kind of trouble?"

"When did you leave him, ma'am?"

"About three weeks ago." She lied, but they were satisfied with her answer because it confirmed the date that the apartment manager had given them.

"Was he living at your apartment?"

She bowed her head. "I am mortified that I was ever mixed up with the man Zack is now...but he wasn't always that way. He used to be what mothers refer to as marriage material. I don't know what changed in him." She looked up at the younger officer. "Yes. We were living together...but I caught him stealing from me and we had an argument about it...and he..." She put her hand over her mouth and her eyes became moist; she looked

away. Gathering her composure, she looked back at the officers. "What has he done now?"

The young officer visibly swallowed and looked down at his feet. The older one quietly said. "We are investigating his death..."

Mari's face crumbled, she slightly bent over, and her hand went to her stomach. Hot tears sprung into her eyes. This time, as the demise of Zack was confirmed, she was not acting. She truly felt sorrow for someone she once cared for. "H-h-his death?" She stammered "How?"

"We're not sure...but the door to the apartment was open...and his...he was found by the pool. We believe it was probably the result of an accident...that he fell over the railing. But we have to investigate these things."

"God...his poor mother. When did it happen?"

"A couple of weeks ago."

"Mari's eyes opened wide as though a thought occurred to her. "You don't think he committed..." Her mouth flew open and she started sobbing. "Oh my God...it can't be my fault...could it?"

"No...no...it wasn't a suicide..." The younger officer went to her and put an arm around her shoulders to comfort her. "...they found cocaine in his system. He probably went outside and just fell." After seeing Mari, and now knowing that the DB had recently lost her, the officer did think that suicide was a distinct possibility, but he did not want to burden her with that thought.

Vee offered Mari a Kleenex. She gratefully took it. "This is very difficult for her. Are you almost finished?"

The officer stepped back. "Just one last thing...can you give us the name and address of his mother and tell us the names of any of his friends.

"Yes. I'll write it down for you." She held out her hand for the officer's pen and notepad and wrote out Zack's mother's information. "He did have some friends where

he used to work. But after he was let go...they all disappeared. I really don't know his recent friends...or if he had any for that matter. For a long time now...Zack would come and go as he pleased. We weren't that close anymore, and I focused on my job." Mari sighed. "He was on cocaine..." she whispered. "It was all so hopeless then...." She trailed off.

"If you will...write down the name of the company where he worked, as well, and we will be on our way."

When they left, the older one said, "I think it was an accident. He was higher than hell and just stumbled over the side."

"That's what I thought until I got a look at his girlfriend. Now, suicide is a front-runner in my mind. Can you imagine what he felt like knowing that he fucked up with a dame like that? I would croak myself too!"

"Like you don't have enough women problems as it is...."

"My God, Mari...you were Meryl Streep in there! Real tears and all! You had those officers eating right out of your hand!" Hal finally had Mari in the privacy of his car, where he could praise her performance, as he drove them home. "Pass the envelope please...and the best actress award goes to...Mari Carlson!"

"Most of it was an act...there are times when life forces you to do what you have to do...but the tears were real." She shook her head. "Looking back, I could probably tell exactly when he started using cocaine. You know...right up until the officer said he had died...I hoped he was alive. There again...he would have been severely messed up." She looked out the window. "Zack asked for everything that happened to him...but it is still tragic..."

"After what he did to you...you can still feel sorry for him?"

“Hal...he was a lost human being. I know he was the architect of his own fate. But that does not make it any the less sad. Besides, I didn’t want the officers to think you did it and the thought of that scared me more than anything.”

“Mari...I didn’t do it...”

“I know...I already said I believe you...”

In a way, Hal was miffed that she thought he didn’t have the chutzpah to kill. “What? You believe that I couldn’t have killed him for what he did to you?”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!”
