



Song of The Heart

by Deb Walsh

T hursday

"You're joking. Tell me you're joking, Chief," Peter Caine demanded disbelievingly. He stood in Strenlich's office by the closed door, and stared hard at the Chief of Detectives, trying to find reason to believe Strenlich was pulling his chain ... again.

"I'm not joking, Peter." Strenlich allowed himself a momentary smile before adding, "Captain's orders."

"Yeah, well, I'm gonna talk to Paul about that," Peter told him angrily, reaching for the doorknob.

"You'll do no such thing, Detective," Strenlich commanded him, the cold steel of his official voice dropping into place as he rose from behind his desk. "You've been given an order. You'll follow it. You will *not* use your personal relationship with the Captain to get out of this assignment."

Peter snorted. "Why not? Aren't you guys making use of my ... 'personal relationship' for this case?" When that tack didn't offer any joy, he tried a new one, "C'mon, Chief. We broke up months ago. She's not going to be happy to see me back on her doorstep."

"Captain's orders, Pete," Strenlich enunciated carefully. "You two have a known history together, and you hanging around her will draw less attention than some stranger suddenly coming into her life."

"Y'wanna bet? We had a pretty spectacular breakup. Anybody who knows Tyler isn't going to believe for a minute that she'd take me back. / sure as hell don't."

"Yeah, well, we've all got our crosses to bear, Pete. Your job is to protect her while we track down this crazy who's been stalking her. Handwriting analysis confirms this guy's the same one who stalked the Anderson woman — so we've got to believe these threats are serious, and we don't want another corpse on our hands. DeBrett's working the evening shift at the club and you've got the graveyard duty. We'll work out who's taking the day shift later. You and Tyler don't have to like each other, you just stick with her and keep her safe."

"Yeah. And what am I supposed to tell Kelly, huh? 'Oh, I won't be sleeping at my apartment for a couple nights 'cos I'm just protecting the woman I was engaged to before I met you - nothing personal, no reason for concern.' Yeah, right."

"What'samatter, Pete? Not as over as you thought?"

Peter looked at Strenlich for a moment, considering this new idea. Then he shook his head. "Oh, it's over, Chief. Dead and buried."

"Good. Then get to work, Detective."

You're going to ... *what?*" Kelly Blaine asked, snapping a carrot between her fingers with a sudden anger. She was standing in Peter's kitchen, making a salad for dinner, and he had just informed her of his new assignment.

Busying himself with chopping onions, he didn't look up, merely repeated in as nonchalant a manner as possible, "I'm assigned to protect Tyler Smith."

"Your ex-girlfriend, Tyler Smith? Your *ex-fiancée*, Tyler Smith?" she elaborated flippantly. "And who decided this, hmm? Did you volunteer?"

"No, I didn't volunteer," Peter retorted sulkily. "I tried to get out of it, but Strenlich wouldn't let me."

"So it was Frank's idea," Kelly suggested, eyeing him with a slightly more hopeful - and less homicidal - expression.

Peter put down his knife and cadged a piece of carrot. He popped it in his mouth, crunching away for a few seconds before replying. "Well, no. Actually it was Paul."



"Paul," she repeated, sudden nervous energy making her bob slightly as she said the name. "Blaisdell's idea. Didn't she perform at your sister's wedding reception? The Blaisdell's *like* Tyler," she added through gritted teeth.

Peter looked up at that, his attitude apprehensive. This was not going well at all. "And they *like* you, too. Mom just hasn't felt comfortable inviting us both over to dinner too much 'cos since Carolyn's married, she doesn't want to look like she's pushing us in the same direction. Besides, Tyler doesn't like *me*. "

"You've discussed this with your mother, have you?" she asked, her eyes sparking fire.

"Well, yeah," Peter answered defensively. "I mean, you've said a couple of times you don't think Paul likes you. It's kinda awkward asking him what he thinks - after all, he's a high-ranking police official. And my commanding officer. So I asked Mom," he told her, shrugging.

Kelly waited a heartbeat, two before prompting, "And?"

"And nothing. He doesn't dislike you."

"But he doesn't approve."

"Approve of what?"

"Two cops. Together."

"Well ... she didn't say that."

"No? But you suspect she was thinking it, don't you? And how do you feel about two cops being involved in a relationship, Peter?" Kelly challenged, arms folded aggressively across her chest.

"What does it matter what we do for a living? We ... you and me ... it's working, isn't it? Does it matter that we're both cops? Would it be any different if you were a -"

"A lounge singer?" Kelly snarled.

"She's not a lounge singer, Kelly. Okay. If you were a lounge singer. How would you feel about dating a cop? Probably the same way Tyler did. She couldn't cut it, Kelly. She couldn't live with the possibility of me coming home some night in a body bag. Can you?" he defied her to answer.

"Can *you*?" she shot back.

Peter straightened suddenly, studying her solemnly. "I don't know," he answered finally, his voice soft.

"I don't know if I can, either," she replied, the fight suddenly drained from her. "I try not to think about it."

"Me, too. And maybe because we are both cops, it's easier for us both to do that ... because to think of you in a ... body bag ... I have to think of me that way, too. And neither one of us can afford to think that way. It's a good way to end up that way."

Kelly nodded slowly, her eyes locked on Peter's. "Do you feel anything for her anymore?" she asked in a small, fragile voice.

Peter glanced away into the middle distance, and shook his head. "I don't know," he admitted honestly. He suddenly felt that this moment was a turning point, that if he shrugged this off, tried to dance around the truth, it would be over between them. Looking directly into her eyes, his face sober, he continued seriously, "I thought I loved her, and I wanted to marry her. When you feel that for someone, is it possible to replace it with nothing?"

Kelly stared at him for a long time before replying, searching his face, the soul behind his eyes. "I don't know," she said at last. Her voice was saddened, a little lost. "If you find ..." she licked her lips and drew a deep breath, "if you find that you can't - replace it with nothing - be honest with me, okay? We don't own each other. If ... well, just let me know, okay?"

"Kelly -" Peter started, reaching for her. "This is an assignment."

"Yeah, of course it is," she told him and went back to chopping vegetables.

The air had grown chill in the apartment, and it never quite warmed up again for the rest of the evening.



Later on, when Peter came out of the shower to change to assume his assignment at the Agrippa, he found his apartment empty. As he stood in his living room, still dripping water onto the carpet from his shower, he wondered if his life had suddenly become empty, too.

As Peter Caine pulled his car up to the curb outside the Agrippa Club, he sat there, letting the engine idle a moment while he studied the crowd awaiting entrance into the club. Automatically, he catalogued faces, classifying the possibles and the no-ways, his hand straying to his inside coat pocket to assure himself that his badge was in place, the other hand dropping from the steering wheel to check that his gun was secure in its holster. He had a history of coming to the Agrippa armed; everybody knew Peter Caine was a crazy cop. If they'd had any doubt, Tyler would have been sure to erase that for them. For once, he was glad of the reputation.

He put the car back in gear and pulled around to the parking lot, searching for a slot in which to park his car. Toward the back of the lot, back where the streetlights offered only the dimmest of illumination, he found a spot and pulled in, switching off the engine and cutting the lights.

Taking a deep breath, he pushed back in his seat, reminding himself of his assignment. Strenlich had made it clear that the threatening letters and phone calls Tyler had been receiving had rattled her severely, enough for her to report the incidents and accept the offer of police protection. What she didn't know was that the handwriting on the letters matched up with that on the letters Janet Anderson had received before this creep had sliced her up. Although it hadn't been his case, Peter had seen the body at the morgue; it hadn't been a pretty picture, and Janet Anderson had been a beautiful woman, a model for one of the downtown department stores. She'd been sexually assaulted before her death, and Nickie had found evidence that she'd also been tortured before the killer had finally ended her life. He'd needed to talk to someone about it, so Peter had been elected.

Tyler Smith wouldn't be happy to see Peter Caine, he knew that. But he hoped she'd be happy to see his badge, just this once. Despite his protests to the Chief, he was determined to keep Tyler safe and alive, and catch this nutcase in the process.

One more time, he checked to make sure the badge and gun were in place. One more time, he checked the rearview mirror, studying his reflection. One more time, he sighed, and opened the door.

As he trotted down the stairs from the door to the club's floor, his shoulder tingled from the hearty slap Joe the bouncer had given him. Shoulder dislocation or no, it was nice to be welcomed back to the club after his extended absence. He heard his name being called, and looked up, waving automatically. It was Thursday night, and the place was full but not quite packed. For the fourth time that hour, he tugged at his tie and smoothed back his hair, and as he caught himself wondering if he should have taken a breath mint, he stopped short. Shaking his head and smiling to himself, he murmured, "It's not a date, stupid."

Surrounded by people enjoying themselves, Peter Caine looked up at the stage. The band was kicking ass as Tyler belted out a song; a new one, one he'd never heard before. A song about betrayal and loss. Sighing, he glanced around for an empty table, and found one not far from the stage, right in front of an amp. Great. Go on assignment and lose your hearing. Shaking his head again, he dropped into the seat and signalled to the waitress.

"... lo, Peter," he caught as the waitress, or rather his fellow detective, Gretchen DeBrett, came over to take his order. "... ight beer?"

"What?"

"I said," she shouted, cupping her hand to her mouth to mimic a megaphone, "Light beer?"

"Yeah," he shouted back. "Great!"

She leaned a little closer, and dropped her voice to a more normal level. "So far so good, Caine. Nobody's hassled her, and she hasn't said anything about more letters or calls. I talked to Terry the bartender — seems she confides in him pretty much." She was tall, nearly six feet, with dark hair just beginning to gray at the temples. A bodybuilder, she was well-muscled and trim, with an attractive, open face. The modified tuxedo uniform she wore set her figure off to good advantage, while letting any potential problem-child know



that she could handle herself. At a few years older than Peter, she was a veteran of undercover work, with good instincts for who she could trust and who she should scam.

Peter had to smile. Terry was still Tyler's confidant. Some things hadn't changed, at least. "That's good, Gretchen. How long're you on duty?"

"I get off at nine," she answered, glancing at her watch. "Man, I'll be glad to turn this gig over to you — my feet are killing me. I knew there was a reason I went into police work."

"Beats a real job, any day," Peter agreed with a grin.

She smiled slyly, shaking her head as she slipped back into the crowd with his order, and he settled back in his chair. Toying with the matchbook on the table, he surveyed the club, his eyes roving over the patrons, assessing the exits, evaluating the distance between the stage and any likely candidates for his quarry. He caught himself tossing the matchbook up in the air and catching it absently, and smiled bitterly.

"You said you'd stay until I could catch it before you," he whispered to himself, and to the man who wasn't there. "So where are you now?" Touching the matchbook to his lips, he set it down deliberately and played airdrums on the edge of the table until DeBrett returned with his beer. He pulled out his wallet and peeled a couple of ones out, handing them to her with a smile and a shake of his head. She tucked the bills in the glass on her tray, raised a sardonic eyebrow at the generosity of his tip, and disappeared again.

Taking a sip from the frosty beer, he relaxed slightly, letting his attention drift back to the song the band was playing now. It sounded familiar, but he couldn't place the words; must be a song Tyler had started to sing around the time they'd split up. He knew all the words by heart to the songs she'd sung when they'd been dating; sometimes he'd catch himself humming one, and he'd start guiltily, look over at Kelly, and count himself lucky she hadn't recognized the tune. And here he was, and where Kelly was he didn't know; probably back at her own apartment. Maybe out with friends. I'm on assignment, he reminded himself angrily. Assignment. To protect a woman who's receiving death threats. But that woman was Tyler Smith. That shouldn't make a difference. But it did.

Sometime during his musings, the band had finished up its set, and now she stood across the table from him, hands on hips, eyes fuming, mouth set in anger ... he looked up at her and felt a disorienting sense of *deja vu*. His mouth twitched in a crooked smile, and he spread his hands. "Buy you a drink?"

Sighing heavily, she nodded, dropping into the chair opposite him. "I should have known Strenlich would send you. Lacking delicacy, isn't he?" she asked with a trace of bitterness as Peter lifted his arm to signal DeBrett to return. With the band's set over, they were able to speak in fairly low tones, but Peter glanced around to confirm that no one was close enough to hear them talk nonetheless.

Gretchen appeared almost immediately, and Peter didn't have a chance to reply as Tyler ordered a drink. He watched her, studied her, looking for traces of some feeling in her. He found none.

Playing with the matchbook again, Peter leaned back in his chair, one arm hooked around the back of it. Lifting one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug, he told her, "I'm not too thrilled about this, either. But Frank figured I'd draw less notice than some stranger suddenly popping up in your life."

Tyler considered this in silence, then nodded. "Yeah, I guess that's the way he'd see it. You didn't tell him that people'd be more surprised to see us together?"

"Of course I did. He didn't buy it. I'm in dutch with my girlfriend, neither one of us wants to be here together, but we're stuck — you need police protection, and I'm it. Deal with it," he snapped at her, more vehemently than he'd intended, and a wounded look passed over her face, gone in an instant to be replaced by a cynical wariness.

"All right. I'll deal with it. Can you?" she asked, leaning with both arms on the table's edge.

He snorted, shifting his glance to sweep the room again. "Yeah. Sure. It's a job," he told her coldly.

"Fine," she volleyed back, tapping the tabletop with long, lacquered fingernails. "What's the plan then?" she bit out.

"Plan? Frank's idea is that I leave with you, check out your place, stick around," he informed her in a business-like tone.



"Stay the night," she guessed.

"On the couch," he countered.

"You can bet on that," she informed him acidly, her eyebrow arched challengingly.

Taking a swallow from his glass of beer, Peter promised seven kinds of mayhem on Frank Strenlich the next time he saw him. And Paul Blaisdell, too.

As far as the world outside the precinct was concerned, Peter Caine was on vacation for the next few days. In fact, he was on rota on a 24-hour surveillance protecting Tyler Smith. Sitting at his table, he stretched and yawned, wondering just how much sleep he'd get in the next few days. DeBrett had stopped by before going off-shift at nine o'clock to check on him, but there had been nothing out of the ordinary to report. She'd wished him good luck and left the club.

It was already well past two a.m., and the band was just winding up their last set, the club was half-empty, and for him, the night was just beginning. Not for the last time, he regretted having spent the early evening with Kelly instead of grabbing some sleep before assuming this duty. But he also knew that if he'd blown her off in favor of this job, there would have been nothing left to salvage. As it was, he felt he had a slight chance of mending the breach this assignment seemed to have caused.

This late at night, with most of the club's patrons gone, the band took the opportunity to jam, and the drummer was lost in a frenzied riff that nearly spun him out of his seat as he attacked his drums with passion. The bass player was strumming out a counterpoint, and the keyboardist was making it up as he went along. Tyler held on to her microphone, moving to the beat, smiling as she watched her band cut loose.

Sitting there watching her, Peter felt something stirring inside him. Memories came back at him, fragments of moments spent with the woman on the stage. Unidentifiable feelings, snatches of conversations. Peevishly, he squelched it, whatever it was. He concentrated on the arguments, the screaming, the recriminations. Focussing on the downside. Accentuate the negative. It was over. This was a job. He told himself that again, just in case.

Finally, they were done. The air rang with the last chord played, and Tyler called out a thank you and good night to the remnants of the crowd before scooping up her leather jacket and leaving the stage. A moment later, she was standing in front of him, tapping her foot impatiently. "Let's go," she ordered tersely.

As he led her out of the club through the rear exit, she had a chance to study the changes in him since the last time she'd seen him. That aura of barely-suppressed energy still crackled around him, but there was something else, something she'd never noticed before. A sadness? No, not Peter Caine. Not Peter Have-a-Ball-Today-Cos-Tomorrow-I-May-Be-Dead Caine.

He moved purposefully through the corridor, his hand hovering over his gun, poised to whip it out at any sign of trouble. She supposed she should be grateful that he hadn't simply pulled it out and threatened everyone in sight with it. Instead he was searching, his eyes constantly moving as he covered the space between the club proper and the outer door.

At the door, he stopped suddenly, glancing back the way they'd come. "Stay here," he commanded her, and slipped out the door, leaving her standing alone in the stark light cast by the unshielded bulb suspended from the ceiling. A moment later, he returned, nodding toward her. "All clear. Let's go."

She allowed herself to be towed along, faintly fascinated by this view of Peter's character. She'd never seen him in action like this before; before it had always been the grandstanding, like that time he'd shot up the club to sour a robbery in progress. Looking back at all the rancor she'd built up during their relationship, she found herself wondering suddenly just how they'd gotten together in the first place.

They were crossing the parking lot, stepping in and out of pools of light, like puddles after the rain. In the street beyond, traffic was light, a few cars and delivery vans, a couple of pedestrians moved quickly through the night. A voice called out an obscenity, answered by another. A horn blared, and raucous music filtered back toward them from a car evidently filled with teenagers whose noise threshold surpassed human endurance. Business as usual in the wee hours of the morning. It was almost comforting in its familiarity.



He was leading her toward his Corvette, bypassing her car which was closer to the entrance, and she pulled back suddenly. "I have my own car," she told him.

"You're going home in mine," he informed her, and pulled on her hand to get her to move again.

"Someone might break into it —" she protested, still holding back.

He turned and looked at her mockingly. "I've seen that hunk of junk you drive, remember? Nobody's gonna break into it — they'll figure somebody already has, and leave it as a dead loss. Come on," he urged, tugging her along.

Glancing at her car, she was forced to agree that it looked like it had already been vandalized, but she didn't have to take that from him. She complained at him all the way to his car, and as he checked around it, he snapped at her, "Look — if it's that important to you, I'll bring you back in the morning to get it. But tonight, you're riding with me. Got it?"

She fumed, hand tightening threateningly on her purse, and glared at him. But the smile that kept threatening to break through took all her concentration as she nodded tersely to him.

"Get in," he said shortly, opening the door for her. He slammed it as soon as she was in the car, and stormed around to the driver's side, flinging himself into his seat and snapping the seat belt into position. He reached forward with the ignition key and glanced over at her. "Seat belt?" he demanded.

She tossed her hair over her shoulder angrily, but complied, settling into the seat and staring straight ahead. But out of the corner of her eye, she watched him, and she felt oddly secure.

"Aren't you taking this Kevin Costner routine a little too seriously?" Tyler demanded as they rounded a corner in her building, Peter brandishing his gun toward empty space as he preceded her.

"What'samatter — you don't like having a bodyguard?" Peter shot back over his shoulder.

"If Mrs. Pitkovitch comes out of her apartment and sees you waving that thing around, it's not my body you'll be guarding — it'll be hers, and it'll be a real body!"

Impatiently, he stopped and stuffed his gun back in his holster. Whirling on her, he asked angrily, "And what would Mrs. Pitkovitch be doing in the hallway at two-thirty a.m., huh?"

"Probably looking for a burglar creeping down the hallway," Tyler snapped. Then she pushed him out of the way and stormed toward her apartment. "Let's just get inside," she muttered.

Peter paused, grinning at her back, then shrugged and followed. She was fitting the key in the lock as he came up from behind, and he suggested reasonably, "Allow me."

"Why, so you can shoot up my plants?"

"No. So I can make sure there isn't anyone in there. Look, you're the one who logged the complaint."

"It's been phone calls and notes, not break-ins."

"He could be escalating to that. That's why Strenlich assigned someone. So let me do my job, okay?"

Their eyes locked, and he could see the fear lurking behind hers. Suddenly, he felt guilty for playing the hardass, and he reached out to touch her shoulder gently. "At least if I check, you'll know it's okay. You won't have to worry about it tonight," he told her softly.

She nodded tersely, hugging her arms around herself, and stood aside. Peter opened the door a crack, slid his hand in, and switched on the light. He held his gun up at shoulder level as he stood to one side and pushed the door open fully. Nothing happened, and he smiled, easing around the door jamb to step into the room. His eyes swept warily over the interior, a tastefully decorated living room leading to a dining alcove. Pretty much just as he remembered it, except for the absence of his picture on the table next to the sofa. Gesturing for her to follow him, he slipped inside, closed the door behind them, and walked immediately to the bedroom door and opened it, peering inside. He moved in silence as he checked out the kitchen, bathroom, and closets, ending with a glance out the window.

"Well, no visitors tonight," he announced with relief.



"I could have told you that," she replied sulkily.

Slipping his gun back in the holster, Peter eyed her critically. "Look, if you want to call Strenlich in the morning and ask for another man, that's great with me. I didn't want this assignment. But for now, we're stuck with each other, okay?"

"Okay."

"Good."

"Fine."

They stood there, glaring at one another, an awkward silence stretching between them. Finally, Peter shrugged, and said, "You should get some sleep. I'll sit up here," he added, waving toward the sofa.

"I'll get you a pillow and a blanket," she offered, her tone slightly conciliatory.

"Yeah. That would be great," he agreed.

Taking her exit cue, Tyler turned away and entered the bedroom. Peter roamed the room nervously, energy tingling through his entire body. He'd get Frank — and Paul — for this. What a nightmare! As he wandered, a blinking light caught his attention, and he was standing by the answering machine when Tyler came out of the bedroom and dropped the pillow and blanket on the couch. "Here. You know where the john is. You know where the glasses are kept. There's a pitcher of spring water in the fridge —"

He was gesturing for her to come over to join him, and with a surly stomp, she complied. His finger was poised over the playback button.

"Hey, that's a private call —"

He waved her off and hit the button. The low squeal of the rewinding tape filled the room for a few seconds, and then the message played back.

"Thought you could get rid of me by changing your number, huh? No way, sweetie. I'm stuck on you. I see you wherever you go. I'm right behind you. You can't get away. Not even that cop boyfriend of yours is gonna save you. I'm comin' for you, baby. Keep a candle in the window for me — I'll be there soon."

A dial tone emanated from the tiny speaker as Tyler gasped. "Erase it — get rid of it —"

"It's evidence," Peter informed her, popping the tape out of the machine and pocketing it. "I thought you had your number changed," he added, glancing over at her.

Fist pressed against her mouth, she nodded dumbly.

"Unpublished?"

Again, she nodded.

"Then I'll need a list of everyone you gave the new number to. And you'll need to put in a new tape. I'm gonna call this in, arrange for some equipment to be brought out in the morning. If he calls again, maybe we can get a trace on the call ... although that really wasn't long enough."

"It was long enough for me!"

Peter looked at her, took in the shaking, the tears threatening to flow, and fought down the urge to take her in his arms to comfort her. Instead he touched her gently on the hand and suggested, "Go take a hot bath, or do something that'll relax you, and go to bed. I'll be here. Nothing more is going to happen tonight. And in the morning, we'll get some technical assistance from the precinct. We'll catch this guy, Tyler. You have my word on it," he told her solemnly.

Something in his voice obviously got through her terror, and she looked up at him, her eyes dilated by fear, and blinked. Then she nodded, visibly relaxing. "That sounds like a good idea. Are you ... are you going to sleep?"

He glanced at the pillow and blanket and shook his head. "No. I'll stay up. I'm on duty, after all. Got any good books?"



It was well after four a.m. when Tyler finally settled down to sleep in her room. Peter had listened to her going through her nightly routine, running the bathwater, sinking into the fragrant heat of the bath, humming to herself, and then finally draining the tub and coming back into the living room on her way to her bedroom. Murmuring a sleepy goodnight, she'd closed the door behind her, and he'd heard her moving around for a while before the apartment had finally fallen silent.

He'd called in to the precinct to leave a message for Strenlich, requesting communications equipment in the morning, and for someone to bring Tyler's car to her apartment from the club. Then he'd busied himself with reviewing the notes Strenlich had provided him on the case, adding a few scribbles on the message the stalker had left on her answering machine.

There'd been precious little on the case so far. The Anderson murder investigation had produced reams of paper, but very little in the way of actual facts. But they'd learned something new about the stalker tonight — he was someone who had access to her new telephone number, and he'd seen them together. Someone at the club, maybe? On the street? He had the chilling sense that it was someone Tyler knew; statistics supported that, but it wouldn't make her feel any better knowing that someone who was a part of her life wanted her dead. But who did Tyler know that Janet Anderson had also known?

Now he sat back and let the emotions wash over him. Not emotions so much as confusion, really. Seeing Tyler again after so many months ... he had to admit that there was still feeling there for her, but he doubted seriously that she harbored any feelings for him beyond contempt. Which, as Kelly's face drifted before his inner eye, was just as well. What he felt was ... residuals. After-effects. It couldn't be anything more than that. Maybe it was the fact that they'd split up and she'd been the one to force the split. Dissatisfaction at not being the one to walk? That was pretty petty, but hell, it was human nature.

Rubbing wearily at his neck to ease the kinks forming there, he sighed. He was on assignment. His job was to protect the woman sleeping in the next room. And he was good at his job. He turned his attention back to the notes.

Friday

A little past ten, Peter jerked out of a doze at the sound of voices in the hallway. A moment of disorientation faded quickly as he took in his surroundings and identified where he was and why. Scrubbing at the sleep collected in the corners of his eyes, he raked his fingers through his hair and leapt up to stand by the door.

A tentative knock and Strenlich's voice calling out, "Peter? Pete, you in there?" greeted him from the other side of the door, and he smiled.

"Just a minute, Frank," he called back softly, undoing the many locks on the door. A moment later, he'd freed them all, and opened the door to reveal Frank Strenlich and Blake in the hallway. "Shhsh," he warned with a finger to his lips. "She's still asleep, I think."

"Shit, Pete, you look like hell," Strenlich commented with a grin. He peered into the room, his eyes falling on the tangled blanket and rumped pillow, and the grin grew wider. "Rough night, huh?"

"Get in here and shut up," Peter snapped in irritation. "And keep quiet," he added with a pointed glance at the closed bedroom door.

Shuffling in under the weight of his equipment, Blake followed Strenlich into the room, and spying the telephone in the kitchen, moved for it immediately.

"Thought you could use this," Strenlich told Peter, handing him a Dunkin' Donuts bag. "Black, right?"

"It'll do. Thanks." Opening the bag, Peter extracted the coffee, and downed half of it while Strenlich watched, amused. "Man, I needed that," he said, sighing.

"Okay, Detective, bring me up to date," Strenlich ordered, leading Peter into the kitchen.

"Got her back here around two-thirty, three o'clock, checked the place out — clean. Then I noticed the answering machine. Played back the tape — it's our man." Peter fumbled in his pocket and pulled out the tape, handing it to the Chief, along with Tyler's car keys.



"Did she recognize the voice?"

"Didn't seem to," he answered with a shake of his head. "Could have disguised it, I guess, but it didn't sound like any electronic masking'd been used. Scared her shitless, though."

"I thought she had her number changed, had it listed as unpublished," Strenlich commented.

"She did. I asked her to pull together a list of everyone she gave the new number to. And Frank — whoever it is mentioned me on the tape. It's someone who was hanging around last night."

"Good work. Look, Pete, Blake here can look after things for a while — why don't you go home and get some sleep? Be back here by six to relieve him."

For a moment, Peter's sense of duty and his sense of sleep deprivation warred. Tyler might be frightened to find a stranger in her apartment, but Blake was a professional, he'd be sure to show his badge as soon as she came out of her bedroom, and the sight of all this high-tech gear would probably ease her fears somewhat. And there wouldn't be any history to deal with with Blake, either. Sleep won over duty, and he nodded. "Great. I'm dead on my feet."

"Yeah, you're looking kinda corpse-like. Oh, and Pete —"

"Yeah?"

"I see what you meant about Kelly. She's been working with Powell on the Rostler case at the 101st — she's been giving me dagger-looks all morning. Give her a call, will ya? Assure her she's got nothing to worry about." Strenlich's eyes roved the apartment for a moment before he added, "She doesn't have anything to worry about, does she?"

"No way, Frank. Dead and buried, like I said."

Early that afternoon, while Peter Caine was sleeping the sleep of the blameless, Tyler Smith got up and wandered into her living room, stopping abruptly at the sight of a strange man sitting at her kitchen counter.

"Oh, Miss Smith!" he greeted, raising his forlorn-looking face and smiling wanly at her. Sunlight glinted off his glasses. "I'm Detective Blake — I've relieved Detective Caine for the day so he could get some sleep." He flashed his badge at her and added, "Everything's okay, nothing to worry about."

"Oh," she said in a small voice. "I thought ... I thought Detective Caine was on 24-hour surveillance —"

"Well, it's not really practical for one man to be on 24-hour surveillance. He'd been up for more than 24 hours when I got here, so the Chief sent him home. He'll be back around six."

"Oh," she said again, moving awkwardly into the kitchen. "Um, have you had breakfast?"

"Hours ago. And lunch. Don't worry about me, Miss Smith. Just ignore me. Follow your usual routine, and I'll follow mine. By the way, we had your car driven back from the club," he added, pushing the keys across the counter toward her.

Filling the coffee filter with fresh coffee grounds, she nodded absently, chewing at her lower lip. "Thanks. Um, what time did ... Detective Caine go home?"

"Around ten o'clock. He was concerned that we didn't make any noise to wake you. Said you'd had a rough night. Oh, I've sent the tape from your machine back to the station with the Chief — he's going to have the voice analyzed to see if we come up with any matches from the databank."

"D'you think that's possible?" she asked hopefully as she poured water into the coffee maker.

Blake shrugged. "If it's a known felon and he's in the databank, then yeah, it's possible. But if it's somebody who's never been arrested for ... harassment ... then it's a long shot. But we're doing everything we can. Don't you worry."

Tyler stood staring at the stream of rich, fragrant liquid pouring into the coffee pot and nodded. "Right," she agreed.



At around five o'clock that afternoon, Peter awoke, feeling much better than when he'd gotten home. He made a quick call into the precinct, and spoke to Strenlich. The Chief laid out the rota for the night, informing Peter that he wouldn't have another detective available until Saturday to take the middle shift. DeBrett would be on duty at the club, but Peter would have to relieve Blake and take basically a double-shift until Blake relieved him again Saturday morning. Skalany would be able to take the evening shift on Saturday, and Strenlich planned to have someone — Katz, probably — on duty in the building across the street on Saturday night, while Peter was in Tyler's apartment. Janet Anderson had been killed on a weekend. They didn't know if that was a key element, but the fact that the stalker had gotten Tyler's changed, unpublished phone number made any possibility more urgent. Peter agreed that he could handle a double-shift, for tonight anyway, and that Skalany would be good with Tyler.

Then he called Kelly, feeling the frostbite through the telephone line as he explained yet again that he was on assignment, and no, he wouldn't be able to see her that night. Her goodbye had been arctic, and he'd put the phone down gently, almost afraid that the cold would have made the instrument brittle.

"You owe me, Frank," he promised himself, then got up to jump in the shower and return to Tyler's apartment to relieve Blake.

At six o'clock, Peter presented himself at Tyler Smith's door, knocking and calling out as he stood in the hallway. Mrs. Pitkovitch, Tyler's aged neighbor, stuck her head out at the sound of his voice.

"My, there's a lot of visitors today, aren't there?" she commented with a worried look.

"Nothing to worry about, Mrs. Pitkovitch," he assured her with a ready smile.

"You two back together, then? I'm glad. She's been lonely these last few months," the old woman told him warmly. "I never understood why you two broke up," she added, shaking her head as she closed the door.

Peter was left staring open-mouthed at Mrs. Pitkovitch's closed door when Blake opened the door to Tyler's apartment. "Well, don't just stand there gaping, Peter. Get in here so I can go home to my wife's cooking." As Peter stirred himself, Blake added, "On second thought, maybe that's not such a good idea ..."

"Oh, come on, Blake, home and hearth? You love it."

"Oh, yeah. Mortgage, kids, braces, sewer taxes ... just great. You don't know how good you've got it, Caine. The single life ... enjoy it while you can," Blake sighed, settling onto the stool he'd set up by his equipment.

"Yeah, enjoy it," Peter agreed absently as Tyler came out of her bedroom, looking gorgeous and staring nervously at him. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, sure, been a quiet day," Blake answered. Looking up from his toys, he stalled out, evidently no longer sure the question had been directed at him.

"I picked up your mail," Peter said simply, holding out a stack of envelopes. "Figured you wouldn't want to, so I borrowed the key off your ring."

Tyler shifted from one foot to the other, looking at the mail as though it would bite her.

"You want me to open them?" Peter asked, noting the agitation in Tyler's stance. She nodded. "Okay."

Peter turned to where Blake was sitting, and the communications expert gestured pointedly toward his equipment. "Okay, show me how it works," Peter agreed, setting down the mail.

"Don't touch *anything*. It's all set up, everything's automatic. If anyone calls, if they stay on the line for three minutes or more, you should get a clean trace. At the very least, we'll get a time-stamp on the call."

"Three minutes? Nobody talks for three minutes. Except maybe my father, and he never calls."

"Yeah, well, it's the best we can do. I'll be back in the morning to take over. Ten o'clock okay with you?" Peter nodded. "You kids have a good night, now," Blake added, pulling his suit coat off the back of the chair and shrugging into it.

"Yeah, thanks," Peter told him. "I'll see you in the morning."



Blake left, adding another warning about his equipment before he closed the door behind him, and Tyler and Peter were left standing alone in the apartment.

"You okay?" he asked.

Shrugging, she nodded again. "You could have told me you were leaving."

"I didn't know I was leaving until Frank told me to go. That was around ten o'clock this morning. I didn't want to wake you."

"Well, at least I'll know tomorrow. How long do you think this will drag on?"

Peter was sorting through the mail, and it was his turn to shrug. "Don't know. The tape Frank took didn't match up with anything in the databank so far, but Kermit's still checking." He looked up at her. "You have that list of who you gave the number out to?"

She nodded. "I gave a copy to Detective Blake. He said he'd drop it off at the precinct before going home. I have another copy —"

"Good. I'd like to see it." He glanced down at the piles of mail he'd sorted and added, "Bills, junk mail, a letter from your mother. You still want me to open these?"

"Yes. Please. If you don't mind ..."

"All part of the service, ma'am," he quipped, but the frightened look on her face caused him to pause, studying those features he'd once known so well. "Tyler ..." he said softly.

"I know. Open 'em, okay? I hate mail anyway," she snapped nervously, hugging her arms to herself and spinning away from him.

He closed his eyes briefly, cursing himself. He didn't know how to handle this one; the history between them wasn't helping, it was further complicating a difficult situation for her. Sighing, he turned his attention to the mail, methodically opening the envelopes, extracting the contents, going through each sheet individually, and stacking the contents with the envelopes. As he went through this ritual, she paced the apartment, waiting patiently for his verdict on the contents of her mail.

"Clean. Oh, and on this book club — you might want to ask them to put you on special customer status," he told her absently.

"What?"

"Oh. I always forget to send in the little card saying don't send this book? I finally asked them to put me on this special status — I only get a book if I actually send the card in requesting it. Saved me a lot of money, not to mention hassle —"

"What's that got to do with anything?" she demanded, shaking her head with annoyance.

His mouth hung open as he realized that his stream of babble, good-intentioned though it had been, had elicited the opposite to the desired effect. "Nothing," he finally said. "Just making conversation." Shrugging, he asked, "You have that list?"

She practically dove into her bedroom to retrieve the list, coming back into the living room quickly to hand it to him. He accepted the list in silence, and wandered over to the couch to sit down and read it. Tyler glanced over her shoulder at him, grimaced to herself, and turned her attention to the mail he had sorted for her.

"Agent ... club ... dentist ... credit card companies ... musicians' union ... shit, Tyler, is there anybody you haven't given this number to?"

"What'd you expect me to do — shut down my life because of some asshole?"

"Didn't Strenlich tell you to keep the people who knew the number to a minimum?"

"That *is* the minimum. I'm not crawling into a hole because of this."

"You realize that ... that with this many people knowing — it could be one of these people, somebody connected with your dentist's office, somebody with the union, maybe even someone at the club —"



"No. I don't believe that. None of those people would have any reason to hurt me —"

"Psychos don't have reasons, Tyler. Psychos have dreams, bad dreams, warped dreams. They don't think like you or me."

"Like me, anyway."

"Oh, we're back to that, huh? Crazy Peter Caine? Psycho cop? Look, why don't I give Strenlich a call right now? Huh? Why don't I call him and tell him this is not going to work? Tell him that you can't stand having me around, that I'm making you more nervous than being alone would, huh? Is that what you really want? I don't want to be here, Tyler. I've got a life, too. And it's on hold while I'm on this assignment."

"Is that all I am to you? An assignment?"

"What do you want to be? *You* broke up with me, Tyler. You're the one who told me I was crazy and you didn't want to see me anymore. I didn't want to end it, Tyler. You did. You pulled the plug on our relationship. So yes, you're an assignment. You hated the fact that I'm a cop. But that's what I am. And that's why I'm here — I'm a cop, and I'm here to protect your life. Sacrifice my own for yours if that's what it takes."

Tyler stood staring at him in shocked silence. Her eyes had grown enormous, shining with tears that started unbidden, tracing smudgy lines down her cheeks as they fell. A choked sound erupted out of her throat, and suddenly she darted into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

"Well, you handled that with your usual aplomb, Cary," Peter remarked sourly to himself.

In her bedroom, Tyler Smith flung herself at the bed, wrenched a pillow out from under the comforter and buried her face into it. Peter was right. She had driven him away, given him no choice in the matter. He was a good cop, even if he did have a tendency for preemptive action and crazy risks. He'd protect her ... and his claim to do it at risk to his own life was not an idle one, she knew. That was part of the problem with Peter ...

What she didn't know was why, after all these months, she felt this confused and angry about him. Having him here, in her apartment, where they'd spent so many evenings, so many nights, together ... maybe she should tell him to call Strenlich. Maybe she should do it herself. It wasn't fair to him, she knew that. Her own torturous emotions were whipping at her, and now they were lashing out at him, too. Emotions that had been in check, emotions she'd thought were gone ... emotions that were boiling so close to the surface, her skin felt scalded.

She didn't know how she could go back out there and face him. All she knew was that she had to, she had no choice. But first, she had to get those emotions under control.

In the living room, Peter raked his fingers through his hair and weighed his options. Strenlich wasn't going to pull him off this case just on his say-so. Tyler would have to demand it. But if she did that, she risked Strenlich choosing not to replace him. He doubted Strenlich would do that, but there was always the possibility. He remembered how protection on Everett Cooper had been pulled, even when the threat of the Shadow Assassin had not been resolved.

But her reactions had given him a clue to the fact that what they had had together ... what they had felt for one another ... it wasn't completely dead and buried after all. For either of them. He didn't know how to handle this. They were obviously bad for one another, they'd tried time and again to make it work, and it had always failed. If they tried again ... no.

His heart was still pounding with the adrenalin high from his own outburst, and he knew that it wasn't going to get any easier the longer they were stuck together. He had to get his own feelings under control. He needed to be detached, not emotionally involved. Compassion was one thing ... passion quite another.

Involuntarily, his thoughts made a sudden detour, back to the incense-scented precincts of the Shaolin temple that had been his home as a child. He'd frequently resisted practicing his meditation, and yet, when he had bothered, it had always brought him ... calmness. A sense of order, a sense of ... peace. A smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. For fifteen years, he'd suppressed those memories as too painful to



examine, too fragile to risk exposure. His father's return had changed that, and yet his sudden departure again five months ago had not driven the memories back into hiding. Peter rose from the couch with a sense of purpose, and walked over to the kitchen area to rummage.

Tyler, her tears and anger finally spent, had scrubbed her face, redone her make-up and fixed her hair, and now stood poised before the door of her bedroom. Smoothing down her dress, she took a long, deep breath, then another. Finally, on a powerful exhale, she reached forward and turned the doorknob.

She opened the door onto the living room and stared. The blinds had been drawn, and the room was coolly dim. On the coffee table in front of the couch sat a single candle, its tiny flame flickering in the gentle breeze created by the opening door. It sat in a saucer, its waxen drips collecting harmlessly. On the floor next to the coffee table sat Peter Caine, eyes fixed on the candle flame, his breath even and slow, his legs drawn into a modified lotus position, his hands held loosely on his knees. A gentle expression touched his face, and she found herself staring at him as though she'd never seen him before. This was a side of Peter Caine she *had* never seen before.

"You don't have to stand there," he told her softly, his eyes never straying from the candle. "I'm not in a trance or anything. I don't do that kind of stuff."

"I wouldn't have thought you did this kind of stuff, either," she commented, her voice tinged with a sort of wonder. "When did you start meditating?"

He drew in a deep breath and expelled it, slowly. Then he did turn toward her, his face relaxed. "Actually, it's more a matter of when did I stop. I told you that when I was a kid, I was searching for spiritual enlightenment."

"Yeah. I wrote that off as more Caine bullshit."

"It's true. You know my father is a priest. A Shaolin priest — they can marry, as the Ancient would be quick to point out. When I was a kid, this was part of the daily routine." He unwound his legs and rose a little stiffly; the grace his father employed when moving in and out of such positions still eluded him.

"You never talked about your childhood. I always figured you ... I don't know. I never really knew what to think."

He smoothed his pants legs down and straightened his tie. "Yeah, well, not many cops can claim to have been raised in a Shaolin temple," he told her with a self-deprecating grin.

"Peter, I'm sorry —"

"So am I. I was out of line. Unprofessional. What time do you have to be at the club?"

"Eight-thirty. It's a late set on Friday nights."

"Great. Are you hungry? I'm starving."

They ordered dinner from a Chinese restaurant that Peter liked in Chinatown, one that was used to him calling in from strange locations for delivery. Skalany called it his Chinese Stakeout. "*Hao. Xiexie. Zajjain,*" he said into the phone and replaced the receiver. "It'll be here in about 30 minutes," he told Tyler as he switched Blake's equipment back on and turned to her. "Got any Coke?"

"What was all that?" she asked, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Huh? What?"

"Whatever language you were speaking — sounded like Chinese," she elaborated, sketching a circle with her hand.

"Oh — well, I'm a quarter-Chinese. You know that."

"No, not really. And I certainly didn't know you could speak Chinese."

He shrugged. "I learned to speak Chinese before I learned to speak English. Mostly we spoke English at the temple, but I had to learn Chinese. I didn't use it for a long time — foreign kids got beat up in the



orphanage, and I got in trouble for fighting one time too many," he replied with a sheepish expression. "Broke a kid's arm when he came at me with a chair. Kicked him clear across the room into the wall," he added with an expression composed of contrition and fond memory.

"Kicked him?"

"Yeah. Kung fu, you know."

"Peter Caine, we dated for almost two years, and I've learned more about you tonight than in all that time. Why —" she cut herself off suddenly, looking away. "The Coke's in the fridge," she instructed edgily, waving her hand toward the kitchen.

Peter stood there a moment, poised to speak, but thought better of it and went to the kitchen to retrieve the soda. Tyler settled back against the sofa's cushions, toying with her curls while Peter poured himself a drink. "Want something?" Peter called from the kitchen, and she replied on autopilot. A few minutes later, he returned to the living room with two glasses and handed her one.

Sitting down across from her in the easy chair, Peter sipped at his drink. "What's wrong now?" he asked after the silence had stretched to an uncomfortable length.

"Nothing," she answered, shrugging.

"Don't give me that. What's wrong?"

She drew a deep breath, set her glass down on the coffee table, and stared at him. Then she said, her voice filled with an old hurt, "Why didn't you ever tell me any of these things — your background, the orphanage, the temple — why did you keep it a secret?"

"Wasn't a secret. Just ... just never came up," he replied, matching her shrug.

"Never came up," she repeated flatly.

"No. I mean ... well, we didn't talk a lot, if you remember, Tyler."

"No. We fought or made love. Not much to base a relationship on, when you think about it, is it?" Her tone had changed from pain to challenge.

"I guess not. The relationship didn't last, did it?" he retorted, his own tone becoming more aggressive.

"No. It didn't." She flung herself back against the couch, glaring at him. "This new girlfriend of yours — do you talk to her?"

Peter blinked, his mouth working silently for a moment before he replied. "Yeah, some. I guess. Work, the people we know, that sort of thing. She's a cop, too."

"A cop," she echoed with a nod. "A crazy cop?"

"No, a good cop," Peter flung back. "Is this interrogation going somewhere? What is it you want from me, Tyler?"

Her mouth snapped shut with an audible click, and she shook her head. Their eyes locked for a long time, and Peter feared another confrontation brewing. She looked away at last, her shoulders slumping, and she said, "Nothing. I don't want anything from you, Peter."

He closed his eyes briefly, and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Tyler. I'm sorry we didn't talk more. I'm sorry it didn't work out. I'm sorry this screwball is dogging you, and I'm sorry Frank assigned me to protect you. It happened, and we can't change that. But we'll get this guy, and in a couple of days, I'm out of your life for good. I promise you that, Tyler," he finished solemnly.

He couldn't be sure, but it seemed as though her eyes glittered as she stared at him for a few heartbeats, but then she looked away, whispering, "Good."

"Great, they remembered the chopsticks," Peter was saying as he dug through the large paper bag containing their meal. He'd already removed several white takeout containers, and there were still several more to be placed on the table.



"How much did you order, Peter?" Tyler demanded, goggling at the prodigious amount of food presented before her.

Peter glanced around him at the boxes of steaming food and shook his head. "I don't know — a lot, I guess, but I like it for breakfast, too." He nodded toward a container sitting in front of Tyler. "That's the rice — you can have it all, I hate rice."

"Click."

"What?"

"Another factoid — no, three — about Peter Caine falls into place. I didn't know you hated rice. Or that you ate Chinese food for breakfast. Or that you could eat with chopsticks."

"Yeah, well, I'm a man of many talents. My father told me I hated rice at the temple, too. And I love cashew chicken cold. Lasagna, too, but the place I like doesn't do take-out. And you can always use chopsticks for airdrums after dinner," he added with a grin.

He held out the second pair of chopsticks for her, but she shook her head. "Thanks, I'll stick to a fork," she told him, brandishing the implement in question.

He opened a container and dug in with his chopsticks. "Fork takes too long," he commented, shoving a healthy clump of noodles into his mouth.

"That's disgusting," Tyler observed, daintily lifting a forkful of fried rice.

"Don't look," Peter suggested, capturing a chunk of chicken with his chopsticks.

She chuckled softly and diverted her attention to the food in front of her. They ate in relative silence for a while, the only sound the crunch of Chinese vegetables, and the scrape of fork and chopsticks. Finally, Tyler set down her fork and pushed the containers in front of her away. "That was really good, Peter."

"It oughta be — it's one of my father's favorite places. He cooks the genuine article, so he knows the good stuff."

She leaned back in her chair and regarded him. "What happened to Captain Blaisdell?"

Peter halted the progress of the chopsticks to his mouth, and looked at her curiously. "Paul? Nothing," he replied. "Paul's around. In fact, it was his idea to assign me to this case. Why?"

"Because when we were dating, when you talked about your father, that's who you meant. I just wondered ..."

Peter set his chopsticks down on the table slowly. "Yeah, it gets kinda confusing. Paul's my foster father. More of a big brother, really. My father — my real father — he's ... well, he's sort of a mystery. You think I don't talk about myself? I'm a regular Oprah guest compared to him. Here we each thought the other was dead for fifteen years, and do you think I can get a word out of him about what he was doing all that time? Nada. Not a thing. Except ..." he broke off, a look of pain and betrayal passing over his mobile features.

"Except?"

He shook his head abruptly. "Nothing. Sometimes I don't know what to believe when it comes to Kwai Chang Caine," Peter replied softly, a hint of bitterness in his tone.

"But it must be nice to have him back," Tyler prompted.

"It would be. If he were here. He took off again about five months ago. Had to find his path, he said," Peter elaborated, the bitterness clear in his voice now. "Finding his son alive after fifteen years wasn't good enough for him, I guess."

"Peter ..."

"A Shaolin walks his path alone, so they say," Peter continued, as though he hadn't heard her. "I wanted to be like my father when I was a kid. I wanted to please him. Instead I became a cop. And we have nothing in common anymore."

"Peter, I'm sure that's not true —"



"No? 'Ordinary men hate solitude, but the Master makes use of it, embracing his aloneness, realizing he is one with the whole universe'," Peter quoted with asperity."

"That's beautiful, Peter — isn't that from the *Desiderata*?"

"Uh-uh. *Tao Te Ching*. Some translation or other. My father's a Shaolin master — he'd tell you he's not a master, but everyone calls him that. Solitude oughta be his middle name. I just can't get close to him, and now he's gone, off to embrace his aloneness and get cozy with the universe."

"Peter —"

Peter glanced at his watch irritably and noted the time. "It's nearly eight. We should get you to the club," he informed her tightly, effectively closing the subject.

Tyler nodded and rose to get her jacket.

The ride to the Agrippa was made in silence, and when they arrived at the club, Peter refused to drop off Tyler at the door. "Sorry. My orders are to stick with you at all times." He turned the car toward the parking lot and pulled into Tyler's normal slot close to the stage door.

"Even when I go to the john? C'mon, Peter —"

"Even when you go to the john, Tyler. We don't know where this creep is watching you — it could be the club. We can't take any chances." He turned off the engine, killed the lights, and released his safety belt.

"Nobody's going to hassle me here at the club. There are too many people," she protested as she unhooked her own belt.

"I mean it, Tyler — you need to go anywhere but on the stage or the table I'm sitting at, and you don't go alone. Got it?" he demanded, twisting in his seat to face her.

Her jaw clenched as she glared at him, and he could see tears of anger welling in her eyes. "Tyler, it's for your own good —"

She turned away abruptly, drawing a shaky breath. "It's just calls and letters, Peter. Nasty, yes. And I'm tired of it, too. But I've never seen this guy, no one's bothered me directly ... I'll get my number changed again, you can tell me who I can give the number to ... I just can't live like this ..." She rested her head against the seat and closed her eyes, sniffing.

"Tyler, he may not be satisfied with just harassing you from a distance ..."

She took a breath to settle her nerves and opened her eyes slowly. "You know something, don't you. Something you haven't told me."

"I —"

"Tell me, Peter. For my own good."

He nodded. "Frank didn't want to frighten you. The handwriting on the notes you've gotten ... it matches the handwriting on the notes another woman received ... before the stalker killed her."

Tyler's body became rigid as she stiffly turned toward Peter. "Who?" she asked in a whisper.

"Janet Anderson. A model —"

"I know her — knew her. She lived in my building until about a year ago. We didn't keep in touch once she moved, but I read about what happened to her. Peter ... the same guy is after me?"

Fear had joined them in the car, a presence heavy and dark. Outside, the sounds of the busy Friday night traffic were muted, separated from them by the thin safety glass of the car windows. Inside, the only sound was Tyler's shuddering breaths and the soft ticking of the rapidly cooling engine.

Peter nodded slowly. "Looks like." He reached out, laying his hand on her arm gently. "So you see, Tyler, this is serious. I don't want you to be alone, not for one minute, until we get this guy."

"All right," Tyler agreed softly.



"I'll need to ask you about Janet ..."

"Later. I need to get to work."

Peter inclined his head and turned to get out of the car. He came around to her side and opened the door, extending his hand to her. "We might as well make it look good," he suggested with a wry smile. She smiled wanly in return and took the offered hand, allowing him to help her out of the car. He shut the door and pointed the electronic key at the car to lock it, and put his arm around her shoulders. He could feel her trembling through her leather jacket, and pulled her closer, wrapping his other arm around her. She leaned into the embrace, closing her eyes a moment as Peter kissed the top of her head. "It'll be all right, Tyler," he told her softly. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"I know," she replied, letting her arms encircle his waist for a moment. Then she pulled back, straightening her jacket. "I need to go to work ..."

Peter stepped back a pace, but still kept his arm around her shoulders. "Let's go."

The band was already setting up when they got inside, and Peter reluctantly released Tyler to join them. He stood there, watching her go, then turned his attention to scan the packed club floor. Friday night at the Agrippa ... it brought back memories, not all of them unpleasant.

Gretchen was at the bar talking to Terry, and had looked up at Peter and Tyler's entrance. She waved him over now, and smoothing his tie down, Peter nodded and came over to join them.

"How's she doing?" Terry asked, filling a tall glass with non-alcoholic beer from the tap.

"Scared. Angry. Tyler," Peter replied as he leaned against the bar.

"How *you* doing?" the bartender added with a smile, pushing the frothy glass across the counter toward him.

"Scared. Angry. Confused," he answered and grinned.

"Yeah, Tyler can do that to a man," Terry chuckled. "Any leads?"

Peter glanced toward DeBrett, but she merely shrugged. "I figured if anyone knew what was going on in the club, Terry would. Besides, the owner told him."

"Anybody else?"

"Joe. Owner figured he should know, keep an eye out."

Peter nodded, sipping at his beer. "Joe's ex-Golden Gloves. He can handle himself. I just found out that Janet Anderson used to be a neighbor of Tyler's. She ever come in here?"

Terry thought for a moment, then he said, "Yeah, a few times. Came in once or twice after she moved uptown. She and Tyler didn't hang together, but I think she liked the music." Just then, a waitress came up to the bar with an order, and Terry turned his attention to business.

Peter gestured to DeBrett. "Find out who Anderson came in with, see if any of them are around, see what you can find out."

"Sure. What're you going to do?"

"I'm going to keep an eye on the lady."

Peter took a seat at the bar, where he could pick up cues from Terry as patrons came and went. DeBrett had questioned Terry earlier, and was now speaking to a small group of attractive young men and women, all dressed comfortably but expensively. Tyler was on stage, she'd sung her opening number, and now the band was backing her up with their usual enthusiasm. Peter wondered how much she'd told them, and made a mental note to question them during their next break.

"This seat taken?" a familiar voice suddenly asked.

Peter looked up, starting guiltily at the sight of Kelly Blaine. "Kelly! What are you doing here?"



She shrugged, smiling tentatively. "It's Friday night, the Agrippa's good for a good time, beer's cheap and it's not watered down," she raised her bottle in salute. "I figured ... why not. So, is the seat taken?"

Peter opened his mouth, unsure of how to reply. "Uh —"

She gestured toward a group of women across the floor from the bar. Peter recognized them as friends of Kelly's, women with whom she frequently partied. "I won't blow your cover, Peter. Anybody sees us together, they'll think I'm just a chick putting the make on a good-looking guy, okay?" she pointed out, an edge creeping into her voice. "I just wanted to say hello. See how things are going. Apologize for earlier." Her stance challenged him to say no, and he had a feeling he knew what her reaction would be if he did. The bar was a public place and he couldn't very well say no without drawing attention to them, so he waved toward the stool and put on a welcoming smile.

The effort it cost him wasn't lost on Kelly, and the tension between them cranked up a notch as she settled herself in the chair. "So, how's it going?"

Peter took a sip from his beer to mask his discomfort, then set the glass back on the bar with a thunk. "Discovered a new connection on the way over here. Tyler knew the Anderson woman. They lived in the same apartment building."

"So, they might have known some of the same people. How come that didn't come up before?" she asked, lifting her bottle to her lips.

"Anderson moved out about a year ago. Guess the investigating officer didn't look back that far, or didn't make a note of it — no connection until Tyler came into the picture. The harassment started only about a month or so before the murder — about two, three months ago."

Kelly nodded. "So, you've got another lead. Closer to wrapping up the case, then," she suggested, her tone a little strained.

"Hope so," Peter agreed, eyeing her warily. "I'd like to put this psycho behind bars for a long time ... like forever."

"Because he's harassing your ex-girlfriend?"

"Because he's a killer. I told you Kelly — this is an assignment. What are you really doing here — checking up on me? Wasn't it you who said we don't own one another? I don't come following after you when you go out with someone else."

"I haven't gone out with an ex-fiancé, either, Peter," she countered, then she looked away, disgusted. "I don't know why I'm acting like this, either, Peter," she sighed. "You're right — our relationship isn't exclusive. Maybe that's why I'm jealous — your relationship with *her* was."

Peter stared at her for a long moment, running his fingers over the condensation forming on his glass. "Is that what you want? Exclusive rights? Commitment?" Peter asked gently.

She rested her elbows on the table and leaned forward wearily. "No," she answered quietly, studying her beer bottle. "At least, I don't think so. I guess I feel ... I don't know. Like everything's out of my control. I don't like that."

Peter had to smile. Control. It was a common trait between them that they both liked to be in control, of themselves, of the situation. *Needed* to be in control. It was one of the reasons they fought so much ... you can't have two people in control of a relationship at the same time. "Like I felt when Tyler broke it off. Out of my hands. Her decision, not mine."

She looked up at him bleakly. "Is that what we're doing, Peter? Breaking it off?"

The question surprised him, and a hint of hope entered her face. He shook his head. "No. Not unless that's what you want ..." he left the suggestion hanging between them, the silence gathering intensity.

A small smile formed on her lips. "Not unless it's what *you* want."

"I'm on assignment, Kelly. It has nothing to do with us. When this is over, we can go back —"

"To normal? I hope so, Peter." She leaned across to kiss him, but he held up his hand. "I forgot. Your cover," she said flatly.



"Kelly ..."

"I'll see you around, Peter. Call me when this is over," she told him, a whisper of sadness in her voice as she rose from her seat. She glanced up to see Tyler heading toward them, the band dispersing from the stage for their break. Peter turned to look in the direction of her gaze; he didn't miss the thunderous expression on Tyler's face, and he was sure Kelly didn't either. "Good luck, Detective."

Tyler came toward the bar, and paused as Kelly went by her. The look that passed between the two women was frigid, and Peter took a hasty gulp of his warming beer. Tyler rolled her shoulder and resumed her progress across the floor, coming to stand in front of Peter. Kelly glanced back over her shoulder toward them, her expression ominous. "Who's that?" Tyler demanded.

"Kelly Blaine. My girlfriend."

Tyler pursed her lips, her face tightening. "Ah. Is she on this case, too?"

"No. She was checking up on me," Peter replied, getting a little sick of the women in his life — past and present — making unreasonable emotional demands on him.

"Doesn't trust you out alone?" she asked flippantly.

"Doesn't trust me with *you*. Want a drink?" he offered, feeling a curious jolt at the ... well, hopeful almost described it ... look on Tyler's face. Almost nervously, he raised his arm to signal to Terry.

After getting Tyler's drink, DeBrett swapped places with Peter while he went off in search of the bandmembers. "Officially, I'm on break, too," Gretchen told Tyler with a grin. "How you doin'?"

Tyler shrugged. "I didn't realize you were a police officer."

"Almost 15 years on the force," DeBrett replied. "Long enough to know better."

"Better than what?"

"Than to try to hold down a normal job," she grinned wider. "I don't know how these women do it night after night ... I work out, but it's nothing to running around delivering drinks. It's all I can do to get back up and come back in here again."

"Well, Detective Caine says it shouldn't be too long ..." Tyler suggested, daring DeBrett to contradict her.

Sobering, DeBrett shook her head. "No. Hope not, anyway. We've got some good leads, and the surveillance should pay off. A couple of days, maybe, a week. Maybe more."

"Leads. Like the fact that I knew Janet."

Gretchen nodded. "A common factor. It helps to narrow the field, you see. Instead of the entire city, we can focus on possibilities shared by the two of you. What was she like?"

"Janet? I didn't know her very well. We both had crazy schedules. She did modelling for Hampton's downtown, some commercials and print ads. She always seemed to be running off somewhere. Mostly we'd run into each other in the elevator, or in the laundry room in the middle of the night." She chuckled bitterly. "Heart-to-hearts over socks and underwear."

"She ever mention anything to you about threats? Seem like she was nervous or anything?"

Tyler thought for a moment, then shook her head. "Nothing out of the ordinary. She'd get fan mail, through the store or the newspaper mostly, and some of that was pretty weird. I've gotten a few like that, too, dropped off here at the club. But nothing at home until ... until this." She shuddered. "It's creepy. I feel ..."

"Violated?" Gretchen guessed. "Yeah. It's one thing when the loonies approach you in public, but it's quite a different story when they find out where you live. How would someone learn that, anyway?"

Shrugging, Tyler answered, "I don't know. My agent, I suppose. But I can't imagine she'd give out my address and phone number to anyone who asked. She doesn't even give it out to potential employers." Tyler looked up and smiled. "You have an excellent interrogation technique, Detective."



It was DeBrett's turn to smile. "Interview," she asserted. "It's the little things, the details that we never really think about, that can sometimes break a case."

"And if you can't break the case? If you can't get this ... slime ... in the next few days or a week?"

"That's up to the Chief." Gretchen glanced out over the club floor to where Peter Caine was talking with Tyler's band. "Although somehow I think even if he pulls protection and surveillance, you'll still have a guardian angel."

Tyler followed Gretchen's gaze and shook her head. "Don't bet on it. Peter's as anxious to get back to his own life as I am to get back to mine. First opportunity, he's out of here."

Gretchen looked at Tyler, then back again at Peter. "If you say so."

"**Y**ou think this guy's for real, Pete?" Tommy Burke, the keyboardist asked.

Peter Caine nodded seriously. "You seen anything, Tommy, guys?"

Tommy shook his head. "No. Nobody's hassled her here. Pretty much the same crowd every night, a few more on weekends," he added with a grin. "Regulars, most of 'em been comin' here for a year or more. 'Cept you, Pete."

"Yeah, well, when we broke up ... didn't seem right to keep coming around. I've missed the chili," he replied with a shrug.

"Not all you've missed, I'll bet," the bassist, Charlie Donovan, commented. "You guys gonna get back together?"

Licking his lips, Peter shook his head. "Sorry, Charlie. I'm on a case, not looking to patch things up. We get this guy, I'm history."

"Too bad," Charlie observed. "Kinda miss havin' you around."

Peter grinned at that; more than one night, he and the band had hoisted a few while Tyler suffered over lyrics for their latest song. He had to admit that he kind of missed those days, too.

"So, you gonna be around for a while?" Greg Kensington, the drummer asked.

"Til we nail this bastard, yeah. Look, you guys think of anything, see anybody who looks ... well, suspicious, give me a call, okay?" He pulled out his notebook and scribbled on a sheet, tearing it off to hand to Tommy. "That's my cellular number. Call me if you've got anything."

Tommy took the slip of paper, studied it for a moment, then folded it and slid it into the pocket of his tight leather pants. "Will do. We want this guy as much as you do, Pete. Tyler gets nervous ... doesn't do any of us any good. Tyler gets dead ..." he shook his head, his lips pursed sourly.

Peter nodded and clapped Tommy on the back. "I know, Tommy. We'll make sure that doesn't happen. See that she's never alone — I've talked to her about that, but you know Tyler — she'll slip the leash if we're not careful."

"Escort duty, huh? I can handle that," Greg agreed. "Knights errant, that's what we are," he added with a gap-toothed grin.

Tommy glanced at his watch. "Time to set up for the next set." He held out his hand to Peter, and the detective shook it warmly. "We'll be in touch if there's anything to pass on."

DeBrett walked back to the stage with Tyler, then rejoined Peter at the table he'd chosen on the mezzanine to pass on what she'd learned, both from Janet Anderson's friends and from Tyler.

"Hmm. In both cases we have women who are essentially public figures, but whose private addresses and phone numbers are protected by their agents. I know Tyler's agent — she wouldn't give a home address out to a family member, let alone a stranger. I know — I tried when I first started asking Tyler out," he added with a self-deprecating grin.



"Well, the agents aren't the same — Anderson was represented by Towle and Associates, and one of her friends over there works for the agency. Said that private information is treated like state secrets; the info is even stored in fireproof file cabinets with combination locks."

"Nice to know some private details are held sacred in this age of Big Brother," Peter commented drily. "I'll ask Kermit to run a cross-check — see if they shared a bank, a credit card company, anything."

"So much for private details," DeBrett remarked with a chuckle.

"Hey, it's police business," Peter shrugged. "Ain't no secrets when you're talking murder."

"Ain't it the truth. Look — you need me for anything else, Pete?"

Glancing at his watch, he shook his head. "Nah. You get some rest — soak those feet of yours."

"Yeah. If I wanted flat feet, I'd'a stayed a beat cop," she grinned. "I'll see you tomorrow night."

DeBrett had handed over her preliminary notes before going offshift, and Peter spent the rest of the evening reviewing the results from both his and DeBrett's interviews. DeBrett would submit a more formal report on her investigation later to add to the file. Tyler sat with him during each break, and on one occasion, actually allowed him to escort her to the ladies room. He'd shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot as female patrons passed by him, giving him the once- and twice-over before disappearing into the bathroom, giggling. After that, he'd agreed to let one of the bandmembers take escort duty, and remained at his table working with his casenotes.

Friday and Saturday were late nights at the Agrippa, and the club didn't close down until four a.m. By the time the band had packed up, Peter's eyes were feeling gritty and hot, and he was glad to get back out into the cool air of the pre-dawn. Terry saw them to the door, then went back to shut down the lights and lock up the club.

Handing Tyler into the passenger seat, Peter closed the door gently and came around to the driver's side. He settled himself in and started up the car, letting it warm up before pulling out of the lot.

"Are you any closer?" Tyler asked suddenly.

Peter looked at her and nodded. "I think so. I think we're starting to narrow down the possibilities. I'm going to stop in at the precinct tomorrow and put in a request for some data searches, see what we turn up. But yeah, I think we're closer."

"Good," she commended, nodding to herself.

Shrugging, Peter put the car in reverse and pulled out of the lot; a few minutes later, they were back at Tyler's apartment building. "Boy, you know our job was a lot easier when most buildings had a security guard," he commented as he shut off the engine.

"Secure buildings cost more," Tyler pointed out. "But I may consider moving when this is all over."

Thinking back to the time Torrence's men had sprayed his apartment with gunfire a few months back, Peter wondered if he should do the same thing. Then again, he seemed to be a magnet for crazies, and he wouldn't want to put some poor civilian in jeopardy simply by living there. He ought to think about getting a house sometime, and design himself a proper security system.

Tyler was calling his name and he blinked, mumbling an apology. "Sorry. I was just thinking ... Let's go," he invited, and they entered her building.

The building foyer was empty, their footsteps echoing on the ceramic tile of the floor. A bank of mailboxes filled one wall; Tyler deliberately bypassed those for the elevator on the opposite wall. Next to the elevator was the building superintendent's office, and opposite to the entrance was a single apartment belonging to the super, and a staircase leading to the second floor. Stairs connected each of the floors, in addition to the fire stairs, but six flights was a little much to climb this late at night.

They were the only occupants of the elevator as it wheezed its way to the sixth floor where Tyler lived. The hallway was deserted too, but Peter kept his hand close to his holster as they walked in silence. Tyler glanced at him and smiled wanly, stepping aside as they came up to her door. "No complaints tonight?"



"This morning," she corrected. "No. No complaints, Peter."

Not certain if this acquiescence also meant defeat, Peter accepted it for the moment as a small miracle, and went through the ritual of opening the door and reaching in to turn on the light. He pushed the door open gently, and stopped, staring at a folded sheet of paper a few inches away from the door.

"What —" Tyler started, and backed up a step.

"I'll get it," he told her, fishing in his pocket for a handkerchief with which to pick up the paper. "Got any tweezers? My evidence kit's in the car."

She nodded and pointed toward the bathroom. Peter set the paper down next to Blake's equipment, absently noted that the light on the answering machine was steady, and followed her into the bathroom to retrieve the tweezers. Then he made a quick circuit of the apartment before stepping back into the hall. He glanced up and down, but the closed doors of the neighboring apartments told him nothing. He'd do a door-to-door later in the morning to see if anyone saw or heard anything, but he doubted that would uncover any new evidence.

He closed the door and rejoined Tyler in the living room, taking the tweezers from her and opening the folded paper with them, carefully placing the sheet back on the tabletop to read. "It's our man," he said softly, automatically noting the distinctive descenders on the letters. "Not much of an imagination," he added, shaking his head. "Is this how they usually come?"

"No, they've always been in my mailbox before," Tyler replied with a shudder. "He was here, wasn't he, Peter? Right outside the door."

Peter inclined his head grimly. "Outside. Operative word. We'll keep him outside." He used the tweezers to fold the letter again. "Got a baggie? I need to bag this. And some tape."

She nodded, and he knew that keeping her busy with minutiae was a good way to keep the panic at bay. She came back with a storage-sized plastic bag and a roll of cheap cellophane tape. Good enough. He dropped the folded paper into the baggie and folded over the opening, sealing it with cellophane tape. He rummaged around his pockets until he found an indelible marker (funny how he always remembered that, but never the rest of the kit), and scribbled his notes onto the bag with it. "I'll drop this off at the station when I go in tomorrow. Later today, I mean. Maybe we'll get a clean fingerprint off of this one."

"I destroyed them before, didn't I? By handling the letters and balling them up."

"No. Everybody reads crime fiction these days. The only prints on the letters you handed in were yours — looks like our perp knew enough to wear gloves, probably surgical. Paper holds fingerprints, but only if they're there to be held. It's a long shot that he changed his MO on this one, but it's worth a try," Peter told her, slipping the sealed baggie into his inside jacket pocket. "You should get some sleep."

"I can't sleep. Not knowing he was ... he was right out there," she gestured toward the hallway.

"He won't be coming back tonight, Tyler. And I'll be here. You've got your windows locked. Go to bed, Tyler," he urged gently.

She rubbed her hands over her upper arms nervously, shaking her head. "Not yet. I need to calm down ... I won't be able to sleep, not right away ..."

Peter grinned at her. "Got a deck of cards?"

They settled on poker since they didn't have a third and fourth for bridge, Peter didn't know the rules to cribbage, and Tyler didn't like gin. They played for pennies as music from Tyler's CD player played softly in the background.

"So how come you didn't stay with *Les Miz*?" Peter asked as he studied his hand.

Across the coffee table from him, Tyler shrugged. "It was just a chorus part. Not very big, and the pay wasn't all that good. The hours certainly weren't any better — I hated playing those matinees. So now I've got *Les Miz* as a credit in my curriculum vitae, and I'm back to doing what I love."



Laying down a card and picking up a replacement from the deck, Peter nodded absently. "Still no luck on a record deal?"

Tyler frowned over her cards and shook her head. "No. We're doing a charity gig next month with some big names. That could be good for us. Tommy wants to cut a CD, so he's looking into financing. Studio time — a decent studio — is expensive." She shook her head again and said, "I'll take two," and laid down two cards, picking up another pair from the deck.

"I'll open," Peter replied, setting a penny into the middle of the table.

"What about you — what kinds of plans do you have?" Tyler asked, eyeing Peter over her cards.

"Plans?" Peter echoed.

Tyler nodded, pushing a penny of her own to sit next to Peter's. "Call. Yes, plans. You know — for the future? You must have some."

Shrugging, Peter placed his bet with, "Raise you two. I don't know. I mean, I'd like to do all the normal things — marry, have a family, settle down with the two-car garage and all. But career? Can't measure success in a single act, I think. The big busts, maybe, when you bring down somebody important, break an organization. But there's always somebody waiting to fill the power vacuum. It's the day-to-day stuff, I guess, catching the bad guys, helping a kid walk away from violence, keep him out of a gang. Keeping them off drugs. My father's good at that sort of thing — motivating kids. I've seen him take hardened gang members and ..." he shook his head in wonder. "I don't know — give 'em something to live for, something worthwhile."

"Your father sounds like an amazing man, Peter," Tyler commented as she matched his bet and raised it.

Peter snorted. "Amazing. That's one word for him. Some people think he's weird. Hell, sometimes I think he's weird. But ... he's my dad. He does things I don't understand, things I can't even imagine. He hands out philosophy like candy, but he believes it — believes it all. He's the one person I've ever known who is ... I don't know. Inherently good. No, two — my Mom, Annie. But I don't think he's had a cynical thought in 20 years. Maybe never. He sees the best in people."

"Sounds kind of naive to me," she observed, lifting one shoulder.

"Yeah, sometimes it seems that way. Then he does something or says something, or clues in something I missed ..." He trailed off. "You wanted to know about my father, and here I am babbling away."

Tyler smiled, not looking up from her cards. "You can tell a lot about a person from their parents. And how they react to them."

"Yeah, well, there's not much to react to when he's God-knows-where," Peter pointed out, putting his cards down on the table. "I fold."

"He'll come back, Peter. Didn't you say you both thought the other was dead? He came back from the dead, then. He'll come back again," she suggested gently.

Dragging his hand down his face, Peter nodded tersely. "Sure. Sure he will. What've you got?"

She laid out her cards, showing a heart straight.

He whistled. "Good thing I folded — you'd'a taken me to the cleaners with that hand."

"What have you got?" she asked with a twinkle as she scooped up the pennies.

He turned over his cards, revealing a mismatched hand.

"I see what you mean. Another hand?"

"Why don't you go to bed, Tyler? You must be tired."

"I am tired," she agreed, shoving her curls over her shoulder. "But ..." she sighed.

"What?"



She looked directly into his eyes, and licked her lips nervously. "I don't want to sleep alone, Peter." She scrubbed at her mouth and chin with her hand, shook her head. "I don't mean sex, I mean —"

"I'll sit with you a while if you want," Peter answered to her unspoken request. "Until you fall asleep."

"All part of the service?" she asked with a mocking smile.

"All part of the service, Ma'am," he agreed with a slight smile of his own.

Light curled around the edges of the window, leaking in between the slats of the blinds, casting a ghostly sheen against the sheer curtains as Peter sat in the chair in Tyler's room watching her sleep. He could tell she was asleep by the steady rhythm of her breathing; he really should go back to the living room and take a look at his notes. But he sat there watching her, wondering.

Sometime during the night, she'd stopped fighting him, stopped railing at his presence. The reality of the threat to her had come home, and with it, a sort of acceptance. She trusted him to keep her safe. Had that trust caused her to put aside some of her anger, too? He felt the dynamic between them changing, but he wasn't sure how. He'd read enough about hostage situations to know that often hostages developed an emotional attachment to their keepers. In a way, this situation was like that ... she was hostage to the threat of this crazy, and he was her keeper. How much more complicated when the keeper had a history with the hostage?

He knew he'd changed since their break-up. The return of his father had reopened windows into his soul, let the fresh air of healing in to close the canker sores of anger. All the hatred he'd stored up during the years he'd thought his father dead, all the fury ... dissipated, at least to a degree. His father's departure had left him lost, some of those childhood feelings of inadequacy and guilt resurfacing. But he could see it, at least some of it, for what it was ... He had a long way to go, he knew, but he also knew that he wasn't the same man that Tyler had thrown out of her life.

And these feelings that threatened to overwhelm him ... were they real, or afterimages on the heart, burned-in ghosts from the intensity of what he'd once felt for her?

Silently, he rose from the chair and stepped up to the bed, bending down to tuck her comforter around her shoulders. She stirred slightly in her sleep, but she didn't wake. He kissed her forehead gently, murmured, "Good night, Tyler," and left the bedroom, closing the door softly behind him.

Saturday

Blake arrived promptly at ten, rapping softly on the apartment door and calling Peter's name. Peter had put on a pot of coffee on leaving Tyler's room, already resigned to the fact that there was too much to be done to allow the luxury of sleep. He let Blake in and brought him up to date with what had happened since six o'clock the previous evening.

"Dull and boring don't come easy to you, do they, Peter?" Blake quipped, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"Wouldn't know," Peter replied with a faint smile. "I've never done them." He checked to make sure his badge, notebook and pen were in his breast pocket, smoothed down the jacket, and ran his fingers through his hair. "She didn't get to sleep until practically dawn, so she'll probably sleep most of the day. I'm going to do a door-to-door on this floor, and then I'm going to the office. Any messages?"

Blake looked up from his toys and shook his head. "Nah. Oh — Skalany will relieve me at six, so you can get some rest. I guess you should plan on meeting them at the club."

"Yeah, okay," Peter agreed. "See you later."

"Right," Blake called absently, tinkering away.

First, he checked with Mrs. Pitkovitch. Elderly, living alone, and with a keen intelligence, Mrs. Pitkovitch missed little along the hallway. She welcomed Peter into her apartment, pressing freshly brewed tea and biscuits still warm from the oven on him. As he munched, he asked her if she'd noticed anyone in the hallway the night before.



"Someone's troubling Tyler, aren't they, Detective?" she asked, lifting her own teacup.

"You could say that. She's had some unpleasant letters and phone calls."

"That's why you're back, then, as a policeman, not as ... well, not because of her," she guessed sadly.

"Mrs. Pitkovitch ..." Peter started gently, not wanting to offend the woman, but uncomfortable with her question.

"All right, I won't pry," she assured him, patting his hand. She took a sip of her tea and set the cup back in the saucer. "Well, I didn't notice anyone I hadn't seen before. A couple of delivery people ... take-out food." She shook her head. "So many of these young people don't take the time for a leisurely meal. I cook most evenings, but if I'm going to pay for a meal, I want to be waited on, and I want pleasant conversation to go with it."

Peter had to smile. Mrs. Pitkovitch would get along just fine with his father, who frequently chided him for his eating habits. That is, when he was around. "Who ordered take-out last night, Mrs. Pitkovitch? Do you know?"

She smiled back at him. "You think a lonely old lady has nothing better to do than watch the comings and goings of her neighbors, don't you, Peter? Well, some evenings I do. Last night ... well, there was a movie on television that I wanted to watch, so I didn't pay much attention. But you could check with Mr. Harrington down the hall — he never cooks. And Miss Jenkins ... she often calls out. The Dixons, they usually get take-out on Friday nights. And Mr. Jones, he's confined to a wheelchair, he orders out whenever his children don't stop by. It could have been anyone, really, but those are the most likely. Does that help?"

"Yes, Mrs. Pitkovitch, it does. Now you keep your door locked and don't worry, okay?" Peter told her, standing up. He picked up his cup and saucer and took it over to the sink.

"You will let me know when you solve this case, won't you?"

Peter glanced at the bookcases, noted the detective novels stacked there, and smiled. "Sure thing, Mrs. P."

"Yeah, I usually order out. Can't cook worth anything, and I hate having to find a parking place. Most of the places around here deliver for free, coupla bucks tip for the driver, and I can watch CNN while I eat," Fred Harrington explained with a shrug.

"Who'd you order from last night, Mr. Harrington?"

"Petrucci's. Got the number right here," he added, going over to the trashcan and pulling his receipt off the pizza box.

Peter studied the receipt, noted that a phone number was written in next to his name and address. "They always confirm your telephone number, Mr. Harrington?"

Harrington snorted. "Always. I've been ordering from them since they opened, you'd think they'd know it by now, but they always ask."

"Can I keep this?" Peter asked, holding up the receipt.

"Sure. I've already recorded it in my budget. What's going on, Detective? This have anything to do with Miss Smith?" Harrington inquired with a worried look.

"Miss Smith," Peter repeated.

"Well, you hear things in an apartment building. It's like a small town in some ways. Young woman, living alone like that ... some creepo calls ... she mentions it to Mrs. P., she mentions it to someone else ..." he trailed off, waving his hand vaguely.

"Something like that. Thanks for your help, Mr. Harrington."

By the time Peter had finished interviewing all of Tyler's neighbors on the sixth floor, he'd learned more about people's eating habits than he knew about his own. He'd collected five more delivery receipts, all of



them with the phone numbers of the patrons written on them. He hadn't noticed that clue before because his favorite places all knew him, and they all knew to use his cellular number.

It was close to noon now, and Tyler might still be asleep, but it was worth a try to check in before he went in to the precinct. He knocked on the door, heard Blake call, "Who is it?" and after he'd identified himself, the locks were drawn and the door opened. "She awake yet?" Peter asked as he stepped into the apartment.

"Nope. Still sleeping. What've you got?"

"An idea. Maybe nothing, but ask her to call me when she gets up. On my cell phone — you have the number, don't you?" Blake nodded. "Okay. I'll see you later then."

Peter swung by Identification to drop off the bagged note, commiserated with the officer on duty about the unlikelihood of actually finding prints on the document, and headed up to the squad room. Peter's in-box was full when he arrived at his desk. He glanced quickly at his mail, set it aside, nodding absently at his fellow detectives. The squad room was half-full, and he suspected those missing were out investigating incidents from the previous night. Friday nights were usually busy, with fallout continuing on into Saturday. Saturday nights were even worse.

He found Detective Kermit Griffin, the precinct's computer wizard, in his office, humming to himself and puffing on a cigarette as his fingers played over the keys. Peter didn't bother to knock — Kermit frequently didn't notice — and entered into the domain of the Keymaster.

"Peter, m'boy, how are you this fine Saturday afternoon?" Kermit greeted over his shoulder.

"Tired. Don't you ever go home?"

"Home is where the disks are," Griffin pointed out reasonably, removing his cigarette and tapping off the ashes. "What can I do for you?"

"Any luck?"

"Nada. Our boy hasn't had his dulcet tones recorded for posterity anywhere I can tap. And I can tap long and deep, my friend."

"Don't I know it. Or rather, I don't want to know. Look, have you done any cross-checking yet with Tyler and Janet Anderson?" Peter asked as he settled on the corner of Kermit's desk ... the only place not littered with disks and papers.

"Bank accounts, credit cards, professional unions, you mean? You wound me, Caine. Of course I have. First thing. Anderson moved her bank branch when she moved out of Tyler's building, but they didn't bank at the same institution to start with. Clean credit rating, too. A regular model citizen."

"That's what I figured. So no connections there."

"Nope." Kermit slid his sunglasses down his nose and regarded Peter over the frames. "But something's brewing in that brain of yours, isn't it? Tell all, my son."

Peter explained about the note that had been left under Tyler's door the previous night, and the results of his door-to-door interviews that morning. He concluded with what he thought was a wild-assed idea, but Kermit accepted it with equanimity.

"Delivery person," he commented, nodding as he ground out his cigarette. "Could be. Nobody gives them a second look, and sounds like they're a fixture in that building."

"Right. And most places will confirm the telephone number of the caller before accepting the order. At least, that's what everyone I spoke to said. So an unpublished, unlisted number would be given out without a second's thought."

Kermit held out his hand, and Peter gave him the receipts he'd collected. "Okay. Sounds to me like we need to do a little searching in the telephone company's records. What's Tyler's new number?" Peter told him. "Okay," Kermit replied, flexing his fingers over the keyboard. To the computer, he whispered, "Talk to me."



As Kermit went to work, Peter scanned the room in search of a chair. He spied one hidden under a pile of paper, and turned to excavate it so he could sit down. As he redistributed the paper onto the floor in semi-neat piles, he could hear Kermit's fingers tapping rapidly across the keyboard. He dragged the chair over and sat to Kermit's left, watching the wizard at work.

"I don't even want to know how you got into their computer," Peter muttered.

"Of course you don't," Kermit answered with a grin, the speed of his keystrokes keeping a steady rhythm. "Ah. Here we are. Okay ... hmm. Tyler doesn't cook much, does she?"

"Not at all. I don't think she knows how to turn on the oven."

"No, doesn't look like it. Had her number changed on ... Monday. Called three of these numbers by Wednesday. Probably had leftovers on Thursday. Nobody on Friday?"

"That's the night I ordered Chinese."

Kermit nodded sagely. "All right, we know that these three places all had Tyler's new number," he said, pulling those receipts aside. "Now, let's see who Janet Anderson called in her last month of life."

Kermit manipulated the information on the screen at breakneck speed, somehow getting out of Tyler's telephone records and getting into a screen that allowed him to search for Anderson's number. It was no longer in service, but the phone company still had its records intact. He scrolled down, found the number, and dug in deeper. "Mmm-hmmm. Changed her number about a month before the murder. And again the week of the murder," he murmured. "Bingo. We've got a match on two of the numbers. Both appear throughout the month on the middle number, and in the last week before the murder on the last. Must be good for her to keep calling after she moved out of the neighborhood. I thought models never ate, though."

Peter looked at the receipts matching the numbers on the screen. "Petrucci's Pizza and Wakefield's Chicken. I wonder if they have routes they service, or they send the first available person?"

"Oh, I'd imagine it's first-come, first-served. Most of these places aren't big enough to do anything else; they'd have different franchises in different areas if their area is big enough to have routes."

Peter picked up the two damning receipts and folded them, tucking them in his pocket as he rose to go. "Thanks, Kermit. I'll check these out and see what falls out."

"As always, a pleasure. So tell me — how's it really going?"

"What — the case? Unless I'm way off base, I think you may have helped me crack it —"

"No. The old girlfriend. Strenlich said you were pretty bent about the assignment, and no one can miss Kelly Blaine's reaction to it."

Peter sighed and dropped back in the chair. "I can't figure women. Tyler throws me out of her life, and then gives me shit because I'm treating this as a case instead of a grand reunion. Kelly tells me she doesn't want an exclusive relationship, and then gives me shit because my case is Tyler. All I'm trying to do is my job —"

"Your mistake is in trying to figure them out. Women are nature's great mystery ... like the Internet, they can only be appreciated, never understood. And they're too useful to kill," Kermit commiserated.

"Ain't it the truth."

"So ... is that all Tyler is? A case?"

"I don't know," Peter answered truthfully. "If I did, somehow I don't think Kelly would be as pissed off as she is. And Tyler wouldn't be as edgy about me as *she* is. And I wouldn't be as confused as *I* am."

"That, Peter, may never change. Do your best. And keep me informed — I love a good soap opera," Kermit grinned at him.

"You're a pain in the ass, Kermit," Peter retorted, rising.



"Ah. But *I'm* too useful to kill, too," Kermit called over his shoulder to Peter's departing back. "Hey, pick me up a bucket of chicken while you're at Wakefield's!" The door slammed in response, and Kermit grinned to himself, reaching for another cigarette.

Peter pulled into the parking lot in front of the Petrucci's Pizza near Tyler's building, and sat there for a few moments, watching the customer traffic flow in and out of the place.

The facade of the building was brick-faced, and the doorway was a semi-circular arch in chrome and glass. He wasn't sure, but he thought they were trying to give the impression of a brick oven. Inside the restaurant was a long counter, with another archway, this one in brick, leading to a kitchen area. Between the front of the building and the counter were small tables with red-checked tablecloths and wrought iron chairs. Patrons, in pairs and singles, sat at the tables eating pizza.

Petrucci's was a small chain, about five or six restaurants around the city. Generally, they were considered to be neighborhood places, as evidenced by the picnic tables set up in front of the building, but they'd just started a rigorous television ad campaign to battle the national giants like Domino's and Little Caesars.

A station wagon pulled into a slot at the edge of the parking lot, its exterior painted to look like brick with the Petrucci name and phone number rendered in fancy letters on the door. A rooftop sign also proclaimed the restaurant's name and phone number. A tall, slender young man in a baker's apron over a brown shirt and pants outfit got out of the car and hurried into the store.

Peter continued to sit there, observing the activity inside the restaurant. He watched the driver go up to the counter and talk to the young woman behind the register. The uniformed kid handed her a sheet of paper, and she tucked it into the register. Then she called over her shoulder, and a few moments later, a stack of insulated pizza boxes seemed to extrude from the kitchen area. As the boxes were set on the counter, he saw a heavy-set older man step out from behind them, and then the woman handed the driver another sheet of paper. The driver studied the sheet for a moment, nodded, and reached for the pizza boxes. Within a couple of minutes, he had the pizza boxes stowed in the wagon, and he was pulling out of the parking lot.

A few minutes later, Peter got out of the car and went into the restaurant. He spoke briefly to the woman at the register, showed her his badge, and asked to speak to the manager. She nodded nervously, and ushered him to the manager's door. She knocked on the door, and getting a reply, opened the door and poked her head in.

"Mr. Gambone, there's a police officer here who'd like to ask you some questions?" the woman explained.

"Police? Show him in, Tracy."

She stepped back, pushing the door open for Peter to pass by her. He nodded his thanks, and entered the room; she closed the door quietly behind him.

Peter handed his badge across the desk as Gambone waved him into the only other chair in the room. A stocky, ruddy-faced man in his early fifties, Gambone glanced briefly at the badge, and asked, "What can I do for you, Detective?"

"Mr. Gambone, I'm investigating some harassing phone calls and letters that a woman in this neighborhood has been receiving. We have reason to believe that there might be a connection with the death of Janet Anderson last month."

"Ms. Anderson," Gambone repeated, nodding sadly. "A lovely woman. And a good customer — she used to order from us at least once a week. I was truly sorry to hear of her death. But ... what brings you *here*?"

"We're checking all the leads we can — this woman's phone number was changed to an unlisted, unpublished line, but she received another threatening call after the change was made. That narrows down our possibilities to people who might have had access to the new number. We've also confirmed that Janet Anderson called here in the last week of her life ... after she had also changed her number to unpublished."

"And you think she, this woman, called in here since she had her number changed."

"I confirmed it with the telephone company, yes. She placed an order on Tuesday night. The call came in on Thursday."



Gambone accepted this fact in silence, his jaw muscles twitching with tension. "We always confirm the phone number of the person placing the order, Detective. If our order-taker has any suspicion that it's a crank call, they call back to confirm the order. It also helps the driver in case they get lost for any reason — they can call the customer to get directions."

"Does that happen often?"

"Hardly ever. Occasionally, with a new driver, perhaps, but if there's a persistent problem, we usually either reassign the driver, or dismiss him. Or her; we have several women drivers, mostly mothers who need a flexible schedule. As for crank calls ... it happens most around graduation time and during the summer — kids with too much time on their hands and too little imagination," he elaborated with a sour grimace.

Peter snorted. "Sounds like my job," he commiserated.

"Yes, I imagine so."

"Do you keep records of which addresses your drivers deliver to?"

Gambone drew a deep breath and shook his head. "Not *per se*. Each time a driver goes out on a run, they're given a list of addresses, phone numbers and the order details; that information is also printed on the pizza boxes themselves. We're not entirely efficient in how we put those lists together, either, I'm afraid — they aren't organized into routes, but in order of how the orders are received and filled. So a driver may have a delivery three blocks away, and another at the edge of our area. In the case of Ms. Anderson, outside of our area."

"There wasn't a Petrucci's near her?"

"Pizza franchises don't exactly flourish in that particular neighborhood — more nouvelle cuisine and sushi, I think," he explained with a slight smile.

"And what happens to those lists when the driver's completed his or her deliveries?"

Gambone shrugged. "They'll sign them and turn them in to the cashier when they get back, and pick up another. The lists are held until the end of the week when payroll is done, then they're discarded. They're used to verify hours reported, but once the timesheets are okayed, they have no value in themselves."

"And when do you do payroll?"

"Well, our accountant should be doing it now."

"Good. I'd like to see the lists from this week. And Mr. Gambone — who has access to that information? I mean, who, other than the driver and the order-taker, would have access to phone numbers before the lists go to your accountant?"

Considering the question for a moment, Gambone enumerated, "The pizza maker - he'd have the order for preparing the pizza. The packager — the person who puts the pizzas in the boxes and puts the label on. And really just about anyone who's standing at the counter when the boxes are stacked to go. On a busy night, we might have a couple of drivers picking up pizzas at the same time. So it's possible that a driver might notice addresses or phone numbers in another driver's stack. Even someone standing at the counter waiting for their pizza."

Peter frowned. That could reopen the field to include anyone in the city, but the odds of that same person being on hand at the exact moments when deliveries to both Janet Anderson and Tyler were being made ... no, it just didn't compute.

"Well, then, I'll want to look at all the lists that were prepared around the same time. Would any of those drivers be on duty this afternoon?"

Gambone shook his head. "No, the evening shift drivers rarely do afternoons. Occasionally, there might be a swap, if someone has something special to do. But I haven't approved any swaps for today."

"So anyone who was on duty on Tuesday night would also be on duty tonight?"

"I'll check the roster."

"Do you keep those on file?"



"Yes, yes we do."

"Then I'll need copies of those as well. For the last two months, if you have them."

"I think we can accommodate that, Detective. You don't really believe that one of my people could be involved, do you?" the manager asked doubtfully.

Peter expelled a breath. "With a woman's life at stake, I don't intend to let any possibility slip by. Right now, I'm just collecting information. I haven't drawn any conclusions."

"Well, thank you for your honesty. Why don't we go see our accountant now, then?"

By the time Peter left Petrucci's, he had amassed a considerable stack of paper, including delivery lists, shift rosters, and the addresses and phone numbers of the staff of the restaurant. Gambone had been reluctant to turn over the personnel information, and Peter had pointed out that if necessary, he could request a warrant for the data. He'd suggested that Gambone contact the precinct and ask for the Chief of Detectives if he had concerns, while Peter waited outside. Gambone had considered the suggestion, and then shrugged, instructing the accountant to provide the addresses and phone numbers, but nothing more. Peter was satisfied with that; if he wanted anything more, he could always have Kermit dig a little more, or do it himself. Or get that warrant after all.

His next stop was Wakefield's Chicken. Unlike Petrucci's, Wakefield's was not a chain, but a single restaurant that specialized in "home-cooked meals." When he and Tyler had been dating, he'd eaten their food a couple of times, and he remembered it as being a cut above most fast food places. It was located a few blocks away from Petrucci's, occupying a sedate two-story building with the restaurant on the first floor, and the administrative offices on the second. Wakefield's had a larger dining room with dark wooden tables, exposed, if fake, beams, and lots of hanging plants. A fenced-in patio containing umbrellaed round tables and a miniature garden was set to the side of the restaurant for outdoor dining.

As he pulled into the parking lot of Wakefield's, he repeated his ritual of observation, taking in as much detail about the operation as he could from a distance. Several vehicles bearing the Wakefield name sat in the parking lot, not because business wasn't brisk, but because the meals took longer to prepare. Inside the tinted glass of the windows, he could see a lot of activity, uniformed waitresses serving tables, a cashier jotting phone orders down, another person organizing take-out meals and calling drivers over to deliver them.

After a few minutes, two drivers came out of the restaurant, laden with multiple parcels, got into their cars and left the parking lot. Shortly after, another car pulled in, and the driver entered the restaurant. He watched this revolving door activity for a little longer, and then went into the restaurant himself.

Claire Wakefield herself was taking orders over the phone, and she greeted Detective Caine with a distracted air. "Could you wait a few minutes, Detective? It's lunchtime, and this is our busiest time of the day. Other than dinnertime, that is," she added with a sigh.

Wonderful smells assaulted Peter, and he nodded, suddenly realizing that he hadn't had breakfast and he was starving. "I'll go get a table and order some lunch. You'll join me as soon as you're free?"

"Sure thing." She glanced over her restaurant and waved to the receptionist. A young woman with pale blonde hair pulled back in a bun came over. "Show Detective Caine to table number 17, Janie. I'll be joining him shortly."

Peter had ordered his lunch and was settling back in his chair to watch the restaurant's patrons when Claire Wakefield finally joined him. She wasn't much older than he was, but she was frazzled and edgy as she dropped into the chair across from Peter.

"It's Peter, isn't it? You used to come in here with Tyler Smith," she greeted.

"Yeah. Long time ago, I'm amazed you remember."

"Well, when one of our patrons ends up on the six o'clock news as often as you have ... it's hard not to remember," she shrugged with a faint smile. "So why are you here now?"



Briefly, Peter recapped the general details of the case for her, going over the same ground he'd reviewed with Gambone at Petrucci's. His meal arrived in the midst of his explanation, but he didn't pause to do more than simply acknowledge it and the waitress who delivered it. He concluded with the link with the death of Janet Anderson, surprised when Claire's hand shot out across the table and grasped his. "Janet? This has something to do with Janet?"

Glancing down at the fingers digging into his hand, he nodded. "We have reason to believe it's the same guy, yeah." Her eyes followed his, and with an embarrassed shake of her head, she pulled back her hand. "Did you know her?"

She nodded. "She was one of my best friends. We'd just started planning an ad campaign with her as spokesperson when she was killed. The restaurant's doing well enough to expand, and my investors had agreed to finance setting up a second restaurant. Janet's ads were going to help set that up in the media."

Peter fished in his pocket for his notebook and pen, and started to take notes. "I'm curious — most of the time you hear about models who are practically anorexic. Yet Janet Anderson called for take-out a lot, so she evidently ate more than just rabbit food, and you were planning to have her act as spokeswoman —"

"Janet Anderson was one of those incredibly lucky people who have a fast metabolism and can eat ... could eat ... virtually anything without gaining an ounce. Her biggest problem was not gaining weight, Detective," Claire replied with a fond smile. "Not my problem at all."

Peter rubbed his own stomach, thought he could feel a little flab there, and nodded with a smile. "So how does her death affect those expansion plans?"

Claire Wakefield sighed heavily. "Not at all, really. She was doing them as a favor for me, and we both figured her face was well-known enough in the city to attract people to the ads. But the investors just told me to find another spokesperson, not shut down the expansion." She picked up a fork and toyed with it a moment. "I told them I'd like to slow down, though. Having a close friend die is hard enough, but for her to be murdered ... I didn't want to simply leap back into the campaign with someone new, like she'd never existed, y'know?"

"Would anyone have had reason to believe that's how you'd react?"

"You don't think the expansion of this restaurant could have caused her death, Detective! The restaurant business is competitive, but it's not murderous. We appeal to a specific type of clientele — part of the reason for our success is that we've tapped into a part of the market that no one else had. Speaking of which, you really should eat your lunch before it gets cold."

Peter glanced down at his plate and smiled. "You say your market differs from other take-out places. How so?" he asked, and started eating as she considered her response.

"Well, probably the one thing you could compare us to would be the diners of the '50s and '60s, but those are really a thing of the past. Oh, you find them scattered around the country, and there are organizations for the preservation of the American diner, but generally speaking, you don't find them much in urban areas. But we take it a step further — our food isn't pre-processed, and we use only organic ingredients. No chemical additives or growth hormones. And we specialize in chicken — low cholesterol, low calorie, etc. We don't offer any beef or pork dishes." She smiled. "No meatloaf or Salisbury steak — you know, the perennials of diners."

Peter swallowed a mouthful of chicken and nodded. "But isn't your take-out business cutting into the other take-out restaurants?"

She shook her head. "Not enough that we've put anyone out of business. We've done some surveying among our customers — a lot of them are the type who don't normally do take-out. So in essence, we've created a market that wasn't there before."

Peter received this in silence, pausing in his lunch to jot down a few notes. From what Wakefield said, it was unlikely that Anderson had been killed because of a connection to the restaurant's expansion plans, but ... "Who's your new spokesperson?"



"We haven't selected one yet. I think maybe we might want to look into a sports figure. It's cliché, I suppose, but it attracts attention. Or possibly a retired newscaster. Distinguished, credible, that sort of thing."

"Not an entertainment figure."

"You mean like Tyler? No," she assured him, shaking her head.

That capped it; a connection to the expansion didn't exist with Tyler.

"Tell me about your operation here — how are drivers assigned?"

She smiled broadly at that. "You can see, Detective, that we live in the midst of chaos. Drivers come in, pick up the orders that are ready to go out. Name, address, phone number and order particulars are attached to each package. They deliver them, and come back for more. We started out with one part-time driver two years ago, and now we've got five for each shift — afternoon and night. It's constant pandemonium."

"So there's no record of where each driver has been?"

"I didn't say that. They maintain their own logs, with mileage, location, how the customer paid and how much, their tips — tips are taxable, after all — and they turn them in at the end of the shift each day. Then the accounting department reconciles the logs against the cash register receipts the following day."

"Are they kept on file?"

"Yes. We use them for evaluating expenses, timesheets, and a lot of other things. And some customers maintain accounts with us; we bill them on a monthly basis. We've found those logs to be very useful."

"Are they filed by driver, or chronologically?"

"Once the payroll is completed, they're filed chronologically."

Between bites of his meal, Peter questioned her on access to the telephone and address information for customers; her response matched up pretty closely to Gambone's regarding Petrucci's operation.

"Do you really think that the ... animal ... who killed Janet could be working for *me*, Detective?"

The anguish in her voice made Peter feel instantly guilty. But the look in her eyes told him that she'd rather find Janet Anderson's killer than be blissfully unaware of a viper in her midst. "It's a possibility, Ms. Wakefield. Considering the timing ... it's a good possibility."

She absorbed this in silence. Then she said, "I assume you'll want copies of the pertinent records." Peter nodded in reply. "Well, our accounting department's down to one person on weekends, but we do have an office copier upstairs. If you wouldn't mind making your own copies, I think we can provide the information. And Detective?"

"Yes?"

"Please keep me informed. I'd really like to see whoever killed Janet caught. I don't want to find out it was someone I employ, but I really do want to see the bastard caught."

Peter inclined his head in agreement.

Peter finished his meal as Claire Wakefield organized the information he needed. After collecting the documentation from the Wakefield's accounting office, Peter stopped by the register to pay for his lunch and place an order for takeout. Claire Wakefield came up behind him and chuckled softly. "You like it so much you've got to have seconds? Maybe we should make *you* our spokesperson, Detective."

He grinned in reply, but shook his head. "It's not for me. For one of my co-workers. I owe him."

"Then I'll make it on the house —"

"Thanks, but ... well, if I get it for nothing, then I still owe him."

"Trust me, Detective — you catch Janet's killer, and you'll have earned it."



Loaded down with administrative documentation and Kermit's chicken, Peter returned to the precinct. The squad room was still not at full complement, but he hadn't expected that; inevitably, someone was out on a call. Kermit was still in his office; he lifted his head and whistled at the delicious aroma of fresh-cooked chicken. "Is that ... barbecue sauce I smell? No, cajun spices ... no ... Come in, Peter, come in, and bring your friends with you!"

Peter dropped the bag onto Kermit's desk in front of him, and the computer expert favored him with a dazzling grin.

"You didn't say what kind of chicken, so I got a little bit of everything," the younger detective explained.

Kermit extracted a drumstick glistening with barbecue sauce and grinned wider, if that were possible. With the hand unburdened by chicken, he slid his sunglasses down his nose and looked over them at Peter. "Ah, Caine, you prove your usefulness every time you do something intelligent like this. So sit, and tell your Uncle Kermit everything you've learned."

Peter settled himself back in the chair he'd cleared (which had somehow miraculously remained unfilled in his absence) and recounted his interviews for the senior detective. "So I've got all these lists and timesheets and stuff now to go through," he concluded with a yawn.

"And you haven't been to sleep since when?" Kermit countered.

Peter glanced at his watch; it was now past two p.m. "Since five yesterday afternoon," he admitted. "But we're getting close, I can feel it ..."

"Hand 'em over to me and I'll start checking through them. You're back on escort duty when?"

"I dunno, I should check with Skalany. She goes on duty at six. Two a.m., maybe."

"Then you've got time enough to get some sleep — Pete, you've got to get some rest, or you'll be no good to anyone," Kermit argued over Peter's protest.

"Yeah, maybe. But I've got to talk to Skalany first. Bring her up to date."

"That's good, but sleep as soon as you've finished the call."

Peter smirked crookedly at Kermit. "You know — you're as much a pain as my father."

"Which one?"

"Both of 'em."

A few minutes later, Peter got off the phone with Skalany. She was at home doing laundry, and she'd told Peter to bring the records from the take-out places over for her to look through. He retrieved them from Kermit and took them into the copy room to make two more sets, one for Skalany, and one for himself. He returned Kermit's set, and then sat down at his desk to clip the documents together.

As he worked, he realized that the documents he had collected might apply as much to the Anderson homicide as to his own investigation. That meant he should bring the investigating officer up to date. He burrowed through the papers on his desk and came up with his copy of the Anderson case file. He'd already studied the file, and had extracted the pages he'd felt were pertinent to his own case, but he hadn't made much note of who'd been in charge of the investigation.

Scanning down the summary report at the top of the file, he cursed under his breath. "Walt Henson. Shit." Henson was a veteran detective, older than Strenlich and with more seniority on the force, since Frank had joined after serving a couple of tours as a Marine. He was a good detective, but fanatical about jurisdiction.

Rather than allow his imagination to get the better of him, Peter checked the file and snatched up his phone to dial Henson's number.

He wasn't sure whether to be relieved or frustrated when he got Henson's answering machine. He left a quick message identifying himself, telling Henson he'd found some leads that might impact Henson's case, and finished up by leaving his cellular number. Then he dialed Strenlich's home number.



"Strenlich," the Chief greeted over the phone.

"Chief, it's me, Peter. Look, I think I might have a problem with this investigation."

"I don't want to hear it, Pete. You're assigned and I'm not pulling you off —"

"It's not that. In fact, I think I'm making real progress — Kermit's helping me track down some leads, and I'm getting together with Skalany to review some stuff. No, the problem is ... well, it could be ... Henson."

"Walt Henson? This isn't his case, Peter."

"No. But I've established more of a connection with the Anderson case — his case — and I think I may be on to something with it. I just left a message on his answering machine to let him know, but you know how he can be ..."

"Yeah," Strenlich agreed with a sigh. "Good cop, but he doesn't share credit. Well, you did the right thing; he has a right to know if any evidence you pick up in your investigation impacts his. But I put you in charge of this case, Pete, and I'll back you up if he starts making noise. So what have you got?"

Peter explained briefly what he had learned, from Tyler, her neighbors, Kermit, and the two restaurants. "I may be way off-base on this, Chief, but I've got a feeling in my gut that we're on the right track," he concluded.

"It's definitely worth pursuing. Good work, Pete. So you and Skalany are going to go through the records together?"

"Yeah. And Kermit's going to do some checking from here. I'm on my way over to Skalany's as soon as I get off the phone. Then I'm going to sleep. I'll be glad when this is over and my life can get back to normal."

"I hear ya. Okay, Detective — keep me informed, especially if you hear from Henson."

"Will do," Peter agreed, and after an exchange of goodbyes, hung up. He felt better for having talked to the Chief. He had no problem about turning evidence over to Henson, but he'd be damned if he was going to give the guy the collar, too. Everything he had was purely circumstantial and they didn't have a specific suspect yet. He had the sinking suspicion that the only way they were really going to nail this guy was to catch him in the act ... and for that, he needed to plan.

He gathered up his stuff, including the original file on the Anderson case, and got up to leave. He paused at Kermit's door to tell the computer whiz where he could be reached if Kermit came up with anything. Kermit merely waved distractedly, never taking his eyes from the computer screen. The remains of several pieces of chicken littered Kermit's desk, and the hand that had waved at him had been sticky with sauce. Grinning to himself, Peter turned back toward the squad room and suddenly found himself face-to-face with one of the women confusing his life. He hauled up short, his face suddenly reddening, and Kelly Blaine smiled a feral smile at him, glancing over his shoulder toward Kermit's office. "I thought you were off-shift this afternoon."

"A new lead, Kermit's helping me track it down. I'm on my way to Skalany's," Peter answered nervously, brandishing the stack of papers.

"Hmm."

"Look, Kelly, I've got to go —"

"Of course you do, Peter. Will I be seeing you again?"

"Kelly —"

"I'm sorry," she said suddenly, shaking her head.

"Me, too. I —"

"Good luck, Peter," she told him, and brushed by him without another word.

"Shit," Peter muttered to himself, torn between going after Kelly, and following up with Skalany. Finally, he concluded he had a better chance of solving this case than straightening out his personal life, and with an angry shrug, he left for Skalany's.



Skalany greeted him at the door with a plunger in hand. "You know anything about plumbing, Pete?" she demanded as he brushed past her into her living room.

"A little," Peter admitted, frowning at Skalany's dishevelled appearance.

She thrust the plunger at him. "Great. You handle the garbage disposal, and I'll start looking through these," she traded, pulling the records and file out of Peter's grasp.

"I —" he started to protest, but Skalany had already flung herself onto the couch and was sorting through the papers. Shrugging, he hoisted the plunger onto his shoulder like a rifle, and quick-marched to the kitchen. He groaned at the sight of the backed-up sink, but looked around for a pair of buckets, and started bailing.

Skalany felt only a moment's twinge of guilt for foisting her plumbing problem on her partner, but as she looked through the pile of papers, she soon forgot about Peter. She checked through his notes first, smiling at the quality of the work. She pulled her own notebook over and started making notes on the key dates to be reviewed: the date Janet Anderson last ordered from each of the places, the date she was probably murdered, the date Tyler last ordered, the date of her threatening call, and the date the note was left under her door. She double-checked the recorded dates of previous calls and letters, and jotted those down as well. There was a pattern here, she was sure of it.

The ball bounced off the seat next to her and rolled to the floor. Skalany looked up, perplexed.

"Found it in the pipe. Your sister's kid been here again?" Peter asked, lounging against the doorframe into the kitchen.

Skalany chuckled. "Harold the Visigoth. Yesterday." She twisted around in her seat to look back at him, and her mouth dropped open at the sight which greeted her. "Peter, you're a mess!"

"What did you expect? Mr. Clean?" he demanded, wiping his grimy hands off on a towel that looked destined for the city dump. Gunk had managed to find its way onto his T-shirt, his slacks, his shoes and even his hair. "Keep downwind of me — I think I'm going to have to soak for a week to get all this crap off me."

She laughed out loud at that, then smothered the laugh to murmur, "Thanks, Pete. I appreciate it."

"What're partners for, huh? Find anything?"

Skalany glanced at her clean sofa, then at Peter, and said, "I'll bring it into the kitchen. I think this could pan out, kid."

While Skalany scrounged for another towel to help Peter clean off, Peter examined the notes she'd gleaned from the records he'd brought. "Out of twenty drivers from the two restaurants, we've got five possibles. I'd kinda expected we'd be closer," he added wistfully.

"Hey, we're closer than we were before. I think you could be right, Pete — nobody notices delivery people going in and out of an apartment building. Nobody notices if they're in the corridor — you figure they must have been delivering to someone else. And nobody ever thinks twice about letting them into their home if they come bearing food they've ordered."

"Yeah, but what is it that's set this guy off, whoever he is? Why Janet Anderson? Why Tyler? Why now?"

"Good questions. Think Kermit's still at the precinct?"

Peter rubbed his hand over his chin and nodded. "He looked like he'd taken root the last time I saw him."

"Great. I'll take these names in and we'll run a check. *You*," she added with a grimace, "take yourself home and clean yourself up." She peered more closely at him, taking in the weary lines on his face. "And get some sleep. I'll head on over to Tyler's a little before six. Meet us at the club at two, okay?"



He glanced at his watch, shocked to discover that it was already four-thirty. He'd been up almost 24 hours, and he felt like it, too. He hauled himself to his feet, groaning with the effort. "Thanks, Skalany. I owe you —"

She gestured toward the sink. "Nah. We're even. And then some. Got any ideas for containing twelve-year-old boys?"

"Send 'em to a temple," he muttered, dragging himself toward the door.

"Yeah, but it didn't do you any good, did it?" she chuckled to his retreating back.

Peter stripped off his clothes as he made his way from the apartment door to his bedroom. He dropped his cellular phone onto the couch as he passed it, along with his badge. His gun he carefully stowed away in a drawer, and then he faced the bed like a dying man in an oasis. He was already falling asleep as he tore back the covers and crawled in under them. His head touched the pillow, and he was out cold.

He slept solidly, oblivious to the ringing of his cellular phone in the next room, unaware of his personal line ringing a little later, and the gruff, angry voice on the answering machine, and completely, blissfully ignorant of the pounding on his apartment door still later. In fact, when his alarm went off at one a.m., he managed to sleep through that as well.

By the time Peter finally struggled awake, his alarm had been bleeping for nearly forty minutes. Prying one eye open, Peter suddenly found himself catapulting out of bed and into the shower; he was going to be late for taking over duty from Skalany.

Hair still wet from the shower, and nursing a couple of nicks he'd given himself while shaving, Peter grabbed his gun, badge and phone and bolted for the door, ignoring the patiently blinking light on his answering machine. He bounced up and down on the balls of his feet as the elevator descended to the garage, blowing his cheeks in and out in frustration. Skalany'd be cool, he told himself. She'd seen how exhausted he'd been when he'd left her place. In fact, the rational part of his mind pointed out, she'd probably expect him to oversleep. It didn't change the fact that he was pissed off at himself for doing so. Who did he think he was? asked that clinical part of his mind. His father? The memory of his father's departing back hit him like a fist in the chest, and the air whooshed out of him as though he'd been physically struck.

As the elevator hissed to a stop in the parking garage, Peter thrust the idea away angrily, striding briskly toward his car. His father. Some nutso itinerant who didn't even have a social security number, didn't know how to drive a car, and who could be God-knows-where right now, probably helping somebody. Somebody who wasn't his son. Somebody who didn't need him half as much as he did. Somebody who hadn't spent the last fifteen years raging at the world for taking away the most important person in his life.

He found himself standing next to his car, his car keys in his hand, his body trembling with ... anger? Grief? Fear? Fear that his father would not return? Grief over the loss of the father he'd lost once before? Anger that his father hadn't found him reason enough to stay? And maybe just a little suspicious that he'd failed somehow to be the son his *father* needed?

No, that's ridiculous, he told himself sternly as he pulled open the car door. His father *would* return. It was a Shaolin thing, this path stuff, this way-finding. The Tao itself meant "the Way." His father had achieved his purpose in regaining the honor of the Caine name, had reached the end of the path he'd followed. Even if that path hadn't been to search for his son's essence, as he'd once claimed, Peter reminded himself with a trace ... no, a pretty hefty dose ... of bitterness. He couldn't understand what motivated his father, what pressures drove him. Tan had made sure of that by destroying the temple before he could learn. Perhaps he would never have learned, perhaps they were simply too different. And the intervening years had taken care of the rest, widening the gulf between father and son so they'd been worse than strangers.

His father had told him repeatedly that he loved him, that his being a cop didn't matter. He didn't know how much of that to believe; there had been times when he was sure he'd seen censure in those calm, depthless eyes. He didn't know if that censure had truly been there, or simply in his heart. But whether Kwai Chang Caine liked it or not, a cop was what he was, and a cop was what he'd continue to be.



Peter flung himself into the car, slamming the door closed with a satisfying crash. Fitting the key into the ignition, he turned the car on, gunning the motor. A small part of his mind, that part he most frequently ignored, pointed out that making a lot of noise wasn't going to drown out the doubts and fears. That was the part of his mind that had faith that his father would return, the part that waited in patience for the day when Kwai Chang Caine's wanderings brought him back home, to his son.

As he shook himself, he clung to that thought. And, as always when the anguish of his father's abrupt departure came upon him, the suspicion that his father's inevitable return was merely wishful thinking re-emerged, and his mind shied away from the possibility. His concern was that the killer would return. His father could wait. The killer wouldn't.

He started up the car and pulled it out of his parking space, slotting the car up the ramp and onto the street. Glancing at the dashboard clock, he registered that it was two-thirty. Skalany could wait, too.

The parking lot at the Agrippa was half-full when he arrived, and he pulled his car in beside Skalany's. He raked his fingers through his still-damp hair, convinced he looked like a lunatic, and not really caring. His whole body sang with the adrenalin high of the race to the club, and the emotional roller coaster he'd suddenly found himself on. It wasn't the first time; the panic and the fear came on him sometimes when he least expected, when he was least able to fend them off. Sometimes, in the darkest places in his soul, he found himself wishing, for the briefest of moments, that Kwai Chang Caine had remained safely, peacefully dead. Then he would never have had to face up to the way he'd changed in those fifteen years, or face the changes he now underwent as a result of his father's return. But Kwai Chang Caine was not dead, and neither was his son's love. Or his son's insecurities.

As he entered through the stage door, he smiled to himself. His father would say that change is inevitable, and that extremes were necessary to come to balance. The winter gave way to spring. Panic gave way to rationality. Well, extremes certainly defined his life — temple kid to cop. To priest's son again. And cop. Somewhere in the middle of those opposites, somewhere in the midst of the tension between those mutually exclusive lives, was him, Peter.

As he came through the corridor into the club, and saw Tyler on stage, singing her heart out, he saw the extremes of his personal life in a momentary new light. Tyler was as different from his childhood as one could get, short of leaving the planet. Streetwise, sensual, excitable and exciting, she was a feast for the senses, if not the soul. Was that what he was looking for in a woman — an extreme to the spiritual kid he'd been? And did he need Kelly in his life now to balance the resurgence of his father's son?

"About time you got here," Skalany's husky voice commented wryly. "Oversleep?"

Peter turned toward her and nodded sheepishly.

"Well, you needed it. You were pretty much running on empty when you left my place." She turned back to the bar and signalled to Terry, who came over and asked Peter what he'd have.

"A Coke, thanks. I need the caffeine." He leaned against the bar next to Skalany and asked, "Anything new?"

She sipped at her drink before replying. "Kermit ran a check on our possibles. We've got a good front-runner."

"And?" Peter prompted, nodding toward Terry as his Coke was placed in front of him.

"Pizza man. Name's Ronald Dell. Recently separated from his wife. As in three months ago. A couple of complaints logged for domestic disturbance over the past year, but she didn't press charges. Kermit found a hospital record of the wife coming into emergency with a bad cut — claimed the knife slipped when she was chopping vegetables."

"Did you talk to the wife?"

"No time. Kermit found that connection after I left the station. He called me at Tyler's. I'll follow up with her tomorrow."

"What about the others?"



Skalany reached into her purse and brought out her notebook. "There were two other possibles at Petrucci's. Ahmad Khan — college student, full scholarship at the Polytech, applied physics major. Shares an apartment with three other students. He probably works at Petrucci's for rent money, been with them about a year and a half. No priors, no record of any kind. The other one's Karen Bradley, she's a part-timer. Married, two kids, husband works day-shift down on the docks. She's probably augmenting his income with a part-time job, and can't work during the day because of the kids. Nothing on her."

"How does he come up with this stuff?" Peter asked, shaking his head in wonder.

"I don't want to know. He's probably broken twelve laws digging up this much. I'd bet that neither of them are likely. Khan has too much to lose, and unless it's a crime of passion, Bradley's out unless her husband's an accomplice — I don't see it. But stalking isn't a crime of passion ... it's a crime of deliberation. And I can't see Anderson or Tyler spending much time down at the docks to pick up Bradley's husband —"

"Married guys aren't Tyler's type," Peter pointed out mildly.

"She doesn't strike me as the dockworker type, either," Skalany commented with a grin. "Course, she doesn't strike me as the cop type, either."

"She wasn't," Peter answered shortly. "What about the two at Wakefield's?"

Referring to her notes again, Skalany replied, "Simon Carlson, retired schoolteacher — taught music at the local high school until the last proposition cut the budget. And Billy Goon — Chinese. Hey, there's a new career prospect for you, Peter."

"Very funny. What's his story?"

"Graduated high school last year, started working at Wakefield's as a part-time driver, moved to full-time when he graduated. No record, except for a speeding ticket in his senior year." She closed the notebook and stuffed it back in her purse.

"So when's this Dell guy off next?"

"Tomorrow. You think that's when he'll hit?"

"I think it's a strong possibility."

"Okay. So what's the plan?"

Skalany agreed to follow up with Dell's estranged wife, and just to be sure, with the other possibles they'd identified. Patting Peter on the shoulder, she wished him goodnight and left the club a little while later.

"You're getting close, huh, Pete?" Terry asked as he wiped the counter down.

Peter favored Terry with a wan smile. "Looks like. I hope so, anyway."

"That's good. Tyler doesn't need this shit. So you get the guy — what happens then?"

"Book 'im and process 'im for trial. Gotta build a good case first. I don't want to see any deals on this one. I sure don't want to see this creep walk."

Terry nodded. "What about you and —" he gestured toward the stage.

Peter shook his head. "Separate ways. Back to my life, back to hers. End of story."

Terry looked at the stage for a long moment, then back at Peter. "Too bad."

When the band took its next break, Tyler came over to sit with Peter. She asked how the investigation was going, and Peter brought her up to date with Skalany's report. "You recognize the name?" he asked her.

"Ronald Dell," she repeated, frowning. "I think ... there's one guy who delivers pizza, he asked me out once. I think his name was Ron. Kind of short, but muscled. Worked out. Proud of it, too — kind of cocky. I told him I was ... otherwise engaged. It was awkward. I haven't seen him recently."

"He was in your building last night, delivered Mr. Harrington's pizza."



"You think he ... ?" she shuddered. "Peter, he was in my apartment. I was alone with him —"

"How long ago was this?"

"I don't know ... a month or so?"

"And when did the calls and letters start? Before or after?"

Tyler thought for a long moment, and finally answered definitively, "After. It was after I turned him down."

"I think we may have identified our trigger, then. Guy mistakes civility for interest, gets rebuffed — however politely," he amended, holding up a hand to placate her as she protested, "gets pissed off. You mix in an unstable personality, and you could have trouble."

"You think that's what happened to Janet? You really think he could do that to me?" she whispered fearfully.

"I think he might want to try. I can guarantee he won't succeed," Peter assured her, not letting his own doubts show.

Peter was still running on nervous energy by the time the club closed up for the night. As he escorted Tyler from the Agrippa, that tension communicated itself to her, and she was snappish and skittish as they made their way to the car.

"Jesus, Peter, what's wrong with you tonight?" she demanded as she snapped her seatbelt into position.

He heaved himself back against the seat and exhaled hugely. "I don't know. Tired, maybe," he admitted. "Frustrated. We're close, I can feel it, but now we've got to wait, see if he makes a move."

"Waiting has never been your strong point," Tyler pointed out with a smile.

He laughed at that. "I know. My father used to say ..." He trailed off, his face pinched. He drew a deep, sighing breath. "My father used to say that nature demands patience. To know when to sow, and when to reap ... when to prune and when to let the trees grow as they will ... you have to be in rhythm with nature. And nature teaches patience. Guess I'd never make it as a farmer," he added with a forced grin.

"Doesn't police work require patience? Piecing together the little bits of information, knowing the right questions to ask to get the answers you need to find the next bit of information? Until it grows into a whole? Isn't that kind of like tending a garden?" Tyler asked gently.

"Yeah, maybe. But I think if I ever tend a garden, I'll be reaping before the fruit is ripe — too impatient to wait," he told her with a wry smile.

"That's why they made grocery stores, Peter, for people like you."

"And take-out for people like you," Peter retorted, regretting it as soon as the words were out.

She was silent for a long moment, and Peter kicked himself mentally. "I think I might have to learn how to cook, after all, Peter," she answered in a small, frightened voice.

"Let's not be hasty," he replied in a cajoling voice, desperately trying to turn the conversation light again. "There are faster ways of committing suicide!"

She punched him on the arm, hard enough to leave a bruise, he was sure. But when she pressed herself back against the passenger seat and raised her arm imperiously, commanding, "Home, James," he smiled and put the car in gear.

When they arrived at her apartment, there were no notes and no messages awaiting them. Instead, Peter was surprised to find actual cooking utensils in the sink. "Skalany made an omelet for dinner," Tyler explained with a shrug.

"Good idea," Peter approved, moving to check the other rooms. They were empty, no sign of unwanted visitors in her absence. He relaxed slightly and came back out into the living room. Tyler had moved to the kitchen area, and was running water to wash the dishes. "You wash, I'll dry," he offered.



She nodded, and rummaged around for a dish towel for him. They worked for a few minutes in silence, oddly comfortable in this domestic routine.

"I like your partner — she's very different from Eppy," Tyler commented as she rinsed a glass.

"Anybody's different from Eppy," Peter agreed, chuckling. "Eppy's Rule Number 87: Anybody can be like anybody else, but it takes style to be different'."

"Meaning Eppy has style? That's rich," Tyler replied.

"Oh, he's not so bad. You met him when he was going through a rough patch — his divorce had just become final, and his oldest celebrated it by getting arrested for D&D."

"D&D? Dungeons and dragons?"

"Drunk and disorderly. Apparently she threw up on the arresting officer's shoes, and he didn't take too kindly to that," Peter added, grinning.

"You see much of him these days?" She rinsed off the last fork and dumped the wash water, watching the suds curl around the drain.

"Sometimes. We ... worked a case together not too long ago. Skalany, too. And my father."

"Your father worked a case with you? I thought you said he was a priest."

"He is." Peter gave a quick snort of laughter. "Funny, he ended up working a couple of cases with me. And he and Skalany —" he shook his head.

"She likes him. She told me so," Tyler admitted. "She likes you, too. She said you're one of the best."

"So's she. She's one of the best partners I've ever had. A good cop and a good partner. 'A good partner is like a good spouse — someone you can always rely on, and someone who doesn't mind putting you to bed when you've had too much to drink'."

Tyler smiled. "Another of Eppy's Rules?"

"Number 104," Peter agreed with a nod, turning around and leaning back against the counter.

"Has he ever written all of these rules down?" she asked as she moved toward the living room and the sofa.

"Nah. He's got 'em memorized. Either that, or he makes 'em up as he goes along," he replied, following her.

"I'd vote for the latter," she said. "Peter?"

"Yeah?" he answered as he sat down next to her.

"Think you could take a little more domesticity? I need to do some laundry, and the laundry room's in the basement ..." she prompted hopefully.

"Lead on. I do a mean fabric softener."

The laundry room was silent and dark as they made their way from the service elevator. Tyler groped for the light switch, and the room erupted into light and stark shadows. "This is the best time to do laundry — no waiting."

He followed her, carrying her laundry basket. "Is this when you'd run into Janet?"

She nodded, digging in the pocket of her sweatpants for change. She'd changed into comfortable sweats and sneakers before coming down, claiming if she had to be domestic, she might as well be comfortable. "Once a month, maybe, sometimes more often. She'd go out of town once in a while for a photo shoot. She had hopes of doing some national stuff, I think."

He set the laundry basket down on the counter, and she turned and started sorting things out for each load. "I used to like coming down here in the middle of the night. No people, no pressures. Just me and the silence. I didn't mind when Janet would be here ... we never really talked much, sometimes we'd sit here for an hour or two and say nothing. But now ... I think I'll have to start doing this in the afternoon, when it's



light out and there are people around." She dumped a pile of whites into one machine, slotted in her coins, and started the machine up.

"Tyler, this'll be over soon," Peter said gently, touching her on the shoulder. "You'll be able to go back to your normal routine."

She sighed. "If we'd stayed together, this would have been part of our normal routine, wouldn't it? Dishes, laundry ... all of it, together. I —"

"Tyler," Peter warned, his body suddenly tense as she looked up at him, her eyes huge and expressive.

"I'm sorry, Peter. I'm sorry it didn't work. I'm sorry I didn't let it work," she breathed out in a rush.

"It takes two to make a relationship work, Tyler," he pointed out with a sigh of his own.

"You're different, but not that different?" she asked.

"I'm a cop, Tyler. It's not just what I do for a living. It's what I am, inside. Someone has to protect the innocent," he added softly, the image of a snow-filled lane and bullies running off toward their nice, normal homes filling his mind for a moment.

She stared into his eyes for a long time, searching for something. He endured the scrutiny in silence, surprising even himself at his patience. At last, she nodded; apparently she'd found what she'd been looking for. "I know," she whispered. "We were doomed from the start, Peter. Did you know that? We could never have made it work."

"I —"

"But I'm glad it's you Strenlich put in charge of this case. I'm glad I got to know you better. Friends?"

He gawked at her for a moment. None of his ex-girlfriends had ever suggested friendship before; all of his breakups had been spectacular and final, always leaving him with a sense of irreplaceable loss. He found himself nodding, a slow, delighted smile spreading over his face. "Friends," he agreed in a voice full of wonder. "Is this anyway for two people who couldn't keep their hands off each other to talk?" he asked, echoing his old sales pitch.

She stood on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek. "It is *now*. Now hand me the detergent before it goes onto the next cycle," she ordered, smiling.

Sunday

Tyler Smith and Peter Caine had dated for nearly two years, off and on, and during that period, they'd been engaged to be married, also off and on. But having set the past behind them, they managed to find a way to talk to one another, to breach the gender gap and find common ground. Peter marvelled at how easy it was to talk to someone when you weren't trying to get them into bed. He realized with a start that that was part of the secret of working with Skalany; she was attractive, and she'd told him on occasion that she thought he was, too, but there were no sparks between them.

Finally, the laundry was done, and together they folded it and packed it back in Tyler's laundry basket. The sun was just rising, burnishing Tyler's living room in warm gold. Peter set the laundry basket down outside Tyler's bedroom and stretched. "I'm starving. Wanna go out for breakfast?"

"Let me get dressed —"

"Nah. You look fine the way you are. We'll go to Rosie's, how's that sound?"

"At least let me comb my hair, Peter," Tyler insisted.

"Okay, but hurry up — I'm so hungry I could eat *your* cooking!"

"A desperate man, then," she observed, ducking into the bathroom.

Rosie's was an open-all-night greasy spoon that catered to the locals with decent food and even better prices. At just before eight a.m., the long counter was crowded with patrons, either early risers or people



coming home from the graveyard shift. By the window clustered a group of occupied tables, and along the wall opposite the counter, a series of high-backed booths. The uniformed woman behind the counter glanced up at their arrival and nodded toward one of the booths, so Peter and Tyler followed the direction she'd indicated, and found an empty booth toward the back of the restaurant. They slid in and immediately picked up the menus held between the salt and pepper shakers.

"No eggs for me — that omelet of Skalany's was enough cholesterol for me for one day," Tyler commented as she studied the menu.

"Eggs get a bad rap," Peter countered, searching his menu for something that struck his fancy.

"You can afford it, Peter. You never stay still long enough to gain weight," she riposted.

"Hey, you make me sound like a perpetual motion machine. You've never seen me on a stakeout," he told her, nodding sagely.

"Oh, I can imagine. Skalany told me a few stories."

"Skalany talks too much. What are you going to have?"

"Good morning, Miss Smith, Detective Caine."

They both looked up at the voice, and Peter could tell from Tyler's expression that it was a familiar one. As he took in the compact, muscular body, the knowing smirk, the challenge in the eyes, he quickly looked at Tyler again. Fear sketched itself across her face, and Peter tensed for action.

"I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed the music last night at the Agrippa," the stranger continued, as though she'd welcomed him instead of glaring at him with terror in her eyes.

"I won't interrupt your breakfast. I just wanted to let you know that," he added, grinning broadly as he turned and walked abruptly away. "I'll see you around," he called over his shoulder.

"Peter!" Tyler insisted when the man had left. "Do something! That's him!"

Peter shook his head. "I can't. I don't have probable cause. All he did was say hello and tell you how much he liked your singing." His face folded into a sour grimace. "What he was really telling you was that he's been watching you." Peter's eyes followed the man's sauntering exit out the door. "I'm gonna call Strenlich when we're done here. I want back-up."

"You don't think I'm actually going to eat anything, now, do you?"

Peter let his shoulders slump and leaned against the booth's back. "No, I suppose not. Let me order something to take out with us, okay? I'm really hungry — I forgot to eat dinner last night. Then I'll take you back to your place and call the Chief."

Plucking at her sleeve with agitated fingers, she nodded nervously.

The fragrant steam rising from Peter's bag of take-out breakfast was forgotten as they walked into the foyer of Tyler's building half an hour later. A black and white sat outside the entrance, and two uniforms were with the building superintendent outside the splintered door of his office. Peter handed Tyler the bag and murmured, "Wait here."

Joining the uniformed police officers, he flashed his badge and asked them what was going on.

"Some maniac broke down the door to my office and trashed the place, that's what's going on!" complained the super, an older man who looked as though he suffered from an overactive thyroid. He ran his fingers through thin gray hair and sighed. "It's gonna take me a week to clean up the mess. An' I don't know if insurance is gonna cover this ..." he swept his hand to indicate the hollow wooden door that had been broken right off its hinges. Beyond the remnants of the door, the office was a disaster, drawers pulled out, files dumped on the floor, furniture overturned.

"We'll need you to give us a list of anything that's missing, Mr. Oswald," explained the officer in charge; Peter searched his memory and came up with a name — Jim Drake. The other officer was Ted Harriman, and they were both attached to the 101. He patted Drake on the shoulder and stepped into the room.



"A list of what's missing? Can't you just catch this guy? How'm I gonna know what's missing? Everything's all mixed up —"

Peter stared at the mess, registering the labelled keys littering the debris. "You keep all the keys to the apartments in here, Mr. Oswald?" he called over his shoulder.

"Sure I do. Gotta have a spare in case of emergency, or when we need service — plumbing, electrical, that sort of thing," Oswald replied testily.

"Start with those," Peter instructed him. "I have a feeling you're going to find at least one set missing." He turned back to the uniforms and motioned for Drake to join him. Quickly he outlined his purpose in the building and his suspicion to the officer.

"Shit, Detective. You want to take this over?"

Peter considered the idea, then shook his head. "Call it in. I want to be kept informed if he does confirm those keys are missing. Technically I'm already attached to another case, but if those keys are missing, this is tied in."

"Sure thing, Detective —"

"Peter," he corrected. "Look, we went out to breakfast not an hour ago, and that door was intact. But the guy I suspect is our perp showed up in the restaurant about half an hour ago. He works fast, I'll hand him that. Get the Ident team out here and see what they can come up with. I doubt you'll find any prints, but you may be able to get something."

Drake nodded, and Peter clapped him on the shoulder to say goodbye. Drake rejoined Harriman and Oswald, while Peter walked over to Tyler and steered her toward the elevator.

"What's going on, Peter?" she asked fearfully.

"I think you could call it a development," he answered shortly, stabbing the call button for the elevator. "I gotta get in touch with the Chief."

"Peter! Where the hell've you been?" Strenlich demanded over the phone line. He'd been awake when Peter called, but from the throaty quality of his voice, not for very long.

"I went over to Skalany's after I saw Kermit, and then I went to sleep. Then I went on duty, met Skalany and Tyler at the Agrippa. We've had a full morning here — what's up?"

"Henson's dander is what's up. You called and left a message, and he couldn't get through to you. The idiot even went to your place last night looking for you. I just got off the phone with him."

"Oh, man, Chief — I was so tired, I slept through my alarm. I raced out of the apartment so fast, I didn't even check my messages. And I've been so busy since then, so I haven't checked with my cell voice mail."

"Well, I've calmed him down a bit, but he's itching to take over this case." As Peter muttered a protest, Strenlich assured him, "I told him in no uncertain terms you're the investigating officer on this case. But he wants everything to do with the Anderson murder. Kermit'll turn over what he has — you got anything more?"

"Skalany's notes, but she compared them with Kermit. He's the one who came up with the best possible. And Chief — I'm sure he's our man. He showed up at the restaurant Tyler and I were just at — made it very clear he's been watching her. And there's been a break-in here at the super's office. Officers Drake and Harriman are handling it, but I suspect when the super catalogues his keys, he's gonna find Tyler's missing."

"You got probable cause on this guy, Detective?"

Peter shook his head. "No. His words could be interpreted as just a guy telling a singer he liked her work. No direct threat. But the implication was there. But the Ident team might turn up something on the break-in. Oh, and Chief? He apparently asked her out — the harassment didn't start until she'd turned him down. Henson could check that angle to see if anyone heard about something similar with Janet Anderson. Claire



Wakefield might know — they were good friends. Ditto the break-in — he must have gotten into the apartment somehow, and stealing the key's as good a way as any."

"That's good, Pete. I'll put him on that. What're Skalany's plans?"

"She's gonna interview Dell's wife — they're separated — and check with our other suspects, just in case we're wrong about this guy. But we're not, I'm sure of it."

"You've all done good work. Blake should be there at ten, and I'm putting Katz on surveillance in an apartment across the street. DeBrett will relieve him at six."

"She'll be happy to get off her feet, then," Peter put in with a tired grin.

"Yeah, well, on her feet, on her duff, she'll be backing up Skalany. Henson'll follow up on the Anderson side of things, but he's going to want in on this, too, Pete." Over Peter's protests, Strenlich continued, "I'll have him relieve DeBrett. He'll be on surveillance. It's still your case."

"Consider me a fixture. I told Drake to keep me informed on the break-in — if Tyler's keys *are* missing, it's definitely tied in to my case. I'll sack out on the couch later if I have to. And I'll let Skalany know where she can find me."

"Okay, Pete." He paused, as though interrupted. "Ident team's on its way. Drake and Harriman — they're good men. They can handle the case with Ident's help. I'm assigning you as detective of record, okay?"

"Right. Might as well — gotta feeling I'm right on this one, too."

"Don't get used to it, Detective. Infallible you're not."

"Don't I know it?"

Blake arrived at ten to find Peter pacing back and forth in Tyler's living room. Tyler was sitting on the couch, huddled in on herself, looking miserable. Blake took all this in and shook his head. Offering to make coffee, he suggested that Peter might want to check on the break-in investigation. Peter didn't need a second suggestion; he took off immediately.

"Trust Peter to always be in the thick of things," Blake commented wryly as he settled down to check over his equipment. He pulled out an additional gizmo from his satchel and plugged it in. "To keep in touch with Detective Katz across the street," he explained, fitting the headset on. He toggled the device on and hailed Katz; his fellow detective answered in bored tones, but Blake was satisfied that communications were in hand.

Tyler hugged herself, running her hand up and down her sweatshirt-sleeved arm nervously. "Is it always like this, the life of a detective?"

Blake smiled, looking up from his toys. "No. Sometimes it's pretty boring. Our boy Caine just has a talent for being in the right place at the wrong time. Some might call it a gift," he added, twinkling at her.

"I'd call it a curse," Tyler breathed, glancing warily at the door. "He thinks the thief stole the super's spare keys for my apartment, doesn't he? He didn't say, but ..."

"Look at it this way, Miss Smith — our perp's about to act. We've got everyone in place. It'll be over soon."

Shuddering, Tyler nodded. "Yeah. It'll be over."

While Peter caught up with the Ident team combing Oswald's office, Mary Margaret Skalany was sitting down in Rachel Dell's living room. It was a small room, but decorated with care. The furnishings weren't expensive, but they were well-tended, and the place was immaculately clean. Skalany looked around her with appreciation.

"It's not much, but it's all I can afford right now. I just went back to work a couple of months ago," Rachel Dell was explaining as she carried two coffee cups into the living room. She was a small woman, and her size put the room into perspective. Her dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail, wisps of it curling around her olive-toned face.



"Since you separated from your husband," Skalany guessed, accepting the coffee with a nod.

"Yeah. Ron doesn't approve of women who work, at least not his wife. Made it kind of tough to make ends meet on a delivery man's salary," she replied, shrugging, and sipped at her coffee.

"So what is it you do, Mrs. Dell?"

"Rachel. Call me Rachel. I'm a receptionist at a law firm. Soon's the divorce is final, I'm taking back my maiden name. Ciccone. I hate it when my mother is right, you know?" she added with a faint smile.

"Doesn't every daughter?" Skalany sympathized.

"You're here about Ron. What's he done now?" Rachel inquired in a matter of fact tone.

Skalany paused, trying to frame the words just right. "Did Ron ever hurt you, Rachel?" she finally settled on.

"Hurt me. You mean, knock me around a little, break a couple of bones? Cut me? Yeah. He hurt me. Not at first — at first, he was wonderful. Like a dream come true. But I guess you gotta wake up sometime. The last two years ... I don't know. It's like suddenly I was married to somebody else. You know the drill — at first it was just arguments — I thought it was me, somehow I wasn't being a good enough wife. Then he started hitting me. You think it isn't going to happen to you, what you see on the TV. You think you're smarter than that. Then, wham!"

"You never pressed charges. Were you ... afraid he might not stop at simply hitting you?"

Rachel set her cup of coffee down on the coffee table and nodded solemnly. "You wouldn't believe how happy I was when he told me he was leaving me. I had all the locks changed on the apartment the night he moved out. As soon as I can afford it, I'm moving. I don't care about any kind of settlement, I just want it over."

"What prompted him to leave?"

A bitter smile stretched her lips. "He claimed that I wasn't good enough for him. He had other women who were just dying to have a piece of him. So he said. Classy women, women with style. Said he delivered more than just pizza. And the tips were better than anything I could offer."

"Did he ever mention names?"

"No. At least, not that I can remember. It's really weird, creepy weird, you know? Watching someone you think you love slowly turn into someone you hate. When we got married, it was the happiest day of my life. And when he left, that was the happiest day of my life."

Skalany studied the woman before her, amazed at the strength it must have taken to have survived an abusive marriage and still be able to go on. Life in the '90s. She sighed. Sometimes being single had its advantages.

"You didn't tell me what you think he's done, Detective," Rachel prompted.

"Mary Margaret," Skalany corrected. She hesitated, then decided that telling the woman the truth would probably set her mind at ease. "We're investigating Ronald Dell in connection with a murder. And threats to another woman."

Rachel nodded acceptance of this, her face blank. "Guess he was right — they're dying for a piece of him. The woman who was killed — was she classy, did she have style?"

"I guess you could say that. She was a model."

Gradually Rachel's expression changed from blankness to horror. "Not that woman who got sliced up, what was her name —"

"Janet Anderson."

"Oh, my God ..." Rachel breathed, her hand pressed against her mouth. She started to tremble. "Oh, my God ..."



Henson arrived at the building superintendent's office around 11 a.m., loaded for bear. "Caine!" he bellowed. "Where the hell's Peter Caine?" He was a big man, heavy-set and muscular, topping Peter's height by two inches. His lined face was graced by a persistent stubble, making him look seedy and older than his fifty-two years.

Peter turned around from his examination of the shattered door and sighed. "Here, Walt. What can I do for you?"

"Where the hell you been, boy? I called you back last night, on your cellular and your home phone, even came over. Goofing off again?"

"Actually, I was sleeping after a 24-hour shift. And then I came back on duty again at two a.m. this morning. I'm sorry, Walt — I don't think even the crack of doom would've wakened me. So what can I do for you?"

Henson shrugged off Peter's explanation as immaterial, and turned to peer at the damaged door. "Strenlich says you think this is connected. Said you suggested I should look into a similar break-in at Anderson's place. What're you doin', making suggestions on how I handle my case, Caine?"

"Helping you benefit from my experience, Henson. As I've benefitted from yours. Frank tell you about the delivery angle?"

"Yeah, yeah. Could be chasin' shadows, Caine," Henson commented off-handedly, holding his hand an inch or so away from the splintered woodwork.

"I don't think so. You don't either. Why are you really here, Walt?"

Henson looked up from his examination of the doorframe. "I want to be there when you take this asshole down, Caine. I know Elder showed you Anderson's body. But you didn't see it *in situ* — it's a sight a man never forgets. I *want* this guy, Caine."

Harriman came up at that moment, eyed the combatants warily, and cleared his throat. "Thought you'd want to know, Pete — Oswald just confirmed that two sets of keys are missing — Miss Smith's, and Mrs. Pitkovitch's."

"Mrs. Pitkovitch's?" Peter repeated, puzzled. "She's Tyler's neighbor. She's up on the sixth floor — go up and check on her, make sure she's okay. Check the place over. And tell her to put her chain up and lock her windows when you go. Our man may be planning to hole up in her apartment to get to Tyler."

"Right," Harriman agreed, and turned toward the elevator.

Peter turned back to Henson, who was waiting expectantly for his reply. "Build the case against this guy for Anderson's murder, and we'll put him away together, Walt."

Henson glared at Peter for a moment, then nodded. "Call me if anything comes up — anything at all. I'll go check with Anderson's landlord, and with that Wakefield woman. But I'll be back tonight — I want to be here when the guy goes down." With that, Henson stalked away, the tails of his coat flapping around him.

Peter stared after him for a moment, then shrugged and turned back to the office.

Harriman returned from visiting Mrs. Pitkovitch about fifteen minutes later, and searched for Peter among the Identification section people and his own partner. At last he found Peter examining a fingerprint one of the Ident people had found. Peter was smiling.

"Looks like his gloves must have ripped," observed the technician, a young woman in her mid-twenties. She lifted the print carefully, placing it on a white index card. She smiled up at Peter. "It's a partial, but it's a start," she added.

"See what you can do with it. It's about time we got some kind of break." She nodded and started making notations on the card to identify the print while Peter turned toward Harriman. "How's Mrs. P?"

"Full of vinegar and ready to take on the army," Harriman chuckled. "Feisty. But her apartment's clean, and she locked up after I left the apartment. You want me to get someone to stand watch outside her door?"



Peter shook his head. "No. I don't want to scare this guy away — I want 'im to walk right into my hands. No. If she's secured the apartment, she should be okay. And we've got surveillance across the street — he can keep an eye on her apartment, too, since it's right next to Tyler's." Peter sighed heavily. "Thanks, Ted."

Before leaving Rachel Dell's apartment, Skalany asked the woman if she had any samples of Ronald Dell's handwriting. At first, Rachel had insisted she didn't, and then she remembered she still had the apartment's lease and some other legal papers with his writing on them. She provided these to Skalany, who promised their return. Skalany also asked her for something with only her prints on it, to eliminate them from the documents Ronald Dell had signed. Rachel Dell had been amused by the request, and had cheerfully submitted to using an ink stamp pad to create fingerprints on a sheet of white paper that Skalany labelled and signed before tucking in her purse. Then Skalany had wished the woman well and departed to follow-up on her other interviews.

Ahmad Khan proved to be just what she'd expected, a student struggling to augment his scholarship with living expenses. He and his roommates were all students at the Polytech, all of them majoring in technical disciplines. When she asked him about Ronald Dell, his smooth, attractive face twisted into a grimace.

"An unpleasant man, I think. Very sure of himself, very much taken with the ladies," Khan pointed out severely. "Not respectful at all. He has boasted often of his conquests."

"Anybody ever complain?" Skalany asked.

Khan shook his head. "I think not. Mr. Gambone — he has pride in his business. He would not suffer complaints about one of his employees, I think."

"Our Ahmad here is the perfect gentleman," observed one of his roommates, a muscular-looking young man who'd introduced himself as "Buck." "Always opening doors for women, helping little old ladies across the street," Buck added with a grin.

Skalany had to smile. Khan looked uncomfortable at the kidding, but bore it in silence. "He ever bother any of your co-workers?"

Khan shook his head. "Not to my knowledge. I believe he had his eye on ... more sophisticated women."

"Women like Janet Anderson?"

Khan stared at her with a mixture of emotions. His dark eyes narrowed for a second, and then he nodded.

Skalany leaned forward, elbows on her knees. "Did he ever mention her?"

After a moment's silence, Khan replied, "Yes. He used to talk of her often. But when she ... died ... he said nothing. Those of us who knew her ... we could talk of nothing else," he said, his expression apologizing for gossiping. "But he said nothing."

Karen Bradley had a few choice words regarding Ronald Dell, none of them complimentary. "He treats women like shit," she observed sourly, then glanced around guiltily to see if either of her children had heard her. Her husband had shepherded them off to the kitchen, where they were making cookies. From the sounds coming from the kitchen, Skalany could imagine the mess they were really making.

"He ever ... bother you? Make advances?"

"No. But he's always giving me a ration of shit about working. Married women shouldn't work in his opinion. Like it's any of his business," she added with a mild snort. "Dave and I discussed it, we decided that the extra money would help. His job is pretty steady, but with two kids, the extra money helps a lot."

"I'm sure it does. Have you ever heard Dell talk about Janet Anderson?"

"You mean do I think he could have killed her?" Karen Bradley considered this for a long time before answering. "I don't know. It's hard to imagine anyone having that kind of ... rage, I guess. But I know he was interested in her. He used to brag about his high-priced piece of ass. As if a woman like that would give him the time of day."



"What about Tyler Smith?"

"Is she a singer?" Skalany nodded. "I've heard him talking about some woman who sings in a band. I don't think I've ever heard him mention her by name, though."

"Can you think of anything else, Mrs. Bradley?"

Shaking her head, Karen replied, "No. But if I do —"

Skalany handed her a card. "That's my number at the station. Give me a call."

Skalany followed through with Carlson and Goon, but neither had anything further to offer. Both remembered Janet Anderson, and both recognized Tyler's name, but neither had ever met Ronald Dell. Satisfied, Skalany returned to the station. There she turned the documents over to the Ident department. They made copies of the documents for handwriting analysis, and for study for possible prints. She also turned in the sheet with Rachel Dell's fingerprints for comparison. As she came into the squad room, Strenlich found her and motioned her into his office. Quickly, he recapped the events of the morning for her.

"Trust Peter. I assume everything's under control?"

"As much as it can be with Caine in charge," Strenlich replied wearily, brushing his hand over his short-cropped hair. He dug a hand into the pocket of his trousers and shook his head. "Why do they always pick weekends?"

"Molly not happy about you coming into work on a Sunday, Chief?" Skalany inquired, settling back against a filing cabinet, arms crossed over her chest.

"In-laws are coming for dinner this afternoon. She swears I set this up just so I wouldn't have to be around," he answered with a tired smile.

"Peter really believes it's going down today?"

"You know Pete. Runs on gut instinct half the time, but his instincts are good."

"Most of the time," Skalany smiled.

"Most of the time," agreed Strenlich.

"Well, Ident's got samples of Dell's handwriting, and unless he wears gloves all the time, they should be able to lift some prints off those documents. I think I'll grab some lunch and head over. Any messages?"

Strenlich shook his head. "Good luck," he said.

Walt Henson was not a happy man. He'd located Janet Anderson's landlord, and now stood in the man's office glaring at him.

"Why didn't you report the break-in, Mr. O'Connor?"

Francis O'Connor flinched at the tone. He was a bird-thin man, with faded red hair and freckles against fair skin. "I was away that weekend, visiting my son at college. I didn't get back until after ... after the unpleasantness." He grimaced at the memory. Henson snorted; O'Connor had returned from his trip to find his nice, quiet uptown building in turmoil, a tenant dead, an apartment vandalized, and police all over the place. "I figured it was kids, vandals. Looking for rent money, maybe. Something they could sell. For drugs or something. I didn't even notice until the next day — the door was closed, it wasn't damaged, and I didn't even come in here until you people were done. Somebody must have fiddled with the lock. It could have happened anytime that weekend. It took me a while to get everything back in order. By the time I got everything sorted out, the only thing missing was that set of keys, and I'd found those in the elevator. I ... I didn't want to believe there was a connection, I suppose."

"You didn't want to believe there was a connection," Henson echoed sarcastically. "So you suppressed important evidence. Critical evidence in a murder investigation, Mr. O'Connor." Henson leaned up against a metal file cabinet and slammed his fist down on the top. O'Connor jumped guiltily.



With no signs of forced entry, they'd had no choice but to concentrate on people the victim knew. O'Connor had been a suspect himself, until his story had been verified. Every male in the building had been a suspect, but he hadn't been able to pin down a motive. All her business associates, all her friends. It was possible there'd been a female accomplice, but unlikely. The sexual assault had narrowed the field to the male population in her life. They were still valid as suspects, even with the break-in and the missing keys finally reported, but he had to admit — grudgingly — that Caine could be on to something.

"Other people had keys," O'Connor protested weakly. "Her cleaning lady —"

"The woman was sexually assaulted before she was killed, Mr. O'Connor. Unless her cleaning lady is leading a double life, I don't think she fits the profile." In fact, it had been the cleaning lady, a Mrs. Rogers, who'd reported trouble at Anderson's apartment. She'd arrived at ten a.m. on Monday to find the door locked as usual, but an unusual stink in the place. The stink of blood. She hadn't gotten any further than the living room before she'd bolted and gone to a neighbor's apartment. A black and white had taken the call. An hour later, he'd arrived on the scene, Nick Elder right behind him. What he'd told Caine was the truth; it was a sight a man never forgets, no matter how hard he tries.

Earlier that week, Janet Anderson had lodged a complaint about harassing calls and letters she'd been receiving for the past several weeks. The investigation had just started when it had changed gears to a murder investigation. And this idiot had been withholding a key piece of evidence in that investigation.

"I don't suppose there's anything else you've forgotten to tell me, Mr. O'Connor?" Henson demanded wearily.

"No, Detective. That's everything," O'Connor replied miserably.

"You know, I'd forgotten about that," Claire Wakefield admitted. "Janet had mentioned a fresh delivery person. A month or so before ... before she died. She didn't remember his name, but I remember now she'd said he was with Petrucci's. She told me I hired a higher class of driver," she added with a bitter chuckle.

"Why hadn't you mentioned this before, Ms. Wakefield?" Henson asked.

She shook her head. "It was ... I don't know. I guess with ... well, with Janet dying like that, I totally forgot, Detective. I didn't attach any importance to it. She thought it was funny, in a way — she didn't feel threatened by it. This guy asked her out, she politely refused, and that was that, as far as she was concerned."

"So she didn't have any qualms about continuing to order from that Petrucci's."

"Apparently not. Detective Caine said she ordered from them the week she died. I've been afraid to find out it was someone I employ, Detective. It sounds as though my people are in the clear."

"Could be, Ms. Wakefield. We're still investigating. But you could be right."

T

he crime scene team had finished with Oswald's office, and were packing up their gear when Skalany showed up. It was already mid-afternoon, and Peter was looking done in. She came up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Why don't you get some rest, Peter?"

He shook his head. "Too much to do. It's moving fast, now, Skalany. Can't you feel it?"

She nodded. "I left samples of Dell's handwriting with Ident back at the station. They should be able to lift some prints, too. So they'll be able to do some comparisons against what they've lifted here."

Peter accepted this news noncommittally. "They took prints off Oswald, so they'll be able to sort his out. I don't want this guy on circumstantial, Skalany. I want him cold."

"This stuff pans out, Peter, and we'll be able to arrest him on suspicion. Didn't Nick do some kind of DNA testing with Anderson?"



"Yeah. Fingernail scrapings and semen. Henson didn't have a strong enough suspect to justify the expense of a comparison test."

"The wonders of modern technology. And the cost," Skalany shook her head. "How's Tyler doing?"

"She's scared. Last time I checked, she'd taken a nap. Blake's up with her, and Katz is across the street with the surveillance equipment." A soft gurgling noise interrupted him, and he glanced guiltily at Skalany.

"It's three p.m., Peter — when did you eat last?"

He shrugged. "Lunch, yesterday. We went out for breakfast, but Dell showed up, so I got take-out. Then this. I haven't had time to eat."

Skalany looked around her; the Ident team had cleared out, and Drake and Harriman were coming back from interviewing the building's tenants. They came over to Peter and shook their heads in unison. Peter sighed. No one had seen or heard anything when the break-in occurred. So much for nosy neighbors.

"It's an old building, Pete," suggested Drake. "Solid walls, solid doors. Except for the office. No apartments on this level, just Oswald's. Our boy must have worked fast — that might be why he just bashed in the door rather than jimmying the lock."

Peter walked over to the door again, and shook his head. "No. It's an easy lock — credit card would pop it. He bashed in the door because he wanted to — venting a little steam, maybe. Showing off, even." He glanced into the office. "Oswald should secure the keys in his apartment until this is fixed. And spend a little money for a decent door and lock."

"I'll let him know," Drake offered. "We about done here, then?"

Peter nodded. "Thanks. Leave your reports on my desk, okay? I appreciate your help."

"Sure thing, Peter." Drake looked more closely at him, and shook his head. "You should get some rest, Detective. Call us if you need us."

Peter smiled as Drake and Harriman went off to inform Oswald that they were done. "Everybody's always telling me to rest, eat. I'm surrounded by Jewish mothers. Any other advice, Skalany?"

"Eat. Rest. That about covers it."

Peter's breakfast had long since turned into an unappetizing, glutinous mess, but he was hungry enough that he tossed it into the microwave to warm up anyway. Tyler's small apartment was beginning to look crowded; Blake still sat patiently with his gear, while Skalany prowled around the living room. Tyler was still asleep. He dragged his fingers through his hair, suddenly feeling very tired himself.

"Why don't you go home and catch some sleep, Peter?" Blake suggested. "Skalany's here, and she'll take the next shift —"

"No. I'll grab a few zees on the couch, maybe. Man, this is the part I really hate."

"The waiting? Yeah, me, too," agreed Skalany.

Ident called around five to let them know that the documents Skalany had provided had given them a close match on the handwriting on the notes both Janet Anderson and Tyler Smith had received. The partial fingerprint picked up at Oswald's office matched fingerprints found on those documents, as well. Since Skalany had also provided a sample of Rachel Dell's fingerprints, they could safely assume that the partial hadn't been hers.

"We could pick him up now, Peter," Skalany pointed out.

"All we've got is a probable match on the letters and the break-in. Not enough."

"It's enough for an arrest on suspicion, Peter. We get him in custody, we can run DNA testing on him. He's got a history of violence — his wife confirmed that. We've got enough to get him off the street."

"But maybe not enough to keep him off," Peter retorted.



"With all the cops around here today, he may not even try for her tonight. He's gotta know —"

"The guy I saw this morning would try. He's daring us, Skalany. He wants to do it right under our noses. He's been getting more and more blatant with each act." He rested his head against the back of the sofa and sighed. "Besides, it's his best opportunity. No music at the Agrippa tonight or tomorrow night. This is Tyler's weekend. What he did to Janet Anderson ... that takes time. He needs time. He's not going to wait another week."

"At least take a nap, Peter. You're driving me crazy," she countered with a wry grin.

"Too much nervous energy."

"Always," Blake observed. "So, how about a hand of cards?"

At six, Blake offered to stick around, but Peter shook his head. "Go on home, Blake. We've got everything under control here."

Blake looked at Peter and shook his head in turn. "Yeah, right, Pete. You're about to vibrate into the next dimension. At least let me go out and get you guys something to eat."

"I could go for a pizza — sorry, poor choice," Skalany amended at Peter's haunted look.

"There's leftover Chinese in the fridge. We can heat that up."

"From the Golden Dragon?" Skalany asked hopefully. At Peter's nod, she rubbed her hands. "Sounds good to me." She made her way to the refrigerator to rummage.

"See? We're okay, Blake. Go home. Get some rest. Hopefully by tomorrow, this'll be all over."

"Okay, Pete. DeBrett'll be relieving Katz and she should check in with you when she does — Skalany'll be manning the radio?" Skalany straightened from her study of the fridge and nodded. "You know how to work this?" She nodded again, grinning. "Okay. You call me if you need me," he added with a sigh.

"I will," Peter agreed, steering Blake toward the door. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Blake departed, still muttering protests, and Peter shut the door behind him. Skalany closed the refrigerator door softly and looked up. "You cook, I'll scan, okay?"

DeBrett checked in shortly after six, reporting no suspicious activity in the street. She confirmed that she could see into the apartment from her position, as well as Mrs. Pitkovitch's, and warned Skalany that Peter ate too fast. Skalany passed on the warning and received a grunt in reply. Skalany assured DeBrett that poor eating habits were a given when the subject was Peter Caine.

The smell of food must have roused Tyler, because she came out of her room soon after, apologizing for having slept so long. Skalany waved off her apologies and pointed to the food. Tyler wandered into the bathroom, and returned a few minutes later to load up a plate for herself.

"So, what's been happening?" she asked as she settled down next to Peter on the sofa.

Skalany paused in bringing a forkful of rice to her mouth, glancing at Peter. He shrugged, and recounted their progress so far that day.

They waited. DeBrett called in every hour or so, just for conversation. At eight o'clock, Tyler turned on the TV, tuning in to *Murder, She Wrote*. Peter snorted derisively, saying that it was shows like this that gave cops a bad name.

"Ever since they took off *Father Dowling*, it's Mrs. P's favorite show," Tyler pointed out mildly.

"She reads too many mysteries," Peter replied. "People end up thinking cops are dumb, and only talented amateurs can solve murders."

"Well, *Lord* Peter you're not," Skalany observed, chuckling.

"No, I can't really see you in a monocle," Tyler took up the thread, smiling.



"Maybe he's a long-lost Chinese prince," Skalany offered.

Tyler frowned at the suddenly pained expression on Peter's face, and glanced over at Skalany; Skalany shrugged, her own brow furrowing. "Sorry," she muttered. "Didn't mean to hit a nerve."

"It's nothing," Peter assured her hurriedly. "Just reminded me of my ... my father."

"Still haven't heard from him, Pete?" He shook his head. "He'll be back. He promised to take me out to dinner again," she added portentously, and grinned at the sudden panic in Peter's face. "Relax, Caine. It's just dinner." He did relax, and so she appended, "For starters, anyway."

Not knowing whether she was serious or not, Peter contented himself with simply glaring at her, but she remained unfazed. Finally, he gave up on that, and turned his attention back to the television.

At midnight, DeBrett made her hourly check-in. The street was quiet, very little traffic, and only a couple of kids on the sidewalk. The building itself seemed to have fallen silent. For most people, the weekend was over, with back-to-work on Monday looming ahead. Peter had dozed off on the couch, his head thrown back and his mouth open. Tyler was curled up next to him, watching a movie.

Skalany glanced around her, wondering if their perp was waiting for Tyler to go to bed. She came over to Tyler and whispered to her, keeping her voice low to avoid waking Peter. She suggested turning out the lights, to give the impression that Tyler had retired for the night.

Stretching, Tyler nodded. "You want him to make a try for me, don't you?" she asked, sitting up. She leaned against the armrest to talk to Skalany.

"That's Peter's idea. We catch him in the act, we've got him nailed. You have nothing to worry about — you've got more cops on hand than the local donut shop."

Tyler smiled wanly and nodded. Patting Tyler on the arm, Skalany got up and turned off the lights, then settled back in her chair with the headset on.

Skalany started out of a light doze when she heard DeBrett swear, "Shit, Henson! What're you doing here already?" through the headset.

She shook herself, and asked, "Everything okay, DeBrett?"

"Everything's peachy, Skalany. Walt Henson just showed up, and scared the shit out of me." She heard DeBrett address to Henson, "You're an hour early, Walt. What'samatter — couldn't sleep?"

"Keep your eyes on the street, DeBrett," Henson complained, and Skalany could hear the sounds of springs creaking under his weight. The apartment Strenlich had commandeered across the street was a furnished place available for weekly rental; the landlord hadn't wasted a lot of money on top-quality furniture for casual tenants.

The other end of the communications line fell more or less silent, except for DeBrett's grumbles under her breath, and Skalany allowed herself a smile. She looked around the apartment; the television was still going, its sound turned low. In the bluish light of the picture tube, she could see Tyler curled up on the couch, her head in Peter's lap. Peter was still out cold, his arms flung out across the back of the couch. He'd be stiff when he woke; he'd been in that position at least an hour.

"Hey, Skalany!" came DeBrett's voice. "I think we're on. I see a guy heading into the building, kinda short and stocky. Could be our man." There was a pause, then, "Wait! Come back here!" To Skalany, she said, "Watch out, Henson's on the warpath."

"Got it, Gretchen." She stripped off the headset and set it on the counter, and went over to wake up Tyler and Peter. Peter woke up instantly, his eyes roving the room. "What? You let me fall asleep, Skalany!" he griped.

She was crouched down next to Tyler, urging the woman awake. "You needed it. Help me get Tyler into the bedroom."



He nodded, and together they roused Tyler and shuffled her off to her room. Skalany immediately went back to the living room, grabbed her purse and gun, and took up her position on the couch, pretending to be Tyler. Peter stayed a moment longer at Tyler's side, trying to communicate reassurance to her. Then he picked up his own weapon, moved over to the door and hunkered down, waiting. Skalany twisted around to look over the back of the couch at him and gave him a thumb's up sign. Peter nodded, and the apartment fell silent again.

She was beginning to think that maybe DeBrett had IDed the wrong guy when the sound of a key scraping in the cylinder suddenly refuted those doubts. One lock clicked open. Another key was inserted into another lock, and the tumblers clicked back. A third. The door was now unlocked; they'd deliberately left the door unchained.

Curled on the couch, Skalany could hear the doorknob turning, and then the soft creak of the door opening. She held herself still, hoping that with her dark hair and slender build, she looked enough like Tyler from a distance to fool this creep. She knew Peter was hoping the same thing from his position behind the bedroom door.

Soft footfalls padded across the floor, and she could feel that he was standing close. She felt her stomach lurch, and she tightened her hold on her gun, pressed close to her chest. The rustle of fabric and a sudden change in the air pressure around her told her he was bending over her. She slitted her eyes, and she could see the television reflecting off a long, wicked-looking blade, held tightly in a hand encased in a surgical glove. She tensed, drawing in on herself, and suddenly kicked out with both legs, sending him and the coffee flying against the opposite wall. At the same instant, Peter leapt into the room, jumping sideways long enough to turn on the living room light. Then both of them were facing the perp with their guns drawn. "Freeze, asshole. You're under arrest," she informed him with satisfaction.

Dell rose slowly, his hand still grasping his weapon, glaring at Skalany and Peter in turn.

"Drop the knife," Peter commanded from his position, his gun held steadily on the felon. Skalany rose from the couch and moved around to the back, keeping the furniture between her and Dell. She glanced over her shoulder to ensure that Tyler was still safely tucked away in her room; she was. Edging around the back of the couch, Skalany kept her gun levelled on Dell.

Backed into a corner, with two police officers holding their weapons on him, Dell grinned, and tossed the knife to his other hand. He made a feint to his right; Peter stepped closer to the apartment door, blocking the exit. He took a step to his left; Skalany closed the bedroom door.

"Put the knife down, Dell," Skalany repeated. "Don't make this any harder on yourself than you have to."

"Harder? What're you arresting me for? Breaking and entering? Easy. I'll be out again in no time."

"Murder," came a deep voice from the hallway. "The murder of Janet Anderson." Walt Henson stepped into the room, his own weapon drawn. Peter moved slightly to the right to allow Henson access, but didn't turn away from Dell.

"You can't prove that," Dell scoffed. Skalany felt bile at the back of her throat; this guy was as arrogant as they come.

"Yes, I can, Dell," Henson replied, taking another step into the room, his gun raised and pointed directly at Dell's head. "You're not going to walk from this one."

Suddenly, Dell looked frightened. His eyes narrowed as he glanced from Skalany to Peter to Henson. The knife flipped back to his other hand, and his arm tensed. His whole body tensed. Then suddenly the knife was flung through the air, and Dell twisted round toward the window. Peter cried out, Henson pulled the trigger, and Skalany was no longer sure where to look. Dell lurched forward, a dark stain spreading on his shoulder as he fell toward the window, his forward momentum carrying him into the glass. It starred and shattered, and he continued to fall forward, the outer window breaking, and suddenly he was slipping into the night in a shower of glass. His shout carried up the side of the building eerily and a cold blast of night air burst into the room.



Skalany turned then and looked at Peter; the knife had hit him in the fleshy part of his upper arm, and he was gingerly wrapping the fingers of his right hand around the haft to pull it out. A thin trickle of blood around the blade seeped into his shirt. "Don't, Peter," she warned. "Wait 'til the paramedics get here."

He looked up at her sourly and nodded, resting his head against the wall and sliding down it to sit on the floor.

Henson was still standing there, his arm extended, the gun dangling from his hand. He stared into the space so recently occupied by Ronald Dell, his face expressionless. "Put the gun down, Walt," Skalany ordered gently. When he didn't move, Skalany walked over to him and took the gun from him, placing it on the arm of the couch, and guided him to sit down. The welcome sound of a police siren rose up from the street, and she went over to the broken window to look out. DeBrett stood next to the crumpled figure of Ronald Dell, waving the black and white over. She glanced up at the window then, saw Skalany, and shook her head. Skalany took a deep breath and nodded, turning away.

"Why don't you let Tyler know it's okay, Pete? I'll call for the paramedics."

Peter nodded, and heaved himself up off the floor.

Ronald Dell died of injuries sustained in his fall from the sixth floor, his neck broken. His body had been bagged and taken off to the morgue by a team from the coroner's office. DeBrett had stayed on the street to supervise the comings and goings of official vehicles, and when the paramedics arrived, she rode up in the elevator with them to Tyler's apartment.

There they found Peter Caine, the point of a knife blade still in his upper right arm, sitting on the sofa holding a weeping Tyler Smith with his left arm, and Mary Margaret Skalany in the kitchen making coffee. Walt Henson simply sat next to them on the sofa, staring into space. The paramedics goggled briefly at the surreal tableau, and then went to work, one man looking after Peter, the other checking Tyler over for shock. Then he examined Henson.

DeBrett went over to Skalany. "One less creep on the streets," she breathed, taking a cup and filling it with coffee.

Sipping from her own coffee, Skalany nodded. "Yeah. And the night's still young."

Monday

"I should suspend you, Walt — you almost blew the arrest, and you endangered a fellow officer in the process."

Walt Henson sat in Strenlich's office the following morning, his face impassive, and Strenlich couldn't be sure he even heard him.

"Did you hear me, Walt?"

"Yes, Chief," he answered in a low voice. He raised his head and looked directly at Strenlich, his eyes bleary and bloodshot from lack of sleep and a grilling from Internal Affairs. "How is Caine, anyway?"

"He's sore, but he'll live. Good thing Dell's aim wasn't better — he caught him in his right arm, and there was no muscle damage. I told him to take a couple of days off. You do the same, Walt — take some time off, cool down — get this case out of your system. Take Marie on a vacation, Walt. Put it behind you."

"Put it behind me," Henson echoed. "I wish I could."

Strenlich sat down behind his desk with a sigh. "IA ruled it a justifiable shoot, Walt. Peter and Skalany both attested to that. You're clear of any charges."

"Guy deserved to die, Frank. What he did to Janet Anderson ... what he planned to do to Tyler Smith ..."

"Are you telling me that it wasn't a clean shot, Walt? Is that what you're saying? Because if you are, I'll do more than suspend you. Our job is to uphold the law here, Walt. We don't take it into our own hands."

Henson turned to look at the Chief, and shook his head. "It was a clean shot. He was armed and dangerous and he was attempting to escape. It was clean."



"Good. Now get out of my office and take a week off."

Peter Caine was on the phone with Strenlich, catching up on the events that had followed the death of Ronald Dell. He was dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt, a surgical dressing wound round his upper arm, and he was in need of a shave. They'd spent most of the night dealing with paramedics, Internal Affairs, reams of paperwork, and even a reporter in the wee hours of the morning. But it was over. He was dead tired, and his arm hurt like hell, but he counted himself lucky. The threat to Tyler was over, and with Dell dead, they didn't have the worry that somehow he might walk. He knew in his heart they'd had a good case, but he was relieved just the same.

A knock at the door interrupted him, but Tyler called out, "I'll get it!" so he went back to his conversation with Frank. The Chief promised to let Claire Wakefield know that her staff hadn't been implicated. The news of Ronald Dell's connection to Petrucci's had already drawn unfavorable press to the chain. Peter spared a moment of sympathy for Mr. Gambone; he'd seemed a decent guy, and didn't really deserve the bad press — anybody can be fooled by a psycho, after all.

When he heard Kelly Blaine's frosty voice ask, "Is Peter here?" he hurriedly ended that conversation and steeled himself for the confrontation to come.

Tyler, still in her bathrobe from her shower, led Kelly into the living room and stepped back, her eyes wide and her face screwed up into a grimace. "Company, Peter," she announced softly.

"Kelly!" he greeted. "Ah — Kelly Blaine, this is Tyler Smith," he introduced. To Kelly, he added, "Tyler's staying here for a day or two until her window gets fixed."

"In the guest room," Tyler amended hastily.

"Oh?" Kelly demanded, investing the single word with layers of meaning.

"Yeah. I mean, uh —"

Tyler stepped up to Kelly and tapped her on the shoulder. She said, "He's all yours," nodded, and ducked back into the guest room.

Peter mouthed the word, "Coward" in Tyler's direction, then assumed a mask of innocence when Kelly turned back to him and tilted her chin in challenge. "Really?"

Peter glanced nervously once more after Tyler, then turned his attention back to Kelly. He shrugged, then winced as his wound stung from the movement. "We talked. We're friends."

"Just friends?"

"Friends is good, Kelly," Peter pointed out.

"So she'll be staying here for a couple of days."

"Just until her landlord fixes her window. Could be today. You ... heard about what happened?"

She smiled, relaxing slightly. She gestured toward his bandaged arm. "Yeah. Kermit told me. That's why I'm here. I figured even if you couldn't be bothered to tell me yourself, you could probably use some TLC. But if you've got a roommate ..."

"Temporary roommate," he grinned at her.

She walked over to him and kissed him on the cheek. "Keep it that way," she ordered, her tone steely. "So ... what did you talk about?" she added, draping her arms around his shoulders and leading him to the couch. "Anything I should know? And when is she leaving? Soon, I hope."

Peter sighed. It had been a long night, and it was going to be an even longer day.