

Rhonda's Revenge

by AJ

This story was written for the Black and Buckskin group, for June's Birthday Babies.
It was also a great opportunity for revenge against a piece of 'Yoga Fluff'.

Feedback? I live for it! :-)
<email me by clicking here>
Cheers!

Thursday, 2pm

It was a quiet afternoon for The Ice-cream Lady. She didn't need to look at the bleak, miserable sky overhead to know why her customers were not interested in her wares; she could feel the early chill on her skin through the dampness of the air. Yet still she sat in her little pink and white truck and waited.

She had inherited the truck from her father back home in England, who had in turn taken the wheel of the vintage cream dispenser when it was left to him by his father, who's father had driven a horse and cart delivering confectionary around the streets of London. Indeed, she was a fourth generation ice-cream seller, which some might find fascinating in its own telling, but that is a tale best imparted at another time...

For now, it is enough to know that there was evil lurking in the streets of Denver - an evil that had cultivated in London, passed unwittingly down through a family who's only interest was selling ice-cream... and it had crossed turbulent oceans to the far side of the globe.

To glance inside the wide service window of the pink truck today, the unassuming observer might smile at the sight of the lady in the pink cap, sitting daydreaming within the safety of her home away from home. If only they knew the thoughts that ran within that rampant mind, they might not be so ready to send their children along to see her.

On that particular afternoon, The Ice-cream Lady was staring up at the inside of the soft pink, padded roof above her, awash with bittersweet memory and smiling wistfully. There was a lot of history in that truck, a lot of history...

The truck had been christened the name `Rinaldo', more through her great-grandfather's love of names starting with R, than by any other reasoning. The tradition had been passed down so that she herself had been named Rhonda.

Rhonda could never leave Rinaldo now, for fear of losing the cherished hold she had on her sacred memories... In fact, her pink icebox on wheels had become her companion over the years. She was too far gone now to realise that it was in fact a lifeline; a threadbare link to sanity that had strengthened in need over time until she was now dependant on its very existence to maintain any semblance of normalcy in her day to day life.

Glancing down at the book she held in her hands, she realised she had not taken in the last page she had read. She had been making notes in the white space of the pages for the last hour, but now realised she had lost her connection to its enlightening words some time ago.

She'd had to order the book through an internet café, but it had been well worth it so far. Entitled `Cat Cuisine of Korea', it had clarified many myths and theories that she had heard during her long years of research into the feline species.

Looking down to review her handwriting, she realised with little surprise that she had drawn a picture of a huge tomcat and through it, she had drawn a spear, with blood dripping down

from its dead hide... Not something she had drawn before, but certainly as violent as her other unconscious creations, of which there were many.

Once, back in school, she remembered her teacher snatching up a test paper off her desk, his face shocked and angry that she had not filled in a single line of her answers in over an hour. Instead, her hand had taken a different path, resulting in an incredibly life-like portrait of the teacher himself, with a pickaxe through his chest and a gaping hole in the side of his head from where a cat had clawed its way into his skull. Around his feet she had drawn tiny dots representing the sprinkles that she loved to put on her ice-cream, scattered amongst his dripping blood. One could only assume the two tiny balls linked by a small wishbone that sat upon his head were cherries...

...Yes, little Rhonda had long been disturbed, little to the knowledge of the unassuming public that came now to savour her produce.

After some time she got up, unable as always to stand in the cramped space, and moved around to take the driver's seat. There was no point sitting there all afternoon, she could be at home on her couch, dreaming of small people with curly hair and wide blue eyes, as she so often did. Hobbits, oh... be still her heart... but then, she still had time to take another last turn around the park.

She drove through the narrow street with a self-satisfied smile on her face, content to let the ancient gearbox choose its own pace through the traffic. With a contented sigh she flipped the switch for the speakers on the roof and her eyes misted as she heard the soothing sounds of Greensleeves as it blared out from above. It was like a balm of cosy memories, swaddling her in a warm glow of satisfaction.

Rhonda knew that she would not swap her life selling ice-cream for anything - truth be told she couldn't. She was her own boss - and what could be better than that? So what if Denver had turned out so far to be as ridiculously cold as London... So there weren't many people that felt like chilling their insides to equal the temperature outside by eating frozen cream... she loved it anyway. Besides, she hadn't hit summer yet, she was sure things would pick up then.

But deep down she knew they wouldn't - at least one part of her mind did. For the dark cloud that marred Rhonda's Wonka-like blissful existence was about to unleash its terrible fury on the city. There was only one other in the country that knew of the terrible accident that had befallen her family when she was only five years old, and even he did not know the true depths of her suffering.

Once upon a time, she had had a twin brother - Ralph. They had been born only minutes apart and were as close as any twin children could be. Then there was her older brother, Richard. He had been several years older than the twins, but they had all been close. And then there was Ruffles, their cat...

Life had been blissful for the twins in their first years. They were their father, Raymond's,

joy and their mother Rachel's soul reason for living. Days were filled with laughter and nights were spent watching television and eating ice-cream, which was always in abundance in their household. Sometimes, their father would take them on his lap and tell them stories and adventures he had had with his beloved Rinaldo, all the while calling to Rachel for more peanuts to sprinkle on his chocolate sundae and if he was really in the mood, a chocolate Flake to stick in the top. That was when they knew they were in for a real treat, for no one could weave a tale of magic like their father could.

Together, on that red valour couch, they'd sailed across mountains of icecream-capped delight and cut through raging seas of blueberry peaks on board Rinaldo's faithful hull - oh, to be five again!

And then, one fateful day - the light had been snuffed from her father's eyes, just like that, and Rhonda's mother had turned from her daughter in her grief, unable to look at her, without being reminded of her second child, now a twisted wreck of his former self.

It had been an unusually bright September day and Rhonda had been playing with Ralph in their front yard. Ripples, the cat, had climbed up a tree and they were trying to call her down. Finally, after hours of begging the cat to see reason, the four-legged ball of hairy mischief had decided to leap to the ground, where she'd then begun to preen, oblivious to the fuss she had caused.

The children had danced in relief but then, suddenly, there had come the loud sound of Greensleeves blaring through the air and before their eyes, they watched as Rinaldo turned and chugged up the brick drive. Their father was home, a sight which usually had the children squealing with delight but that particular day, as Ripples sat preening herself in the sun, the truck had become a menacing spectre, bearing down on them with a terrible menace.

Ralph and Rhonda had stood horrified and stared at the truck, transfixed and unable to move as time slowed down. It's menacing, churning legs of black rubber inched closer, closer to their beloved Ripples with every long second that ticked by. All the while, the sound of Greensleeves blared through the still air, screaming at them in shrill warning.

The grill of the truck looked like snarling teeth, the lights like eyes of evil fire, as long second's ticked past. A drawn out, anguished shout of "Nooo!" could be heard and Rhonda turned in her daze to see her mother on the front step, pointing as if in slow motion to the cat, as Rinaldo loomed still closer and closer, until it was only inches away from Rurple's fur.

And then Ralph had made his move. His tiny legs began to gravitate towards the feline prey and before they could stop him, he put himself in the path of Rinaldo - once his friend, now his cat's executioner.

More than just Ripples had died that day. That day, the spirit of Rinaldo was forever

tarnished and life would never again be the same in Rhonda's household.

Ralph never did fully recover from the terrible tragedy. His neck had remained twisted and slowly, over time, his heart followed suit until he was but a shadow of his former, happy self. He had died several years later of complications resulting from his injuries and a large piece of his twin sister had died with him.

Richard had moved away after his little brother's death. He had always wanted to become a cook and over many years of study and training, he finally became a respected head chef in a prestigious restaurant, but he was never truly happy.

As for Rinaldo, he was put in storage, her father unable to look at the pink coat of paint and shiny chrome fittings without feeling anger swell in his heartbroken chest.

And never again was ice-cream to be found in their house.

It was not until he lay dying only twenty short years later, that her father had had a final vision. In a dream, the ancestors of his bloodline had spoken to him and told him that Rinaldo must ride again. And so it was that the broken man had called Rhonda to his deathbed and extracted a sworn promise from her; that she would restore Rinaldo to his former glory and once again bring frozen cream to the children of the city.

After a soul-searching journey to the waterfalls of South Africa's mountains, Rhonda had taken up the gauntlet with pride. Deep down, she had never really blamed Rinaldo, for such tragedies in life could often not be laid at the feet of one party alone. There were many contributing factors. But most of all, she blamed Rupples. She harboured such dark, untapped thoughts towards the memory of her once-cherished pet that she herself was not aware of the eventual splitting of her own mind.

Her developed hatred of cats finally manifested into violence in her final year of high school when she ran one down in her mother's car. It may have seemed like an accident except for Rhonda's shifting of the car into reverse and speeding back over the ruined animal.

Now, it seemed, her cruelty to the feline species knew no bounds. Her obsession with them had driven her to terrible acts of darkness that one side of her personality had no recollection of. But that day had marked the beginning of a path of evil for Rhonda, one which seemed to have no light that she could grab on to during her terrible slide to insanity.

The ways she had found to kill and dispose of a cat could not be documented in a single day and the ingredients that she had discovered to add `spice' to her ice-cream would chill the heart of the most hardened person.

To compound the already twisted trail of her tender years her own mother, in despair for what she knew had become of her daughter, took her life on an ordinary autumn's day, leaving Rhonda alone in a world gone forever cold. Only Richard existed now for her to call kin, but he carried out his days working long hours and hiding away in his house three hours

south of the city.

But then, mere months after burying her mother, Rhonda had had an epiphany. She needed a new start, a new life - a chance to show an untainted view of Rinaldo to the world. It was when Richard called to tell her that he had decided to accept a job in America that she had decided to use the money from the sale of her parent's house and pay for Rinaldo to accompany her on a new beginning - to Denver, Colorado.

It didn't take long to start her new life and find a route that wound itself around the city's suburbs, passing by popular parks on a long track that led back to the house she now rented with her brother. Sometimes she would turn her face to the chill wind that ran down from the snow-capped mountains, a distant look on her face and during such moments she would wonder what path she would have chosen if that fateful day, so long ago now, had never happened... but then her grief would resurface and she would scowl and turn her head away from the fresh breeze.

And so it was that Rhonda, carrier of the iced cream legacy of her ancestors, fully grown in body but impaired in mind, came to circle a shiny, rumbling Rinaldo slowly around the park, coming to a stop by a handful of people, each toting small children, that were playing on the green lawns of the park. The sound of Greensleeves, like a pipe calling one and all, reverberated around the field as she cut power to the speaker and let her ghosts dwindle amongst the noise of the generator, bringing cold to her precious cargo.

Thursday, 2.15pm

"There's that ice-cream truck again," JD said, stopping to pick up his water bottle and taking a healthy swig. He'd seen it drive by earlier but had been a long way from finishing the run they had been set.

"Hey that's the same truck that used to drive around my neighbourhood when I was a kid," Buck told him.

"You lived on the other side of the country Buck, it's not the same one. There's like a million ice-cream trucks that go around... and that one's totally different."

"No there's not. There's just one, with the same guy in it."

JD stared at the taller Agent, not sure if he was serious. "That's ridiculous. Every truck looks the same. We had an old man used to drive around our neighbourhood when I was a kid, they all looked the same."

"It probably *was* the same guy - he just had a really long route."

JD saw the word `Rinaldo' painted on the side of the truck and pointed. "Can't be too many trucks out there with a name like that painted on them."

Buck squinted at the writing, but didn't back down.

JD gave up, and then had an idea. "Well, I'm gonna get an ice-cream."

Buck shook his head. "It's too cold for ice-cream." Then he spotted the woman peering from inside the vehicle and did an about face. "All right, lemme give you a hand."

JD frowned. "I thought you said it was too cold."

The older agent just grinned. "It just got a lot hotter."

JD looked back at the truck and could see a woman's rear end bending towards the serving window as she bent to fill a cone for a little kid, suddenly understanding where Buck's need for ice-cream had spurned from.

A dark moustache tweaked in appreciation as Buck leant back to take in the full view with exaggerated show. "And that definitely ain't no old man..."

"Finished for the day, boys?" Chris asked as he jogged to a stop beside them. When he'd noticed them heading toward the ice-cream truck he'd known they'd decided to call their training short.

Buck grinned. "JD was just offering to shout ice-creams."

Before JD could protest, the rest of the team, bar Ezra, joined them. The southerner was still on the other side of the park.

"Haven't had one in years. Vanilla cone, JD," Josiah said, turning away to find his water bottle as he panted. Chris's idea of a day out of the office left a lot to be desired.

At JD's miserable face, Vin took pity. "I'll help ya, kid."

Buck glanced at the Texan, quickly noting the profile of his sweat-soaked long hair and tight black tank top that exposed the lean muscles of his arms. The man was deceptively defined when he wasn't wearing that coat of his. Well, he could just stay the hell back; he'd spotted the woman first.

"That's ok, Vin. I got it," he said, slapping his teammate on his sweat-soaked back as he walked past.

Vin took a good look at the truck and immediately grinned.

"Good ol' Buck, always ready to lend a hand," Chris said with a smirk.

"Yep." Vin looked harder at the woman facing out at them from the back service window.

He owed Buck more than one payback. "Think I need a drink..."

Chris's own grin widened as he watched Vin walk off, knowing it would piss Buck off to have Tanner moving in on his mark as he was.

From inside Rinaldo's hull, Rhonda readjusted her pink striped shirt and fluffed her hair quickly from her ponytail, stroking the shiny surface of the ice-cream dispenser lovingly, taking comfort in the familiar texture beneath her hand as she watched the men approaching. One hand went to the gold, shiny locket she kept on a chain around her neck, her thumb idly tracing a circle on the smooth metal.

"It's time to spread the word, Rinaldo," she whispered. "Let's give it to them."

Thursday, 5.45pm

Buck made his way from the bar and placed his precious cargo of beer on the table, looking around at his team.

"That sure was a great idea Chris, takin' us out for some sunshine an' exercise like that..."

Chris took a drink before giving Buck a shake of his head. He knew exactly what he'd enjoyed about the park, and it hadn't been the exercise.

"It wouldn't be such a bad idea to make it a regular thing... In fact, I say we go again tomorrow," he patted his stomach, "work off some of this beer..."

JD chuckled as he sipped his own beer. "You mean work on that ice-cream woman some more. She didn't even look at you Buck."

Buck looked shocked. "JD, when you gonna learn, a woman like that likes to play coy, she'd never out and out show her desire for me in front of everyone. Women are subtle creatures when they want to be, but even the tightest bud will open eventually with the right amount of coaxing."

"And fertiliser," Josiah deadpanned.

"Are you listening to yourself?" JD shook his head as he looked at the rest of the team. "Are you listening to this?" He turned back to Buck. "Playing coy? *Subtle creature*? Buck, she was an ice cream lady, not the *first* lady! Admit it, you're magnetism's dried up."

"Hey now, it don't matter what a woman does for a living, they're all the same at heart and they all wanna be treated good... and that one there's no different, she's just gonna take a little time is all."

Ezra raised a casual brow. "Really... And how long, prey tell, do you believe a man of your notable experience would require in order to extract a phone number from such a... *lady*..."

Buck smiled. "If you're lookin' for a bet, Ezra, count me in. I'll have her number by the end of the week."

Nathan was smiling too. "I have to admit I'm with JD here, Buck. Ain't you concerned you didn't get her number already?"

A slight frown came to Buck's face as he looked at Nathan. "Now Nathan, like I said to JD, sometimes these things take a little finesse. Even a man of my extraordinary talents can't always just jump in and expect a good result every time. That there is a woman of specific tastes." His face grew wistful. "Think of her like the ice-cream she sells - you gotta apply just the right amount of heat, then that sweet, frosty vanilla cone'll just melt real slow down your fingers... You move too soon and you're the one likely to get burned."

They thought he was finished, but he started up again before his own voice had died away.

"It's like a fragile fire you gotta tend to with just the right amount of kindlin' or else -"

"Well then," Ezra said, cutting Buck's next long-winded analogy off and nodding across the room toward Vin who was returning from making a phone call in the quiet outside the bar. "I can only deduce that our Mr Tanner has a talent for rapid acclimatisation, or else his retardancy to fire is somewhat advanced."

Buck's frown deepened as he continued to stand and looked from Ezra up to Vin. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

JD laughed now. "It means you're the one that got burned Buck, she slipped her number to Vin as soon as he reached for his drink."

Vin sat down and stretched his legs out across Buck's empty seat, putting his attention to his beer with a subtly amused expression on his face. He looked up at Buck's open-mouthed, shocked face.

"Catchin' flies, Bucklin?"

Buck shook his head, not finding words and Vin gave a slight shrug of indifference just as his cell phone rang. Looking down at the display he grinned up at Buck as he again stood. "Be right back, boys. Gotta fire ta tend."

Buck's eyes followed the back of Vin's coat amidst the laughter around the table. Vin had heard him even from accross the room.

"No way..." he said softly, but knew it was true as he sat down with a thud into his wooden chair. He looked disillusioned. "No way..." he said again to himself.

"Don't worry about it brother, she's just a woman with specific tastes," Josiah told him, chuckling.

The conversation moved on until Vin returned a short while later and finished his beer in one gulp, wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve as he stood to leave. "See ya'll tomorrow boys."

Buck stood with him. "Where you goin'?"

But Vin just grinned, putting a hand on Chris's shoulder as he moved past his chair. "Oh no where in particular..." He timed his words as he moved away from them, making sure Buck could still hear him. "Jist gonna get me some sweet vanilla cone..."

"Don't forget it's a school night," Chris called to his back, chuckling at Buck's face, full of confusion as if there was something seriously out of whack with the world and he couldn't get a grip on it as his friends laughed around him. "And don't forget that meeting in the morning!" He called as an afterthought, to which Vin held a hand up in acknowledgement without turning around as he left. "That goes for all of you," he warned his team.

Friday, 9am

Chris poked his head out of his office door to look at the empty desks of the absent members of his team. Nathan had come in, but there was no sign yet of Buck, JD, Vin, Josiah or Ezra. If it wasn't for the fact they had a meeting with the DEA in twenty minutes, he would have given them longer to report in before checking up on them. He considered for a moment that they were doing it on purpose, knowing how he'd warned them not to be late today.

"Any of them call in?" he asked.

Nathan shook his head and Chris went to Buck's desk, reaching for his phone just as Ezra walked in and noticed he was one of the first to arrive. It just hadn't happened before.

"Well well, however can I associate with a team who displays such a pitiable regard for punctuality..."

"You heard from any of them?" Chris asked him.

Heading to his desk Ezra looked from Chris to Nathan. Now that he thought about it, it was odd that four of them hadn't come in on the same morning...

"No. Is somethin' wrong?"

"We've got that meeting in twenty minutes and we haven't heard from any of them."

Ezra frowned. "Who are you callin'?" he asked Chris.

"Buck. Vin didn't pick up."

"I've tried Josiah for the last ten minutes," Nathan informed him.

Ezra picked up his phone. "I'll try Mr Tanner again."

After a long minute Chris hung up and redialled and this time there was an answer after another long wait.

"Hello?"

"Buck?"

"Chris," was the one word affirmation and greeting.

Chris frowned at the sound of Buck's voice. "Yeah. You ok?"

There was a pause before Buck answered. "Yeah... just not feelin' the best. I woulda called but I just woke up."

Chris shook his head. "What about JD?"

"JD?" There was a pause as if Buck was looking around the room to spot JD. "He told me last night he was borrowing Vin's bike today, thought he'd go in early... he's not there? What time is it anyway?"

Chris looked at Nathan. Buck sounded disoriented, but that could be because he just woke up. "After nine and no, JD's not here either."

"Nine! Shit..."

"Buck, go and check on JD."

Nathan's phone rang as Chris waited for Buck to return.

"Hello?"

"Nathan... it's Josiah."

"Josiah," he said for the benefit of Chris and Ezra. "I've been trying to call you. Where are you? Are you all right?"

"I'm alright now, but I was pretty sick last night. I must have been in the shower when you called. Slept late... I'm on my way now."

"You sure you're ok? Buck, JD and Vin aren't in either."

"Yeah I'm alright. They call in?"

"Only heard from Buck so far, Chris's talking to him now, but I don't think he's feelin' too good either."

"You think we're all sick?"

"Don't know yet, but it's starting to look that way."

"Alright, I'll be in soon."

"OK. I'll let Chris know."

Chris looked at Nathan, the phone still to his ear as he waited for Buck to return. "He's sick too?"

Nathan hung up. "Yeah, but he says he's ok now. How's Buck?"

"He doesn't sound too good, he's seeing if JD's still there." He looked at Ezra. "Anything?"

Ezra shook his head as he redialled Vin's phone. "Nothing."

Buck came back on the phone. "He's in bed, Chris. Look's pretty sick."

Chris was relieved that Buck sounded more alert than he had a minute ago. "He awake?"

"Yeah, but he reckon's he's been up all night bein' sick. He was pretty quiet about it though, but I was pretty messed up myself... I don't think he slept much." Buck was quiet a moment. "Maybe it was that pizza we had last night..."

"Maybe, but I ate it too and I'm ok..."

"What about everyone else?"

"Just you, JD, Josiah and we haven't caught up with Vin yet."

"They sick too?"

"Looks that way. We've got that meeting with the DEA this morning."

"Shit! Well I'll be there soon."

"Don't worry about it Buck. We won't have time to go over it now anyway, I'll reschedule. Take JD and yourself in to see a doctor, find out what made you both sick."

"You sure? I'm feelin' alright now."

"Yeah, come in later if you're up to it, but I want to know what's wrong."

"All right then."

Chris hung up and looked at Ezra who shook his head. He headed for his office and called to cancel the meeting before grabbing his keys and heading back out.

"I'm heading over to Vin's. Call my phone if he check's in."

Nathan got up. "I think I should come with you, Chris. I don't know if it was something they all ate, but it's not like Vin to be late or not call."

Chris nodded, turning to Ezra. "Mind the fort."

Ezra gave a mock salute to Chris's back and watched them leave, a frown marring his face. Four of them sick in the one shot was strange indeed.

9.30am

Chris parked across the street from Vin's apartment building and Nathan followed him across to the parking area allocated to tenants. It wasn't much more than a dilapidated lean-to constructed from corrugated tin, but it kept Vin's bike dry enough. Right then though, the bike was nowhere to be seen.

"You think he went in to the office?" Nathan said, glancing at Chris's face.

Chris was looking thoughtfully around at the other vehicles, none of them looking to be made in the current decade, or two. "Or he hasn't been home."

They went inside and up the old, wooden stairs to Vin's floor, walking down the narrow, shabbily carpeted passageway and trying his door, only to find it locked.

"He's not there."

They turned to find a beautiful young woman of indeterminable race peering at them from her doorway across the hall.

"I'm sorry?" Chris said.

"Whatever you want with him, he's not there."

Chris pulled out his badge and flashed it to her. "I'm Captain Larabee," he nodded to Nathan, "And this is Agent Jackson. We're trying to find Vin. We have reason to believe he may be sick and are worried he might need help."

The woman looked concerned for a moment, but then shrugged. "I don't know where he is, only that he didn't come in last night and hasn't been in this morning."

Chris studied her eyes and knew she was telling them the truth before he watched her step back inside her apartment and close her door. He had seen the protectiveness in her posture and wondered then if Vin was on more than friendly terms with his neighbour. He turned and saw a knowing look on Nathan's face and knew he was thinking the same thing.

Pulling his own keys from his pocket he rifled through them until he found Vin's spare and put it in the lock, opening the door and walking in with Nathan a step behind him. Going straight to Vin's bedroom, he glanced through the lounge and kitchen as he walked, not seeing anything that indicated Vin had been there that morning.

The bed was unmade, but that didn't tell him anything, it was usually in that state. The shower hadn't been used that morning as it was completely dry, as was the towel he found hanging there.

Walking back out, his face showed his rising concern as Nathan spoke.

"Maybe you're right and he didn't come home. Maybe he stayed at that woman's place."

Chris gave his head a slight shake as he looked again around the room, as if asking it why it wasn't telling him what he wanted to know. Nathan could be right, he was pretty sure Vin wouldn't bring her back here. With a last glance towards the bedroom he decided they weren't going to get any answers standing there. "Let's head back to the office, see if we can get a location on that woman or her business." He pulled out his phone to get Ezra working on it.

9.45am

Vin wasn't sure where he was, but he was cold, damn cold and he was having trouble breathing. The realisation that he was in trouble came swiftly but it took a long while to get his eyes to open and when they finally did he realised that wherever he was it was too dark to see anything. His arms were numb and if his mind were moving faster he would have realised that they were tied in front of him, but pinned beneath his body where he lay, face down on a cold concrete floor.

10.00am

"Anything?"

Ezra looked up as Nathan and Chris entered. "Not as yet. I have a list of all registered mobile ice cream vendors operatin' in the city, but none are listed to a woman or have any females listed as drivers on the registration information."

"Call everyone on that list," Chris said, coming further into the room and noticing Josiah at his desk. "Josiah. How you feeling?" He thought he looked pale and tired.

"Nothing a good night's sleep won't fix... Nothing at Vin's place?"

"No, the only thing we can do is trace his movements from the last time we saw him. We need to find that woman." He turned to go to his office, hearing Ezra talking on the phone as his own phone rang in his pocket. The display told him it was Buck.

"Buck. You guys ok?"

"I'm not too bad, feelin' real tired now, but JD's gotten a little worse, he's having a little trouble breathing and he reckon's he ain't seein' right. The doc wants to admit him to the hospital and run a full set of tests on him. Hows Josiah?"

"He says he's fine, just tired. What about you? Aren't they testing you too?"

Buck chuckled. "When the doc told us what he was going to test, I decided JD'd be a better test case. Besides, the kid threw up without any help in there, so he'd already given one sample over."

Chris grimaced in sympathy. "I still want you to be checked out, Buck."

"Chris –"

"I want proof that whatever made you sick is related." He didn't give him a chance to argue. "So call me as soon as you hear anything. I still haven't heard from Vin, does JD know anything about where he went with that woman last night?"

That reminded Buck of what he'd had to tell Chris. "I checked my phone, Chris and Vin tried to call me last night at about ten. I didn't hear a thing and he didn't leave a message."

"His phone was going flat," JD said beside him, hearing the conversation. "I called him last night at about 9.30 to make sure it was ok I use his bike today after work. I was going to ride out and see Casey after work tonight."

Buck looked at JD. "You hear that, Chris?"

Chris had heard JD's tired voice come from near Buck. "Put him on, Buck."

JD took the phone from Buck. "Chris."

Chris heard the shortness of his breath. "Hey kid, how you feeling?"

"At least I got nothing left in me to throw up or... get rid of."

Chris winced in sympathy. "What did Vin say last night when you called him?"

He took a moment to answer, his dehydrated brain wasn't working as fast as it should. "He said there was no problem borrowing his bike. He was going to take my car home. You still haven't heard from him?"

"No, he's not answering his phone. He say where he was?"

JD thought back to the conversation that seemed like it had happened years ago after the long night that he'd been through. "I asked him if he'd taken her to a fancy restaurant and he told me they were just leaving Rinaldo's and were heading back to her house to get dessert. I heard her laugh in the background."

Chris shook his head. Vin was a pretty private man, it seemed strange somehow that he would be flirting with the woman with JD listening in.

"I thought it was weird," JD went on, "that he said Rinaldo's, because that ice-cream truck had the same name painted on the side of it."

Chris frowned. "He ever mention this place to you before?"

"Never. It's a new fancy restaurant Uptown. Casey's been bothering me to take her there for her birthday."

Chris ran a hand through his hair. Rinaldo's definitely didn't sound like Vin's sort of place. He doubted they had blood-rare t-bone on the menu. Then again, he'd known Vin to go out of his way to spoil a woman before.

"Where is this place exactly?"

"I haven't been past there but it's on 17th Street."

"He say anything else?"

JD was having a hard time concentrating but after a long few seconds he remembered something. "No, but he sounded real tired. When I asked him if he was all right he kinda paused and I think maybe he didn't want to say anything in front of her. And also his phone was going flat so he hung up pretty quick. I got sick pretty soon after that."

Chris's lips were in a tight line. Tanner never charged his bloody phone. "Alright JD. You take it easy there – and call me soon as your results come back."

Chris hung up and went back out to the main office. "JD says Vin took that woman to a restaurant Uptown, I'm going to check it out. He tried to call Buck's phone around ten last night but JD thinks his phone might have gone flat after he spoke with him at 9.30. Nathan, Josiah, you take over calling the registered trucks. Ezra, you're with me." He was tempted to put out an APB on Vin's bike, but knew if his best friend was just sleeping in late with a woman, he wasn't going to appreciate cops kicking down the door to surprise him.

Ezra was relieved to hand the task over and instantly handed the list of names to Josiah as he passed him. "I'm up to here," he indicated the fourth name down on the list of at least thirty names.

Josiah looked up, Ezra had made a total of three calls. "You trying to set a record there brother?"

Nathan cut in. "He uses so many words it takes him ten minutes a call."

Ezra nodded to them both as he left to follow Chris. "Always pays to be thorough, gentlemen."

The initial darkness Vin had found himself in did not abate with time. He was in a closed, cold, dark space and he still hadn't moved an inch. He knew he needed to check things out but he felt so tired that it was hard to get his mind to work. And he was shivering, badly.

He had to think, and yet his mind seemed to be in a slow, trudging gear... where the hell was he...? `OK... be systematic,' he told himself. `How did you get here? Where were you last...'

Dinner; He'd picked up Rhonda on his bike and they had gone to dinner at that fancy place she wanted to go to. He remembered getting the bill and feeling sick... but no, he'd been feeling sick before that... In fact, by the time his main course had come out he'd felt downright ill, but he'd hung in there, for Rhonda's sake.

Rhonda. There was something decidedly strange about that woman. When she'd smiled at him in the park and he'd opened his hand to see her phone number had been pressed into it along with the change from his drink he'd been flattered, if a little taken aback by her forwardness. She was definitely easy on the eye and as he'd watched her ignore Buck's attempts at flirtation, he'd thought she seemed like a down to earth woman he could get to like.

But when he'd picked her up, that was another matter entirely.

Although she lived in a decent enough neighbourhood the large metal gates that enclosed the house, painted an interesting shade of blue, ostracised it from the rest of the well-kept houses on the street. He'd had to work the latch to get through, only to find a barrier of hedges that were in dire need of trimming.

He'd found a path to the front door and had frowned curiously at the little mounds of dirt that dotted the raw soil on either side. There were chimes dangling from overgrown trees, catching the last remnants of the fading sunlight and tinkling softly in the breeze and there was something that looked like a dried-out fur hide tied to a low branch that he'd had to duck under. If he were to judge by the smell alone, he would say the thing was fairly fresh. He wasn't a man easily spooked, but the unusual setting definitely unnerved him.

If the front yard was not enough to make him question why he was there the large, gargoyle-like knocker on the front door gave him pause and he lifted the welded metal piece with a building feeling of disquiet. The ominous knock that echoed through the yard when he let go was enough to alert the neighbours that someone had arrived next door, if the noise of his bike arriving hadn't, and he found himself uncharacteristically shifting his weight between his feet.

'Fight or flight'. The term popped into his mind unbidden and he forced himself to wipe the scowl off his face as he waited, turning and looking more than once over his shoulder to the path behind him. He half expected the wind to suddenly pick up and start the chimes ringing louder as dark shadows swooped him... *Too many movies Tanner...* Perhaps she was just house sitting for someone...

A dog howling suddenly actually made him jump just as the door opened, but he released his tension in a relieved exhale when he saw her, his fears temporarily tempered. She looked normal – if not beautiful, with her hair hanging loose over her off-the-shoulder blue knit top that tapered down her lean frame to tight, tailored black pants that hugged her hips. He had told her to dress for the bike and he felt himself sigh inwardly this time in relief, because for a minute there he had started to expect Mortisha herself to come to the door. The place had his skin crawling and he couldn't wait to get the hell out of there.

"Ready ta go?" he'd asked huskily, forgoing a formal greeting in favour of getting the hell out of there. If he delayed he might be asked inside the house, and if the inside was anything like the outer yard, he'd rather give the experience a miss. Maybe his place wasn't that bad after all... "You'll need a warm jacket, gets mighty cold on the back of the bike."

She held out a thickly lined coat and gave him a broad smile. "All ready."

He helped her pull the fawn-coloured coat on, eyeing the black and white trimming of fur around the collar and cuffs before she smiled over her shoulder at him and pulled out a rather large ring of keys. She started with a lock high on the door that she had to tiptoe to reach, then moved to a second deadbolt with a padlock, before pressing in a manual code to a third lock above the door knob as he frowned from behind her.

He realised she had finished and was looking at him and tried to shrug off his frown. "Can't be too careful I guess..." but his voice was unsure.

She didn't seem to notice though, just flashed him a big smile before grabbing his arm and leading the way back down the path to the gate. He was starting to think about the end of the night already. It just felt... off, and suddenly he regretted baiting Buck the way he had. Karma, he thought with a grimace, it got you every time.

The ride had been easy enough but strangely, by the time he got there, he'd felt as if his eyes were on fire and his nose and throat had started both itching and running at the same time. The roof of his mouth felt like ants were crawling along it and there was only one thing that he knew of that could do that to him...

As he kicked his stand down and got off his bike, fighting the urge to rub at his eyes, he turned to her and eyed her fur collar suspiciously. "Do ya have a cat by any chance?"

He didn't understand the strange widening of her eyes, as if he had slapped her or hurt her in some way, but the look was quickly gone as she told him that she didn't, even as a finger had come up to idly stroke the fur trim. He'd stared at her then and after the longest of moments, let a grin split his lips. *'Tanner, you've been doing the ATF thing way too long, yer gettin' paranoid.'* He needed to relax and stop thinking ridiculous thoughts. So she was lying about not having a cat, so what? She was a willing, red-blooded female and if Buck were here, he was sure a little thing like a pet wouldn't get in his way.

Once inside, things had improved. The staff had all known her and smiled warmly at her, which had put his mind at ease a little. How she afforded to eat there regularly though, he didn't know. The prices on the menu were insane. When she picked up the wine list he was almost too frightened to look.

But throughout the meal he'd found her accent charming, if not a turn-on and everything she told him about her native country seemed all the more interesting through the pleasant sounds of her voice. The only issue she skirted was how she had come to be driving an ice-cream truck for a living but beside that, the conversation was easy and interesting.

But then he had started to feel sick. It started as a heavy feeling in his stomach that rose progressively through the meal until it reached his chest and settled higher up inside his head, making him want to lie down – and yet not lie down both at the same time for fear that having his head lower than his body would make him feel worse.

By the time the dessert menu had reached them, he'd wanted out of there and picking up on his discomfort, she had asked him back to her place for `dessert' instead. The suggestive smile she had given him and the inflection in her words told him exactly what she was offering.

"Sure," he told her, thinking that maybe the ride would clear his head and if it didn't he would make his excuses and get the hell out of there. The thought of going into that house had

him thinking of calling for backup...

JD had called then about his bike and he'd been frustrated to realise his phone was going flat. Then after he'd paid the bill with an inner curse, thinking that he could feed an entire block of people for the money he had just paid for a pint-sized medallion of beef, they had left.

But the fresh air of the ride had not helped his rapidly sinking disposition and by the time they reached her house he was feeling positively awful. He was sweating despite the chill air and to his dismay, the urge to be sick was rapidly overpowering him.

"Look at you," she'd said as she'd faced him, seeing that he was still sitting on his bike. She put a hand out and touched his forehead. "I knew you were getting sick! Come inside out of this cold and let me make you a drink."

She tugged at his arm but he held back.

"Uh... actually, I *am* feelin' kinda awful... an' I got this real early start tomorrow, so..." One finger was already hovering over the ignition button.

"At least let me make you a warm drink before you go, I've got just the thing to settle your stomach. You're in no condition to ride anywhere like that. Give it a few minutes you might feel a lot better." She'd winked at him then. "I promise I won't bite..."

Again he'd found himself wondering if he wasn't being paranoid again. What was a warm drink on a cold, frosty night, made by the hands of a pretty woman? Was he crazy? But he couldn't ignore his instincts and they were telling him that all was not right with that house, if not the woman standing before him now. She'd been pleasant enough at dinner, but several times he had found himself having to call her back to the present when a distant look had come over her face. And always, there was the persistent itching of his eyes and throat that had started the second she had come to the door...

"I really gotta get goin'. I'm real sorry fer..." Then it had hit him and he was off his bike in an instant, barely managing to balance it onto its stand before staggering for the thick, uncut bushes and hurling his dinner to the worms.

"That's it," he'd heard her say firmly. "I've got just the thing to help you feel better. Come on!" She'd patted his back soothingly as he had retched again, feeling more and more miserable by the second.

He didn't have a choice, he suddenly felt more than the urge to throw up going through his system and as embarrassing as it was to acknowledge that feeling, he was fast approaching not caring. Maybe he should call one of the boys to pick him up. Buck could bring JD and the kid could ride his bike back... He pulled out his phone.

"What are you doing?" she asked him, with more than a little suspicion he thought.

"I gotta call my room-mate. I'll need someone to pick my bike up for me." But even as he said it he heard the short ring cut off and his phone beeped at him, signalling it was flat. Why the hell didn't he charge the thing?!

He looked again to the house and contemplated her offer again, feeling a little better after throwing up, but the place looked as ominous as it had before. There seemed to be a low-lying mist that hovered just above the dark, winding path, or was he imagining it... Still, he wanted to call Buck now. He'd just use her phone and get the hell out of there.

"Come on," she'd said again, tugging at his arm and leading him toward the house.

10.40am

Ten forty was a bad time to be interrupting staff at a restaurant from preparing for the lunch crowd, but that mattered little to Chris as the wide, single oak door was opened for him and he stepped into the plush interior of Rinaldo's, Ezra a step behind him and looking the place over with an appraising eye. There was only one table occupied at that time with four suited men conversing quietly, obviously having an early business lunch.

"Good morning, do you have a reservation today?" The question told them that if they didn't, they wouldn't be eating there.

Chris gave the maitre'd a once-over as he approached, sizing the short man up and noticing the way he was checking Ezra out. He pulled out his badge, Ezra doing the same beside him.

"We're with the ATF, we're here to ask you some questions about a couple who dined here last night."

The maitre'd smiled, looking in the mirror to see if the four businessmen had noticed, but otherwise maintaining a cool facade. He shook his head, his Italian accent pronounced as he spoke. "My name is Marco. I was not here last evening, but I will help you any way that I can." Again he looked the younger agent over, checking out the cut of his expensive, tailored suit.

Chris looked around the large room, spotting the bar and a young man looking at them curiously as he cleaned a glass. "Is there anyone here now that was working last night that might be able to help us?"

"No, only the kitchen staff, and they do not see our guests in the restaurant."

Chris studied the man's face a moment as Ezra spoke up.

"Can we see the reservation list for the evening?"

"Certainly, this way."

"If they had a reservation, she probably made it in her name," Chris said to Ezra as they followed.

"May I ask what is the nature of these questions? Did the people you are looking for do something wrong?" The Italian asked them over his shoulder.

"They're missing," Chris said simply. "They were last heard from dining here in this restaurant."

They reached the greeting counter and the man pulled out a large, leather bound reservation book, flipping back to the previous page and turning it around with both hands to face the agents. "Help yourselves."

His eyes lingered on Ezra with open assessment and this time the southerner noticed before he glanced down to look at the pages before him with Chris. They were silent a moment, scanning the names, of which there were many.

"What time did JD say he spoke with Vin?" Ezra asked, not seeing Vin's name on the register.

"Around nine thirty."

Chris was still scanning through the names, but Ezra's question gave him pause. He looked up, eyes narrowed in thought. "And he said Vin was leaving, heading back to her place for dessert..."

Ezra nodded and looked up at Marco standing patiently before them, not above using the obvious attraction the man had for him to get the information they wanted. He gave him a subtle smile. "We need to see the credit receipts from last night, from around nine-thirty."

Marco didn't hesitate, he just nodded in return to the good-looking agent and headed off to find the information he wanted. He considered that smile he had just been given a confirmation that his interest was returned.

"You're a bad boy, Ezra," Chris said with humour as he continued to look at the book for Vin's name.

"It has been my experience that to ignore an openin' of any kind is both unwise and counter productive."

Chris looked up, wanting to see Ezra's face as he contemplated the double entendre' but was diverted by the Maitre'd's quick return, records of credit sales in hand.

"Thankyou," Chris said, taking them and glancing at Ezra, but seeing his usual poker face displayed.

He scanned through the list, skimming through unfamiliar names until he finally saw the one he was looking for.

"Here," he said, pointing halfway down the list.

Ezra leant forward and immediately saw the amount of the bill charged to the name Vin Tanner and wasn't able to stop his eyebrows rising. For a man who always declared he could feed half the city for the price of one of Ezra's specially delivered office lunches, this was curious.

"I believe this answers the question as to the state of Mr Tanner's health..."

Chris glanced sideways at Ezra before looking back at the details of Vin's transaction. Nine forty pm. He looked up at the maitre'd, still standing before them and had to clear his throat to get him to pull his eyes from Ezra. The man was smitten and he might have found it comical if not for the fact that his best friend was unaccounted for. He knew, that with every passing minute, the situation was escalating.

"I need to see the surveillance camera from last night, up until just after nine forty."

Marco shook his head. "There is no –"

"Yes, there is." Chris jutted his chin to a small, almost imperceptible dome on the roof that looked like a light fitting, before looking pointedly back at the door. "And the external one from the doorway."

Seeing he was going to protest, Ezra intervened and said conspiratorially. "He'll get the tapes, one way or another. It would be far easier to simply give him what he wants."

Put out and not at all happy now, Marco gave a small grunt of acquiescence and turned his back on them. "Follow me."

11.00am

Rhonda awoke slowly, instantly aware of a pain in her neck and bringing up a hand to rub at it as she opened her eyes to her lounge room. She'd slept on the couch again...

Getting up, she looked down and frowned as she realised she was dressed in pants and her blue knit top... Had she gone out? Yes, that's right, she'd gone to dinner... with Vin... but then what?

Yawning, she made her way to the bathroom. A hot shower would clear her head. Then she

could worry about why she was wearing good clothes to bed. She looked in the bathroom mirror and noticed a large bruise across her cheek, like a hand imprinted on her skin. Fingering the tender skin around her pale face her eyes widened in fear; fear that again she had lost a piece of her life, her memory... what had she gotten into?

11.20am

"That's him."

Chris's gaze sharpened at the image of Vin entering the restaurant with a woman beside him. You could not see either of their faces as a waiter guided them to a table by the far windows and they took their seats.

"I'll need the number of that waiter," he informed Marco, who was standing and looking over their shoulders at the screen they were seated in front of. The little man turned and left at the request.

They both leant closer to the screen, trying to look at the woman sitting opposite Vin, but the camera was too far away to make much out.

"Forward it," he told Ezra, and they watched the two figures move their hands and heads in conversation until they saw Vin put his phone to his ear.

"That must be JD," Chris said, almost to himself as he watched Vin talking a moment.

Another minute and the conversation was over and the waiter brought the bill. Vin gave him a card, which was returned for him to sign and then they were off. Just as the woman left the table Vin stopped, letting her walk ahead of him as he turned back to the table and grabbed his glass of water. They watched as he skulled it in one gulp, putting the glass back down and running a hand over his eyes as if to clear them before he turned back to face the camera. They didn't need a closer lens to see that he wasn't looking well.

"That definately answers that question," Chris said, shaking his head. *'Where the hell did you get to, cowboy?'* "Put the other tape in," he instructed Ezra, "before your boyfriend comes back and tries to kick us out again."

Ezra ignored the jibe and put the external surveillance tape in, pressing play. Again he forwarded it a long way until they watched Vin enter, then forwarded it again until he left the building. There was nothing to suggest anything had happened. Neither his, nor the woman's, face showed anything as they left. Still, it was the clearest picture they had of her.

"Let's get this tape back and get some prints made. I want to know who the hell she is."

Marco re-entered the small office at that moment and looked at the screen, paused on the woman's face, Vin's beside her.

"These are the people you are looking for?"

Something in his voice had them turning in their chairs to look at him.

"Yes..." Chris said, waiting. When the man did not say anything more he grew impatient. "Have you seen them before?"

"Not the man, but the woman..." He turned and closed the door behind him, moving closer to the screen to look at the image again to be sure. "I know this woman."

Chris waited a full second. "Who is she?"

Marco was hesitant, but these agents had only said she was missing, not that she had done anything wrong.

"She's not in trouble," Ezra reassured him, as if reading his mind. "It's our friend that holds our concern."

Marco looked at Ezra and decided he'd tell the man with the lazy accent and the beguiling green eyes anything he wanted. "Her name is Rhonda, she is the sister of the chef here. She comes in often."

Chris and Ezra exchanged a look.

"Where can we find this chef?"

Marco looked put out. "He should be here, but he has not come in yet and he is not answering his phone."

"Is he usually on time for work?"

"Always. He has not missed a day or been late since he started two months ago. He is brilliant, very professional... although a little temperamental," he admitted.

Ezra nodded. "I am sure that he is."

"I asked the staff if he had called in this morning and Francis, one of my bartenders, said that he saw Richard last night in the laneway, just outside here, around two thirty. That is very strange because he finished much earlier, around one."

Ezra shook his head. "Richard is the brother?"

"Yes."

"And did your bartender say what he was doing here?"

"No, but he thought he may have been drinking."

Chris's phone started ringing but he spoke to Marco before he answered it. "We'll need to speak with that bartender."

"We are very busy, especially with Richard not here."

Chris gave Ezra a look to take care of it as he answered his phone.

"We understand," Ezra stepped in, "but it is imperative that we speak with him to further our investigation... and we'll need Richard's address."

Marco looked at them both before giving a short nod and leaving them alone.

Ezra looked to Chris and saw his anxiousness to get on with the investigation as he spoke on his phone.

"Well how long before they *do* know anything?"

Buck leant his head back against the wall behind him, listening to the impatience in his old friend's voice as he sat in the curtained off room that he and JD currently occupied. It had been a long night and was proving to be an even longer day.

"Tests take time, Chris, you know that. The doc thinks another hour, but he's going with food poisoning at this stage. He asked if we had any of that pizza left over, but I think Josiah ate the last of it."

"It wasn't the pizza, I told you before I ate it too. Besides, Vin left before we ordered it."

Buck frowned. "You're right... but I don't know what else we all ate that —"

"The ice-cream, Buck," JD said from beside him.

Buck thought about that but Chris, hearing the suggestion, ruled it out. "Vin didn't have one, he only had a drink and Josiah only had a bite of his before he threw it out, remember?"

Buck did. Josiah had declared it the worst ice-cream he'd ever tasted and had offered it to a panting Ezra who had finally joined them. The Southerner had looked at the defiled offering and turned away in disgust.

"But he was still sick, which might reflect the one bite he *did* have. JD ate the most," he gave JD a shake of his head. The kid had ordered a triple scoop of chocolate and vanilla. "And you don't know for sure if Vin is sick too, but if he is, he still bought his drink from the same place and it wasn't packaged in a bottle or a can.

There's a definite connection there. You can't rule out that her stuff might be the source. It's

probably home-made."

Chris was starting to get truly worried now. He looked back at the woman's face, trying to see more than the black and white picture allowed.

"Speaking of Vin, you still haven't tracked him down?" Buck asked.

"Not yet. We're at the restaurant now. Turns out his date is the sister of the chef here."

"That a fact..."

"Yeah. but he didn't come in today, so we're looking into it."

Chris watched as the door opened and the young man he had seen cleaning glasses when they'd entered walked in. He was around Vin's build, tanned and healthy looking, despite the late hours he probably worked tending bar. He was younger than JD by the looks of it and his eyes went straight to the tv screen and stayed there. There was definite recognition there. He noticed that Ezra, too, was watching the young man closely.

"Call me with those results right away," he told Buck and ended the call, giving the young man his full attention.

"You're looking for Richard?" the kid asked before he could speak.

He nodded, studying his face a moment.

"What's he done?"

Chris moved forward now and extended his hand, which the younger man took after a moment longer looking at the screen.

"I'm Captain Larabee of the ATF. This is Agent Standish."

Ezra tilted his head in greeting.

"Francis," the young man introduced himself.

"We just need to ask Richard a few questions regarding his whereabouts last night. We are trying to locate his sister and a missing agent of ours that was last seen here in this restaurant."

Francis's eyes widened. "Rhonda? Why are you looking for her?"

They both watched his face closely as Chris answered.

"Because she was dining with one of my agents here last night and now he is missing."

Francis obviously had some sort of history with the woman. "Do you know Rhonda very well?"

He shrugged. "We dated a few times, nothing serious."

There was more to it. Chris barely tilted his head to Ezra, but the astute man read his signal perfectly and turned to Marco.

"Perhaps I can come with you to help locate that address now?"

Marco's frown disappeared as he looked at Ezra. "Certainly."

Once the door was closed Chris sat on the edge of the desk. "Tell me what you saw last night."

For a moment Francis said nothing, but then he shrugged as if it mattered little to him. "I wasn't meant to work last night, but Charlie wanted to go home sick so I came on around ten thirty. I heard Rhonda had been in with some guy, but I didn't see her. Then after cleanup I stayed back and had a few drinks with some of the staff, like we usually do. I was putting some empties out the back when I heard a car goin' real fast down the lane before it braked real sudden and hard. By the time I got around the gate Richard was closing the passenger door behind someone. I called out but he just moved back to his side and opened his door."

"Did you see the passenger?"

"No, they were already in the car, but it's like he was helping the person in and closing the door for them. I thought maybe the person was drunk."

Chris's heart picked up pace. "Then what happened?"

But Francis shook his head. "Nothin'. It was pretty dark and I called out to him but he didn't hear me. He got back in and took off. I thought maybe he'd been drinking too."

"Because he didn't answer you?"

"Well, yeah. I wasn't all that far away, he should have heard me... and because it was really weird to see him here so late after he'd gone."

"Do you know what make his car his? The registration plate?"

"I don't know the plate, but it's a red Celica. Two door, late model. He looks pretty weird in it, cos he's so big."

"Does he usually drink?"

"He has a few after work with us sometimes, but never many. He just seemed kind of edgy. He's usually a real calm guy... except when we get busy, then he's a bit of a prick..." He didn't smile.

"Did you notice anything else?"

"No, I don't think so."

"How well do you know Richard?"

Again Francis shrugged. "Not very well. He doesn't talk much about himself. He came out here with his sister a few months back from England but never talks about home. I don't think he liked it there."

"How do you know if he doesn't talk about it?"

"Just the way he looks when you mention anything about it, or the country in general."

"What about Rhonda, you said you went out with her?"

"Yeah. Richard wasn't happy about it though. I'd already decided I wasn't going to see her again anyway, but he came to my house one day after I'd taken her out... told me a few things. We've been ok since that."

"Why weren't you going to see her again?"

"She was just... a bit strange," he said vaguely.

"Strange how?"

Another shrug. "She lives with her brother in this pretty weird house. She seems normal enough but when you talk to her you kind of get the impression she's somewhere else, you know?"

Chris didn't, but he nodded anyway. "And her and her brother live in this pretty weird house...?" He prodded.

"Yeah... I was only there one time, but there's a lot of these weird animal skins and stuff and the front yard's kinda Beetlejuice."

Chris smiled a little at the description as he studied the sincere face and realised he was serious. "So what happened when Richard came to see you?"

"I opened the door and he looked really pissed, like he was going to start something so I told him straight away I wasn't going to see her again, so he could back off and he kinda

just did. It was weird."

"And what did he tell you?"

Now Francis looked a little uncomfortable.

"I need to know if my Agent could be in any danger," Chris said firmly.

"He told me there was something I needed to know about Rhonda, but I never really knew if he made it all up just to put me off seeing her again."

"But you'd already told him you weren't going to."

"Yeah but... it was just a bit –"

"Weird?" Chris asked, for the kid had used the word numerous times already.

"Yeah, weird..." he looked at Chris like he must have esp. "He told me that she wasn't completely stable. That she'd had a kind of break-down a few years back and she'd never really been the same."

"This was back in England?"

"I suppose, they haven't been here long. It might be why they came out here."

"What did he mean by unstable?"

"He didn't say... Look, I really gotta get back to the bar, they'll be goin' nuts out there soon."

"Alright. I appreciate you taking the time."

Francis reached the door before Chris spoke again.

"Do you think that Richard might have taken exception to his sister dating my agent last night?"

Francis shrugged for the last time. "Maybe... I don't know. I don't think he'd do anything about it, if that's what you mean."

"But he came to your home to warn you off..."

"Yeah, but it was more like he was trying to protect her, you know? Or me, maybe; maybe if I wasn't so sick he mighta given me a harder time, but he left pretty quick after he'd said his bit. I got the impression he felt kinda sorry for me or something."

Chris's eyes narrowed. "You were sick after your date?"

The kid looked pained as he remembered. "Not until the next day. I spent the whole day throwing up. I never did find out if she got it too."

The door opened then and Ezra and Marco came back in, Ezra looking oddly flustered and Marco a little upset.

"I have the address. It's on the other side of town," Ezra informed him and Chris realised his agent wanted to get the hell out of there.

"Francis, you've been very helpful." He gave him a card. "If you remember anything else, please give me a call. I may be back later with some more questions."

"Just do not come back until after the lunch is finished," Marco said rather forcibly.

Chris looked from the short Italian to Ezra and realised something had definitely happened. Marco must have made a move. Despite his worry for Vin, he could not help but grin at Ezra as he passed him and headed out the door, shaking Marco's hand again.

"Thankyou for your time," he told the Maitre'd.

"*You* are most welcome."

He purposefully snubbed the southerner who merely followed Chris out the door.

They didn't speak until they reached the car and got in, Ezra behind the wheel as Chris pulled out his phone to call Josiah and Nathan to fill them in and get them looking into the strange family's background. He also wanted an APB out on the red Celica licensed to Richard Riley, brother of Rhonda Riley and current tenant of number 17 Rochester Road, according to the information the maitre'd had given Ezra.

As he waited for the call to connect he glanced sideways at Ezra, who still hadn't said a word since they'd left. "Lover's spat?"

Ezra gave him a derisive look as he pulled out the road map to look for the address they'd been given.

"The man was presumptuous."

Chris couldn't resist throwing his words back at him. "It's my experience that to explore an opening of any kind, whether wise and productive or not, can have repercussions."

Ezra watched his boss chuckling beside him and raised the road map higher to block the view.

11.40am

When feeling finally did return to his arms, Vin wished they would go back to sleep. They were still pinned under him and by the feel of it, tightly bound together. With a low moan he shifted his weight and brought them out from under him by rolling onto his side, barely aware of the shivering that was getting progressively worse.

His stomach spasmed in sudden awakening and with the sharp cramping pain came the memory of being violently sick, repeatedly until tears had streamed from his eyes and his nose and mouth had watered in mocking pity.

He'd been sick... No, he'd been more than sick. He'd thought his entire body was turning inside out. Rhonda... she'd led him into the house... he was going to call Buck and JD to come get him... but he'd never gotten to the phone.

He remembered after he'd been sick in the front yard she had practically dragged him up the path and he remembered eyeing those mounds of dirt again along the way as his head had refused to come up. He had a clear memory of her fussing her way with practiced experience through her fortress of locks and combinations before he'd been led inside – and that's when the nightmare had truly begun.

"Come, I'll make that drink for you, you're gonna feel all better in no time. Come on, this way..."

She'd led him through a lounge room and he'd barely had time to take in the fur that covered everything in site before he'd reached a chair at a kitchen table and she had pushed him down.

"Sit, it won't take me a minute."

He'd sat. What else could he do? But then he'd remembered, he wanted to use the phone. "Uh... can I borrow your phone?"

She had swung around with such swiftness that he had sat back in his chair. He'd thought then that she wasn't going to tell him where her phone was, but she'd nodded. "It's back through the lounge."

"Thanks."

He got up, relieved that he didn't have to try and make his way back out of her house to his bike. He didn't think he'd get that far. As much as he wanted to get out of the house and away from all of the fur that was starting to itch his throat with a vengeance, he knew his best option was to call Buck and JD and get them to help him out.

But then, what had started in the yard came back with swift vengeance and this time, it was the eye of the storm. He barely had time to open his mouth before she shoved him toward the hallway leading from the kitchen and down the passage until she came to the bathroom,

opening the door and propelling him inside.

He didn't know, and didn't care, if she was still there when his knees hit the cold tiles at the same time as his stomach erupted with a force that made his eyes burn. He could not remember ever feeling so bad as he did at that moment, but the next thing he knew, there was a terrible pain that seemed to slam into the back of his skull like a sledgehammer and he must have passed out right there on the tiles.

Shifting now where he lay on the cold concrete floor, he searched for signs of that sickness, but felt only the residual cutting pain that lanced through his abdomen and the chill of the terrible cold air. He doubted he had anything left to give but although his throat and stomach were remembering the trauma they'd been through, the sickness itself was gone.

Still, that wasn't the last he remembered of that house, for he'd woken up again - and he'd been considerably warmer. She'd been there again, or her voice had been... And he'd been in a soft bed. No... a couch. He'd woken up on a couch and there had been voices arguing around him. Rhonda's voice and... a mans...

He'd heard her arguing with a man and when he'd finally had the energy to lift his head off the couch to look, he'd seen it was a rather big man. His first confused thought had been that the woman was married and this was her husband, meaning he was probably about to get the crap beaten out of him and he was in no state to defend himself. Their accents were the same.

Then the voices has grown more heated and he'd heard her beg him to just go to bed, to which he had angrily replied, `not when there was this sort of crap going on under the roof.'

That was when he'd managed to get his legs up and under him, pushing to unsteady feet and trying to take in the situation through a vision so blurred he'd thought he might be seeing double. Sickness threatened to take him again and he'd had to fight to study his watch, finally working out what the hands were showing him... Two am. Two am?! Had he been out of it for so long? And why did the back of his head feel like it still wanted to explode?

Survival instincts saw him backing his way towards the door, but even before he knocked over the lamp with his unsure feet, the crazy pair had turned toward him.

The man had shaken his head as he'd watched him, talking to Rhonda. "I can't believe you brought him into my home! I can't believe you've done this again!"

The words had chilled him. Done what again? And as he'd watched on, the man had slapped her, hard, right across the face and with a startled cry she'd flown back into the wall and crashed in a heap to the cold ground. That left just the two of them...

"You stupid, crazy bitch," the man had spat, looking down at her with sadness a moment before turning once more to the dazed man in his lounge room.

Vin was torn between helping her and helping himself, but he'd already taken three more steps back towards the door on legs that threatened to betray him. He was in no position to get in the middle of a domestic dispute and if he tried to, the way he was right then, he would only end up on the floor next to her.

"Did you have fun last night? Can't you see she's not right in the head? You get off on fucking crazy people?"

He'd considered then the possibility that he might be dreaming it all. His head was pounding, his vision was blurry and the whole thing seemed completely surreal, but when blinking did not stop the image of the man from coming toward him, he'd had the sinking realisation that the situation was real.

"Look," he'd tried to reason, finding it hard to find the words he wanted. "I don't know what's goin' on here, but I never touched her. We got back here and I's so sick I passed out on the couch here. Reckon I'll just leave ya'll to it and get outta yer way."

To his surprise the man had laughed, but kept coming toward him. "You stupid bastard," he'd said, his voice a strange blend of sympathy and regret. "You wanna know what's wrong with you, why you're sick?"

Vin had wanted to know, but not if he'd had to stay there a second longer than he had to to find out. He'd kept his back to the wall and moved back, trying not to run into anything else as he tried to distance himself from the man still moving toward him.

"Don't you wonder where all this fucking fur comes from..?"

Again he'd shaken his head, his only thought to wonder what was the fastest way to break out of that crazy asylum.

"Let me guess, you met her in the park? Bought an ice-cream or something else from that condemned piece of shit on wheels? Didn't it taste wrong to you? Can't you people *taste* it for God's sakes?!"

"Taste what?" he'd found himself asking then, curiosity getting the better of him as he still tried to back his way to freedom. And where were his keys...?

"You've got no idea have you... They never do..." Again he'd looked sad. "She's clever, my little sis, I gotta give her that."

Vin had looked at the intent burning in the man's eyes and chanced a glance behind him to look for the door, even as the words `sis' registered. So he wasn't a jilted lover or husband... somehow it hadn't given him any relief to know that. And still he couldn't find the bloody door...

"Look, whatever's goin' on here, it ain't none'a my business. I'll jist leave ya to it an' be on m'way... I'm real sorry I came in here, I shoulda just gone on m'way." Why the *hell* hadn't he just gone on his way? Because he'd been throwing up what had felt like his kidneys in the front garden, that's why...

Finally, he'd backed into the door and had felt behind him for the handle, not waiting a second longer to turn it and try to tug it open. But it hadn't budged and the man's laughter had reached him again. He'd turned back to see him shaking his head in definite sympathy that time.

"You think running out of here is going to help you? You're already gone... I don't know how long it'll take but she's already gotten you."

Vin had let the door go, realising the man was being deadly serious. "What are ya talkin' about? Gotten me how?"

"I can't help you, but I can make it easier for you. I'll get you out of here, but I can't let you go home. I know it's wrong, but she's my sister."

He'd shaken his head then. Just when he'd thought the man was being straight with him, he'd start talking in riddles again. He'd gotten angry again. "What are ya talkin' about?!" The man was talking as if he had a death sentence that couldn't be avoided. He'd known he was sick, but until then had thought maybe it was just something he'd eaten. Maybe that chicken he'd had at lunch.

And still the determined brother stepped closer, arm out like he was trying to stop a wild animal from bolting, and speaking in a soothing voice. "I'll make it easier for you, trust me."

Vin had felt a fresh sweat break out on his skin at the seriousness of the man's expression and reached for the door again, turning to it and eyeing a bank of locks that almost made him scream in frustrated anger. He was trapped, and everything he looked at was doubling up before his eyes. He turned too fast to put his back to the door again and staggered blindly into the hard wood, feeling arms grab for him as his world spun.

No way was this psycho taking him. His babble about him making it easier for him sent cold shivers down his spine. Gathering his strength he'd come up with a punch that slammed straight under the man's jaw, rocking him back the step he needed to move around him. He decided then and there that if he couldn't get out the front door, he'd find another way. He'd jump through a fucking window if he had to.

But then he'd found an impenetrable wall in front of him and a right arm had crossed to his own jaw, rocking him sideways towards a picture on a wall so hard that his head cracked into the glass, breaking it. Blood flowed from a cut near his hairline and all that purging his body of whatever it was that had made him sick must have drained him of his energy because the blow sent him to the ground again so fast he wasn't sure if he was sitting or standing.

He'd tried to muster his strength again, to send another punch towards the shape reaching down for him again, but his eyes were refusing to stay open. He'd felt the overwhelming pain of his head splintering apart and then his arms lifting, then nothing more.

11.55am

Chris answered his phone as Ezra did a circle of the block, again looking for number 17, having missed it the first time around.

"Chris, it's Nathan."

"Nathan, you find something already?"

"No, not yet. It's Josiah, I'm running him into the hospital to see the doctor that's looking JD and Buck over."

Chris's jaw tightened. "What's happened?"

"He's feeling bad again, says his chest is tight and he's having a little trouble breathing. It came on pretty sudden. I just spoke to Buck and he and JD are going through the same thing. I'm hoping if I go down there the doctor'll be able to tell me more."

"Alright Nathan... you got any theories?"

"No... I'm guessin' it's food poisonin', but it doesn't seem to be typical of any one strain in particular. The fact that it's affectin' their breathin' ain't a good sign though. Vin might need help when you find him."

Chris acknowledged that information with tightening of his jaw just as he spotted number seventeen. "There, Ezra, the blue gate. Nathan, keep me informed. We're at the woman's house now. Hopefully she'll be able to lead us to Vin. If not, we'll speak with the waiter that served his table last night."

He hung up and took a good look at the house as Ezra parked the car across the street and cut the engine. Beetlejuice indeed... They both grew quiet as they took in the strange-looking residence. It just didn't match with the streetscape.

"The Celica doesn't appear to be there," Ezra said quietly, studying the layout carefully.

"Neither is Vin's bike. Let's put a call out on that too." He didn't care now what he may or may not be disturbing, as long as they found him.

Ezra placed the call and they got out of the car, both of them taking time to look around the street for anything that might be out of place. Both men noticed the sign tacked to the light

pole that said `Missing Cat' with a picture of what was obviously a beloved pet, but neither of them thought much of it as they crossed the road to the house.

"Alright, watch your back in there," Chris said. "If this woman is truly unstable, there's no telling what she might have done." 'To Vin,' was the unfinished thought.

Rhonda heard the door knock and removed the towel from her wet hair, moving to the window to glance out the curtains at the two men now standing on her porch. One was dressed quite formally in a full suit while the other was not wearing his jacket, but everything from his shirt to his shoes was black. She could not think what they wanted... unless it had to do with the cats...

"Ma'am, this is the ATF, we need to speak with you!"

Again the door knocked and the man in black called out and she knew she had to let them in. ATF... Vin had been with the ATF. Maybe this was about him.

Chris's patience was at it's end when finally there came the sound of locks being turned before the door opened to reveal a young woman, her hair wet from a shower and her clothes neat and fresh.

"Rhonda Riley?"

"Yes?"

Chris shook his head even as he stepped forward, taking in the fresh bruise on her cheek that he was sure had not been on her face in the tape from the night before.

"Sorry to bother you ma'am, but we need to ask you some questions about where you were last night. We have a man missing, Agent Vin Tanner, and he was last seen dining with you at your brother's restaurant. Also, your brother did not show up for work this morning and his boss gave us your address. Is he home?"

They watched as her face grew perfectly emotionless.

"I have not seen my brother this morning. He's isn't here."

Chris's eyes narrowed. "OK, but we still need to ask you some questions about last night. May we come in?"

They followed her inside, Chris taking a last look back at the strange yard and the dirt path that was dotted with small mounds along it's winding trail from the gate.

Ezra fought the urge to pull his coat over his mouth as he was instantly assaulted by the pungent, obvious smell of animals residing within a human home. Cats, he decided with a sour expression, and many of them.

Chris too, could not help but notice the smell and for an instant considered that if Vin had come in here, he would probably have broken out in hives.

"You have cats, ma'am?"

Rhonda stopped in mid-stride, but resumed her pace and kept leading them toward the kitchen after her brief pause.

"No."

Ezra and Chris exchanged a wary look. That was a blatant lie. They might not be there now but they had to be around, given the smell.

Ezra tapped Chris on the arm and pointed to the fur cushions on the couch as they went through the lounge. It was then that they noticed that there was fur trimming on just about everything in the room. From throw rugs to lampshades to picture frames, it was everywhere.

"I like the way you've decorated the place... most, *unusual*." Ezra told her as they reached the kitchen.

She eyed him suspiciously and then nodded. "Thank you. Can I get you something to drink?"

Chris nearly said yes, he was actually thirsty at that moment, but after what Buck had told him, he shook his head. Judging by Ezra's unconcealed grimace of distaste, he wasn't about to accept any refreshments in this house either.

They sat down at the small formica table and Chris had to take his weight off it when he unbalanced its thin metal legs with his elbows.

"Can you tell us what happened after you left the restaurant last night with Agent Tanner - Vin?" Chris asked.

Rhonda appeared to think about it and after a moment, she shook her head. "He dropped me home and I went to sleep on the couch," she lied smoothly.

Ezra's brow puckered. "Have you been ill? Experienced any sickness in the last twenty four hours?"

Again she shook her head, no.

"Was Mr Tanner feeling ill when he left you?"

She appeared confused by the question, her eyebrows drawing together. "No, not that he mentioned to me."

"That bruise on your face, did somebody hit you?" Chris asked. It had to have happened after she had left the restaurant.

She fingered the bruise almost wistfully before again, frustratingly, shaking her head. "No, I fell in the shower after I got home."

Chris was getting angry, fast. "And it left a perfect handprint on your cheek?"

Her eyes sharpened then and a little fight came into them. Chris considered it a welcome respite from the vague look that had been there a moment before.

"Look, I want to help you find him, I really do, but I don't know what you want me to tell you."

"Did you have a fight with your brother last night?" Ezra asked in a softer tone, sensing that Chris's impatience was getting the better of him. He'd been brought up to date about what the bartender had said and now, having met the woman, was starting to wonder if there wasn't some credibility to the theory that she was unstable.

Rhonda turned to Ezra and her eyes widened a little in memory. Had she had a fight with Richard... Yes she had. He'd hit her... Why? Her eyes went towards the lounge room and she had a vision of watching Vin sleep on the couch, dead to the world. And then Richard had been there, yelling at her. She shook her head at the younger agent with the assessing eyes. "No, I did not fight with Richard," she lied.

"Alright, when did you last see your brother?" Chris asked.

"He came home around one, one thirty this morning." Her hands were now folded neatly on the table before her as if to project calmness, but Chris saw the way her eyes shifted between them. She was nervous.

"And you were up?"

"I was sleeping on the couch," she said again. What could she tell these men to make them go away?

"Do you remember your meal last night at the restaurant?"

"Yes, it was nice. Vin was nice," she offered, remembering then the meal she had shared with the quiet ATF agent.

"And after the meal you came straight back here and he dropped you off?"

She nodded.

"What time was that?"

"Mm... somewhere before ten I guess."

"That's a little short for a date isn't it?" Chris asked.

Her eyes flashed again and for a moment she looked like she was going to say something other than what she did. "He said he had an early start, so he left early."

Chris nodded as if he believed her. "And did he say if he was going anywhere else?"

"No."

"Did you make plans to meet again?" Ezra asked.

She was starting to feel harassed. "No, we did not, but I assumed he would call. He enjoyed my company as far as I could tell."

"Did he come inside before he went home?"

"No."

"You didn't ask him in?" Chris said, leaning forward.

"Yes, but I told you, he had an early start."

"What about when he picked you up? Did he come in then?"

"No." She was annoyed now. "What is it you want from me exactly? If you want to find your friend you would be better off out there chasing down real leads. I do not know where he is."

Chris and Ezra looked at each other a moment, before Chris stood, pacing.

"Rhonda, how long have you been driving the ice-cream truck? Is it your own business?"

"Yes, it is. And I have been driving it for several years now, first back home in London and now here."

"Why haven't you licensed your business?"

She hesitated. "I have," she lied again.

Chris stared down at her. "There's no record of your name in the registry."

Her eyes darted to Ezra, as if he could help her. "Well, there must be some mistake, I filled in all the forms when I first got here."

Ezra nodded as if he understood. "And do you make all of your own produce yourself?"

Her face changed a little and the first smile they had seen from her floated across her lips. "Yes, I do. It's a long tradition in my family."

"Here?" Ezra asked, waving an arm to encompass the room. "In your home?"

But she had had enough. "I do not see how that has any relevance to finding Vin."

Ezra was stopped from pushing her by a warning look from Chris.

"Would you mind if we took a look around your place?"

She stood up to join Chris, wanting them both to leave. "Yes, I certainly would. I'm a very private person and I've told you all that I know. I'm sure he's just sleeping in late somewhere. Have you checked his house?"

"Yes," Chris told her, "we have, and he didn't go home last night. That makes you the last person to have seen him." *And our prime suspect.*

"What about your brother?" Ezra asked. "Are you not concerned for his whereabouts? The Maitre'd at the restaurant informed us that it is highly unusual for him to be unpunctual. Would he be sleeping in somewhere also?"

Now there was real animosity in her eyes and for a moment, both Agents saw something dangerous in her look. "Perhaps he is," she said in a cold tone. "But he's not doing it here."

"Ma'am, we're sorry to have disturbed you. Thankyou for your time," Chris said suddenly, nodding to Ezra who turned to follow him out.

Confused by their abrupt departure, she walked them back out to the front of the house. The older agent turned when he reached the door.

"I was just wondering... not too long ago you dated a bartender from the restaurant, Francis?"

She was clearly taken aback by the unexpected question. "What about him?"

"Well..." Chris ran a hand over his jaw as if in thought. "He told us he was very sick after that date with you, spent the whole day in bed in fact..."

She didn't like his tone. "And?"

Chris shrugged. "And I just find it strange, that's all... my men buy your ice-creams and they all come down sick the next day, my agent dates you and goes missing... it's just strange, wouldn't you say?"

"I'm not standing here while you talk to me like I'm some criminal..." she said angrily, stepping back, but Chris handed her a card before she could close the door.

"If you remember anything else..."

She took it and slammed the door none too gently.

Back at the car, both men stopped and looked back at the house, seeing the blinds move in a front window.

"She's lying through her teeth."

Chris only nodded, pulling out his phone as he got back inside, taking the passenger seat. He waited for Ezra to move inside. "We need to search that house. You call to get backup on standby, I'll get started on the warrant."

Ezra didn't ask on what grounds he was going to get one, he knew Larabee well enough to know that what the Captain wanted, he got, one way or another.

12.10pm

Vin heard something move and for a moment thought there was someone near him, but everything once more went quiet. He was finding it more and more difficult to breath now and could only put it down to the freezing temperature of the room and lying for so long immobile on the cold floor. Where the hell was his jacket?

He had to get up, but whenever he tried to lift his head off the hard floor, he felt a stab of pain go through his skull that made him lie quiet again. And he felt bone tired, his mind still sluggish, if a little clearer than it had been when he'd first woken there.

Again his mind drifted back to the house, desperate to piece it all together now and he thought again of Rhonda's brother, remembering how he'd woken seated next to him in his cramped car. He'd felt the wheels moving over hard ground beneath him and the noise of traffic beyond the sound of the motor before he'd managed to open his eyes to see streetlights move past the window.

Any slight movement to lift his head from the cold glass where it rested had seen him close

his eyes against the pain that reverberated around his skull and his empty stomach to give a sickening roll. He must have moaned aloud at some point for there had come that familiar, accented voice from beside him.

"We're nearly there, not much longer."

He'd swallowed the sickness down and tried again, turning his head and barely making out the man's shadow. "Where..?"

"Not far," was all the answer he'd been given.

He'd tried his hands then, quickly realising they were bound together; tightly, if the pain in his arms was any indication.

"You like cats?"

He remembered again the strange question and how he'd managed to shake his head in confusion. What the hell was this talk about cats..?

"I hate the feral fucking things," the man had told him. "They stink, they kill everything at night, they're a nuisance and a fucked up pet to have... but they don't deserve that... and neither do you. I ain't gonna let her do it."

He'd heard the strange promise before the car had turned suddenly into a narrow ally. At that point he'd begun to collect his thoughts enough to think of trying the door, but had found it locked when he'd moved his arms to the latch.

"Just sit tight. Nearly there."

Another turn and another narrower, even darker ally and then the car had come to a stop. The man had gotten out and had come around to his door quickly, but by the time it was opened, he'd already been halfway out of the car, not about to wait and find out what the man had planned for him.

It was all the chance he'd needed to bring his head up and deliver a sound crack beneath the man's chin again, blinded with the pain the action brought him but not stopping there, fuelled by a furious rush of adrenalin. He'd dropped his feet firmly to the ground and used both hands to throw his weight into the man's midsection, sending him doubled over and fighting for breath.

He'd been sick, hurting and his vision was a blurred mess, but he hadn't been about to stick around and see if the man got back up. 'Fight *and* flight,' he'd thought in a moment of insanity as he'd taken off down the ally towards the light that he could see at the end of the lane. As he ran he pulled at the rope at his wrists, feeling it give with surprise. The skin at his wrists burnt but he gave them no mercy until he felt his hands come free, not caring about anything other than getting his freedom back and putting as much distance between

himself, that car and that crazy bastard bent on 'helping' him as possible.

But then he'd heard the boots pounding again behind him and a hand had grabbed onto his jacket from behind, dragging him back and trying to stop his momentum. He'd struggled, with everything he'd had, his heart pounding as he managed to kick out at the larger man and twist his body as he felt the large man slip.

Somehow he'd managed to pull his arms free of his leather sleeves and with that movement had come freedom as Rhonda's brother was left holding an empty coat as he tripped, propelled down by the kick Vin sent to his knees.

And again he'd run, the adrenaline holding him, propelling him forward towards the sounds of traffic he could now hear up ahead.

As Vin remembered how he'd taken flight down that laneway his cold body shivered anew at the recalled memory. He tested his arms again, wanting his freedom with a fresh sense of urgency. He thought he knew now who had put him where he was... who had tied him up again and left him to his freezing fate...

He remembered the sound of an engine gunning ahead of him as he'd rounded the bend in the lane. For a moment he had seen nothing but darkness, but then two blaring headlights had lit before him, flooding him in light even as a motor gained speed and shortened the length of the beams as they approached him.

He hadn't known what to think as the fresh source of attack had come at him, the vehicle bearing down on him loudly and gaining speed over the short distance.

There'd been nowhere to go. It wasn't a movie where he could swing up something on the wall and avoid the collision, there was nothing but smooth concrete on either side. Maybe if it *had* been a movie he could have launched himself onto the front grill like Mel Gibson and held on for life until the tyres screeched under a slamming of brakes and he was thrown to the ground to roll harmlessly out of the way... but again, it wasn't a movie, and it had all happened way too fast.

Remembering the feel of the ground as he'd been thrown back, Vin suddenly felt fresh pain awaken through his body. He'd tried to roll with the impact, but the car had picked up considerable speed for such a short run and he'd landed a fair way beyond the front bumper.

He'd barely had time to comprehend that he'd been run down when he'd heard a door opening and shoes moving towards him along the ground... only they hadn't been the boots he'd heard before... they'd been women's shoes...

He'd known he wasn't going to get away again. He remembered thinking he could have broken both legs or cracked his head again, he really hadn't been sure, but he'd known

without a doubt that he wasn't getting back up.

He hadn't kept his eyes open long enough to feel himself be dragged forward and into a whole new mode of transport... one he had briefly been acquainted with just the day before. And he certainly hadn't heard his attacker round the corner only to watch Rinaldo backing it's way out of the lane.

He had no idea that Richard Riley had stood and watched his sister drive off before him and had only been able to tip his head back and give a frustrated shout to the early morning sky. The older sibling had watched as Rinaldo's round headlights got further away and had wanted to scream at the world for bringing the cursed machine into his family's life.

She'd run him down in cold blood and he'd been too late to stop her and for that, Richard felt it his duty to try again. He'd headed back to his car, stopping to grab the leather jacket left behind and put it in the passenger seat before moving around to the driver's side. He hadn't even heard the shout from his workmate Francis come from the nearby gate. He'd taken off after her with renewed determination to put a stop to her plans.

Going with the feeling that she wouldn't go straight home, he turned left at the end of the laneway and headed for the river. He knew the spot that she went to along the river to get away and he thought he could get there before her. He needed to talk to her, to make her see reason... and if he couldn't, then he knew he needed to get her help beyond his giving.

2.00pm

Chris left the Honourable Judge Wicks' office with a determined glint in his eye. Getting a warrant was always a frustrating task, but he hadn't counted on Judge Travis being unexpectedly out of town without notice. Now he was going to have to give Wick's something more before he was allowed to search the woman's home. The fact that she was most likely operating her business without a license was a start, but it wasn't enough.

God help that woman if she had done anything to Vin. He wasn't sure what he'd find there, but she was hiding something, and there was something about that house that was too strange to ignore. He would get what he needed to get inside and if he couldn't, he'd go there anyway. Something was telling him Vin's life could depend on it, and that something was getting more persistent with each hour that passed.

He met up with Ezra at the car, just as the southerner hung up his phone. His face told Chris there was bad news before he spoke.

"That was Nathan. JD and Buck's results are back."

He hesitated and knowing it was rare for Ezra to falter over words, Chris's worry escalated. "Well?"

"The doctor has determined it was definitely food poisoning. You'll have to speak to Nathan for specifics, but he said their samples showed definite traces of toxins produced only in processed foods. Specifically, he said it was the deadliest toxin known that is produced by micro-organisms in food."

Chris swore with passion. Nothing was ever simple with his team. Of course it wasn't some common type of food poisoning. "Are they alright?"

"Nathan believes they'll be all right. Thankfully there's an anti-toxin, which they have all received. The initial symptoms they displayed were related to another lesser poison in their system, the secondary symptoms came on much later with shortness of breath and respiratory problems, JD being the worst according to Nathan. The onset of these symptoms was only recent and it appears the degree of illness is related to the amount of food consumed. The time it takes for the symptoms to show is also varied from individual to individual."

"Have they determined what it was that they ate?"

Ezra shook his head. "However, given that this particular poisoning is rare and in 65% of cases fatal, the health authority is stepping in at once."

Chris had stopped at the word fatal. "What else did Nathan say?"

Ezra looked away for a moment. "He said that without treatment the victim usually dies of respiratory paralysis." His phone rang again and he was relieved this time at the distraction. Chris's face clearly showed his worry over his missing best friend.

"Then we need to stop by the hospital and get that anti-toxin – and Nathan."

Ezra nodded as he listened to the police officer reporting to him, then thanked him after a moment and hung up. He joined Chris in seating himself again in the car.

"They've found Richard's car down by the river."

Chris looked at him as he started the engine, Ezra's face told him there was more.

"And they've found Richard Riley."

2.30pm

Rhonda saw the police car drive past her house and began to get a bad feeling. Were they going to come back? She had no time. 'It's time to take care of things,' a voice told her. 'You have to do it now.'

She left the window and headed out the back of the house, down the rear porch steps and

through the gap in the hedge that ran along the perimeter of the house. She came to a latched gate and opened it, stepping through and moving to the wooden hatch that led down to the basement beneath the house.

When they'd first moved in she had discovered the underground shelter and had immediately known she would set up her business down there. Knowing Richard had a terrible fear of closed spaces was also a payoff for using the area, for he would never bother her by looking into her things.

Luckily for her, her prey usually stalked at night, when her brother was at work, and so she too, worked mostly at night. She lured them in and then brought them down to her work area, wasting no time in introducing them to their chosen fates. But this time was different. This time she had something extra special to work with.

She'd nearly had that young man Francis to use for the plan she'd had growing in her mind, but her brother had seen to driving him off. Well, he wouldn't be interfering again. Tonight she would free a spirit from it's confining skin, using everything she had come to learn to bring freedom to a soul, in turn purifying the body so that it could be shared with others and they could taste the sweetened nectar of death... And her brother would not be coming to stop her. He'd thought he'd known her mind, what she had been planning, but he'd been wrong.

Vin rolled onto his back, using his arms to swing himself over. He couldn't see anything in the complete blackness of the room, but the low hum of a motor and the frosty air reminded him that he was inside some sort of refrigerated storage room. He couldn't think about that though, because that image brought to mind a closed in, tight space – and to realise he was trapped in such a space would be more than he could handle.

He had to get himself up... Why the hell hadn't he just given Buck that woman's number? Then he never would have forked out all that money for dinner and he was pretty sure he never would have been pummelled in the head by her psychotic brother, hauled through dark streets to gain his freedom only to be run down and taken again.

That was the only conclusion he could come to, that her brother had caught him again. And he'd put him in some sort of cold storage chamber and left him to die. He didn't know the details, but he figured if he made it out of there without freezing to death, he could piece it together later. Maybe the intention was just that – for him to freeze to death... To hell with that.

But then he heard definite footsteps outside his cold prison walls and for a moment had the urge to call for help... but he dismissed it quickly. Chances were this was no ally.

After long seconds, in which he heard a lock being turned, a sliver of light appeared, widening with the sound of a shifting of metal until it revealed the silhouette of a person in

the open door. The frost from the room immediately swirled out the opening to shroud the form in an almost supernatural fog and he squinted at the figure, trying to make sense of his blurred vision until he finally realised what he was seeing; Rhonda.

2.40pm

Having checked on his men at the hospital and picked up Nathan, together with the precious anti-toxin, Chris let his renewed determination drive him to their next destination; the river. He didn't say a word to Ezra, nor to Nathan, as he pulled the car up at the crime scene.

It was an isolated patch of river bank, sloping steeply down to the water and reachable only by an overgrown dirt track that led down off a quiet road. But right now, it was awash with activity as men and women moved around carrying out their jobs.

He stopped beside the taped off area, flashing his badge again to the officers at the scene as he, Ezra and Nathan all got out, the beauty of the early afternoon sun lost to them as it gleaned off the surface of the river below down the steep, rocky bank.

"Captain Larabee?" A police Sergeant asked as they approached, recognising the ATF leader.

"Yes," Chris said, not recognising the man in return. "What can you tell me about what happened here?"

They moved toward the red Celica, noticing the large dent in the rear bumper and trunk and the strange angle it had been left at, pointing down to the steep drop to the water below.

"The forensics' team are already into it. They'll tell you more than I can."

They walked over to several plain-clothed investigators and Chris recognised the team's leader, a dark haired man a few years older than himself.

"Chris," the man said, recognising him as he stood up. "Good to see you."

"Martin," Chris said and they shook hands.

"I've heard about your missing agent," Martin said.

"Then you'll understand our sense of urgency on this case. What can you tell me so far?"

The investigators intelligent eyes shifted back to the car and he led them first to the rear of the car. "It appears it was hit from behind. We don't have anything yet on the other vehicle, other than it appears to have been a large make, with a front grill high enough to ride over the rear of this car, ramming it down towards the river bank before backing up and coming

in again to hit the driver's side."

He drew them closer to the trunk, pointing to large scrapes in the metal without touching it. "We've found traces of an unusual pink, matt paint left behind from the impact here."

They looked at the paint closely and saw that he was right, each thinking the same thing. Chris turned to Ezra, this was exactly what they'd needed.

Ezra nodded, "Consider it done." He moved off to head back to the car.

"Call me as soon as you have it, I'll meet you over there with backup." He turned to Martin. "I believe the second vehicle you're looking for might be an ice-cream truck, owned by the sister of the man who owns this Celica here."

Martin frowned. "That would explain the size of the vehicle." He led them around to the passenger door and they saw that it was crushed in, pink paint again noticeable on the torn metal. But beyond the dented frame, they had their first look at Richard Riley, slumped over the steering wheel and pinned by the door that trapped him. "Does his sister have a motive?"

Chris shrugged. "We have a theory that they may have had a fight last night, nothing more at this stage."

"Cause of death?" Nathan said, moving closer beside Chris.

Martin used his gloved hand to point to the man's neck and they made out the blood and the deep gash that started from the side.

"His throat was slit, ear to ear. Look's like he was stabbed first," he pointed to his own neck. "Right in the larynx. Hard to say which one was dealt first right now. His ID tells us he's Richard Riley, aged thirty-seven, born in the UK and here on a working visa. He's also the owner of the vehicle, purchased from a local dealer two months ago."

"Is there anything that indicates it might have been a woman?"

"Well, we'll know more soon..." Martin moved back around to the body and lifted the man's head so that they saw his deathly white face, staring obscenely at the bright afternoon sun. "But my guess at this stage was that he was trapped by the impact against the door, and then attacked through the broken window. There are fragments of blue material there," he pointed to the glass shards still lining the edge of the door, "where the assailant leant through to strike. The strikes appear to have come from above, while he was still seated and his body was twisted toward the door. He was trapped and there was no need to overpower him. I couldn't guess at this stage the size of the attacker, but this suggests he didn't need to be a powerful man to carry this out."

"Or woman," Chris affirmed.

"Or woman," Martin amended, straightening and leading them around the car to the passenger door. "It doesn't look like he was the only one in the car, either." He pointed to dark smear of blood on the passenger window. "And it looks like whoever was in this seat had a head wound. We've also lifted several strands of hair from this side, judging by the length I could make an early presumption that it was a woman."

Before Chris could say anything to the contrary, Nathan called his name and caught his attention as he stood peering inside the car. He followed his gaze as he answered Martin's prediction. "My agent has long, lightish brown hair. It could be his." Then his eyes fell on what Nathan was looking at and he felt cold fear trace down his throat. "And if that doesn't tell us it was him, his jacket might."

Martin looked inside and saw the suede jacket on the seat. "I'd presumed it was the victim's... you're sure it's your agents?"

Chris looked at the familiar coat. "No doubt about it." He stood for a moment, trying to come to grips with the knowledge that Vin really had been in this car, and in real trouble. He had a headwound and there was no telling if he was sick and in need of that anti-toxin Nathan had with him.

He looked over through the space to the driver's seat and the corpse of Richard Riley. What the hell had happened here? Why would Rhonda kill her own brother? Had he taken Vin, angry that she had gone out with him, as he had been angry about Francis? He wanted answers. He turned to Nathan.

"I want to head over to the house and keep watch for her until Ezra gets the go-ahead to move in."

Nathan nodded and Chris turned to Martin.

"You need the coat?" He knew that he did, but it didn't stop him from wanting to get it out of that car.

"For now. I'll make sure it's returned to your agent."

Chris was grateful for the message of hope and nodded solemnly. "You'll let me know what you find?"

Martin nodded. "Of course."

Vin tried to sit up as Rhonda approached him, but couldn't get his arms to push him up. His chest felt tight and his body was a combination of pain and numbness. He couldn't act with any urgency, his body bent on slowing him down, and he was shivering so bad now that he thought his teeth might shatter. He tried to clamp his jaw shut, but that had little effect and he could only watch on as the woman approached him.

He wanted to speak, but couldn't seem to put any words together and realised it had become hard to swallow. It was as if the cold had seeped into his skull and was robbing him of thought. He couldn't think, nor could he act to defend himself.

"Hello again," she said, moving closer and squatting before him, looking at him through the frost that had appeared since she had opened the door.

Vin knew the door was open behind her, but the opening was no more than a distant, blurred shape in the distance. It was unreachable, he couldn't even lift his head from the ground.

She reached out a hand to his face and he instinctively turned his head away from her touch, but her fingers found the cut at his temple. "He hit you, I know, but I'll make you forget all that soon."

He tried to speak again, tried to find some words to say that would stop what was happening and get him to a warmer place, but he was shivering too hard to manage it.

"Sh... I know how tired you are. The cold does that too you. I put them all in here and they scratch around and carry on at first, but then they get really quiet after a day or two and then they just go to sleep... I would let you go to sleep too, but they're coming, and I don't have time."

Vin didn't register her words, they held no meaning for him now. His unfocused eyes rested on a mound of fur lying close by as he heard her laugh.

"That was a hard one to catch, that one. They are such wary creatures, you have to really earn their trust before they'll come to you..."

For a moment Vin thought he knew what that pile of unmoving fur was and his mind threw him an image of the collar of her jacket. "Cra-zy," he finally got out, his teeth chattering the word into broken syllables.

She looked down at him for a moment, then tilted her head to the side. "Now, you've just been spending too much time with my brother."

He watched her stand up and leave him alone and for a moment the door closed again, leaving him once more in darkness. By the time she came back he wasn't thinking of how he could free himself any more. In fact, he didn't seem to care what was happening around him at all.

He wasn't alone for long. She came back and he felt her touch his face again.

"You're nearly asleep. That's good, but not just yet. We have something to do first."

He felt his arms move and heard the rattling of chain as his hands were pulled over his head and secured. He didn't even think to struggle, because he didn't care. He was barely aware of anything any more.

"All right, now I think I'd better tie your feet too. You know," she paused, looking at his heavy-lidded eyes. "This is a first time for me too."

She giggled then and the sound of it grated through his head as he felt her tie his legs. He tried to focus on her outline, but it was impossible. His vision was useless. He tried to say something, anything, but it was beyond him.

She finished her work and stood again, leaving him once more, only to return again and kneel beside him. He studied her shape and heard her talking again.

"I got this book here," she showed the open volume to him, not deterred when he gave no response, "from South Korea. It took a while to track it down... I've been reading it, but it's a lot different when you actually go to do it... See up there?" She pointed to the corner of the ceiling to his left, but he did not look. "Well... I tried it on that one, but he didn't last very long. He died before I even got to slit his skin."

Damn her to hell, those words reached him even through the walls of his muddled brain and he felt his eyes move to the ceiling as if by their own will. There was a row of small carcasses, his vision taking delight in doubling them up in his view, hanging above them. What the hell had she done?

'Do you like cats?' he heard a voice ask him again in his mind.

He felt his shivering start anew and this time wasn't sure if it was the cold as she disappeared from his blurred and fading view yet again. He heard her rummaging around outside of the room, still talking to him over her shoulder.

"So I was thinking, maybe this book doesn't just apply to cats and dogs. I really don't see the difference. If you can eat a cat, or a dog, or a cow for that matter, why not a human? They feed cows to cows, pigs to pigs, that's how all those diseases get started... why not human to humans?"

Vin didn't make out what she'd said, he could only hear her voice, and it was probably a blessing. She didn't stop talking, however, when she returned and knelt again beside him and this time he heard her clearly, even if it took several seconds to process the words.

"If I do this right, I'll get a lot of meat and there will be plenty to go into the processing. I made sure I got extra tins so that I can store it all. You're going to reach a lot of people."

He felt his shirt being cut away and then the meaning of the words hit him. WHAT THE HELL?! She was going to cut him up?! Use him for FOOD?! He'd found himself in some pretty bad situations before, but NEVER had anyone threatened to feed him to people. But

while his mind processed this information, his body had no other reaction other than an accelerated heart beat. While his lungs shut down, his heart seemed to be picking up the slack. He couldn't move, even if he wasn't chained to the wall, and he still knew enough to know things were about to get a lot worse for him.

"They say it's good to stretch the limbs before they're cut..." she studied his dilated pupils. "I don't think you're tired any more... that's strange. You should almost be asleep. I think this might help."

He felt her move above his head before he felt the first cut rake down his forearm, deeply drawing out precious warm blood. He managed to actually struggle, but it wasn't much more than a slight jerk of his body, before she moved to his other arm and repeated the motion, sitting back.

"There," she said, watching the blood well and flow over the wounds to the cold floor. "That should help. Let's give that a second."

God help him, he knew enough about killing an animal to know that she was bleeding him in her own weird, sick way.

2.55pm

Chris pulled up outside the house with a squeal of tyres and saw that Ezra was still not there as he looked at the squad car parked further up the road. His sense of urgency was sky high and he wasn't prepared to wait a second longer. He opened the car door and studied the seemingly quiet house.

"Chris," Nathan said, hanging up his phone after calling for an ambulance to stand by. "Give Ezra another minute. He's bringing more backup."

Chris turned back and his face showed impatience and anger. "Vin might not have another minute." If she could slit her own brother's throat, there was no telling what she could do. But as he stepped towards the house he heard a car sliding around the corner at great speed and turned to see Ezra flying down the road towards them.

The car braked to a halt and Ezra was out the door before another squad car turned into the street, having followed behind. He looked to Chris and patted his pocket, indicating he had the official papers that would make their forcible entry legal, but knew that it wouldn't have stopped his leader from going in after Vin.

They grouped together and decided on a plan. Ezra would lead half of the men around the back and Chris and Nathan would move in with the remainder through the front door. The two of them would use their open phone lines to communicate.

"That's better," Vin heard her tell him softly. "It's not good to be panicked, it releases bad toxins into the bloodstream."

He couldn't open his eyes any more and didn't want to see her face above him anyway. He was happy to once again realise that he just didn't care what happened to him. He was falling into a blissful kind of sleep.

He heard her rambling but wasn't listening. "Sometimes they beat the dogs alive. They say it adds flavour to the flesh and makes the meat tender... but I think they've got it the wrong way around. You have to put the animal to sleep first. See? I'm not cruel or anything."

Again her laugh grated his nerves and he felt the cold point of a blade touch his chest, right beside his heart. She used her other hand to tap the side of his face, checking if he was still awake. He didn't plan it, but his eyes opened again against his will.

"Still here..."

He wasn't sure if she was happy about that or not as he tried again to swallow through an uncooperative throat. Despite the numbing cold he could feel the wounds on his arms burning despite the cold air.

"Do you think you're ready now?" He heard her giggle. "I've never been able to ask that question before. Cat's can't answer you when you talk to them!" She found that oddly funny.

But Vin didn't answer her either. He remained silent, his body closing down from too long in the frigid air, his brain settling into a peaceful kind of sleep. He was so weak, it was impossible to stay awake any longer, yet when she tapped his face again, his eyes opened once more.

"There's still fight in you..." he heard her whisper. "You know, sometimes they put the cats in boiling water, alive, just like lobsters... the cats fight, but they say a lot can be gained from drinking the water afterward."

He felt the blade on his chest again.

"This is where I'm going to cut you open."

He felt the knife scrape down his bare skin, cutting just deep enough to draw blood. She was marking the spot for the deeper incision she was going to make, before she gutted him like an animal. She was playing with him... He felt the cut stop above his navel.

"I'll clean you out properly, I'm very efficient. Of course, there'll be a lot more this time... but you won't feel it by then. But you can feel it now can't you..."

Again he said nothing and she couldn't explain why, but she wished he would. She wanted

to hear someone talk to her...

He felt the knife dig deeper into his stomach, right where she'd stopped the incision line and felt his head move with the pain.

"Yes, you can feel it."

Rhonda smiled. He wouldn't talk to her, but it really wasn't his fault. Soon he wouldn't be talking to anybody, ever again.

Chris approached the house cautiously, Nathan, Ezra and six backup officers spreading out around him. He signalled for Ezra to head around the back with the three officers as planned and moved up the front steps with Nathan and the remaining men.

When he knocked at the door, he wasn't surprised that there was no answer this time and after a long pause he proceeded to kick it in.

With practiced movements, they made their way through the lounge, securing the room before moving on toward the kitchen. Nothing seemed different to when they'd been there earlier and there was no sound of anyone in the house. They searched the bedrooms, noticing that the fur trim that dominated the décor extended throughout the entire house.

"All clear in here," he said into his phone, listening for Ezra's response.

"Nothing so far back here... except some undefinable... animal hides..."

He could here the disgust in his agent's voice.

"We've found a gate and are checking it out."

Chris looked at Nathan and pointed back out toward the lounge room, wanting to head out toward the back and meet up with Ezra. The house was clear.

At that precise moment, Rhonda heard the gate upstairs open and her eyes grew wide, her hand stilling on the blade. Vin was still clinging lightly to awareness, but rapidly giving in.

"It's them," she told him, shaking her head as she studied his closed eyes, wondering if they would open again.

She was in turmoil. If she'd been able to finish, they would never have known he was here, but if they found him now... what would they do to her?

She couldn't let them down here to find her work. She moved to get up, but then stopped

again in thought, looking the bleeding body over. They would not get him, either way.

Vin was barely aware of the knife as it came back to his skin, this time lingering over his throat. He couldn't see the indecision in Rhonda's eyes as she looked at the peak of his adam's apple, letting the razor sharp blade draw another bead of blood from his skin.

She was remembering Richard, seeing his eyes again as he had gasped a final breath of shock as he turned her way. Her hand shook, causing the cut she had already made to Vin's throat to widen. Who would have thought she would feel such regret...

Chris reached the back door just as Ezra reached the site of the wooden hatch that led underneath the house.

"There's a basement of some kind," he informed Chris.

"Right behind you, hold your position until we get there."

Ezra waited and after a moment heard a loud curse behind them. One of the officers had obviously run into the one of the dead hides he had seen a moment ago himself.

"Quiet," Chris said firmly and the man looked away from the ATF Captain's glare.

The uniformed officer looked guilty, but no less fearful. The place was giving him the creeps.

Rhonda heard them coming; heard scratching around on the surface above her. They were going to come in... the butcher's blade wavered and she turned to eye the door. She needed more time!

That's when she decided to close them both in lock the door from behind. She'd installed the lock to keep Richard out in case he ever came down here and was now thankful for that. She took the cold metal from Vin's throat and got up to shut the door, closing it firmly, not able to conceal the loud noise of the metal hitting the frame, before turning the lock with a resounding click.

Ezra heard a loud bang of metal come from under the wooden door and watched the remaining men as they joined him. He stepped back to allow Chris access to the hatch.

"I just heard something. It sound's like someone could be down there," he informed the new arrivals.

Not wasting another second Chris lifted the door, the dry wood creaking as he pulled on the metal handle and propped it up against the wall, leaving it open. He tried to peer into the

dim space below and could see the outline of a wide room with too many dark shadows for his liking, but it didn't stop him from heading down.

He addressed the officers. "Two of you men go back to the front and watch the perimeter, see if that ambulance is here yet and if not, call it in again. The rest of you keep watch up here for anything trying to come in – or out."

The officer's nodded and Chris disappeared down the hatch. It was then that the terrible smell hit him and he could not stop the dark thoughts that entered his mind. If Vin was down there, what the hell had she done to him?

He descended the wooden stairs, facing forward, Ezra and Nathan right on his heels and guns drawn. It was eerily quiet and as they got a better view of the room, it was Nathan that spoke first.

"What the hell is going on down here?!" he whispered harshly.

"It would appear there is more than ice-cream on the menu," Ezra said softly and felt the tension coming from Chris.

They each moved away from the stairs and spread out through the freezing cold room, looking into each shadow until they knew it was empty. Realising the room was clear they took a harder look at what they had stumbled upon, and each of them felt a chill up his spine.

It was like a butcher's room. There were large, stainless steel benches around the walls with knives of all shapes and sizes hanging from hooks, but that wasn't the worst of it. There were stacks of white containers and it was from them that the terrible smell was emanating.

"Ezra, take a look in those," Chris pointed to one of the largest sets of the plastic tubs that was closest to the southern agent.

Ezra's eyebrows shot up. "Me?!" his voice actually broke on the word. "Surely Mr Jackson would be more suited to the task."

"Ezra." Chris's voice left no room for discussion.

Ezra cursed under his breath and moved to the closest container, his face a grimace of complete distaste as he pried open the lid.

Neither Nathan nor Chris was prepared for his gasp of horror as they watched him jump back and drop the lid as if it had burned his skin.

"Well?" Chris asked.

"It's... my God... they're..."

Chris strode past both men and looked down at what had made his most eloquently spoken agent lose his ability to string three words together.

"Jesus Christ."

Nathan, too, moved to look and took Chris's spot when his leader turned away, a hand held over his mouth.

It was a container of eyes. White, raw, sightless eyes cut from countless skulls.

"Sweet God."

Suddenly they didn't want to know what was in the rest of the containers.

"What's that humming noise?" Chris asked after a moment and they all listened intently.

Nathan pursed his lips as he stepped towards the far wall of the room, moving slowly as he listened. "Sounds like it's coming from this direction."

They noticed the wall had a tall panel of metal that ran almost to the ceiling. Reaching out, Nathan put his hand to the surface.

"It's freezing," he told him, searching higher for some sort of latch to open it.

Chris moved closer to study the door and reached for the handle that Nathan had missed, pulling on it and finding it locked.

"Some sort of cool room, or refrigerated storage," Nathan guessed.

"If I hadn't just looked into the depths of hell, I would have presumed this might be where she kept her ice-cream..."

Ezra shook his head as Chris glanced at him. There was no telling what they'd find in there, but it wasn't going to be good.

"If you gentlemen will allow me?"

They let him through and watched as he pulled a card from his wallet and slid it through the crease between the door and the frame.

"Ezra, that shit only works in the –"

An audible click cut Nathan's words off and Ezra flashed a quick grin as he tugged the door open.

"You were saying, Mr Jackson?"

Nathan just shook his head and put a hand to the door.

"Wait," Chris said, moving in front and taking the lead. He didn't want his men going in to face whatever was in there ahead of him.

He stepped forward into the darkness, holding his gun ready.

Rhonda watched the door open wider and saw the first man begin to enter, stepping closer to the light and holding her knife behind her back. She waited, making sure she wouldn't miss, letting him take one more step into her lair...

Chris had no time to react, the knife came at him with a speed that shocked him and he didn't manage to get off a shot before he felt the blade sink into his shoulder and cried out in shock and pain.

"Chris!" Nathan shouted, seeing him stagger and stepping forward, only to find a woman confronting them all with a knife in her hand.

"Stay back!" she spat at them, holding her weapon before her.

Nathan pulled Chris back and Ezra took the lead. Chris was holding pressure over the wound with his hand.

"It's over," he called past Ezra, seeing her stare out at them wildly. "Drop the knife and come out of there."

Rhonda stared through the door at the men. "Go to hell," she answered.

With one eye on the crazed woman, Nathan looked beyond her to the body lying on the concrete floor, blood coating his exposed arms and chest. Ezra, too, saw the man and both realised instantly who they were looking at.

"Chris," Nathan said, knowing his Captain could not see the ground inside. "She has Vin in there."

"Yes I have, so move back!" she shouted, hearing them talk.

To their surprise, she suddenly turned and moved fast to head back to Vin, but before she could use him as a shield, a single shot rang out and both Nathan and Chris turned their stunned gazes to Ezra's smoking gun. The southerner didn't look back at them though, he had already moved in to disarm her and see to Vin.

Nathan joined him, shaking his head at the change in the situation as he stepped into the freezing space.

"She's alright," Ezra called, kicking her knife towards the doorway and struggling to get a hold on the resisting woman. "Nathan, a hand here?"

Nathan moved in and grabbed her, eyeing the graze on her arm where Ezra's bullet had failed to cause any real damage.

"Cuff her and get her out of here," Chris instructed, wanting to get to Vin but not able to in the overpopulated space.

They managed to pull her arms back and Ezra secured the handcuffs as she cried out, her arm protesting the rough treatment.

"I've got her, Nathan, see to Vin," the southerner said, dragging the still protesting women with him to the door.

Chris stepped back to allow them through, looking into the hate blaring from the woman's eyes and seeing a madness there that shocked him.

"Watch her, Ezra," he called after him. "...And nice shooting."

Ezra turned to look back and saw Chris nod at him, giving both thanks and praise for his quick thinking, before he turned back to drag the women up the stairs.

"Chris, are you alright?" Nathan called, kneeling down to Vin's side.

Chris came into the room, still holding his own shoulder as he took in the aftermath of the lightning-fast siege. "I'm ok. How is he? And what the fuck did she do to him?" He eyed the deep lines of blood that ran down his forearms and the long thin trail that had been marked down his chest, stopping over his stomach.

"I don't know yet. Keep pressure on your shoulder!" Nathan said automatically, not looking behind him to know Chris had stopped as he tried to assess Vin's condition.

"Vin? Can you hear me?" he asked, determining quickly that although his breathing was alarmingly slow, he was indeed alive. "We need to get him out of here, now," he told Chris. "Where are those paramedics?"

"Coming in now," Chris said, hearing a shout from above. He could see the trouble that Vin was having breathing and didn't need Nathan to tell him that the fact that he wasn't shivering was a bad sign. He knew what hypothermia could do.

Two men climbed down warily, both obviously put off by the strange location, if not the pungent smell of decaying flesh.

"We have an agent down. Through here," he told them both.

One of the paramedic's paused and looked around the room. "What the hell is that smell?!"

The second man came to Chris, looking at his wounded shoulder.

"I'm alright, see to him first."

"Is this the agent that may be suffering from botulism?" the other man asked, holding a hand over his mouth and nose now as he came further into the room.

Chris blinked, deferring to Nathan.

"Yes," Nathan called out, hearing the question and getting up to let them have access to Vin. He was alarmingly cold and unresponsive. "He's not responding and his breathing is slow and laboured. He's showing definite signs of hypothermia but I don't know if he's been exposed to the toxin as the others have."

He eyed the cuts on his arms and torso. The arms would probably need stitching, but on their own, they would not have been dire injuries. But given that Vin couldn't afford to lose any more precious energy, they were contributing to his unstable condition.

He joined Chris at the door, ready for the question before it came.

"Botulism?"

"It's the form of food poisoning they have."

"So give him the anti-toxin you brought."

Nathan shook his head. "Not until we know if he has it. Right now they need to get him warm and watch his respiration. If he does have it, it's probably too late for the anti-toxin now," he told him straight.

Chris looked at Nathan. "You're saying it could kill him and there's nothing they can give him?"

"I'm saying I don't know anything yet," Nathan told him straight. "We'll have to see what the tests show."

Chris studied the men as they hovered over Vin's form, working to assess his injuries. Botulism... he didn't like the sound of that at all. Simple 'food poisoning' sounded a whole lot less evil.

"Come on Chris, let's let them get him out of here. I need to stop you bleeding from that wound."

Chris felt the blood still flowing from the wound and reluctantly agreed, seeing that they were getting ready to move Vin anyway and he'd just be in the way done there. As he turned, however, he noticed something gleam in the corner of his eye and looked up toward the ceiling. "Oh my God... Nathan."

Nathan turned and looked up where Chris was staring, horrified at the ceiling. The paramedic's also sensed something was wrong and looked.

"What the hell *is* this place?!" one asked, giving his attention back to his patient but feeling a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold run through his bones.

Chris took his eyes from the high railing that ran along the roof, the carcasses of several animals hanging from hooks along it's length. He looked back at Vin's alarmingly pale face, his eyes going to the long cut that marked the length of his torso and refused to look again at the rail. He knew what that women was going to do to him.

"Get him out of here," he ordered the men.

"We're ready now. We'll bring him up behind you."

Chris nodded, taking one last look to make sure Vin was still breathing before following Nathan back up the stairs, using only his good arm to pull himself up with help from his agent as he reached the top.

His phone rang as he let Nathan guide him back from the hatch to look at the knife wound.

"Chris, it's Buck. What's going on?"

Chris watched the activity around the basement opening as they worked to bring Vin up, keeping him supported and manoeuvring him through the tight opening expertly, but still with difficulty.

"We've got her. She had Vin, don't know if he's sick yet, they're taking him in to the hospital now."

"Is he ok?"

"Jesus Nathan," Chris said as the medic put pressure to his wound. "He's unconscious. She..." Chris shook his head, how did he describe it. "She had him locked in some sort of refrigerated room. He's suffering from hypothermia and we don't know what else yet. I'll fill you in when I get down there."

Buck had heard Chris growl at Nathan. "And you?"

"I'm ok, she stabbed me in the shoulder before we got her."

"And did you find out anything about the ice-cream?"

Chris looked at Nathan. "I've got a feeling it's more than just the ice-cream. I'll tell you when you're up to it."

"You can't say that and just go... What do you think it is?"

Chris watched as one of the paramedics moved behind Vin, calling the situation in over his radio. He listened to them say that the patient was experiencing severe hypothermia and respiratory distress, but was distracted again by Buck.

"Hey, you with me?"

Chris nodded. "I'm with you, Buck, I gotta go. I'll be down there soon. I'm putting Nathan on, he'll update you."

He handed his phone to Nathan without a word and shrugged off his helping hands as he followed after Vin.

5.45pm

Buck looked at Vin's sleeping form and smiled at Chris as he entered the intensive care room. He'd had to work hard to get the nurse to let him in. "5.45... you know this was the exact time we were sitting in the bar last night when she called him."

Chris looked over his shoulder at Buck, not finding that a happy revelation, but he was too relieved that it was over to give it further thought.

"How you feeling?"

Buck shrugged. "A million dollars after today night."

Chris looked at Buck's face and saw that his friend really was ok before turning back to the bed. Finally he saw what he'd been waiting for since Vin had stopped breathing in the ambulance and moved forward in his seat, reaching out with the arm that wasn't immobilised in a sling to place a hand over Vin's arm.

Vin blinked and turned his head away from the overhead light, finding it too bright to deal with for the moment. The mask over his face delivering warm, moist oxygen, hindered his view and made him want to get a breath of dry air, but he couldn't seem to get his arms to move to take it off.

He was warmer, that much he knew, although he wasn't feeling much yet. *Hospital.*

He blinked again until he focused his still blurry gaze on a pair of concerned green eyes, trying to speak but failing. He still had trouble swallowing.

"Hey there, rest easy. Doc says it'll be hard to talk for a while."

Chris saw Vin's eyes as they showed his inner battle to remember what had happened and let him work his way through his emotions until he saw the blue eyes calm once more, knowing he'd caught up when a question came to his eyes.

"Yeah, we got her, so go back to sleep."

Vin seemed to relax and Buck could only watch on in awe as he saw the blue eyes open again and ask another silent question, to which Chris responded.

"He's dead."

Vin's eyes closed again and this time he slept, relaxed in the knowledge that the crazy woman who'd wanted to gut him like a pig and serve him up for dessert had been taken care of. He knew Chris was sitting by his side and that was enough to let him relax and let go of the panic that he still felt at not being able to defend himself.

"Glad you guys could catch up," Buck said sarcastically. He'd always been more than amazed at the silent communication the two men managed to pull off.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?"

Buck grinned. "Nope. Unlike Junior here and the kid, Josiah and I didn't consume more than our share of that homegrown poison. It's a restraint that must come with age..."

Chris gave him a look and Buck caved.

"OK, I snuck out. I'll go back in a minute. I just wanted to make sure you were both ok."

Chris merely grunted in response and they both remained quiet a moment, looking at Vin's relaxed, pale face through the mask. He was hooked to an IV of warm fluid, the doctor's still working to get his temperature up to an acceptable level.

"He was damn lucky," Buck said quietly.

Chris looked at his old friend, seeing the worry in his face that matched his own.

"I know," he nodded, his eyes returning to the bed.

He didn't know when he'd get the chance to tell Vin just how lucky he'd been. The doctor's had told them he would need close watching for weeks yet, until the deadly toxin they had indeed discovered in his system was destroyed completely. Even then, he would find

shortness of breath a problem for a long time to come.

The forensics' team had pieced together most of what had happened during Vin's twenty four hour date from hell, but there were still some things they hadn't worked out.

Had Vin gone with her brother to try and escape, or had the man been about to do him more harm? And what would drive a woman to murder her own brother so brutally as she had?

The murderer herself was giving no insight to the questions. She had said nothing and they could not push her for answers while she was being treated and assessed to determine her mental state.

Chris had to admit the possibility that there were some things they might never know. But they had Vin back, and that was that mattered right then. And what they did know somehow seemed more than enough.

"How long do you think until I can tease him about this?"

The question had Chris's eyes shooting up as he turned to look up at Buck, seeing the intent in his face. A smile reached his own lips as he let a tense breath escape his chest.

"Let's just say, once they give him the all clear to return to work, you're free to hassle all you want."

Buck nodded. That was fair. The damned Texan had stolen his date, and he'd done it with blatant cockiness. Some might have thought he'd suffered enough for that, catching a deadly illness and almost freezing to death while he waited to have his stomach slit open... but Buck didn't. That kind of thing was impermissible in his book – and unforgivable.

"But just know, when you do decide to give payback, I'll be sure to tell JD just what the secret ingredient in that ice-cream was that he ate so much of..."

Buck's eyes flew to Chris's. "You can't." He'd sheltered the kid from that knowledge since Ezra had told him, with more than a hint of malice he'd thought...

"Try me."

Buck frowned and took a seat beside Chris, his thoughts of revenge now dissipating. If JD found out what they'd discovered down in that workshop of horrors, he didn't think therapy would be enough to pull him through. Hell, they'd told Josiah only a half hour ago and the man had nearly passed out on the spot, then turned and muttered something about finding the chapel as he'd left his own bed.

"Damn lucky isn't the half of it."

Buck looked at Chris, hearing the emotion in the raw words as he repeated what he'd said

a moment before. "Yep," he agreed, looking again at Vin. He'd been through hell. He might joke about taking revenge, but he wasn't sure what he would have done in Ezra's situation. He didn't think he would have been so forgiving with his bullet if he'd been the one to walk in and see Vin laid low like that. That woman deserved everything she got.

Epilogue

One month later, on just another quiet day in Denver, Rhonda found herself looking up at another padded roof. In her mind she had convinced herself that she was ensconced in Rinaldo's protective shell... but every now and then she questioned why this shell didn't go anywhere... or why there were no windows to gaze from.

She looked down at the drawing in her lap, the crayon they had given her not giving her much to work with, but still it was taking shape. She let her hand move over the sheet, adding more blood to the ground beneath the dying body of the man, his throat slit from the claw of the cat that was now sitting staring back at her with a grin. The cat had killed her brother...

Her hand moved to frantically scribble out the image, her hands coming over her ears as she rolled to her side and crawled up in a ball, humming softly to her herself. The tune was both calming and filled with sorrow as she repeated it over and over and over... only now no one would answer the call. She was completely alone, trapped forever inside Rinaldo's hull to visit lands only she could reach.

fini

Feedback? I live for it! :-)
<email me by clicking here>
Cheers!