

# THE OUT

An Uber-Xena story  
by The Fallen [e-mail: [ukfallenangel2@yahoo.com](mailto:ukfallenangel2@yahoo.com)]

*For Dawn*

**DISCLAIMER:** This story is intended for mature readers only. While it doesn't feature any hugely graphic sex scenes there are scenes of a sexual nature. There's also a fair bit of violence and foul language. Therefore it is recommended that only mature adults should read it. The following story is © 2008 and is written purely for entertainment purposes. It cannot be reproduced in any shape or form without the author's prior consent. The *Xena: Warrior Princess* series and all characters thereof are the copyrighted property of MCA/Universal/Renaissance Pictures. Finally, no snowflakes were harmed during the production of this story.

**AUTHOR'S NOTES:** Fair warning - this isn't your normal Uber story, for two reasons. As those of you who read my Mel/Janice tales probably know, I differ from most of the Uber fanfic writers in that I don't see the whole 'descendents of XnG/soulmates/reincarnation'-thing as a blessing but as a curse. That's not to say there can't be happy endings, of course, although I generally don't believe in such things. :) All that aside, this is my actual first attempt at writing a true Uber story; that is, a story featuring totally new characters that are only based on Xena/Gabrielle (and others). I've written many Mel/Janice stories before (and I'm writing a full length novel right now, as it happens), but not true Uber. So hopefully this will work out okay.

And finally, this story is fairly complex, so if anyone wants to read further notes, please head over to my website at: <http://www.geocities.com/ukfallenangel2/>.

Wow, long preamble. Okay, onto the story itself...

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## 1: Bearing Up Under the White Bear

The snow came down once again in the small town of Wilusa, North Dakota. Thankfully, Cassie Wayward thought, this late January morning the snow was only falling in the lightest of flurries, unlike the thick blizzards that had blanketed the town early last week and which had seemingly forced life to slow to a standstill. It had taken long hours and lots of backbreaking work by volunteers to clear the roads. Large piles of dirty, graying snow lined the sidewalks and melting salt crunched underfoot as Cassie made her way to work.

She yawned loudly and her breath fogged the air. It was too damn early in the morning for her and she felt like she hadn't slept at all the night before. Admittedly, she had stayed up late,

although sadly not because of anything exciting. Instead she had lain in bed until almost midnight reading the book that had finally been delivered by Amazon yesterday. She'd fell asleep mid-sentence and had found the book on the floor when she woke. She had been loathe to stop reading, and had thought about taking the day off work, but then remembered Mr. Weschler had stressed that it was important that she came, and so instead she had read a page or two more over a hasty breakfast and then had continued reading as she walked to work. It was still dark this early, although the streetlights offered just about enough light for her to read by, although that was not without its dangers. Already she'd twice almost slipped on patches of ice and she wasn't really paying attention to her surroundings.

It was not surprising, then, that she slammed into something solid as she stepped back onto the sidewalk after crossing Lethe Street. She was sent reeling back suddenly. Her feet went from under her, skidding on the icy sidewalk, and she fell down hard. The breath was knocked from her and the book slid from her hands.

She swore loudly. When she looked up and saw the looming frame of Sheriff Daniel Reeve framed in the flickering blue neon light of the Daily Grind coffee-shop, she realized why it felt as if she had run fast and hard into a brick wall. Danny was a huge man, well over six feet and stocky with it. Indeed, his large size was a benefit in his line of work, as most men thought twice before giving him any trouble. To his frequent embarrassment, many of the unattached women in the town had no such qualms. Good looking, well-mannered, with a decent job and, most importantly, single, Danny was considered a prime catch. However, he was keen to remain free and although he dated frequently, he resisted all attempts at commitment. That was probably the reason why he and Cassie got on so well; after all, he knew there was absolutely no chance she would ever be interested in him.

They had been close friends since their early teens, when, after both having been bitten by snakes one summer day, they had been stuck together for hours in Doctor Galen's waiting room. This misfortune had bonded two high school outcasts and over the years their friendship had only grown stronger. They had few secrets from each other; indeed, Cassie had come out to Danny before anyone else, even her mother.

Danny had suffered through an abusive childhood, as his mother had died giving birth and his father had always blamed him, and so his friendship with Cassie was one of the things he had escaped to. Cassie, on the other hand, had enjoyed a good, if strict, childhood, although she had never known her father. That was something her mother had always refused to talk about, and eventually Cassie had given up asking, until one day, the cancer won and it was suddenly too late to ask anything. Danny had been there for her then, too.

As he hauled Cassie to her feet, he was full of apologies. Cassie was a small woman but she knew that even if she'd been a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier, Danny could still have picked her up with little or no effort. She'd seen him toss bikers and drunken thugs around like rag dolls. In all his years in the Sheriff's department he'd never once fired his gun, although he carried it due to regulations despite his inherent dislike of firearms.

"No problem, Danny. I knew something bad was going to happen today and if me being floored

and wet is the worst then I'm grateful."

"Makes a change for me to knock you on your ass," he said with a sheepish grin. The pair of them attended a weekly karate class in nearby Achaea, and although Cassie had taken to the martial art as if she had been born to it, Danny had struggled, hindered by his bulk and generally slow reactions. After making sure that he hadn't spilt his hot coffee on her, he made a half-hearted attempt at brushing the snow off her woolen coat. She let him make the effort, just to make him feel better, but did most of the work herself.

"Sheesh, I'm going have some bruises tomorrow," she said, rubbing her rear.

Danny bent down and picked up her book. One corner was soaked by icy water in a puddle. He shook it and then handed it back to her with a hounddog impression. She felt so sorry for him, she couldn't be angry even if she had wanted to. "*The Republic*?" he asked with a frown. "Isn't that a little..." He paused, searching for the right word. "...autocractic for you?"

She grinned. "It's a little autocratic for everyone, I think. I'm only really interested in one of the concluding pieces, the Myth of Er."

"Sounds like old Plato couldn't think of a title," Danny said, scratching his head beneath his fur cap. "What was the sequel called, the Myth of umm... I don't know?"

"Very funny."

"You on your way to the bank?"

She nodded.

"Mind if I walk with you?"

She didn't and he knew it, although it was nice of him to ask. All the same, she felt compelled to make a joke of it as they fell into step alongside each other. "Shouldn't you be out serving and protecting?"

"You're a citizen, just like everyone else," he said with a shrug and sipped his coffee. "So what's up with the early start?"

"Annual review," she said by way of explanation. "Poor Val had to be in by seven."

"Seven? I wish."

Cassie clucked sympathetically. One of the department's deputies had come down with the flu last week and then had refused to take time off, promptly spreading the sickness throughout the department. Great work ethic, poor self-health discipline, Danny had said at the time. Unfortunately for him, this now meant that the Sheriff's Department was stretched thin, resulting in Danny putting in incredibly long hours and being on call for twenty-four hours a day since last

weekend. He looked tired.

He yawned. "So tell me, what's this Er?"

"Not what, who," she corrected.

"Whatever. So what's the old guy rambling about?"

"Long story."

"I imagined it was," he said, with a mock weary tone in his voice. Truth be told, she knew he loved to listen to her ramble on about Ancient Greece, its history and mythology, but it was less because of what was being said and more that she was the one saying it. "But we've got three blocks to go."

Grinning, Cassie slipped one arm through his. "Er's a Greek Hoplite. A soldier," she added, seeing his confusion, "who dies in battle. His body isn't found among the dead until ten days later, but it's as if he only just died. He hasn't decomposed or anything. His family is preparing his body for a funeral when he sits up and starts talking. He's been resurrected somehow."

"What's he talk about?"

"His journey through the afterlife. How in limbo the souls of the dead are allocated to Heaven or Hell - or the Greek equivalent anyway - and then later return to limbo to prepare for their next life."

"And the point is? Assuming there is one..." he muttered under his breath.

She elbowed him playfully in his ribs. "The point, Danny, is that it's an early example in the belief of divine, or at least celestial, retribution. Do good things in life and in death you will be rewarded. Do bad things and you'll be poked with a sharp stick for all eternity. And it's a strong indication of both resurrection and reincarnation."

"Reincarnation? You believe that crap?"

"Maybe. I often feel..." She caught him looking at her and smiled wanly. "Never mind. According to Er, both the good and the bad got to be reincarnated... well, all except the really bad, murderers and the like, and some of the study interpretations I've been reading on the net suggest that even they have a chance."

"Probably come back as a slug or something."

"No, you see, according to Er, the souls of the dead get to choose their next life."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No. Plato describes the system as working but flawed. You see, those that lived a good life and were rewarded, when their time came to be reincarnated, tended to immediately choose a bad life next - asking to be rich or powerful or feared or the like - while those that had been punished had learned the error of their ways and usually asked for a good life - simple, quiet, modest lives."

"Sounds like nothing's ever going to change under that system," Danny said with a grin, "kinda like the government."

"Well, eventually, maybe. But it's a cycle. Most things in Greek myth are. Look at the story of Persephone and..."

He held up a hand to stop her mid-flow. "Whoa there, sister. I reckon I've had enough history for one day, especially on two hours sleep." He smiled to show he meant no offense, although he didn't have to. Cassie grinned back. She knew she could get carried away when passionately talking about her favorite subject. "I don't know how you can stand to read that stuff, Cassie, I really don't. Give me a good Weber or Ringo novel, and I'm happy."

"It's better than just sitting around the apartment alone all night."

Danny nodded and his smile vanished, only to be replaced by a glum expression that made Cassie wished she hadn't said anything. She didn't need Danny feeling sorry for her. They reached the bank and she knocked loudly on the glass door. She noted his patrol car was parked right outside. He sipped his coffee while they waited for the elderly security guard to fumble through the keys.

"You know what? I think we both need a good woman." He paused in thought then grinned widely again. "Better yet, a bad woman."

"Nah, Danny. We'd fight over her."

He punched her arm playfully. "I meant one woman each, perv."

"Sure you did, Danny," Cassie said with a cheeky grin before slipping through the door.

## **2: Making the A Not B Error**

Three or four doors down from the Bank of Arcadia, on the opposite side of the street, a jet-black 1968 Camaro had been parked for a good part of the morning. Amongst the old pick-up trucks and battered and weathered sedans of Wilusa, the gleaming muscle car stood out like the corpse at a sparsely-attended funeral. The only reason that it hadn't attracted any unwarranted attention was because the winter weather had ensured the streets had remained almost empty, and those townsfolk who were foolish or hardy enough to venture out kept their collars turned up and their heads down against the chill wind.

Not that Zoe Mercuri really cared about being noticed. She popped another piece of dried fruit in her mouth and stared off into the distance as she chewed thoughtfully. A coffee shop-cum-diner was the busiest joint on the street, she noted, with customers coming and going fairly frequently, although they never seemed to linger for long, despite the harsh temperatures outside. At least half of the other stores were closed, some permanently, with large squares of tatty plywood nailed over the windows and door frames. Any glass left unprotected was broken. There was a small cinema with a dilapidated sign still advertising a movie that had been in the bargain bins of most retail outlets for several years now. Garish posters advertising last week's game of high school football were everywhere. The streetlights finally flickered out, although they'd been unnecessary for the last hour or so.

God, this was a shithole of a town, she thought. Why someone like Percy Hamilton would end up here puzzled her. With his money he could be living in the lap of luxury somewhere. But then she supposed people could say the same about her.

"I don't like this," Ted Abrams said from behind Zoe. Both he and Ivan were huddled down low in their seats, not such much to avoid being seen, although in their line of work that line of thought was never far from their minds, but rather as a protection from the cold. Even with the heater running full blast, in the back seats it was still freezing cold, something that both brothers had pointed out during the early morning road-trip countless times.

No one said anything so he repeated himself. "I said I don't..."

"We heard what you said," Ivan interrupted with a sigh. Like his brother, he was thin-faced and gangly, with dark eyes and a sallow expression. The most noticeable difference between the two was that the younger brother had a mop of dirty brown hair, while Ivan was completely bald.

"We just don't care."

"I'm serious. He's taking too long."

"It's been twenty minutes, which is nothing. This isn't Pasadena, after all."

"Oh, you had to bring up Pasadena, didn't you?" Ted said angrily, turning away from the window. "You know that wasn't my fault but every time..."

"Be quiet, both of you." Zoe didn't shout, instead keeping her voice controlled and low. Both the men fell silent instantly, like naughty children being told that their mother would pull the car over. She knew it wouldn't last.

"I just don't like it, that's all," Ted said.

Zoe sighed. Damn, she needed a smoke. She took another chunk of dried fruit from the paper bag on the dashboard instead, studied it for a second, then threw it back in disgust. Snowflakes were frosting the windscreen. She plucked her cellphone from her inside jacket pocket, flipped it open, and then pressed a number to activate speed dial. Before the line could connect, she stabbed at the cancel button and angrily returned the phone to her pocket.

The streetlights finally flickered out, although they'd been unnecessary for the last hour or so. In the rearview mirror, Zoe watched a Sheriff's Department patrol car turn onto the street. She held her breath for a second, fretting over the stolen North Dakota plates the Camaro was sporting. As the Crown Victoria drew up alongside, she could sense Ted and Ivan tensing behind her. She'd had enough experience with close calls to know that bluffing normality was always the best answer. But of course the police car rolled on by without stopping, the driver not even giving them a second glance.

"Here he comes," Ivan said quietly.

For a moment, Zoe thought he was referring to the police car, but as she looked up she saw Sam walking diagonally across the road from the bank, heading back towards them. The tall man was broad-shouldered and heavily muscled but you'd never know it from looking at him today, bundled up as he was in a thickly-quilted coat. A wool cap hid his thick, jet-black hair and his darkly saturnine features were likewise obscured by an upturned collar. His mother could have walked past and not recognized him.

A gust of icy cold air buffeted the interior for a second, as Sam climbed into the car, prompting a chorus of curses and complaints from the brothers. He was a lot less polite than Zoe had been earlier. "Oh for fuck's sake," he snapped, his deep voice booming, "shut the fuck up. A little bit of cold ain't going to hurt you."

Zoe didn't say anything. She and Sam had known each other for so long, she knew it was easier to wait for him to volunteer information than for her to try to drag it out of him. So she waited.

The brothers were not so patient, however. "Well?" said Ivan.

Zoe sighed again. How the hell did she get stuck with these two, she wondered? Sam shot her a glance then concentrated on getting warm, placing his hands over the heater vents on his side of the car. He lit a cigarette, then offered her the pack, which she declined without a word.

"Pretty much as we expected," Sam finally said. "One security guard, elderly fella. Looks like he carries a standard .38. Sits by the door. Two tellers but there are four counters on your right as you walk in. Manager's office is straight ahead as you walk in, with second office to your left, although that one looked empty as far as I could tell. There's a corridor between them leading to the restrooms and then the vault. The guard may be elderly but he seems spry, he kept an eye on me as I walked down there."

The smell of tar and nicotine was driving Zoe crazy. She considered winding down her window for a second but then thought about the grumbling it would elicit from the guys in the back and decided against it. The fresh air would probably have killed the cravings though. "What about the vault?" she said.

The padding in Sam's coat bunched up as he shrugged. "Looks big and impressive to me, but I don't know safes." He smiled, white teeth flashing from the darkness of his goatee beard. "And you don't know safes like this."

"I know," she admitted.

Ivan grabbed ahold of Sam's seat and pulled himself forward. "Cameras?"

"One in the corridor, at the end. Two in the main lobby, each in a corner. The one right ahead of you as you walk in is too low for security. The other is much higher and behind the counters. Might be more in the offices but I didn't see them."

"So what now?" said Ted.

"We wait." Zoe told him.

"For what?"

"For that," she said, nodding towards the Greyhound bus that thundered by.

\* \* \* \* \*

They parked at the Wilusa bus station, which was a grand title for a small parking lot and even smaller building at the furthest end of Main Street. As they pulled in, the last of the few travelers were alighting amidst the slush and the exhaust fumes. Zoe saw Harry Croker stepping down onto the sidewalk and then walking around to the opposite side of the bus to go get luggage.

He was an easy guy to miss. Non-descript was probably the most frequently used word on any police reports concerning Harry, and over the years there had been plenty of those. It wasn't that he couldn't be described (looking at him now, arguing quietly with the bus driver about the rough treatment of his bags, Zoe could easily note his pasty skin, his overweight build, his thinning grey hair and salt-and-pepper beard) but rather that he just seemed to blend in, remain inconspicuous, and avoid attention. She'd known him spend hours in the company of civilians and at the end of it, when badgered by the cops for a description, they'd just shrug their shoulders and say he looked normal, or average, or just like you and me. Remaining in the background was probably his second greatest talent.

Zoe got out of the car, wincing against the sudden on-rush of cold air, and leaned against the door. Her long black hair, tied back in a ponytail, was whipped around by the wind, and she turned her head away. Sam got out the other side and walked around to stand beside her. After a few more minutes, Harry made his way up to them, struggling under the weight of two large



duffel-bags, which he gingerly placed on the ground in order to have two hands free to hug Zoe. She felt a little uncomfortable, with the warmth of the hug (both literal and figurative) surprising her, and she could feel herself blushing, conscious of the display of affection in front of Sam and the others. She broke free as quickly as she could.

"It's good to see you, Zoe," Harry said quietly.

Christ, Zoe, thought, were there tears in his eyes? She hoped not. This was getting too embarrassing. "You too," she said quickly. "What's it been? Three or four years?"

"Try six. Hey, Sam, you're looking well."

Sam took the outstretched hand and shook it. If he was irritated by the man's presence, and Zoe thought most likely that he was, he did a good job of hiding it. He had always found Harry very trying for some reason. "How was Folsom, Harry?"

A haunted look passed briefly over the older man's face. "Not easy." He sighed almost imperceptibly, then shivered, perhaps from the cold but maybe also from trying to shake off bad memories. "You want to explain what this is all about, Zoe? I can't imagine anything worth stealing in this Podunk town."

"Later. Let's get something to eat first." Zoe unlocked the trunk and she and Sam picked up a bag each. Shit, they were heavy. What the hell did he have in these things?

"Be careful with the bags, Zoe," Harry said quietly.

She half-smiled. She knew to be careful but the old man had always been overly cautious. One of the many reasons he was so good at what he did, she supposed. She had to slam the trunk shut; it was getting to be a tight fit. Speaking of which, she saw Sam had already got back into the car. "You'll have to squeeze in, I'm afraid." Harry sighed and clambered over the driver's seat to cram his not-inconsiderable bulk next to Ted and Ivan.

"No problem," Harry told her with a brief smile. He ran his eyes over the Camaro. "Impressive car," he added before ducking his head and clambering in over the driver's seat to cram his not-inconsiderable bulk next to Ted and Ivan.

Zoe ran her hand along the roof of the car as she walked back to the awaiting open door. It was, without doubt, a beautiful vehicle. The Camaro had been lovingly restored over the course of a decade by its previous owner, although Zoe hadn't cared about the time and effort he had put into it. All she had known was that she had loved the car at first sight and so she had bought it, paying way over Blue Book value. When asked how much he wanted for the car, the owner had deliberately named a figure he had thought she would, or could, never pay. More fool him. There wasn't much Zoe couldn't afford and she made sure she always got what she wanted. Most of the time, anyway, she thought with a sigh. Here, in Wilusa, was the exception.

The Camaro had been sitting, mothballed, under a tarpaulin for the last four years. When, last

week, she had returned to the garage where it had been stored, and tugged the tarpaulin free, her breath had caught in her throat. Its beauty had stunned her. And when she drove it, she felt powerful, free, wild and uncontrolled - all the things she never felt every other minute of her life. She loved this car.

It was going to be one of the things she would miss most, she had to admit.

### **3: Choice Blindness and Other Failings**

There was thick condensation on the large windows of the Daily Grind diner and coffee-shop, which obscured the interior from the view of passers-by and, to Zoe, that seemed like a good thing. The less you saw of the grimy interior of the place, the more likely you were to eat here. The place was decorated, and Zoe only used the term in its loosest sense, in horrible, sickly yellow and brown colors, and probably hadn't changed since the late 1970s. She wondered how many tourists walked through the door, took a quick glance around, then turned right around and walked out again. The locals were probably used to it.

She sat on the outside of a circular booth, the ancient yellowing nughyde creaking in faint protest every time anyone dare to move. Sam sat opposite her. She'd made her choice of seating out of habit - she'd always like to have an escape route, something her mother had beaten into her - but she imagined Sam had chosen his to ensure the other three men were pinned in between them. He liked to be in control. That was probably the reason he liked her so much. Well, that and the fact she'd made him an awful lot of money over the years.

The five of them were the only people in the diner. Occasionally someone would come in, get coffee and leave, perhaps chatting for a short while, but that was it. At this time of the day, caught midway between the early morning rush and the lunch trade, the place was pretty much dead. The owners were probably thankful for the extra income, the staff probably pissed that they had to work during a usually quiet time.

A cute waitress topped off their coffee. Ted and Ivan both grunted acknowledgements in between shoveling forkfuls of beans and bacon into their mouths. The brothers could certainly pack the food away, Zoe noticed disgustedly. In contrast, Harry was poking at a salad, hardly eating, but then he was doing most of the talking. Sam sat quietly, smoking and drinking. His scrambled eggs and hash browns had so far remained untouched. Zoe herself hadn't ordered

anything.

The waitress smiled at them all, then turned it up a notch for Sam as she refilled his mug. He had that effect on women. Well, most women, Zoe thought with a self-satisfied smile. When the waitress finally moved away, back behind the counter to join the few other staff members, Zoe spoke up.

"How long?"

Harry shrugged and speared a wilted, browning piece of lettuce with the end of his fork. "No way of knowing without seeing the vault. Small town like this, can't be too bad. Depends on if you want it broken or eased."

"Broken is fine." She, like Harry, kept her voice low. The staff of the coffee-shop were talking amongst themselves and the inane chatter of two morning talk show DJs came from a cheap-looking radio sitting on the end of the counter, but it was still possible they could be overheard.

"Well, in that case, an hour tops for drilling, depending on the thickness of the door, then a few more minutes for prep work. After that, it depends on how they've got the vault set up. Again, it's a small building so chances are the vault door will be the only barrier. They could have some extra bars in there though."

"And if they do?"

"Easier than the door. Say another ten minutes for each door."

Sam stubbed out his cigarette and lit another. Zoe wished he would stop. She swore he was smoking more these days, perhaps just to annoy her. "What about the safety deposit boxes?" he asked.

"Broken again?"

"Nope."

Harry thought about this for a minute or two. "Each box, five to ten minutes depending on the type of lock. How many?"

"We're not sure."

"Hmm... well from the size of the bank they can't have that many. Say a couple of dozen at most." Harry was now scribbling numbers on a napkin and mumbling under his breath. "Let's see, hour-and-a-half for the door, extra fifteen minutes for interior doors just in case, plus twenty-five boxes at five minutes each, which is, five times five or ten, say seven-and-a-half, that's..." He paused, his brow furrowed.

"About three hours," Zoe said.

"Is it? Okay, I'll take your word for it. So say about five hours total."

"That's too fucking long," Ted said suddenly, his mouth full of half-chewed food, spraying spittle and tiny morsels across the table. For once, Zoe was grateful she was sitting next to him rather than opposite. She saw Sam wipe at his face with a napkin. "We should be in and out."

Sam and Zoe exchanged glances. Zoe looked down quickly. She didn't trust herself to say anything, as her anger with Ted was beginning to boil over, and instead took a piece of dried pomegranate from the plastic bag in her jacket pocket and popped it into her mouth.

"That's not the way things have been planned," Sam said wearily.

"Yeah?" said Ted, gesturing wildly with his fork. "Well, if you want to hang around that long, you're asking for the cops to come. Even in a shithole like this, they ain't dumb."

"The police won't be any problem, trust me."

"I still don't like it," Ted went on. "It's too long. We're asking for trouble."

Zoe looked at each of the men in turn. Ted was red-faced. Ivan was more circumspect than his brother, and remained quiet, although Zoe could tell he was also worried. Harry sat quietly, disconcerted by the bickering. She knew the older man didn't like dealing with people he didn't know.

"We're after what's in that vault." Sam said angrily, although he still managed to keep his voice low. "That means we have to work around Harry's estimated schedule. No choice, no argument."

"Screw the schedule. That's fine. If Harry here says it takes five hours, it takes five hours. I'll take his word on it. He's the fucking expert, after all. What I want to know is how the hell do we get out?"

"You don't need to know."

"Like hell I don't!"

Zoe slipped a knife under the table and pressed it hard into his thigh. "Keep your voice down, Ted," she said, warningly.

The young man blinked slowly. He glanced down at the dull blade pushing into the denim of his jeans, then looked up into Zoe's stern blue eyes, and then finally across at the diner staff, who were now staring over at them. His face took on a sheepish expression all of a sudden. He mumbled a hesitant apology. "I'm just not happy with going into this thing blind. None of us don't need no more prison time, you know?"

"We know what were doing, Ted," Sam said, with a smile that was meant to be reassuring but

looked like a shark trying to apologize to a fish. "We're the experts, remember?"

Ted shrugged indifferently. "Have it your way," he said resignedly.

"I usually do."

Zoe put the knife back on the table and stood up. Sam looked at her, frowning.

"Where are you going?" There was a menacing undercurrent in his words, as if she was straying from the plan already and he needed to pull her back in-line. None of the others seemed to notice, although Harry was paying much closer attention to the doodles he'd been marking on his napkin. Violence, or even the threat of it, had never sat well with Harry.

"I need some air," she said. "You're not helping me with your chain-smoking, you know."

He held her stare for a second longer than she liked, then grinned, exhaling a huge cloud of smoke. "Whatcha gonna do?"

The cold air hit her hard as she pushed open the glass door and stepped out into the street. She shivered and zipped up her leather jacket, turning up the collar. The biting wind was going a little stronger she thought, and the wintery sun dazzled off the slick sidewalks. She pulled down her sunglasses and walked a few yards down the street, trying to look casual, until she was past the long diner window and could act unseen. She dug into a jacket pocket, pulled out her cellphone, and punched in a number.

By the third ring, she had lost her patience. "Come on, come on, pick up..."

A woman's voice on the other end of the line said, "Hopkins Detective Agency, how may I direct your call?"

From behind her, she heard the bell over the diner door ring out suddenly. She turned in a panic, dreading the thought of Sam catching her. Instead she saw Harry walking towards her. She hung up immediately, ignoring the voice saying 'Hello?' repeatedly, and stuffed the phone back into a pocket.

He stood by her for a moment, his breath heavy in the chilly air. It was as if he had something to say but didn't know exactly how to say it. Eventually he broke the silence by saying, "You given up smoking, Zoe?"

She shrugged. "Trying my best."

"You know, my father used to fish."

Okay, she thought, that was a little out of the blue. Where was he going with this? "So?" she prompted.

"Well, I could never get into it. I told him I thought it was cruel. He laughed at that, saying that I shouldn't care about being cruel to the fish." Harry paused, looking her directly in the eye. "I told him I didn't care about the fish, I thought it was the worm who got the bad end of the deal."

"Is there a point to all this, Harry?"

He scratched his beard. "Yeah. Care to explain to me why I'm feeling more like the worm than the fish?"

"What are you asking me?"

"I don't like this, that's all. Look, I don't mind doing a job without knowing what to expect. I can crack most vaults, given time. But not knowing one thing is different to not knowing anything."

"Okay, so I'm playing this one close to my chest. But come on, Harry, you know that's how I operate."

"I know, I know. But this is a small-town bank in the middle of nowhere. How much cash do you think they have?"

"You'll get a healthy payday out of this, I promise, Harry." Over his shoulder, she saw the others exiting the diner. Sam looked around, saw her and Harry, and started walking towards them. She swore under her breath, conscious now that she would not be able to make another call.

Harry still seemed skeptical. "Really? Enough to pay off all five of us? And why are we hitting the bank at lunchtime, instead of first thing in the morning when the bank is empty?"

"I have my reasons. You're just going to have to trust me."

With a long sigh, he nodded. "Seriously, I'm getting too old for this shit."

Zoe smiled. "You're never too old, Harry."

Approaching them both, Sam looked to be in a foul mood. She could understand that. A mere two minutes in the brothers' company was enough to drive anyone crazy, and she'd been left with them for more than half-an-hour earlier that morning. Served him right.

"Give us a minute, will you, Harry?" Sam said.

One of Harry's virtues was that he always knew when to beat a hasty exit. He nodded and sidled off to ensure the brothers also kept their distance.

"Who were you calling?"

She'd misjudged the reason for his anger and she felt her heart quicken in momentary panic. She wondered how he could have known and the shock must have showed on her face because his

mouth twitched upwards into a smirk. Too late she realized she had given herself away. All the same, she tried to bluff her way out.

"Who says I was calling anyone?"

"Don't play me for stupid, Zoe. I know you."

She caved quickly. "Okay, okay. I was trying to call Michi."

"Michi? How can you?" he said, shocked.

"Not Michi herself. I hired a detective agency in L.A. to try to find her, a few months ago. I was just calling them to see what progress they'd made, if any, but I couldn't get through."

He looked pensive, worried almost. "And you didn't tell me?"

"You would have told me I was being foolish."

"Well, you're right."

"About which?"

"Both. I would have done and you are." He reached out and took hold of her shoulder. His fingers gripped her so hard through the thick leather she almost winced. "Michi's gone, Zoe, and she ain't coming back. She wanted nothing more to do with you after what happened. She told you as much, if you remember."

"I remember," Zoe said, both her voice and face hardening.

"So why are you trying to contact her?"

"I don't know. Maybe I need closure."

He laughed at that. "Nah, you're not the type."

Zoe couldn't help but bridle a little at his laughter. "You think? Well, maybe I just need someone who understands."

"Understands what?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, Sam. What I've been through, what we're about to do and why, and most importantly what's going on..." She tapped the side of her head. "...up here."

"You don't think I understand?"

"No, Sam. I think you think you do."

He scowled. "Maybe I don't, Zoe. But I'm here and Michi's not."

\* \* \* \* \*

Zoe wasn't lucky enough to get another few minutes on her own. Sam had stayed right by her side as she led the others back around the side of the diner, to a rundown parking lot out back. She'd parked the Camaro back here earlier, not so that the car wouldn't attract attention - if she had wanted that, she would have driven a different vehicle entirely - but so their activities wouldn't.

She unlocked the trunk and Sam pulled out the heavy bags Harry had brought and placed them gingerly on the uneven concrete. Zoe smiled to herself at that. Most likely, there was nothing too dangerous in the bags and even if there was Harry would have made sure it was perfectly safe. But she and Sam had worked with Harry many times before in the past and Sam had developed a healthy respect for explosives. He often remarked that it was hard to negotiate with a bomb.

Another bulky duffel-bag was removed next, and underneath that were stacked several thick dark blue bulletproof vests. Sam took two and handed them to the brothers.

"What's this for?" Ted asked, looking puzzled.

"Just in case," Sam said. "As you said, were going to be in there a long time. If something goes wrong, we'd rather you live. Smile, kid, you should be reassured that Zoe values your life."

If there was an implied threat in Sam's words, it went completely over Ted's head. Most things probably did, Zoe thought. "I'd prefer her to tell me how we're supposed to get out of here."

"You're talking to the mistress of the labyrinth mind, kid. No one knows what's going on in her head, not even me. I sometimes wonder if she even knows."

"Yeah?" Ted said, "Well, she ain't a mob boss or Queen of the Underworld or anything like that."

Sam smiled. "Take my advice. This is a very difficult job and the only way to get through it is we all work together as a team. And that means you do *everything* she says."

Sam then asked for their cellphones, which they reluctantly handed over, and he threw them into a plastic carrier bag. If they noticed that neither he nor Zoe took a vest for themselves, they said nothing. Harry was standing some way apart from the others, blowing into his cupped hands to keep warm. Zoe pushed her sunglasses up onto the top of her head and held out a vest for him to take. He shook his head and she frowned.

"Harry," she said, "it might go pear-shaped in there."

"I know. But I'm too old to worry and too fat to fit."

"You sure?"



The older man smiled. "Whatever's going on, Zoe, I trust you." She saw his eyes flicker over her shoulder and knew he was looking at Sam. "I may not like this now, but I know I'll like it later."

"Cellphone, Zoe," Sam called out in a reminder.

She walked back to the rear of the car and dropped her phone in the bag he held open. There were three other phones already in there. He didn't bother asking Harry if he had one, she noticed, just scrunched the bag up and threw it into a corner of the trunk.

After slamming the trunk shut, Sam crouched down and unzipped his own duffel-bag. He took out several semi-automatic pistols, placing them in a neat row on the top of the trunk of the car. Zoe noticed that he kept all the other weapons he'd bought inside the bag, keeping them hidden from the others.

Once he retrieved four pistols, he stood and began handing them out. Ted and Ivan checked their weapons over thoroughly. Despite their many failings, the brothers knew how to handle firearms.

Zoe wouldn't have offered Harry a gun, because she knew he didn't use them, didn't like them, and wouldn't feel comfortable even carrying an empty one, but Sam tried to pass a pistol to him.

"Sorry, Sam, but I've never seen the need," Harry said, shaking his head.

Sam shrugged. "Means less of a sentence for you, I suppose."

Ted looked up suddenly from checking his pistol. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Relax, kid. It was just a joke," Sam told him. He handed the last pistol to Zoe, who immediately stuffed it tightly into the back of her jeans. She didn't need to check it; she knew Sam would have already cleaned and prepped the gun for her.

"Not much of one," Ivan said.

"Our Sam isn't known for his sense of humor," Zoe said with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Together, they headed down the side alley alongside the diner, Zoe and Ivan keeping in front by several strides. She would have preferred to have Sam beside her, as he was a known constant. Who knew how reliable the brothers would be once the shit hit the fan? A reputation, even one as pitiful as they had, only went so far. Besides, they had decided early on to keep the two brothers separate so as to ensure they didn't do anything untoward and given the choice, as she reluctantly had been, she would rather have Ivan. He seemed to be the more level-headed of the two.

Everyone knew what they should be doing, but you never could tell. It was always in the first few minutes of an operation like this that people were likely to go off-kilter and do something

crazy. Usually that was just the unsuspecting civilians but sometimes, with an inexperienced crew or colleagues you hadn't worked with before, you could never be sure.

The others waited on the sidewalk, keeping their firearms hidden beneath open coats. Ted carried the smaller duffel-bag, while Harry hung onto both of his. Zoe and Ivan crossed the street, pausing only to let a slow-moving pick-up pass them by, and then strolled causally towards the bank. Both had their hands in their pockets, which looked fairly natural in this cold weather.

Ivan looked up as they neared the bank. Over the door, carved in stone, was a subscription in Latin. "Et in Arcadia ego," he read aloud. "Wonder what that means."

Zoe didn't look up, keeping her eyes on the bank. A plump-looking woman was just leaving, still laughing at something that had obviously amused her inside the bank. "I am Arcadia as well," she said.

"And how do you know that?"

"Oh, you'll find I'm full of surprises," Zoe said with a brief smile as she pushed the door open.

The warmth of the bank's interior was a pleasant change from the cold winter air outside. Leaving Ivan behind her to deal with the elderly security guard, Zoe strode forward. Sam's brief description of the bank had been spot on. There were indeed four open counters, although the two furthest from the door had signs stating 'Next Teller Please'. There was one other customer, a prissy looking woman who may have been conducting a transaction but was spending most of the time chatting to a gaunt-looking brunette, who had her hair pulled back so tightly it must have made the courteous smile on her face forced. The fourth and final station was open, with a petite blonde looking at an angle over at a computer screen. Zoe headed that way and tapped gently on the countertop with her free hand. She could see Ivan out of the corner of her eye approaching the elderly guard.

The teller looked up. Unlike the fierce-looking brunette, this teller was cute. She had an adorable button-nose, with a smattering of freckles. Her hair was short, cut into an unruly and scruffy bob, and green eyes that shone as she smiled. And what a smile, Zoe thought. It might have only been polite and forced, applied daily each morning like make-up as part of workaday uniform, and given out free to each and every customer, but it could knock the socks off most people. Small mouth, with soft pink lips, and white, even teeth.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" the blonde asked, with a voice that could melt ice from the other side of a room.

Zoe pulled down her sunglasses a little and looked over the rims. She let the teller see her pale blue eyes moving up to meet hers, then said, "Oh, I can think of plenty of ways you could help me." As flirting went, it was pretty crude. Still, as Sam was fond of telling her, you'd be surprised how often the simple and direct approach worked. A cheeky grin usually sealed the deal.

All the same, the woman's smile flickered, shifting from fixed and polite to surprisingly genuine

and embarrassed before going back to official company handbook definition of a smile once more. "Was there something you wanted, ma'am?" Her eyes flickered downwards momentarily, then she lowered her head a fraction, so that she had to look up and to the side at Zoe. Was she flirting back? Maybe, but she got the impression that this woman was far too professional to flirt during work hours. A pity, Zoe thought, biting her lower lip.

"Ma'am?" the woman prompted.

Boy, that makes me feel old, Zoe thought. "I'd like to make a withdrawal, please."

The teller frowned, then smiled again as she tried to explain bank policy. "You can't make a withdrawal unless you have an account with us, ma'am."

Zoe smiled, reached into a jacket pocket and pulled out her pistol. She pointed it almost casually across the counter. "Wanna bet?"

#### **4: No Soap Radio**

Ten minutes had passed since the dark-haired woman had stuck a gun in Cassie's face and threatened her into silence. Since then, Cassie had gone through quite a sea-change of emotions. At first, when everything had looked like was going to be another ordinary transaction in an otherwise ordinary day, she'd welcomed the cheap thrill that came when the woman had flirted with her. She'd even stolen a quick glance at the woman's cleavage, hoping that she wouldn't be spotted, and perhaps just a tiny bit hopeful that she would be.

Of course, that little buzz of excitement had been subsumed by a prickling anxiety once she'd had a gun shoved in her face. She couldn't bring herself to acknowledge the feeling as fear though. She tried not even to think of the word. She told herself she was stronger than that.

Cassie had never been in a bank robbery before and she didn't think Val, Joe, or Mr. Weschler

had either. She couldn't help but wonder who would want to rob a small town branch bank like this? This wasn't the damn Depression-era, after all. She had been robbed while at the ATM once before, but that was more than five years ago, and the culprits had been a couple of meth-addicted teenagers. Even back then, threatened with a box cutter, she had never felt in any real danger. She had got as much money as she could out of the ATM, handed it over, and they had run off, as she knew they would.

This, however, was very different. The way the gang moved in unison, each with an assigned task, sometimes obvious, sometimes not, made it clear that these people were serious. They weren't junkies out for an easy score, but professionals with a specific goal in mind. An awful lot happened in a very short space of time and Cassie found her mind in a whirl.

The bald man who had walked in with the woman had stuck a pistol in Joe's ribs and quickly taken the security guard's gun from his holster. Joe had looked crestfallen but there was nothing he could have done. Cassie certainly wasn't about to blame him for not resisting. The woman had told everyone, in a commanding but remarkably gentle voice, not to move or do anything stupid. Cassie and Val had been asked (asked, she noted, and very politely too) to step back away from their counters and stand with their backs to the wall.

Three more men had entered the bank shortly after that, one looking remarkably similar to the bald one, although with a full crop of dark hair. Another was a grey-haired older man, with a thick beard, who carried two heavy duffel-bags that he soon dropped them gratefully. Behind them came a tall, imposing guy with a mess of jet black hair tousling out from under a wool cap. He had saturnine features, darkened even further by a goatee that framed his scowling mouth, and probably had more muscles than all the other men in the bank put together.

The dark-haired woman seemed to be the leader, although Cassie found herself wondering sometimes as there seemed to be a questioning hesitancy between her and the muscle-bound freak. Perhaps they were an item, she thought, with a tinge of disappointment and then cursed herself for thinking of such a thing at a time like this.

Bolstered by the arrival of his accomplices, the bald man had tossed the security guard's revolver to the woman, who opened the chamber and tipped the bullets out onto the table that stood in the centre of the bank lobby. She had pocketed the small, snub-nosed revolver, lay her own gun down and then jumped up to sit on the table's edge, swinging her legs, for all the world looking like a bored schoolgirl.

The two guys who looked somewhat alike (Cassie had by now decided they must be brothers or cousins) had kept everyone covered with their guns. The muscle-bound freak had taken Joe's keys and asked him which of them locked the front door. Joe had hesitated, gulped, thought twice and then told him. Cassie didn't blame him. The door was locked and then the long venetian blinds closed over all the front windows. They even changed the sign on the door from 'Open' to 'Closed', which struck Cassie as either absurd or insulting.

It was only to be expected that Mr. Weschler would step out of his office shortly afterwards. With his door shut he hadn't heard the low commotion going on, but had noted the change in

lighting when the blinds were lowered. Seeing what was going on, he immediately made to take a step backwards, but the muscle-bound freak had caught him by the scruff of his neck, crunching the shirt collar of his expensive suit, and shoved him forward, motioning with his gun that he should join them all.

It was at this point that Cassie and all the others were herded into the centre of the bank foyer and forced to sit down. The brothers went around each of them, having taken several pairs of handcuffs from the smallest duffel-bag, and had proceeded to cuff them each by one hand to the table legs. As the tables weren't bolted to the floor, they had made sure to run the cuffs through a gap in the metalwork, which meant the hostages - and with a gulp, that's exactly when Cassie had realized that was what she and the others now were - were stuck together in pairs, except for the fortunate Mr. Weschler. Rank had its privileges, she couldn't help but think, even in a situation like this.

While all this was going on, Mister Muscle had been checking out the rest of the bank, slowly and purposefully moving through each room in the bank in turn. Cassie watched him when he went into the Manager's office, and saw that he was checking every space big enough to hold a person, just in case someone was hiding. They obviously wanted no surprises, she thought, unnerved by their thoroughness. He had to ask Joe again which key on the loop was needed to unlock the deputy manager's office, but even with that being locked and obviously unused, he again checked everywhere he could. When he had disappeared down the corridor that led to the vault, the grey-haired man went with him, taking his duffel-bags.

"Okay," the woman said, and Cassie was snapped back to the present by her voice. "I think we have your attention. If I really need to tell you, this is a robbery. Behave yourselves, don't try anything stupid, yadda yadda yadda, and you won't be harmed, I promise you."

"Are you crazy?" Weschler exclaimed angrily, looking up at her. "You do know this bank is just a sub-branch, don't you?"

One of the brothers stepped forward and raised his hand as if to strike the manager, but then thought better off it after catching an angry glare from the woman.

"We know what we're doing," the woman said and smiled patronizingly at him. "For example, I'd like your set of keys please. I'd like all three of them and we only have one so far."

Weschler reluctantly dug his free hand into a trouser pocket and brought out his keys. The bald brother took them and threw them on the table.

"And the third set, if you will?"

Val shot Cassie a look, and Cassie shook her head frantically.

"There isn't a third," the manager said.

"Really? That is unusual." She looked over at Cassie, who glanced away a little too quickly.

"Well?"

"She has them!" Val blurted out suddenly, jabbing a pointed finger towards Cassie. "They're in her bag."

"Thank you." The woman turned towards the brothers. "Ivan, would you be so kind?"

The bald man walked behind the counters and after rummaging around for a while, returned with two purses. He tipped both upside down in turn, spilling the contents over the table next to where the woman sat. He plucked out a large set of keys from the debris and handed them to the woman.

So the bald guy was called Ivan, Cassie noted inwardly, giving Val a dirty look. She'd make a point of remembering all their names as they came up, she decided, although she wasn't sure what good it would do her.

"Now, I'll point out that it's just stupid to hold out on us," the woman was saying. She wasn't looking at Cassie, but it certainly felt as if the words were being directed right at her. "If we ask you for something, I'd strongly urge you just to tell us. That way no one gets hurt. Because believe it or not, we don't want any of you to get hurt."

"We don't?" Ivan said with a sly grin.

"No, we don't."

The other brother had been standing by the door and now he whispered urgently, "Someone coming."

"Everyone be nice and quiet now," the woman said.

A shadow moved past the blinds and loomed large on the door. There was a pause, and Cassie imagined the visitor reading the sign and being puzzled. The door rattled once, then again more violently. The shadow shrunk a little as whoever it was leaned against the glass trying to peer in, although the blinds blocked practically everything. There were a few mutterings, probably swearing, then the shadow moved away. Almost everyone in the bank breathed out a sigh of relief. Everyone except the woman, Cassie saw.

A moment or two passed before anyone spoke.

"What if he saw something?" the man by the door asked.

"I wouldn't worry about it, Ted." The woman heaved herself off the table just as the muscular guy came back from the vault. The grey-haired man wasn't with him, Cassie noted.

"All clear, Zoe," he said in a rumbling deep voice. "Harry's getting set-up, should be ready start drilling in a few."

So her name was Zoe, Cassie thought. She didn't look like a Zoe. Again, something unsettled her. They had no compunction about using names, that was it. Okay, so maybe they weren't their real names, but still... they hadn't done anything about hiding their faces or disabling the security cameras either.

"No chance they've left the vault unlocked, I suppose?" Zoe said with a wry smile. When he shook his head, she added nonchalantly, "Oh well, always worth hoping for."

She moved around the teller counters and started digging around, looking beneath each desk in turn and then around the computer monitors when she didn't find what she needed. With a puzzled look on his face, Ted asked her what she was doing.

Without looking up, she said, "Looking for the silent alarm."

"What the fuck?" Ted's face turned red in anger in an instant. "What the hell do you want that for?"

"So the police know we're here, of course," she said sweetly. "Ah, here it is."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Come in, Sheriff."

The GSM radio system radio squawked noisily as Danny turned the patrol car onto Ponos Drive. He plucked the mic from the console and pressed down the transmit button.

"Morning, Effie," he said, smiling. "You fixed the coffee yet?"

There was nothing but static for a moment, then the voice of the emergency operator back at the Sheriff's Department building came through. "Sheriff, I think we might have a problem."

Danny sighed. He could tell by the young woman's worried tone that this was indeed serious. Normally, Effie Baxter was incredibly cheerful and outgoing. Right now, however, she sounded very upset. "What's going on, Effie?"

"The silent alarm at the bank has gone off."

It took all his self-control not to drive off the side of the road. Immediately his thoughts went to Cassie. Keeping his voice level, he told Effie, "It's probably an accident. I'll check it out." Even as he said it, he knew in the back of his mind that it wasn't likely to be a simple case of someone falling against the button.

"Be careful, Sheriff. Miss Henderson was in here a little while ago. She said she tried to cash a check during her lunch break, but she found the bank locked and all the blinds drawn. She banged on the door but got no response. Sheriff? Are you there?"

"Yes, Effie, I'm here." He thought for a second. "Okay, I'm driving over there now, be there in a few minutes. It's probably nothing, Effie, try not to worry. Oh, and Effie?"

"Yes, Sheriff?"

"Don't spread this around, okay?"

She reassured him that she wouldn't breathe a word of this to anyone and signed off. Danny pulled the car over and coasted to a dead stop. After changing channels on the radio, he tried to raise the only deputy fit enough to work today.

"Ike? Come in, Ike."

A small crackle followed by a long hiss, then, "...up, Sheriff?"

"Where are you, Ike?"

More static. "...at the McAllister farm... the morning... John's filed another complaint..."

"Leave it."

"Sheriff?"

"Meet me at the corner of Main and Algos."

"...kay, give me five minutes to..."

"Leave now, Ike." Danny's voice was hard.

There was a pause, punctuated only by a brief screech of static.

"You got it, Sheriff. Be there in ten."

\* \* \* \* \*

This was part of the plan, of course, Cassie realized that much. It had to be. Although it only looked like half the team were being kept in the know, judging by the shocked expressions on the brothers' faces. Both of them blurted out loud protests as soon as Zoe pressed the alarm button, angrily shouting that this was stupid, that this was just asking to be caught. Zoe said nothing, just kept smiling. Even when the dark-haired brother raised his pistol towards her, she kept on smiling.

The muscle-bound freak stepped forward, placing a large meaty hand over the gun and forcing the hand down. "Relax, kid. Zoe knows what she's doing."

"Do you? Do you know what's she doing?" Ted said angrily. "Cos I tell you, Sam, I'm beginning to think there isn't a damn plan and she's just crazy."



The man called Sam nodded in agreement. "Well, she's certainly crazy." He stepped over to the table where the dark blue duffel-bag had been placed and unzipped it, fishing inside until he found what he needed. He drew out two squat, rectangular weapons with long magazines and handed one to Zoe, who walked back over to the door with him. Cassie had seen enough bad action movies to recognize that these weren't Uzis but were something similar. Shit, she thought, they had some serious firepower.

Ted turned away, swearing loudly.

His brother sighed. "We're in this now, Ted. Might as well go along for the ride."

"For fuck's sake, Ivan..." Ted began, then his voice trailed off. He swore again, running together an impressive series of curse words, but then seemed to get himself under control, taking a deep breath and trying his best to control his temper. "You're right. But I want it on record that I don't like this."

"So noted," Zoe said, and if anyone else picked up on the trace of sarcasm in her words, they didn't show it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Danny knew he should have waited for Ike to arrive before proceeding. But something was driving him on as he strode across the street towards the Bank of Arcadia. He'd have liked to think it was a sense of duty, or some foolhardy heroism, but in reality he couldn't get the worries over Cassie's safety out of his mind.

He'd parked almost directly across from the bank. From there he could see the window blinds were lowered and even the sign on the door had been turned to show 'Closed'. That struck him as out of place. Would a criminal think of doing that? He didn't think so. Perhaps there wasn't anything funny going on after all. Perhaps daft old Ruth Henderson had got the wrong end of the stick. For the second time today, he told himself that he was clutching at straws. It was going to be one of those days when he did nothing but, he thought, as he rapped loudly on the glass of the door.

There was a long wait. Eventually he heard keys rattling in the lock - without the blinds being pulled up, he noted, which was odd in itself - and the door was opened a tiny fraction. The elderly security guard stood in the small gap, blocking Danny's view of the rest of the bank lobby.

"Afternoon, Sheriff."

Another oddity, Danny thought. Normally Joe called him by his first name. "Afternoon, Joe," he said, turning his head to look away but still keeping his eyes on the security guard. "The bank's closed a little early today, isn't it?"

"Fraid so. Mr. Weschler decided to rework all the computer systems and has run into problems.

Don't understand it myself."

Danny nodded sympathetically, keeping up the pretence. "Everyone gone home, I expect?"

"Yes. Just me and Mr. Weschler here."

"Okay then." Danny saw Ike Michael's patrol car pulling in across the road behind his own.

"Well, just checking on you. Keep safe, Joe."

As the door shut behind him he heard it being locked again. He strolled back across the street, as casually as he dared, not trying to think about the fact that any moment now he could be shot in the back. Ike was already stepping out of his patrol car. He didn't walk around to meet Danny, instead letting him come to him. Danny just wanted to get to the radio in his car and call up Effie.

"What's going on Danny?" Ike asked. He was a short man and looked even shorter when standing near the much taller Sheriff, with a mop of curly dark blond hair and a weathered face. He and Effie were a long standing item, although they'd been engaged for so long pretty much everyone who knew them doubted they'd ever get married.

"The bank alarm's been tripped," Danny told the deputy as he reached into his patrol car for the radio.

"You're kidding, right?" Ike looked startled. "By accident?"

"Doesn't look like it. The place is locked up tight and Joe was acting really weird."

"Shit," Ike said, before spitting onto the sidewalk. Then he suddenly tapped Danny on the arm. "Movement!"

Danny hurriedly looked over at the bank. The door was already open and two people were stepping out on to the sidewalk. A tall, slim, dark-haired woman was first, with a thick-set brute of a man following close behind. The pair separated as they moved outwards, putting a yard or two of space between themselves. He noted they both held ugly, square, metallic objects in their hands...

Out of the corner of his eye, Danny saw Ike's hand drop down to his gun, then saw both strangers raise what they were holding, which finally registered...

"Down!" Danny shouted and leapt across to collide with Ike. His large arm wrapped around the smaller man and slammed him to the ground. There was the harsh staccato sound of gunfire, sharp in the winter air, and the windows of both patrol cars blew out, showering the two cops with shards of broken glass. Danny rolled off Ike and kept close to the ground. The deputy was swearing under his breath and fumbling for his gun, but his nervous fingers were unable to undo the latch. A pause. Then more rapid shots and the cars dipped dramatically as the tires on the other side burst. The metallic clanging sound of bullets puncturing the metal bodywork

continued for a moment.

"Holy shit!" Ike yelled above the gunfire.

Then the noise stopped suddenly. Moving swiftly, Danny risked poking his head around the rear bumper of Ike's patrol car and he saw the bank door being slammed shut. No doubt it was being locked again. Ike raised himself up on one knee, having finally pulled his gun free of its holster, and aimed it across the hood of his car. Not that there was anything to aim at. He studied the bank, then turned and sank down in relief.

"Don't take it so personal," Danny said.

"Well, excuse me, but it always feels personal when someone tries to kill me! Sweet Jesus Christ on an F-bomb!" Ike was shaking, Danny noticed, his hands trembling as he checked his revolver.

"They weren't."

"Weren't what?"

Danny took another quick look around the fender. "They weren't trying to kill us. They were firing short, controlled bursts. They had plenty of time to hit us if they wanted. They were aiming for the cars. And look, not a single bullet passed us."

He gestured at the nearby store fronts and Ike looked up. It was true. No pockmarked wood or brick, no shattered windows, no damage at all. Whoever these guys were, they knew how to handle weaponry. High rate of fire weaponry too, Danny thought, looking down at the snub nosed .38 Ike was cradling and suddenly feeling rather inadequate.

"Then what the hell are they up to?"

"Good question," Danny said and reached over the shattered passenger side window of his patrol car to grab the radio handset. Luckily the bullets hadn't wrecked that. "Wish I had a good answer for you. Effie? Come in, Effie."

The door to the nearby Book Nook store opened and the owner stepped outside. "What the on earth is going on out here?"

Ike swore loudly and told him in no uncertain terms to get the hell back inside and keep his head down. Subdued, the bookstore owner did exactly that. Turning back to Danny, Ike said, "We're going to have to seal off the street, just in case they decide to start getting more random with their aim."

Danny nodded his agreement. "See what you can do to start evacuating these stores. But do it quickly and as quietly as possible. Let's not start a panic."

"I'm guessing it's probably a little late for that, Danny."

Just then the radio crackled. "Sheriff? The switchboard's going wild here," Effie said, sounding flustered. "People are reporting gunfire..."

Danny cut her off. "Listen, Effie, the bank's being robbed. I want every deputy down here within half-an-hour." Effie started to say something in reply but he spoke over her. "I don't care if they're on their deathbeds, Effie, I want them here, is that understood? Tell Tom to open up the armory and bring the rifles. Do it now, Effie."

She signed off and as he threw the handset back into the car he saw Ike looking up at him. "I know," he said with a shrug, "not much better against that kind of firepower."

"Better than pistols. I guess," Ike said. "You gonna answer that?"

"What?" Danny said, puzzled. Then he heard it too, a quiet buzzing coming from the cellphone on his belt. He plucked it free and looked at the screen to see who was calling, then gave Ike a worried look. "It's Cassie."

He felt his chest tighten as he flipped the phone open and held it up to his ear. "Cassie?" It wasn't. Instead he heard a woman's voice, soft and low, with an accent he couldn't quite place. "Who am I speaking to? This is Daniel Reeve, Sheriff of Pembin County."

Danny looked behind him at the bullet-riddled patrol cars. "Yep, about a hundred or so of them, actually." He could see Ike was getting edgy as the conversation continued, anxious to know what was being said. "I'm glad you approve," he said dryly, "but if you're done making small talk, maybe we could discuss how bad the situation is. I'm going to assume the obvious; you're robbing the bank and you have hostages."

"How many hostages do you have?" He held up his hand with fingers spread so that Ike saw and mouthed the word five. "And there's just the two of you? Uh-huh, I can accept that. What do you mean, for the moment?"

Danny tilted his head to hold the phone in place between his ear and shoulder, and withdrew his notepad from inside his thick fleece jacket. He motioned at Ike to get a pen. He scribbled down a number and showed it to Ike. It was a phone number. Danny didn't recognize the area code, but knew it was out of state somewhere. "That's it?" he asked, listened for another second, and then said, "What reassurances do I have that the..."

Before he could finish he heard a faint click and the line went dead.

Ike scratched his head. "Well, what's going on, Danny?"

Danny held up a hand to silence the deputy as he thumbed in the number he'd been given. Once he heard the ring tone, he gave his answer. "I think we're in serious trouble, Ike, that's what."

## **5: Fear Conditioning**

When Sam and Zoe ran back into the bank, there was a deathly silence waiting to greet them. No doubt all the other hostages were fearfully thinking about what might have happened outside; Cassie knew Danny's fate was weighing most on her mind. She watched as Zoe, in the lead, handed back the machine-gun she had just fired. She did so casually, almost without looking, as if she would have dropped it if her henchman had not been there to catch it. The bald-headed brother had locked the door almost immediately.

"What have you done?" Cassie said. Sitting next to her, Val gave her a sharp kick in the ankle, hitting bone and making Cassie wince in pain.

Zoe didn't answer directly but instead pointed offhandedly at her and smiled sweetly. "As much damage and as little harm as possible. I get the impression that you're going to be trouble," she said. "Why not try to prove me wrong?" She turned to Sam. "Check on Harry, see how he's doing."

Having removed the magazines and packed away the machine-guns back into the duffel-bag, the burly man nodded and headed down the corridor that led to the vault. As he disappeared from view, everyone heard the high-pitched whine of a drill starting up.

Zoe looked down at the hostages. "Who knows the Sheriff's number?"

Nobody answered. Most of them kept their eyes averted, probably due to fear, but Cassie was feeling an inward surge of relief - if this madwoman was looking to make contact that meant Danny was still alive. Maybe not unharmed but alive.

"Come on, one of you must know."

"Yeah," Mr. Weschler said sardonically, "it's 911."

"Don't get smart," Zoe snapped, "I meant his cell."

"How the hell should we know?"

"I know," Cassie said quietly, if only to stop her reckless boss from saying something stupid.

Zoe crossed to where Cassie sat and crouched down beside her. "Yeah? And how would you know that?"

"We're old friends."

The brunette chuckled and raised an eyebrow. "Well, ain't you little Miss Goody Two Shoes?"

"I ain't that good," Cassie said, turning away.

Zoe got to her feet, walked back to the table and began pawing through the pile of purse innards that Ted and Ivan had dumped there earlier. "Which is your cellphone?" she asked Cassie.

Cassie thought about resisting but decided it wouldn't be worth it, over such a small issue. Besides, if she gave up her phone then the crooks would get to talk to Danny, which also meant she would learn for sure if he was okay or not. "The red one," she said finally.

The woman's long, delicate fingers picked up the cellphone but then paused, looking at something else mixed in with the assorted debris. Whatever it was, Cassie couldn't see from her low angle. What was so captivating, Cassie wondered?

"It's number five," she said, catching the distracted woman's attention. "On speed dial. That's his number."

Zoe seemed to shake herself, the frown that had appeared on her brow a moment ago disappearing, only to be replaced by a mischievous smile. "On speed dial too, eh?" She pressed the button marked four and held the phone up to her ear. It rang twice, the tone loud enough for everyone in the bank to hear, but when it was answered nobody could make out the tinny voice.

"I'm afraid not," Zoe said in response to whatever had been said by way of a greeting. "Funny, I was going to ask you the same thing."

Cassie's heart leapt in joy when she heard the woman say, "Well, Sheriff Reeve, I take it we've made our point?"

Danny's reply was obviously amusing, for Zoe gave out a sudden peal of laughter. "Oh, I like you. A sense of humor in the worst possible situation. That speaks well of you." She listened for another second before speaking again. "Correct on both counts. The manager, two tellers, the security guard and one very unlucky customer. Now, that would be telling, Sheriff. Enough with the questions. I hate to sound cliché but the point, or points, my friend and I was making was that

we are in control in here, agreed?"

The whine of the drill in the vault suddenly went up a pitch or two and Zoe covered her free ear with a hand so she could hear better. "Why, that's very gracious of you, Sheriff. And I accept that, for the moment, you are in control out there in the cold. But listen closely, Sheriff Reeve, I want you to do something for me. I want you to call the following number..." She rattled off a series of digits. "Ask for Agent Hudson or Cory. Tell them Zoe Mercouri sends her love. Yes, that's it. If they run true to form, they should be here within forty-five minutes. Then you won't have to worry about who controls what. Hannah and Grace like to take charge of things."

She hung up on the Sheriff mid-sentence as Sam walked back into the lobby.

"Harry's got the drilling underway," he announced. "Says it's going to take a little longer than he first thought though. Something about the vault plating, I don't know."

Zoe nodded in acknowledgement and dumped the cellphone back in the pile of debris, her hand wandering over the other items, pausing here and there.

"So Cassandra Wayward..." she said slowly and deliberately.

"How do you know my name?" Cassie asked her.

Zoe held up a small plastic card. "Some fool wrote it on your driver's license. So how do you have the Sheriff's number in your cellphone?" She glanced at Cassie's left hand, dangling as it was through the handcuff. "Not married, not engaged, so what... are you two just fuckbuddies?"

Cassie blushed and shook her head. She was about to say something, perhaps something foolish, when next to her Val snorted in laughter instinctively, then looked startled at her own outburst and looked down, scared that she might have attracted attention to herself.

"What's so funny?" Zoe said.

Val said nothing, just shook her head frantically, and tried to avoid making eye contact.

"She asked you a question," said Ted, threateningly.

"Leave her alone," the security guard said.

"Who asked you, grandpa?"

"Shut up, Ted," Zoe interrupted before turning her attention back to Val. "Well, did I say something funny?"

"I'm gay," Cassie said, if only to save Val from further interrogation and humiliation.

A single raised eyebrow. "Are you now? In a small town like this? No wonder you have a

problem keep your mouth shut. You've obviously got a lot more courage than sense." Zoe turned the driver's license over and over in her hand. "Cassandra, huh? No chance you were named after the Greek princess?"

"No," Cassie told her, "my mother named me after Cass Elliot. The singer."

"I know who Mama Cass is. Well, that's the second mistake your mother made." The brunette's attention had returned to the pile of items on the table. She picked up the book Cassie had been reading, thumbed through it quickly. "So this wouldn't be your book, I suppose?"

Cassie didn't say anything, just nodded.

"Of course it is," Zoe said with a look of disappointment. "A little oppressive for someone like you, isn't it?"

Although it wasn't the first time that had been said to Cassie today, it was the way it was said that made her bristle at the words. "Someone like me?" she snapped irritably. "You don't know anything about me."

Zoe looked puzzled. "No, Cassandra, perhaps you're right. Yet I feel I do. I wonder why that is."

"Try reading the book. Maybe you'll find out."

"In this?" She almost sneered at the book.

"You'd be surprised. Once you get past Plato's theories on justice, he has some interesting things to say about reincarnation. Maybe you knew me in a previous life."

Cassie didn't think what she was saying was important; she was just making noise, filling the silence. But when the color drained from the woman's face, she knew something she had said had hit a nerve. The smile vanished and with it went the cockiness, the self-assured nature. Suddenly it seemed like she was no longer in control and if that scared her, for some reason it scared the living hell out of Cassie. She gulped and tried to think of something to say but she didn't know what she'd said to cause such a reaction.

Zoe was staring at Sam, with what could only be described as a look of desperation on her face. "Sam?" she said quietly. Her tone was pleading; she almost sounded like a lost little girl who, confronted with an unspeakable horror, was frantically asking a grown-up what to do.

"It's nothing," Sam said, glaring at Cassie. "Just a coincidence."

Zoe's confusion changed swiftly to anger as she rose. "There's no such thing as fucking coincidences, Sam!" and hurled the book at him. He ducked, stepped forward, and grabbed her by the collar of her jacket. She yelled obscenities at him, but he ignored her and pulled her along with him. She might have been tall and in good shape, but she was just a paper doll in his huge hands. Her sunglasses were dislodged and flew off as she struggled, and her hair came loose. He



dragged her into the manager's office, threw her bodily against the wall, and slammed the door behind him. Almost immediately, the dull rumble of them shouting at each other could be heard.

No one said anything for a moment. Cassie saw worried glances pass between the two criminal brothers.

Val leaned over and whispered, "What was all that about?"

"Beats me," Cassie said honestly. But it was something to work on, she thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

The FBI arrived in Wilusa exactly thirty-nine-and-a-half minutes later. Danny didn't know which worried him the most: the fact that they had gotten here so quickly or that the mystery woman in control of the bank had been right with her prediction. A convoy of three shining jet black SUVs drove up towards Main Street, passing through the barricade which was lifted and carried open by a sick-looking Pembina County deputy. A SWAT truck, black with a white roof and white lettering, tinted windows, and chained tires, rolled up to the edge of the street, bringing up the rear.

They couldn't have stood out more if they tried, even assuming they were trying, and it wasn't just the black paint jobs against the white snow either.

Danny, Ike, and the rest of the deputies had barricaded off both ends of the street, and had quickly but carefully evacuated all of the stores down there. Not that many of the staff, owners and customers had been happy with such authoritative action, although most had their tempers cooled when they passed the bullet-ridden remains of the two patrol cars. Despite the cold and the obvious danger, small groups of people had gathered at both ends of the street, although they were so few in number that the sick deputies didn't have too work hard at keeping them at bay.

By the time Danny had caught up with the convoy the SWAT vehicle was parked and unloading, with heavily armed and armored troopers leaping out of the back and quickly but cautiously moving into holding positions on the other side of the street. Suited figures exited the large SUVs as they played to a halt. The funny thing about FBI agents, Danny thought, was that although they were supposed to wear plain-clothes, they always appeared to wear the same clothes. They looked so... well, uniform, he thought with a smile. Wearing dark suits, sunglasses, highly polished shoes, and ear-pieces, they might as well be wearing uniforms.

From the lead vehicle, two blonde women stepped down. The driver was almost unnaturally thin, with wavy blonde shoulder-length hair and a pinched, hard face. The other agent was shorter but much broader. She was obviously someone who spent far too much time in the gym, Danny thought, as she appeared to have more muscles than was feasibly possible, and her clothes did little to hide that. Her hair was cut extremely short but she had a softer countenance than her partner and a pleasant enough smile.

Both made their way across the snowy street to greet Danny. They wore expensive looking suits, one a dark blue and the other charcoal grey, and both had white blouses, loose enough at the

collar to show the tops of thin Kevlar vests. If either of them were cold, dressed in such thin fabrics, they showed no signs of it. Both agents also wore expensive sunglasses. Danny knew that wasn't uncommon among FBI personnel who often, even in the less sunny climes, saw sunglasses as some kind of necessity and spent large amounts of their paychecks on them, although he was never sure why.

The thin woman approached Danny first. "Sheriff Reeve?"

Danny shook the outstretched hand. "Yes, I spoke to you on the phone, I believe."

"That's right. I'm Agent Hudson and this is Agent Cory," she said, indicating her partner. "Well, Sheriff, you've kinda landed right in the middle of a shitstorm, haven't you?"

## **6: Monkey See, Monkey Dead**

It was a good ten or fifteen minutes before Zoe and Sam returned to the bank lobby, although the loud shouting match between them had ended much sooner. Zoe seemed quiet, subdued even, and walked back to take her perch on the table with her head bowed. Even when she sat up on the table edge, she made sure not to make eye contact with Cassie. Whatever it was Cassie had said to unsettle her, it seemed to have a lasting impact.

Sam didn't seem affected, however, as he walked past Zoe and approached Cassie menacingly. He dropped down to crouch beside her and she noticed he was holding the paperback Zoe had thrown at him earlier. His lips curled in a grotesque smile. "The Myth of Er, eh?" he said, trying to appear genial. "I read that a few years ago. Zoe there got me interested in this crap. A little heavy-going but then I had a lot of time on my hands."

"Yeah, eighteen months with good behavior," Zoe said from across the room and she flashed him a weak smile, half-hidden by the loose hair falling past her face.

Sam smiled back at her, then turned to continue questioning Cassie. "But I found it hard to swallow," he said. "I never really could summon up any belief in the divine. Now Zoe there couldn't be more different. She's more of an Orphist."

Cassie knew she was being tested and it bothered her. Why should she have to prove anything to these people? It was bizarre to say the least. All the same, she hated the idea of that woman thinking she didn't know what she was talking about and so she responded bitterly. "Really? She believes that our souls are divine but we suffer through continual painful reincarnations until we find the correct path, and we are punished for bad acts?"

He blinked, surprised, then stood up. "Something like that. So you do know your stuff. Huh. Go figure."

Zoe finally looked at her. "So how come you know so much about this?" she said, shrugging off her leather jacket to reveal the white wifebeater underneath. For a brief moment, Cassie thought it was actually a tee, white with dark sleeves, but then her brain registered the variety of tattoos that covered the woman's upper arms, shoulders, and even neck. Zoe pulled her long tresses together and used a rubber band to secure it back into a ponytail again.

Cassie ignored the question. She was more interested in the ink. "That's a labrys, isn't it?" she asked, looking at the woman's right shoulder. "And are those the wings of a phoenix?"

Zoe smiled nervously. "I've gotta admit, you're freaking me out a little."

"Really?" Cassie asked. "Why is that? After all, you're the ones with the guns."

"Oh for God's sake," Val snapped, "stop it Cassie!" She must have immediately regretted her outburst as she quickly glanced up at Zoe and then looked away.

Cassie looked directly at Val, who wouldn't meet her eye. "What is you think I'm doing exactly?"

When Val spoke next, her voice was quiet. "Stop antagonizing her... them."

"That's good advice," Ted said threateningly.

Sam grinned at that, then turned to look at Mr. Weschler. "What do you say?"

The bank manager looked up in alarm at being addressed. "What?" he said, "Why me?"

"Am I right in thinking most bank managers, even those who run little crap holes like this, have to attend safety precaution classes?"

Mr. Weschler nodded and gulped but said nothing.

"Speak up."

"Yes. Yes, we do."

"And you've attended one?"

Another nod. "Last summer in Fargo."

"And what did you learn?"

"To co-operate as fully as possible while ensuring the safety of any customers and bank staff that are held," he said, almost by rote.

Sam grunted. "I suppose passive resistance wasn't even mentioned. Still," he said to Cassie, "it does sound like you're not doing what is expected of you. Not going to get that promotion if you keep on like this, are you?"

"Believe it or not," Cassie said angrily, "this isn't exactly my dream job."

Zoe spoke up again, as a shadow passed over her face briefly, like the sun passing behind a cloud. "Yeah, well dreams aren't always what they're cracked up to be."

"Speak for yourself," said Cassie. "Personally I dream of having a holiday in Greece some day."

Sam pinched the bridge of his nose in a sign of weariness. "You would," he said.

"You should," said Zoe.

"You've been there?" Cassie asked, her interest immediately roused despite her reservations.

"We lived there for a year and a half. Only just got back to the States a few months back, actually." Zoe said with a nod. Her face had lit up and something of her earlier confidence seemed to return as she now talked. "It's a beautiful country and the people are so welcoming. It felt like home to me. The ruins, the architecture, the history... you wouldn't believe some of the things we found there; outside of dreams they wouldn't seem real." She paused, smiling, lost in memories. Then she seemed to catch herself and the smile grew wider. Maybe, Cassie thought, she had realized that this was rather a strange conversation to be having in the midst of an armed bank robbery. "You didn't answer my question," she said. "How come you know so much about Greek myths?"

Cassie pursed her lips, thinking hard. "I will, if you promise to answer one of mine."

She laughed and Cassie couldn't help but smile at the sound. "You have some balls, you know that? Sure, why not? After all, I can always lie."

"About promising or in your answer?"

"Either. Both."

"But will you?"

"Depends on the question."

"Fair enough. I read a lot."

Zoe was surprised by the paucity of the answer. "What?"

"You asked me how I know a lot about Greek mythology and philosophy, and that's your answer. I read a lot."

"That's it?"

"You want more?"

"It would be nice."

Cassie shifted position and tried to relieve some of the pain in having her arm held up for so long by the cuffs. "I've always been interested in it. I don't know when I first started reading about history and mythology. My mother always said it was after I was bitten by a snake when I was thirteen. She said instead of venom the snake had fanged a lust for knowledge into me. I think she was joking." She paused, thinking about what to say. "I know we learnt about Rome in school, maybe that sparked an interest. But I just started reading sometime and haven't stopped. I have a room at home that's full of nothing but books. I even learnt Greek with one of those tape lesson things a few years ago. Not that I'll ever get to use it, I suppose," she finished wistfully.

Zoe grinned and said, in perfect Greek, without trace of any accent, "Really? Well, you never know when the opportunity might arise."

Stunned, Cassie didn't know how to respond. After a second or two, she frowned and said, "With my luck, it will happen never, today." Her Greek wasn't as perfect, however, and she felt self-conscious about using it, aware that she might have made a mistake or two. Then, switching back to English, she asked Zoe, "So how come you know Greek?"

"Is that your question?"

"No!" Cassie said hastily. "That's not fair."

Zoe laughed. "That's a real strange sentiment coming from someone in the predicament you're in, sweetheart."

"Yep, nothing in this life is fair," Sam added.

"Or any other. It's okay," Zoe said, still chuckling, "you'll still get your question. Greek heritage. My great-grandfather was Greek, so I was brought up speaking that as much as English."

Cassie nodded and thought about that for a moment or two. She tried to ignore the evil looks that both Val and her manager were giving her. Mrs. Lewis, the unfortunate customer who had been

caught in the bank when the robbery began and who hadn't said a word through this entire ordeal, started crying again. She tried to stifle each sob but they still sounded unnervingly loud in the uncomfortable silence.

Of the criminals, Sam was watching both her and Zoe, his gaze flicking between the two and a worried expression on his face. Ted had moved behind the counters, picking through papers and supplies, perhaps looking for some easy cash in the tellers' drawers, while his brother was holding open a gap in the blinds and peering through, his eyes darting up and down the street outside.

Zoe pulled her discarded jacket close and took some dried pomegranate from a pocket. She chewed thoughtfully for a little while and then said, "So what was it you wanted to ask me?"

There were many, many questions Cassie could ask but she knew she had to choose carefully. There were the obvious ones, related to her current precarious situation (Am I going to live? Are you going to kill any of us?), but then there were those to do with the robbery (What are you after? Why are you doing this? What can you hope to gain by alerting the authorities?)

After a minute or two, Ivan seemed to lose patience. He looked around from his place at the door and snapped at her. "Take your time, why don't you?"

"Leave her be, Ivan. It's not like we don't have the time to waste," Zoe said, proving Cassie's thoughts to be true. "Besides, I know what she's going to ask."

Cassie looked up sharply. Did she? How could she when she hadn't decided herself? Then one question burst through the surface of her thoughts, like a drowning man gasping for air, and she blurted it out. "How is this going to end?"

Sam laughed. "Well, we might kill you or we might not. Kinda ruins the surprise if we tell you in advance."

"That's not what I meant," Cassie said, and whether any of them believed it or not she didn't know and didn't care. She only cared that Zoe believed her. She had wanted to know how this conversation would end. She had the impression that it was leading somewhere that would make things difficult for both of them.

"I know," Zoe said, shivering. Whatever she thought Cassie was going to ask, that obviously wasn't it. To her credit, she composed herself pretty quickly this time, and her cocky smile returned almost immediately.

"What then?" Ted said incredulously. "You want to know whether we get away with the money or end up in prison? How are we supposed to know that? You think we can see into the future or something?"

Both women looked at him and with such scorn in their faces that he turned away without another word. Frowning, Zoe turned back to look at Cassie, who couldn't help but notice, for the

first time, how icy blue her eyes were.

"Badly," Zoe said softly, "that's how this will all end."

\* \* \* \* \*

Whoever the woman in the bank was, she certainly knew the pair of FBI agents pretty damn well, Danny thought. After cursory introductions and a few brief questions, they'd immediately taken charge of everything and had pretty much ignored Danny since. They'd reorganized the barricades, which hadn't gone down well with the Sheriff's men, sent the tactical team to take up positions in and around the buildings on the opposite side of the street to the bank, and now had several junior agents interviewing any townsfolk who volunteered.

Danny had been pretty much relegated to working the barricade, which most of his deputies took great delight in. When this was all over, he thought, he was going to have to bang some heads together. He had kept near to the two agents, though, which they seemed to tolerate if only because they occasionally needed to ask him a question regarding the town's geography.

One of the small trucks that had accompanied the FBI convoy now stood with its rear doors wide open. Inside was an impressive array of surveillance equipment, including monitors, computers, recording devices, and so on. A young agent removed his headphones and jumped down out of the truck, approaching the point where both Agents Hudson and Cory stood talking to the senior SWAT team officer. The agent cupped his hands together, blew in them in a vain attempt to get warm, and then stuck them under his armpits. Good, Danny thought, he was cold. That was the first sign that any of these domineering sons of bitches were human, although he'd require some reliable DNA evidence to be absolutely certain.

"Phone line set-up, ma'am," the agent told Hudson.

"And all my men are in place," the tactical officer said, "ready for the green light."

"Good," said Hudson, "just let's hope we won't need you."

"We all hope that."

The group walked back over to the truck, where the young agent passed Hudson a phone headset. She nodded to the other agent seated inside the truck and slipped the headset on. Danny motioned to Ike to join him and the pair moved towards the quartet.

"Damn it," Hudson said quietly. "She's not answering."

"She'll talk, sooner or later," Agent Cory said. "Why would she want us here otherwise?"

"There's something more going on here," Danny said loudly, silently amused at the instant glance that passed between the two lead agents. "You guys got here awfully fast considering that number went to the California office."

Both of the FBI agents looked at him silently for a second, as if they were shocked he dared to interrupt.

"We were in the neighborhood," Cory finally said.

"Really? I find that hard to believe. And do you mind explaining what the hell the Mercuri Taskforce might be?"

"Mercury Taskforce?" Ike said, puzzled. "Sounds like a bad movie."

"Shut up," Hudson said testily.

"Yes, we do mind," Cory said, more diplomatically, but only a little. "Now do your job, keep civilians behind the barricades, and most importantly keep out of our way. You're expected to co-operate with us, remember?"

That was it, Danny decided. These women had pushed him too far and his temper finally got the better of him. "Now, hold on just one damn minute! This may be just another job to you, but this is my home town. I'm sworn to protect it, and that includes those damn hostages in that goddamn bank! So you might think you can come barging in here and take charge, hell, you might even be right, but I'll be damned if you don't at least tell me what the hell is going on!"

"Calm down, Danny," Ike said warningly.

Hudson shook her head. "Sheesh, it's always the same. Any one with a badge thinks they have a right to know everything, even in a little shit-hole like this." She glanced over at Danny. "No offence."

"Some taken," he said through gritted teeth.

"It could be worse," Cory said. "At least we don't have to deal with the Secret Service goons like that time in Florida. What were their names?"

"Forrest and Donovan," Hudson reminded her partner.

Danny looked between the two of them. "Are you guys going to continue talking about us as if we weren't really here?" he said irritably. "Or are you actually going to live up to the meaning of the word co-operate?"

The pair exchanged another glance, then Cory said, "It's only fair, Hannah."

The thin agent sighed and ran a bony hand through her hair. "Crap," she said forcefully. "Okay, why don't you run and get the file?"

"I don't think we should be worried about that right now," Ike said distractedly. He was looking past them all, down the street.



"Now what's your problem?" Hudson snapped.

Ike didn't look at her. "Someone's coming out of the bank..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ivan frowned. A little angrily, he asked Zoe, "What do you mean, badly?"

He may well have been concerned but that was nothing to what the other hostages were feeling. Mrs. Lewis' sobs grew louder and now she was making no effort now to hide them. Mr. Weschler had pulled his tie off with his free hand and was struggling to undo the top buttons on his shirt, swearing continually under his breath. Large patches of sweat stained his underarms. Val was sullenly silent, her eyes throwing daggers at them all but especially at Cassie.

Only Joe and Cassie looked undaunted although for very different reasons. Joe seemed to be taking everything in stride. Maybe it was his age, Cassie thought, or maybe it was just his usually good humored outlook; whatever it was, he seemed unfazed by what was going on around him. As for Cassie, well, she was still scared; she wouldn't deny that if asked. But her curiosity meant that she yearned to know more about this woman, to learn about her travels and experiences in Greece, and most importantly to figure out why she reacted oddly earlier. All of that seemed to keep her fear in check.

She watched Zoe peering through a gap she'd made in the venetian blinds. "Looks like the FBI have finally decided to show up," the dark haired woman said.

"So what do we do now?" Ivan said. He shifted his pistol from one hand to the other and wiped his now free hand on his pants, trying to get rid of the sweat.

"Forget that!" Ted said angrily. "What do you mean by badly?"

Zoe sighed, turned away from the window, letting go of the blinds which clattered back into place. "Relax, Ted. A couple more hours and you'll be walking out of here a rich man."

Ted didn't exactly seem appeased by this but he restrained himself from speaking and just scowled instead. Before he or anyone else could say anything Zoe continued. "And Ivan, by my guess we have only a few minutes before the phone starts ringing. They have a regimented game-plan, you see. Every time it's the same." She sighed and jumped back up onto the counter to sit down. "So we throw them a curve ball. Who's having an especially lucky day?" She waved her gun wildly in the direction of the seated hostages.

Mrs. Lewis wailed, which caused the bank manager to try to shuffle away from her. Maybe he was trying to distance himself from her in case the shooting started or maybe he just couldn't stand the noise any longer. Whatever his reasons, he couldn't get very far thanks to the short reach of the handcuffs binding them together.

There were tears in Val's eyes too now. Cassie reached across and tried to squeeze her hand

reassuringly but Val snatched her hand away, giving her a look full of loathing.

Zoe grinned evilly. "Maybe I could have phrased that better. One of you is about to be released. Any suggestions as to who?"

Nobody dared say anything, although Mrs. Lewis was now sniffing loudly, trying her best to restrain her crying. All looked hopeful. Joe looked quietly resistant. Cassie looked at the tiled floor and kept her mouth shut.

"Well, I would have thought you'd all want to get rid of the troublemakers first. Don't they teach you that at your courses?" Zoe asked the manager but then waved a hand quickly when he opened his mouth to reply. "Don't worry, rhetorical question. So let's think about this. Who's been giving us the most trouble?"

All eyes turned to Cassie, who couldn't help but look away.

"Oh yes, our delightfully inquisitive friend there. Well, Cassandra, are you ready to go free?"

Cassie said nothing.

"I'll take that as a no," Zoe said, chuckling. "Just as well, I don't think I'm finished with you, not yet."

Despite being puzzled by that remark, Cassie couldn't help but smile. When she caught sight of Val glaring at her, the smile faded and she tried to look serious. What the hell was she thinking? For a moment she had actually been pleased that she'd be staying in the bank, in the middle of a damn armed robbery. How stupid could she be? She shook her head, disappointed in herself.

"So who to choose, who to choose..." said Zoe in an almost sing-song voice. Her eyes flickered over all of the hostages, finally settling on the elderly security guard. "How about you, Joe?"

Suddenly, all the phones started ringing at once. Ted moved towards one receiver with his hand outstretched but Zoe looked up at him sharply. "Ignore it."

"Why him?" Mr. Weschler said, indicating Joe with a tip of his head.

"Ooh, and there's that wonderful customer service that the Bank of Arcadia is well known for," Zoe said. "Well, Joe's the oldest for one. Also, gun or no gun, having a security guard around always irks me."

"So we're doing this on an age-basis now?" the bank manager asked caustically.

"No," said Zoe, "we're doing it on the basis I get to shoot anyone who pisses me off."

"Forget it, ma'am," Joe interrupted loudly.

"And he's also the most polite. You don't want to go free, Joe?"

The security guard shrugged, which wasn't an easy gesture to make with one hand cuffed so high above him. "As you say, I'm the bank security guard. I'm meant to protect the customers and the staff. I should stay until last."

Ivan laughed. "And you think you're protecting them now?"

"You don't get loyalty like that nowadays. But then you probably don't deserve it either. Alright, decision made," she said, jumping off the table and fishing a small set of keys out of her jacket pocket. She bent over and unlocked the cuff around Mrs. Lewis' wrist. "On your feet, lady."

Mrs. Lewis was not a young woman and usually bored the ever-polite Cassie with tales of her health woes every time she came into the bank. Despite that, she scrambled to her feet with the speed of a woman half her age, wiping her tear-stained face with her sleeve. She was guided to the door by a firm hand under one elbow. Ivan had the door unlocked already.

"Can I get my things?" Mrs. Lewis asked in a squeaky voice.

"Hell, no, you can't get your things!" Ivan said incredulously. He smiled though.

"Put your hands above your head and keep them there, please," Zoe said and the hostage did as she was told. "Don't make any sudden moves. Walk slowly forward and then just listen to what they tell you to do."

Alarmed, Mrs. Lewis looked at Zoe frantically. "What? What are you saying?"

"Just trying to keep you alive, honey." Zoe stepped back and Ivan pulled the door open. Bright daylight flooded that corner of the bank.

## **7: Pattern Interruption**

The end of Main Street was now crowded with press vans from all the local network affiliates, and with the crowd swelling, Ike and the other deputies were being hard-pressed to keep them back behind the barricades. Every now and then a flashbulb would go off, either from an over-

eager news reporter or one of the more ghoulish bystanders.

With a concerned look on his face, Danny was watching Irene Lewis being helped into the back of an ambulance by a paramedic on one side and her fretting husband on the other. Standing clear of the doors, the bulky Agent Cory closed her notepad, looked up at him and smiled. She had a nice smile, Danny thought, a cheeky smile, like she had just thought of the punch line to a particularly rude joke which she was eager to share.

He didn't hear Agent Hudson walk up behind him. "So what do you think?" she asked him.

The sudden interruption of his thoughts made him jump a little and he blushed when he saw she noted his reaction. "Irene isn't one to lie."

The blonde woman pushed her sunglasses up onto the top of her head as Cory joined them. "Well, unfortunately it's not about whether she's lying or not, just if she's remembering accurately enough."

"For what's it worth, Hannah," Cory said, "I believe her."

Hudson wasn't having any of it. "It's unlike Mercuri to work with a team."

"True, but it's not unknown. I just wouldn't want to be them at the end of the day." Cory caught Danny's puzzled look and explained further. "She has a reputation for betrayal. She keeps a few people close but everyone else is fair game."

"Which means they're probably fodder hoping for the big score, who haven't heard of her, and who are in way over their heads and don't realize it. Except the safecracker. She'd need someone reliable for that. What do you reckon?"

Cory shrugged. "Hard to say, seeing as how Mrs. Lewis there didn't get a good look at him. My guess would be Harry Croker though. She's worked with him before."

Nodding thoughtfully, Hudson agreed. "Makes sense. Might as well check on his current whereabouts." She passed the order on to a subordinate, who scurried off to do her bidding without a word of complaint. "What I don't get though is why she needs a safecracker in the first place. Wouldn't the vault be kept unlocked during business hours?"

"It's a newer vault, from my understanding," Danny told her. "Installed sometime early last year, I think. Anyway, it's kept locked all day, every day. Has a code that only the manager knows and that gets scrambled if the silent alarm is activated."

"And how do you know so much about it?"

"I'm the local Sheriff. Besides, Cassie told me, if you must know."

"Good friends, are you?" Cory asked suspiciously.

"Something like that, yes."

Hudson frowned. "But the alarm wasn't activated until after they were in control of the bank."

"Still quicker and easier than beating the code out of the manager," Cory said.

"I suppose. Do you buy Mercouri pressing the alarm herself? Why would she do that?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. You know Zoe, she has everything planned down to the last detail. She's not the kind of woman who likes surprises."

Danny sighed in frustration. "You know," he said, "I'd appreciate it if I wasn't kept so in the dark about the woman who's holding four of my townspeople captive. You did say you'd be willing to share information."

"That we did," Cory said with a placatory smile. "Why don't you go and get her file, Hannah?"

Somewhat reluctantly, and not before sending an evil glance in her partner's direction, Agent Hudson jogged over to their SUV. After she was out of earshot, Cory turned to Danny and said, "You're worried about her, aren't you?"

She didn't need to say Cassie's name. Danny nodded.

"Try not to. It won't do you any good. Besides, Hannah's the best negotiator I've ever worked with. And we know Mercouri better than we know ourselves. We ought to, we've been trying to put her away for over six years now."

"Well, she seems to be doing a good job of keeping you on the back foot today, doesn't she?"

Cory smiled to show she took no offence at the remark. "The man's got a point. Still, where Zoe's concerned there's always a plan. We just have to figure it out. And besides, Zoe Mercouri may be a lot of things, most of them bad, but the one thing she isn't is a killer."

Danny watched the thin blonde clambering over the front seat of the SUV, reaching into the back for a manila folder.

"Any reason why Cassie is provoking her?"

He shook his head. "I told you, Cassie's not the antagonistic type. There's got to be something more going on."

"Any chance they could know each other from somewhere?"

He blinked, startled by the question. "I wouldn't have thought so."

"Sorry, but I have to ask."

He nodded and then they both fell silent as Hudson neared. She moved between them, expecting them to follow, and leaned over the hood of a nearby car. Opening the plain folder, she slid a photo out from under a paperclip and over to Danny.

"So this is her?" Danny said, studying the mugshot. "I thought you said you'd been *trying* to catch her."

The woman was tall, just under five feet eleven according to the lines painted on the wall behind her, with dark, straight hair that fell down to her shoulders and cold blue eyes. She was attractive in a tough, intense kind of way. There was a nasty purpling bruise on one cheek and a small cut on her forehead. Something about the picture told Danny that she never did anything the easy way.

"She did serve some time but we couldn't get anything heavy to stick," Hudson said a little hastily, as if she was embarrassed by the Bureau's failings. She quickly flicked over several pages in the folder and moved the conversation on. "I'll keep this short. Zoe Helene Mercouri. Greek name, if you're interested. Her grandparents emigrated in the late 1940s to escape the war."

"Greek?" Danny said, scratching his chin. She glared at him, displeased with the interruption.

"Born in 1972. Her school reports indicate above-average intelligence but that she was more of a planner than the creative type. In 1987, aged fourteen, she disappeared."

"What do you mean, disappeared?"

Another knowing glance passed between the two agents.

"Well..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Officer Debra Martinez looked at the pictures pasted all over the wall, trying to take them all in. Some were painted in watercolors, others were charcoal or pastel drawings, but most were pencil sketches. There were so many of them, all variations on the same theme. Double-headed axes. There must have been fifty or more of them; different shades, different sizes, different colors. The papers rustled in the cool summer breeze that flowed in through the open bedroom window.

"Did you draw these?" she asked, turning and smiling as sweetly as she could. It wasn't easy, considering the situation.

The teenage girl sitting on the very edge of the bed didn't say anything, just gave a very imperceptible nod. Her long dark hair covered most of her face and she kept her head down, not wanting to look at anyone.

"They're very good," Martinez said, trying again to draw the girl out. "What are they?"

"Just something I see in my dreams," the girl said, so quietly the policewoman wasn't sure she'd even heard her.

Martinez looked over at her partner, Officer Arnold Ryan, who leaned against the door jamb. His large bulk blocked the other rooms behind him from sight, which Martinez thought was probably just as well. He rolled his eyes and then said to the girl, "You like axes, do you?"

She looked up at him, her blue eyes wet with tears. "They're not axes."

"Sure look like axes to me."

"Stop it, Arnie," Martinez snapped.

"She's a suspect."

"She's a victim."

"Says you."

"You think she killed her own parents?" Martinez said quietly. She regretted saying it almost instantly, as she heard a stifled sob come from the girl.

Arnie wouldn't let it go. "Wouldn't be the first time. She's covered in blood, she's a goth or whatever the kids call themselves nowadays, and she's got a thing for hatchets. Good enough for me."

"Don't be stupid! She's a kid, for pity's sake." Martinez crossed to where Arnie stood and stared him in the face. "She found the bodies, so that explains the blood. She's the one who called 911, there's no axes anywhere in the apartment, and what was done was done with a knife, which we've found."

"And you know as well as I do that the most likely culprit in any murder case is a family member."

Martinez was about to continue arguing when the girl said something.

"I hid."

"What, honey?" Martinez said, turning towards the teenager. "What did you say?"

The girl was crying, her head buried in her hands. Her voice was muffled when she spoke again. "I hid under the bed," she said. "I didn't want to die. I didn't see who did it, I swear. I just hid."

"It's okay, honey," Martinez said. What else was she supposed to say? She looked away,

ashamed that she couldn't do more. She was trying her best. This wasn't her job.

Arnie seemed to be of the same mind, for he turned his head to face the corridor outside the bedroom and bellowed loudly. "Does someone want to get social services on the phone?"

Martinez knew it was the right thing to do. She turned back to tell the young Mercouri girl that everything was going to be fine, only to see that the bedroom was now empty. The drapes by the open window fluttered in the night wind.

"Oh shit," Martinez said. "Where the hell did she go?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Horried by what he had just been told, Danny asked, "Did they ever catch the killer?"

Hudson shook her head. "She may have witnessed some of it, but she claimed that she hid under her bed the whole time. From what little we know, she lived on the streets for some years before being 'adopted', and I use the term very loosely, by this man."

She pulled another photo free from the folder and handed over for the Sheriff to examine. This one was not a mugshot, which Danny assumed meant that this fella had never been caught. He might have been as guilty as hell of numerous things but he'd never been charged with anything. That didn't bode well, he thought. Although, looking at the photo of the man, he could see why some people might not want to accuse him of anything. He had an intimidating air about him, with a cocky smile of white teeth poking out from beneath a thick black goatee beard. Everything about the man was dark. His scruffy long hair was jet black, his eyes were like burning coals, and his skinned tanned.

Danny looked at Hudson quizzically.

"Samuel Charles Arthur Randall," she told him.

"Oh, he's a real charmer," Cory scoffed. "Educated the expensive way. Knows his claret from his Beaujolais, that's for sure."

Hudson ignored her partner's interruption. "He's older than he looks. Keeps himself in good shape. He's a suspected former hitman for the mob in Chicago, who eventually branched off on his own. Since then, he's restricted his criminal endeavors somewhat, although over the years he has been suspected of several murders, countless thefts, and numerous other crimes."

"Only suspected?" Danny asked.

"Yep. Evidence has always been thin on the ground where Randall and Mercouri are concerned."

Cory touched Danny's forearm. She had nice hands, he noticed, with well-manicured nails. "Make no mistake, Sheriff," she said, "they are very, very good at what they do."



Shuffling some papers in the file, Hudson nodded. "Indeed. Mercouri has claimed that he saw potential in her and trained her as a thief."

"What like, Fagin and his pickpockets?"

"Hardly," Hudson said derisively. "No, he trained her to be the best damn thief he could. And credit where it's due, he did a damn good job. There aren't many locks she can't open or alarms she can't work around. Over the years, she's been responsible..."

"Allegedly responsible," Cory interrupted.

Hudson shot her a look that said 'oh come on!' and then continued. "She's been responsible for stealing jewelry, gems, artwork, sculptures, and more, all of it priceless and usually considered highly protected. Remember the Hellenic Museum job back in 2004? The Bronze Age funerary jewelry that went 'missing'?"

"Yeah, yeah, I remember. It was all over the national news," Danny said. "Didn't the ambassador from Cyprus make the whole thing into a scandal? But they recovered those eventually, anyway, right?"

"Wrong. Once the insurance company found out Mercouri was behind the robbery, they knew they had little or no chance of getting the stuff back. So they hastily came up with some copies and told everyone the genuine articles had been recovered. The payout to the client was kept quiet, the ambassador was given a ton of hush money, and in the end it was a hell of a lot easier than actually trying to get them back."

"But we didn't tell you any of that, Sheriff," Cory said with a grin.

Hudson continued as if no one else had said a word. "Mercouri's rich, although I suppose that depends on your definition of the word. Besides which, Randall gets a large amount of her earnings. He's kinda her fence, agent and bodyguard all rolled into one. And like we've already said, she's good at what she does, Sheriff, make no mistake. Randall knew how to pick 'em. She plans everything out to the last detail."

\* \* \* \* \*

The security guard shone the beam of his flashlight around the central artifact room once, and peered in through the glass pane of the locked door. On the other side, Zoe crouched behind a short pedestal supporting a bust of Caesar. The light touched the tips of her boots but didn't linger. After a few seconds she heard the footsteps of the guard, moving on to continue his rounds through the museum.

She had to stay where she was for now, as this spot was the only place in the room where the three security cameras didn't have coverage. A perfect blindspot, Sam had called it. Not so perfect when you've been stuck crouching in the same position for twenty minutes. She was getting some serious cramping in her calves and thighs. If she didn't move soon, she was going to have a problem moving when she needed to.

She touched a finger to her earpiece. "Anytime you're ready, Sam," she murmured.

There was a hiss of static. "Sam?" She was starting to get a little worried. "Sam, you'd better answer in the next few seconds or I'm going to..."

"Keep it together, Zoe," Sam's deep voice came through suddenly, louder than she expected. She winced and thumbed the volume control on the earpiece. "The electricity's getting cut off in three... two... one..."

The safety lights went off suddenly, plunging the already dark room into pitch black. The red active lights on the three cameras also died.

"Generators will be up and running in less than thirty seconds, Zoe," Sam said. "If you're going to go, go now."

'Typical Sam,' she thought, 'always just a little bit too late.' By the time he'd started speaking, she was already on her feet and sprinting across the artifact room towards the emergency doors that led to the stairwell. She pushed through one door, making sure it was shut behind her so the alarm wouldn't sound when the electricity started flowing again.

She had pulled down her miniaturized night goggles before moving into action, although she knew the layout of the building so well by now that she didn't really need them.

There was no way she could get down four flights of stairs in time, so she clipped a grappling hook on to the strong metal railing and leapt over the banister. The high-tensile wire was attached to the body harness she wore, which had been pre-measured for the distance to the floor, short a few feet. Within seconds, she had fallen past all three floors and was jerked to an abrupt and painful stop a bare few feet above the ground. She stabbed the release button and dropped the last short distance, immediately sprinting through the nearby security doors, clicking them shut behind her just as the lights came back on.

"You make it?" Sam said through her earpiece.

"Was there ever any doubt?" Zoe said, trying to slow her breathing. She looked at the large vault built into the far wall. "Let's just hope Harry's specs are as good as he claimed."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Not everything, obviously," Danny said, tapping on Mercouri's mugshot.

Cory shrugged. "We got lucky."

"Lucky nothing," Hudson contradicted her. "Capone was brought down for tax fraud. You do what you have to."

"And what *did* you do?"

"We managed to catch her with some items she'd been trying to fence. Possession of stolen goods was the only thing we could get to stick."

"If she's so clever..." Danny began to say but Cory held up a hand.

"We got a tip-off," the muscular agent said. "It was supposed to be anonymous but it wasn't hard to figure out that it was Randall. He probably planted the goods on her too."

That made no sense to Danny. "Why would he do that?"

"Who knows?"

"He likes to control her," Hudson suggested. "If she gets out of line, he slaps her back pretty quickly. Maybe this time she was getting a little too wild."

"Does she know?" Danny asked.

"If she does," Cory said, "she's forgiven him."

"Unless," said Hudson, frowning, "this is part of her plan. Now there's a worrying thought."

"So how long did she get?"

"Eighteen months for grand larceny."

"With good behavior, she was out in under twelve." Hudson snorted angrily. "What a joke. Not that it was easy on her."

\* \* \* \* \*

Zoe was cutting through the north wing of the prison back to her cell from the exercise yard. Technically she wasn't allowed to do this as the entire wing had been temporarily closed for minor renovations but she'd been given the go-ahead by the head guard, Blake. There had been a problem with some of the electronic locking systems, according to what she'd heard on the prison rumor mill, although if that were true no one had taken advantage of it.

Whatever the reason, the prison committee had made good use of the time to clean the area up. The place stank of fresh paint, some new railings had been installed and stood out starkly from the older, grungier, versions, and the safety nets beneath each floor had been removed for repair.

There was now a serious case of overcrowding in all other sections of the prison, as inmates from the north wing had been transferred over. Tensions were running high all over, and violence had broken out more often than usual among the inmates. With the prison trying to save money, as always, the guards from the north wing had been given leaves of absence. More inmates in a smaller, more confined area, with fewer guards overseeing them; anyone could see that it wasn't the best of ideas. But a buck was a buck, she supposed. Money talks, morality walks.

It was going to end badly, anyone could see that. What she couldn't predict, of course, that it was going to be a bad end for her.

When she reached the top of the fourth set of stairs, Montoya stepped out in front of her. She was a small woman, but tough and wiry, with her black hair pulled up in a bandanna.

"Remember me, *puta*?"

Zoe did, but denying it gave her more time. "Can't say I do."

She took a step backwards, only to bump into something solid. Glancing behind her, she saw two large, thuggish women blocking her escape route.

"You stiffed me after that job in Pomona," Montoya said menacingly. "I got six years thanks to you. Remember now?"

Truth be told that hadn't been her. That had been Sam's doing, something she'd argued against, but she doubted telling these three women would do her any good. "So you paid off Blake? Funny, I thought he wasn't interested in money."

"Who says we gave him money?" Montoya had a shank out now, withdrawn from inside her orange prison-issue jumpsuit. It was a piece of unidentifiable metal, crudely sharpened, with duct tape wrapped around the base to form a makeshift handle.

"Classy," Zoe said and then slammed her forehead hard into Montoya's face. She felt the satisfying crunch of splintering bone beneath the impact. A gush of red spurted forward.

Montoya wasn't expecting the headbutt, so staggered backwards, tripping over her own feet and falling over. The shank slipped from her grip and skittered over the edge of the metal floorwalk. It could be heard clanking against metal railings as it fell all the way down to the ground floor. Zoe lunged forward, intent on sprinting along the walkway to safety. As she moved past the fallen prisoner, Montoya had enough presence of mind to reach for her legs and managed to grab one ankle. Zoe sprawled forward and then the other two thugs were on her, kicking her hard over and over again, forcing her back against the railings. She could do nothing but curl up and try to protect herself.

Montoya had gotten to her feet and was trying to stem the bloodflow from her nose. "The *perra* broke my dose. My goddamn fuckid dose!" She lashed out with a booted foot, catching Zoe on the temple.

"What are we going to do?" one of the women asked her.

"Get me another blade!"

"There's no time."

Montoya thought about this for a second. "Then throw her over."

Zoe felt herself being lifted up from the metal floorwalk. She tried to struggle, kicking out at her attackers, but it did her no good. One wrapped her arms tightly around both legs while the other put two meaty hands under her armpits.

And then she was over and she was falling.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Now, whether or not she's made a full recovery," Hudson said, "rather depends on who you talk to. She was five months, two weeks, two days into her sentence. She spent most of the remainder of her sentence in the prison hospital, which probably explains why she got parole. That and maybe a few well-greased palms."

"Hannah," Cory said warningly, "you've got no course to say that. Anyway, she was a changed woman. Said she was going straight."

Crossing her arms, Hudson harrumphed loudly and looked away.

"You don't believe it?" Danny asked her.

"Look around you, Sheriff. Besides, she started acting a little crazy. Claimed on several occasions that all that mattered now was her Greek ancestry. Building a case for a future Section 8 plea, if you ask me."

"As always, Hannah's only giving you half the story," Cory said. "She also began to study Ancient Greek history. I suppose she had a lot of time to read while stuck in a hospital bed. She worked towards getting a degree, although she never completed it."

"It let her get in good with the parole board, that's all."

"Say what you like, Hannah, I honestly thought she had gone straight."

"More fool you."

"That's interesting," said Danny, interrupting their argument before it could get too heated. "About her fascination with Greek history, I mean."

"Yeah, well she's got a serious hard-on for her culture now, that much is true," Hudson said scathingly. "After her parole period was up, she actually went and lived in Greece for several years. We only tracked her coming back into the country a few months ago."

"What was she doing out there?"

"As far as we know, just taking an interest in museums, historical sites, lots of archaeological

digs," Cory told him. "And spending a lot of money on them too. Even funded one or two of her own."

"Yeah, well she can afford to, can't she?"

Danny dropped the photos back into the folder. Something about this was puzzling him. "If she's rich, why the hell is she robbing a bank? And if she's so detail-oriented, what's with letting us catch her?"

Grimacing, Hudson put her sunglasses back on. "We haven't caught her yet, have we?"

\* \* \* \* \*

A lizard ran across the hot tiled floor of the taverna and out over the stone step into the street. It had the wrong idea, Izanami Michi decided. It was far better to roast slowly inside than to risk the severe heat of the Khalkidhiki midday sun.

The locals swore the breezes that blew in down the mountain kept them cool but she didn't see how. Maybe they were just poking fun at her. She wouldn't put it past them. They liked making fools of the students only slightly less than they liked overcharging them for everything.

Michi sat alone, drinking an ice cold Orangina, trying her best to cool down now that she was out of the heat. How the hell could it be hotter here in the shade of the city than out on the plains all day in direct sunlight, she wondered? Trouble was, she still had another hour or two of shopping to do. She hated these monthly shopping trips and she hated even more the fact that as one of the college students working on the dig she was more likely to get lumbered with the chore than any of the so-called 'professional' archaeologists. Why they couldn't just hire one of the local workers to bring in supplies, she didn't know.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a shadow falling over her table. Any other day she would have been irritated by the disturbance. Today, she welcomed the extra shade.

"Good morning," a woman's voice said, "mind if I join you?"

Michi took a lengthy swig from her bottle and looked the woman up and down, slowly. She was attractive, in about her mid-thirties, Michi guessed, with her dark brown hair tied back in a ponytail. Dressed in khaki shorts, a sweat-soaked blue halter-top and dusty hiking boots, she looked like most other tourists that visited the area. All the same, something about her implied that tourism was the last thing on her mind. Michi put the bottle back on the table and wondered how on earth she could find out what the first thing was likely to be.

"I get the impression you'd be sitting here even if I said no," she said.

"I don't like to take no for an answer, it's true," the woman said with a flash of a smile.

Michi suddenly thought it was a very pretty smile. A mischievous thought popped into her head and she couldn't resist speaking it aloud. "Not that I imagine many people saying no to you, am I

right?" She laughed at that and Michi thought for a moment that she had never heard such a wonderful sound. But she tried to focus and get her thoughts out of the gutter. The heat must have been getting to her. "I've seen you before, hanging around the dig."

"I've an amateur interest in archaeology, particularly that of Ancient Greece. Although I must say your colleagues aren't very welcoming."

"Yeah, we kinda don't like onlookers. It's distracting at best," Michi said, and thought how very distracting this woman could be, "and destructive at worst. The locals do their best to discourage the tourists from coming out there, except those that run the daily tours."

"Well, I'm not exactly a tourist."

"No? Then what are you?"

"I'm someone with a lot of money who has an interest in rare artifacts."

Michi's face hardened. "We have nothing to talk about." She slammed the bottle down on the table and got to her feet.

The woman grabbed hold of her wrist and held her tight.

"Let go of me!"

"Sit down," the woman hissed, looking around to see if they were attracting too much attention. Luckily for her, the taverna was almost empty and no one was looking at them.

Somewhat reluctantly, Michi retook her seat. "Listen, tall, dark, and bad-mannered, you're asking me to steal our findings and sell them to you, which isn't going to happen," she said, almost pouting.

The woman shook her head. "I'm not asking anything of the kind. I'm not really interested in the dig at Panagia, nor any of the discoveries made there. Not that I imagine there will be many."

She was right there, Michi thought, in her four months here they'd found nothing particularly exciting. "Then what are you interested in?"

"Specifically? You." The woman looked her right in the eye as she said it. A cheeky smile played around her mouth. "Let me explain. Right now I'm looking to sponsor a new dig and I want you to head up the team."

Michi couldn't think of anything to say for a moment. It was one of those times her brother Yoshi would have described as spit-take moment. Thankfully, that only happened in one of his movie scripts and never in real life. "You're joking, right?"

"No. I can assure you of a healthy salary and plenty of money to fund the dig, which will, of

course, be distributed at your discretion."

She scratched her head, puzzled. "Why me? There are plenty of more people better qualified. I can think of a dozen just off the top of my head, some of them even on our current site."

"Why not you?" the woman said as a waiter brought her a bottled beer. "You graduated summa cum laude from Pelby College in Cambridge then spent eighteen months as an intern at MASCA in the Penn Museum back in the States. And before you say it, you have more than two years total field experience here in Greece alone, and further experience in Italy. Not a lot, I'll grant you, but enough. You're more than qualified."

"How...?" Michi was stunned.

"How do I know so much about you? I like to protect my investments." She paused, then laughed again. "Did that sound too mysterious? Alright, I admit it, Google is a godsend."

Michi couldn't help but laugh at that. There was something strangely infectious about this woman's sense of humor.

"You're also insightful and have a knack for finding artifacts where other, more experienced, archaeologists claim there can't be any. Didn't your site leader in Agrigento spend three months digging in one spot despite your protests, only to make the biggest find of his life when he finally spent just a few days digging where you recommended? Seems like he got all the credit, too."

"I didn't mind," Michi said with a modest smile. "The fact we found something was all that mattered."

"You're young," the woman said. "You'll learn."

A worrying thought popped into the young archaeologist's head. "Is this all above board?"

"We'd hardly be allowed to dig there if it wasn't."

"Sorry, it just seems too good to be true."

"In my experience, it's the bad things that tend to be lies."

Draining her drink, Michi had to admit to herself that her curiosity was getting the better of her. "So where is this new dig?"

"Near here. Nea Potidea."

She couldn't help but laugh. "You're wasting your time. You do know that area was thoroughly excavated back in the eighties, right?"

"Yes, well, I have some inside information," the woman said, rubbing her forehead as if weary.



"Such as?"

"You're just going to have to trust me on this. Between the two of us, we'll find something, I'm sure. "

"I don't know..." Michi said, thoughtfully. She tried to catch the eye of the staff in the hopes of getting another drink but her eyes fell on an imposing, muscular figure seated at the bar. He was wearing all black, which wasn't the smartest idea in this heat, and had a thick black goatee beard. He was watching them both, scowling. "Friend of yours?" she said, motioning towards him with a tilt of her head.

"Something like that."

"He doesn't seem too happy that we're talking."

"He thinks I'm wasting my time here."

"Yeah, well, I'm not so sure you're not. And starting a dig from new, that's not cheap."

"It's my time to waste. My money too."

"I suppose so," Michi said, although she still had her doubts.

"Still uncertain?"

"How can you tell?"

"Well, let me make a suggestion..."

"Yes?"

The woman reached out and touched Michi's hand. "Why don't we go back to my hotel room and I'll spend the night doing my best to convince you?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Hudson glanced at her watch. "I'm going to have to start calling the bank again soon. The release of that hostage has thrown off our schedule."

"These things never run to plan, Hannah, you know that."

"Not our plan, at any rate," Danny muttered under his breath.

"All the same," Hudson went on, "we should have started talking earlier." To Danny, she said sarcastically, "You think you have enough info now?"

"Hardly," Danny countered. "I still think that her Greek obsession is more important than we think. After all..."

"Tough," said Hudson, turning away dismissively. "Am I still patched in, Tom?"

"Good to go," said the communications expert, giving her the thumbs up from the back of the nearby control truck. Hudson took the headset from off her belt, turning away from them as Ike Michaels jogged over from the barricades.

"Danny..." the deputy began.

"Hold on, Ike," Danny said. He grabbed Hudson's shoulder and pulled her back around. "Now, just wait one damn minute..."

"We've wasted enough time already!" the FBI agent said angrily.

Ike picked up the photo from off the SUV's hood. "This our perp?"

"Yes," both Danny and Hudson snapped at the same time.

"Holy crap," Ike said, "I know her."

## **8: Deferred Gratification and Impulse Control**

There was a moment's stunned silence as both FBI agents stared dumbfounded at Ike. When they finally recovered their wits, the young deputy found himself hit by a barrage of questions. Danny finally had to hold up his hands to silence them both.

"What do you mean, you know her?" he asked.

Ike looked uncomfortable. "I mean, I don't know her, but I've seen her before."

"When?"

"Do you remember Lorne Williams' Halloween party last year?"

"Not really."

"That's right, you were working."

"Is there a point to this story?" Hudson snapped.

"Yes," Ike said, giving her a filthy look. "During the party she and this fella walked in. I remember because Effy remarked that they were the only people who weren't in costumes."

"Describe the guy," Danny said.

"Tall, bulky, obviously worked out a lot. Tanned too. Had a beard."

Danny picked up Randall's photo from the hood of the car. "This him?" he asked, showing Ike the picture.

"Yep, that's him."

"What did they want?"

"How should I know?"

"This is important, Ike."

"I know that, Danny! I'm trying to think."

Cory tried to change tacks. "Who's this Williams?"

"Owner of the biggest local law firm," Danny told her. "Works almost exclusively for the more affluent families around here."

"So what did Mercouri and Randall want with him?" Hudson asked, puzzled.

"Maybe they planned on hiring him after this job ended. Always good to have an expensive lawyer in your pocket."

"No, they didn't want him," Ike said excitedly. "They wanted to speak with Percy Hamilton. Lorne took them all into his library to chat."

"Old man Hamilton?"

Confused, Cory asked, "Who's he?"

"In brief, an eccentric millionaire. Born and raised in Wilusa but left about thirty years ago after some sort of scandal. I think he made his fortune on the stock exchange," Danny explained.

When Ike snorted in disbelief, he added, "At least that's what he always claimed."

"Likely story," Ike said under his breath.

"He spent many years in Europe, got married, had a couple of kids, and then returned, what, four or five years ago?" Danny glanced at his deputy for confirmation.

Ike shrugged. "Sounds about right. His kids live somewhere around here too, I think. Wasters, both of them."

"We'll have to speak with him," Cory said urgently.

"That's going to be difficult."

Hudson glared at the deputy. "I hope you're not going to give us any crap about jurisdiction?"

"Death is kinda out of everyone's jurisdiction, don't you think?"

The thin agent frowned. "He's dead?"

"Hit a patch of ice and ran his car off the road last November. Doctor Galen wrote it up as accidental death at the time."

"Two known criminals turn up on his doorstep and then a few weeks later he's dead?" Cory mused. "I don't hold with coincidences like that."

Danny shot her a small smile. "Can't say I blame you."

"So what now?" Ike said, looking between the others.

"We talk to Mr. Williams instead," Danny said stoically.

"Agreed," Cory said. "Hannah will stay here and try to open negotiations with Mercouri. Sheriff, you and I will go ask Mr. Williams some questions."

"Ike, you're in charge here until we get back," Danny told him.

Hudson seemed to find that amusing. "Is he now?"

Danny handed her his cellphone. "Here."

"What's this?"

"It's how Mercouri contacted us last time. You might need it. Cassie's number is two on my speed-dial."

"You ready?" Cory asked him. "We'll take my ride."

Danny looked down the street to where the bullet-riddled patrol cars sat. "Probably a good idea."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cassie closed her eyes and said a silent word of thanks that the phones in the bank had finally stopped ringing. Everyone seemed to let out a long deep breath at the same time. The constant jangling of the phone over the last few minutes had just set all of their nerves on edge. The criminal brothers seemed more bothered by the noise than the remaining hostages did, she noticed.

"Aren't you going to answer one of those calls?" Ted asked irritably. "Sooner would be better than later."

"They can wait," Zoe said with a grin.

"They may be able to, but we can't," he said. "You only live once, after all."

"I wish. Besides, I'm guessing sooner or later they'll be bright enough to try Miss Wayward's phone." Zoe held up Cassie's bright red phone and wagged it in the air to show him.

Ted snorted in disbelief. "Just guessing?"

The cellphone rang as soon as she finished waving it and Zoe laughed at Ted's shock expression. It was all Cassie could do to keep from laughing herself, he looked so comical. She turned away and bit down hard on her tongue.

"Well, let's say it was an educated guess." She pressed the 'talk' button and lifted the phone to her ear. "Good afternoon, Hannah."

"I shouldn't be surprised that you knew it would be me, should I, Mercouri?" The volume on the phone was set high enough for nearly everyone in the bank to hear the tinny voice, if they listened closely. Cassie was the closest to where Zoe sat, so she had no problems hearing every word. Maybe, she thought, Zoe had planned it that way.

"You know my game," Zoe said, "you should expect me to know yours."

"I wouldn't mind so long as we were both playing the same game."

"If we are, then I'm cheating."

"I'll bet. I wanted to thank you for releasing Mrs. Lewis."

"She was getting on my nerves."

"What are you doing, Zoe?"

Zoe smiled. "Using my given name, Agent Hudson? Growing desperate, are we?"

"Growing weary."

"Well, don't worry, this will all soon be over. And we have no plans to hurt any of the hostages, you have my word."

"Then can I ask you to release another as a sign of good faith?" There was a pause, almost as if Hudson was thinking she knew exactly how much that was worth.

"Not yet. In a little while, maybe."

"This isn't like you, Zoe."

Zoe looked up and her eyes met Cassie's. She looked away quickly, almost as if she was embarrassed by what was being said. "Things change."

"Things do. People don't." Another pause. "What are you hoping to achieve?"

Sam walked back into the lobby, wiping his grease-stained hands on a restroom towel. Zoe saw him and nodded.

"Redemption," Zoe said quietly and hung up. She tucked the cellphone into the front pocket of her stonewashed denims, jumped off the table and walked over to meet Sam.

"Well?" she said.

"He's got the vault open," Sam said, "but there's another security gate behind it. We're looking at another ten to fifteen minutes or so."

They spoke in hushed tones but again Cassie found she could hear everything. If any of the other hostages could, they gave no sign. Val and Mr. Weschler now seemed utterly defeated, neither of them daring to look at anything but the floor. Even Joe seemed more subdued than he had been earlier. He just kept playing with his wedding ring, twisting it around and not taking his eyes off it.

She watched as Zoe grabbed the man's thick wrist and twisted it so she could look at his watch.

"No problem. Still plenty of time."

Cassie decided to try something. As the two criminals talked, she began to shift in her spot, slowly at first, then more erratically, fidgeting restlessly, twitching her legs.

Val turned her head to stare at her. "What are you doing?" she said as quietly as she could.

"Trying to find out what's going on," Cassie said honestly.

"We know what's going on, we're being held captive!"

"Keep still, Cassie, for God's sake!" Mr. Weschler hissed.

Two booted feet stomped heavily beside Cassie. She looked up. Their frantic whispers had attracted the attention of Ted. "Is there some sort of fucking problem over here?" he said loudly. Cassie saw Zoe and Sam looking over at them.

"No," Val said, almost hysterically. "No problem, no problem, no. Please." She began to rock herself.

"Yes," Cassie said loudly. "I need to pee."

"Then piss your pants."

"Charming. No chance of running to the restroom, I suppose?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that Sam had gone back down the corridor leading to the vault. Zoe was walking back towards them.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing," Ted said. "I'll handle it."

"He won't," Cassie said indignantly. "I need the restroom and he isn't going to be handling anything."

Zoe smiled at that, then turned to Ted. "Okay, I'll take her."

"Let her piss herself," Ted protested, "what do we care?"

"Shut up, Ted, and unlock her cuffs." Zoe took the security guard's revolver from off the countertop, watching as the young man crouched and used his keys to release the handcuffs that bound Cassie to the table. He helped Cassie to her feet, none too gently, and then shoved her forward. Having been sitting in one position for so long, Cassie's legs were a little weak and she stumbled forward slightly. Zoe caught her and their eyes met for a moment.

Smiling, Zoe said, "Come on then. I swear, nothing but trouble from the moment I walked in."

\* \* \* \* \*

Danny had to hold tight to the Jesus-handle as the SUV lurched around a tight corner. He wondered if all federal agents drove this wildly as a matter of course or if it was just Cory. Maybe she wasn't used to driving on snowy wet roads, he thought charitably. All the same, she'd probably do a lot better if she got off the phone and concentrated on driving.

Finally, after making another swerve into the oncoming lane, Cory hung up the phone with a snap. She fiddled for a while to get it back on her belt clip. When she took her eyes off the road for a long few seconds to get it placed right, Danny almost ordered her to pull over.

"Hannah just got through talking with Mercouri," she said, then flashed him a dazzling smile. "On your cellphone, no less. Mercouri's not willing to let any more hostages go free. Not yet, anyway. And she's playing everything close to her chest. One bit of good news though, we found their car. The techs are going over it now."

"She's playing for time," Danny said thoughtfully.

"Yeah, but why?"

Danny shrugged then realized she wasn't looking at him but was instead looking at the road ahead for once, for which he felt grateful, so he said, "I don't know. But then nothing about this sits right to me. They're packing some heavy-duty firepower." He thought about that for a minute. Maybe these two experienced FBI Agents saw Ingram Mac-10s every day of the week back down south, but in Pembina County they weren't that common. "My point is, they could have walked away at any time. We couldn't have stopped them, that's for damn sure. So why wait? It makes no sense."

"Maybe they needed more time to get the money packed away. Or to get through the vault."

"Maybe," he admitted. "But they still could have left at any time before you guys showed up. And I mean, if she's such a good thief, why rob a bank? She has money, so that's no good. So it must be something else."

"Well, good luck with figuring it out. Thinking about it is giving me a headache. You know what else bothers me? Why did she request us? I mean, I know why specifically us, we've been trying to lock her up for years and she knows who we are, but why want us there? Is she asking to get caught?"

Danny rubbed his temples wearily. He was so damn tired. "Beats me. Everything for a reason, isn't that what your partner said?" She nodded. "So then, Agent Cory..."

"Grace, please," she interrupted him.

He was startled but found himself smiling. "So, Grace, you married?"

She grinned too. "Is this a proposal, Sheriff?" she said teasingly.

"Danny."

"Well, Danny, you proposing?"



He shook his head, still smiling. "Just making conversation. I can't think about Mercouri any more. Your headache is contagious."

"Well, I'm divorced. Hannah threw me a fourth wedding party last year to celebrate."

He looked puzzled. "Four years?"

She shook her head. "Fourth ex-husband. How about you?"

"I'm not married. The right girl never came along, I guess."

"How about that Cassie?"

He laughed and when she looked at him he felt obliged to explain. "I don't think that would work. The right girl never came along for her either."

"Interesting," Grace said.

"What?"

"Mercouri's gay too. Could explain the antagonism your Mrs. Lewis made such a thing of."

"I doubt it," Danny's said. "Turn left here. I told you, Cassie's not the antagonistic type. There's got to be something more going on. Maybe I'm clutching at straws, but I can't help feeling it has something to do with Cassie's interest in Greek mythology."

Grace looked at him sharply, jerking the wheel and causing the SUV to lurch dangerously across the white line and into the oncoming lane again. He almost reached over to grab the steering wheel but then thought better of it. She'd probably take his arm off if he tried. She over-compensated at first and then finally brought the vehicle back under control.

"Why didn't you tell us this earlier?" she snapped, suddenly angry.

"I did!" Danny protested. "Or at least I tried to. Your partner doesn't take kindly to us yokels offering advice, does she?"

"Crap!" She slammed her palm into the steering wheel several times. "Crap, crap, crap!"

"What?" said Danny, alarmed by the sudden outburst and what it might do to her already erratic driving.

"Mercouri is obsessed with Greek history and mythology."

"Yeah, you said that already."

"Well, Hannah might not consider it important but I do. And what she didn't tell you is that when

we describe Mercouri as obsessed, we mean *obsessed*. After she healed enough to be sent back to prison, she was forced to talk to the prison shrink. It took some time but eventually she opened up. She claims to have had a near-death experience that made her aware of a past life. She swears she's the reincarnation of some ancient Greek Amazon or something."

"Jesus Christ," Danny muttered under his breath.

"Yeah, maybe him too. Hannah thinks she's faking but I've begun to have my doubts. I'm starting to think she's crazy as a loon. And I don't need to tell you that if your friend starts trying to recite Homer's Odyssey or something to win Mercouri over..." Grace looked Danny right in the eye, "...well, trust me, it ain't going to end well."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cassie walked as slowly as she could down the corridor, although that wasn't easy with Zoe's hand on her shoulder and the barrel of the gun occasionally poking her in the ribs. She wanted to make sure she remembered everything she saw, just in case she was released. Anything she could tell Danny would help, she was sure of that.

As they passed the open vault, Cassie tried to look in out of the corner of her eye. As it happened, she didn't need to be so discreet. Sam had stepped out of the vault in front of them, causing Zoe to stop, She even pulled Cassie back a little, as if she was trying to protect her from him.

"What's going on?" Sam asked, obviously displeased to see them both together.

Cassie tried to peer over his shoulder. It was hard to see much but she could see that the older man (what had Zoe called him... Harry, that was it) was removing safety deposit boxes from the far wall and placing them in neat orderly rows on the metal table. After had placed each one down, he leaned over it and worked on the lock with a pair of picks until the top popped open, then went back for another. Over in the corner, there was a large pile of bundled bank notes that looked like it hadn't even been touched. That was interesting, Cassie thought.

"She needed the restroom," Zoe said. "It's no big thing."

He harrumphed and then leaned in close, so that his mouth was less than an inch away from Zoe's ear. Zoe didn't flinch or move away, she noticed. "You've got to get a grip, Zoe. This is spiraling out of control, real fast." He was trying to whisper, Cassie thought, but she doubted he was capable. Someone so used to bullying, shouting and intimidation probably didn't even know the meaning of the word. She could hear what he said quite easily.

He stepped back and turned to go back into the vault, ducking to get through the low doorway. "We're going to need you to start looking through these soon, Zoe," he said over his shoulder. "Don't be long."

\* \* \* \* \*

Due to the limited size of the building itself, the bank restrooms were understandably tiny. Two stalls took up most of the space on one side and a large part of the rest of that far wall was taken up with a baby-changing station that had never seen use in the two years Cassie had worked at the bank. On the opposing wall were the mirrors and ceramic basins. Between the two there was a very limited space.

Cassie's flat shoes clicked softly on the hard tiled floor as she walked in. Zoe's boots just thumped. Cassie held the door open for a moment, to ensure that it didn't slam back into Zoe's face, and then let it swing shut behind them with a click.

She was pushed forward, albeit gently, and turned to see Zoe jumping up to sit onto the countertop between two sinks. The woman waved the silver revolver in the general direction of the stalls.

"Keep the door open," she said.

"You're kidding, right?"

"I look like I'm kidding?"

Cassie protested. "I can't pee if someone's watching."

"Well, you'd better learn fast."

"Why are you doing this?"

"So I can keep an eye on you and keep you from doing something stupid."

"I meant, why are you robbing the bank?"

Zoe seemed a little unsettled by the question. "Maybe I just don't like Mondays."

"Be serious."

"Who says I'm not?" Zoe said irritably. "Now, do you have to piss or not?"

Cassie held up her hands in a gesture that was meant to placate the woman's temper. "Please, just humor me, will you? What harm can it do?"

The dark haired woman thought about that for a second or two, then grinned. "You don't really need to pee at all, do you?"

"No," Cassie admitted, daring to smile back.

"Un-fucking-believable," Zoe said, still grinning. "That's what you are, girl. Unbelievable. Still,

you have a point, it can't do any harm. And what the hell, it will pass some time. Go on, I'm listening."

Taking a deep breath, more to calm her nerves than anything else, Cassie said, "I may not know anything about crime. I work in a bank and still I would have no idea how to go about robbing it. But I'm not stupid." Zoe opened her mouth to say something so Cassie hurriedly continued. "Something here doesn't add up. You're robbing a bank in the middle of nowhere, so how much can you expect to get? You're doing it in bad weather, so your chances of making a getaway are less. And there are five of you, so what little money you do get is stretched even further."

"You're assuming we're all sharing equally."

"You're armed to the teeth and are obviously professional. At least I think so. I suppose I haven't mixed in the same circles you have." She paused, sinking her teeth into her bottom lip as she thought carefully about what she wanted to say. She had to tread very, very carefully here. "But if you're this good and you've got so much invested in this venture, why are you doing it for so little return? This just doesn't make any sense."

"Not to you, maybe."

"I can't see how they make sense to anyone. You've made no secret of you being in the bank, taking your time instead of getting out fast, shot at some police officers, and you've demanded the FBI come here. You even know the two FBI agents by name." Cassie stopped talking, uncertain if she should continue. When Zoe didn't say anything, she took the plunge. "You're not after money, are you?"

Zoe said nothing for a moment, instead looking the plucky bank teller up and down. Then she smiled and said, "So why don't you tell me what am I after?"

"Something in the safe deposit boxes. That's why you need time, so that no one knows what you've taken."

Zoe grinned, jumping down from the sinks and stepping closer to Cassie, the gun held out in her hand. "Pretty smart," she admitted, nodding in agreement. "Still, you have made a mistake or two."

"I did?"

"Uh-huh. You told this to someone with a gun." Zoe clicked the hammer back on the revolver.

Without thinking, Cassie moved as fast she could, stepping to one side and punching hard into Zoe's stomach just as her sensei had taught her. The woman bent forward and gasped for air. Cassie grabbed her wrist, turned into her, and pulled hard as she shifted her weight suddenly, throwing Zoe over her shoulder and slamming her hard onto the cold tile floor. The gun went skidding from her grip and Cassie dove after it, scooping it up and in trembling hands turning it onto Zoe.

Zoe lay there for a while, flat on her back, her chest rising and falling as she sucked in deep breaths. Then she laughed out loud, the sound echoing around the restroom. Understandably, her peals of laughter alarmed Cassie somewhat, as it wasn't exactly the reaction she was expecting.

"Sorry," Zoe said, sitting up and shuffling backwards so could rest against the cold, tiled wall. She was still grinning and her shoulders were heaving as she tried to keep herself from laughing. "So what now?"

Cassie was confused. "What?"

"What's the plan, Cassandra? Shooting me wouldn't be very wise of you. Or do you plan to use me as a hostage to get yourself out of here?"

"Neither. I just want answers. That's all I've ever wanted."

Zoe waved a hand. "Ask away. You're the one with the gun."

"So what is this about? Really?"

"Something most people would throw away."

"Not money then?"

"No, not money. At least, not for me."

"And Sam?"

Zoe frowned at this question. "What about him?"

"What's in this for him?"

"Oh," she said, understanding now. "He gets to stay in control. Or at least think he is. He likes that."

"And the others? They just want the money?"

"That's all they care about, yes. Me, I don't care too much for money."

"Money can't buy you love?" Cassie said skeptically.

"Yes, well, I don't care too much for that, either," Zoe said, looking away. She drew up her legs and rested her arms on her knees.

"I don't believe that."

"Don't you now? Well, we all have to not believe in something."

"Like coincidences?"

"Yeah, like coincidences."

They were silent for a moment or two, then Cassie said, "So where did you learn so much about Greece? Family tradition or something?"

"Not really." All the humor seemed to have drained out of her suddenly, as if the question had reached inside her and pulled the plug. "I try not to think about my family too much. Only the bad memories seem to have stuck."

"Oh, so you're blaming all this on an unhappy childhood?"

"Not at all. My childhood was pretty good, I suppose, until my parents were murdered."

"Oh my god..." Cassie whispered, shocked. Then she looked up sharply, aware that she might be being played for a fool. "Is that true?" she said suspiciously. As soon as she had said it though, she regretted it. The sad look on the woman's face was heartrending.

Zoe nodded. "I don't lie."

"I'm sorry." It was inadequate, of course, but what else was there to say, Cassie wondered?

"You don't have to be sorry, you're the one with the gun, remember?"

"All the same..."

Zoe went on speaking quickly, perhaps just so they wouldn't linger on what was obviously a distressing subject for her. She brought the conversation back to the subject Cassie had begun. "I spent most of last year working on an archaeological dig in Greece. Hard work but a lot of fun. I had to start at the bottom, even though I was paying everyone's wages, funny really. Michi insisted on it."

"Who's Michi?"

Zoe's face hardened again briefly, although she tried to hide it. It didn't work; Cassie still noticed.

"The dig supervisor," Zoe said. "I bribed her away from a crummy job she had on a dig at Panagia. I think she was grateful for that, at least in the beginning. She taught me a lot about archaeology, ancient artifacts, historic Greece. Hell, she taught me a lot about a lot of things. Helped keep my head straight too." She sighed sadly. "In the end, I think the only thing I taught her was to be more cynical."

"It's quite a jump," said Cassie thoughtfully. "From archaeology to bank robbery, I mean."

"Ah, you want the long story."

Cassie was pleased to see that Zoe was grinning again. "It would be nice."

"Alright then," Zoe said, chuckling. "When I was in prison a few years ago, some of the other inmates tried to kill me. Well, perhaps 'tried' isn't entirely true. They did a damn good number on me." She ran a hand through her long hair, gingerly touching her skull in places. "It took me six months to recover, which sounds worse than it is. Regular hospital beats prison hospital, trust me."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Anyway, I was in pretty bad shape. When they rushed me to hospital, they had to operate and something went wrong on the table. The doctors said I died for more than thirty seconds. Clinically dead, was how they put it. Like there's more than one kind of dead." She smiled at the thought. "Thirty seconds. Doesn't sound like very long, does it? Sheesh, what I wouldn't do to get those thirty seconds back."

"Why?"

"I lived a lifetime in that half-a-minute, believe me," Zoe told her, with an indifferent shrug. "They called it a near-death experience. Didn't seem like one to me. No floating, no white light at the end of tunnel, and about as far from peaceful and serene as you could imagine. More like a near-life experience."

"You're talking about reincarnation?" Cassie asked, remembering Zoe's earlier reaction to the word.

"Maybe. It was certainly a different time and place."

"Ancient Greece." It was more of a statement than a question.

"I don't know. All I know for sure is that I was someone else and yet still me. I looked the same, moved the same. But the way I acted... the things I did..." She hung her head.

When she continued speaking, her voice was quiet and Cassie had to strain to hear.

"Such ferocity, brutality, and sheer frustration. I was a killer, a madwoman." Zoe was looking at her hands right now, examining them, turning them over and over. She had a disgusted expression on her face, as if her hands were covered with blood. "And then I did become calm. Not because of anything I did, but something else, some external force, something I couldn't quite pin down. It comforted me, protected me, loved me. It made me realize I didn't have to act the way I was. I need to find that comfort again. I thought I had it, once."

She sighed. "I saw the prison shrink once. Didn't really want to but the warden insisted. I didn't

tell him the whole story. I could see it wouldn't have done any good. How do you explain something like that?"

"You're doing okay with me so far," Cassie said quietly. She was rewarded with Zoe looking up at her and smiling slightly.

"Yeah, well they would have locked me in the looney bin if I had tried explaining all this to a psychiatrist." She took a deep breath and continued. "While I was recovering, I had lots of time and little to do. The prison library was a godsend. I read everything they had on ancient Greece, which wasn't much. But it was easy enough to get books shipped in. The prison board tends to approve of inmates studying. Helps with your chances of good time, too. After I got out, I kept my nose clean for a while, until my parole period was up."

"And then?"

"And then I went to Greece, with Sam in tow. I wanted to go straight, which Sam wasn't too happy about, and getting out of the country seemed the best bet. Away from temptation, as it were. We visited all the historic sites at first, drifting from one to the other as the mood took me. I kinda felt myself drawn further north each time. Eventually we ended up touring an abandoned archaeological dig in Moudania, outside a small town called Nea Potidea. There was something about the place, I couldn't tell you what, but it felt like I had been drawn there for a reason. When I had that same serenity wash over me, I knew this place meant something to me. So I spent some of the ill-gotten gains I'd earned over the years and funded an archaeological dig there that summer, can you believe it?" She chuckled half-heartedly. "I don't know why I did it. Maybe just to have an excuse to stay there longer. Sam was getting itchy feet and wanted to come home. Maybe I did it to piss him off."

Cassie gulped nervously, then asked, "You and Sam... are you?"

"What? Hell, no," Zoe denied vehemently and laughed at the thought. "We're just business partners. All the same, he's stuck with me through good and bad. Most of it's been good, though, I suppose. For him, anyway. Why do you ask?"

"Just trying to get under your skin, I guess." It was stupid, if honest, thing to say and Cassie regretted saying it almost immediately.

"Well, I think you've already done that," Zoe said. Cassie felt herself blushing and hated herself for it. "I suppose you think I'm crazy too, right?"

Cassie shook her head. "No. Well, maybe a little. You are robbing a bank, after all. That takes a certain kind of crazy." They both laughed at that. "But if you mean for believing in reincarnation, then no. I'm not sure I believe in it personally but I've always been drawn to it. And many famous people have believed in it; Benjamin Franklin, General Patton, Henry Ford, there must be others."

"Yeah, well, even they wouldn't believe some of the things I've seen. Things that shouldn't even



be possible..." She grinned again. "Listen to me, almost giving everything away. Well, one thing's crazy for sure. I've only ever told one other person all that and I always thought she never believed me."

"Michi?" Cassie thought aloud, then smiled when she saw Zoe looking surprised. "Lucky guess." There was something in the woman's piercing blue eyes when she mentioned Michi that sent a stab of irrational jealousy to her heart.

"Wonder why I told you?" she asked herself quietly. Then she seemed to shake herself out of her reverie. Clambering to her feet, she flashed a quick smile at Cassie. "We should be getting back to the others."

Startled by Zoe's confidence, Cassie motioned her back down with the gun. "We're not going anywhere."

Zoe ignored her, instead brushing small specks of dirt off her jeans. "It seems that just like your mother, you're in the habit of making two mistakes at a time. Do you play chess?"

Cassie was caught offguard by the question. "What? Yes, why?"

"I never learnt," Zoe said, "and believe me, if you're ever in prison you'll find that most people play. But Sam's always said I'd should. He thinks I'd be good at the game. Something about me thinking two or three steps ahead all the time." She stepped closer to Cassie, so there was very little space between them now. The barrel of the gun brushed against Zoe's flat stomach, catching on the white fabric of the shirt..

"Stay back!" Cassie warned.

"You're not going to shoot me," Zoe said, never taking her eyes from Cassie's face.

"Why not? Because you don't think I could?"

Zoe smiled assuredly. "No, because the gun isn't loaded."

To her credit, Cassie wasn't dumb enough to glance down at the revolver to check. But it didn't matter because soon as Zoe had told her, she remembered how the woman had tipped the bullets out onto the countertop after taking the gun away from Ivan. She sighed dejectedly and reversed the gun in her hand, holding it out for Zoe to take.

Zoe didn't take the gun. Instead she grabbed Cassie's thin wrist and pulled the unsuspecting young woman towards her. It was not a violent action but forceful enough for Cassie's breath to be knocked out of her when she slammed into Zoe's chest. The gun dropped from numb fingers and clattered noisily on the tiles. The taller woman tilted and lowered her head and without thinking Cassie found herself bending backwards in response, just as she felt an arm slip around her waist.

Their lips were a hair's breadth apart when Zoe murmured, "Trust me, this one is loaded." She pressed the barrel of a semi-automatic pistol against the blonde's neck, then gently ran it down to where Cassie's blouse was buttoned. Cassie was surprised by the warmth of the metal until she remembered it had been tucked against Zoe's skin at the small of her back. The thought made Cassie flush, then shudder as the gun barrel moved lower, popping open a button. As soon as she did, the gun was moved away.

If she was going to apologize, Cassie didn't give her a chance. "I do," she whispered.

"Do what?" the confused Zoe asked.

"Trust you," Cassie told her and pushed forward, grinding her groin hard against Zoe's thigh. Their lips met and Cassie plunged her tongue deep into the other woman's mouth. Zoe responded, pulling the shorter woman in tighter, fingers clutching ardently at her ass.

It was Zoe who eventually pulled away, breaking the kiss and stepping back, putting a little space between them. She smiled, looking for all the world like the cat who got the cream. "Is that right?" she said. "You'd do well to remember something I learned at a very early age."

Cassie looked down, shame-faced. The sensation of this woman's firm body pressed against her own had excited her, try to deny it as she might and as inappropriate as it was. "And what's that?" she said quietly, not really listening, more concerned with the consequences of her actions.

"Always have an out."

\* \* \* \* \*

Zoe prodded the gun into Cassandra's back to keep her walking forward. Not that she needed prompting. If there was one thing you could say about the blonde, Zoe thought, she always seemed calm. The other hostages weren't doing so well. The bank manager was still sweating profusely, despite it being on the chilly side inside the bank, and his suit was now looking decidedly rumpled. The brunette teller had been crying again, although always quietly unlike that damn annoying customer from before, and her mascara had run badly, leaving dark streaks down her cheeks. Only the security guard seemed anywhere near as calm as Cassandra, although he looked considerably more tired than anyone else.

None of them looked at her when she walked in. The teller gave a wild, angry glance at Cassandra but then turned away sharply, almost as if she was feared that Zoe would strike her. The men avoided her stare.

Ted looked uncomfortable and impatient, while thankfully Ivan looked a little more relaxed and at ease. He was chewing on a cocktail stick he'd found somewhere.

Shifted his pistol from one hand to another, Ted asked, "You were gone a long time, was there a problem?"

Zoe's eyes dropped to Cassandra's tight rear as the blonde walked back to her place. Shit, she

thought, that girl had an ass that could make your motor stall. To Ted, she said, "Nothing I couldn't handle. Make sure you cuff her."

Taking Cassandra by her elbow, Ted motioned for her to sit down, which she did without a word. He took the hanging handcuffs and locked the loose circle around her wrist.

It was getting dark outside, Zoe noticed. The streetlights were already on but their pitiful glow had been drowned out by the large spotlights the FBI had set up. Wisely, Ted and Ivan had kept the interior lights off. They'd have to switch them on sooner or later, but there was no point making targets of themselves just yet. Tucking her pistol back into her waistband, she walked over to where her jacket lay on the counter. Fishing in the pockets, she took out what was her last piece of dried pomegranate fruit and started chewing on it.

"As for the rest of you," she said loudly, "I have good news. You get to go free. Ivan, would you release them, please?"

Ivan threw her a curious glance but did as he was instructed, going down the line with the cuff keys and unlocking each in turn. They all looked at her now, with looks of hopeful anticipation.

"Are you serious?" the bank manager asked suspiciously.

"Never been more so."

"What about Cassie?" the security guard was brave enough to ask. It was decent of him to do so; the others didn't seem to care. When things settled down to normal in this little backwater, Cassandra was going to have some serious bridges to mend, Zoe thought.

"She stays here. We still need one hostage, just in case. And besides, I'd like to hang on to her for a while longer."

She saw Cassandra looking at her and saw that the double-meaning in her words hadn't gone unnoticed. Just in case, she flashed the cute blonde a reassuring smile. While Ivan finished unlocking each of the hostages' cuffs and helped them each to their feet, Zoe took Cassandra's phone out of her jeans pocket and pressed re-dial. She heard it ring only once, then Hudson answered.

"Zoe? Was there something you needed?"

"It's getting dark out there, Hannah. I don't want any mistakes."

"Mistakes? What are you getting at, Zoe?"

"I'm releasing some more hostages."

"How many?"

"Not all of them."

"I didn't think so. But hope springs eternal."

Zoe hung up. "Don't count on it."

## **9: Knights and Knaves**

Grace pulled the SUV alongside the big house on the hill, passing through heavy-looking wrought-iron gates that Danny could never recall seeing shut. They parked at the top of the long driveway and got out, looking up at the house. It was built in a faux old-English style, with plenty of dull grey stone and white bordered windows. 'Baroque' had been the word Danny had once heard the owners use, although he didn't know exactly what that meant. He did know he hated the sight of this ugly house though.

Gravel crunched underfoot as they walked across towards the steps that lead up to the front door. This too was meant to look old and traditional, being a heavy slab of oak with huge black metal hinges. Danny looked back over the grounds while they waited for someone to answer the doorbell. The lawn was still perfectly white, the layer of snow that covered the grass still untouched.

Williams' wife eventually answered the door, clad in a skimpy bathrobe that left little to the imagination. Danny struggled to remember her name and came up short. She might have been a beautiful woman in another light but as it was she always looked tired and beaten down. Life had that effect on some people, Danny thought, more so if you had any dealings with her husband. If she was alarmed to see Danny, she didn't show it, just stood back and let them both in without saying a word. She had gestured to Williams' study with her free hand. The other held a tumbler of scotch and ice, which she'd almost spilt as she stumbled back up the broad stairway.

Danny and Grace had gone through to the study, a large oak-paneled room with thick glass windows on the left and rows and rows of books on shelves on two of the other three walls, even stretching above and over the door frame. A large flat panel television was mounted at an angle high in one corner and an antique desk occupied most of the far end of the wall.

"Nice life for some," he heard Grace mutter under her breath as she looked around. Instinctively he thought of Williams' wife and nodded.

Seated behind the desk was Lorne J. Williams. He had wavy dark hair, kept short and slicked back with hair oil. Now well into middle-age, his tall frame was becoming flabby and ill-cared for but he was still a rough-looking handsome man with a strongly pronounced chin.

He rose to his feet as they entered and if he was startled by their sudden arrival he covered it well. Danny introduced Grace, and Williams shook both their hands.

"Do be seated, please, Sheriff," he said graciously. "Although I must admit I'm surprised to see you. I would have thought you would have your hands full today." He plucked up the remote control from the desk and clicked the television off. It had been one of the local news channels reporting on the bank robbery, Danny had noted.

Danny sank down in one of the plush leather chairs. Grace seemed to hesitate, either because she preferred to remain standing or because she didn't want to waste time, but then followed suit.

"Now what can I do for you? Always happy to help out the Sheriff's Department, of course." He glanced over at Grace. "And by association, the FBI, that goes without saying."

"We're after some background information regarding the perpetrators robbing the bank," Danny said bluntly.

"And you came to me? Well, I don't know why."

Grace fished the photos of Randall and Mercouri out of her pocket and slid them across the desk. "Do you know these two people?" she asked.

Williams picked up the photos like they were contaminated with something highly contagious, holding them between finger and thumb delicately. He studied the photos for a long time. Although perhaps it only seemed like a long time to Danny. "Know them?" he finally said, looking up and smiling. "No. I have met them once, however."

"At your Halloween party last year."

He didn't look surprised at Danny's words. Years of training in courtrooms, interview rooms, boardrooms and cells had probably knocked all the surprised reactions out of him. He probably couldn't be surprised now even if he expected to be. "Yes, that's right, Sherriff. Although I must tell you it wasn't me they wanted to see."

"Percy Hamilton, right?"

The lawyer leaned back in his chair and templed his fingers together. "Just as you say."

Grace exchanged a glance with Danny and rolled her eyes, as if to say this was like drawing

blood from a stone. She probably had more exposure to slimy lawyers than he had ever had or ever would. And he'd had more than enough to last a lifetime.

"What did they want of Percy Hamilton?" Danny said.

"Should I be invoking lawyer-client privilege?" He was almost asking the question of himself.

"Hamilton is dead. I think that's gone out of the window, don't you?"

"Not necessarily." Danny was about to snap something, but Williams held up a hand and continued. "However, I am willing to tell you so long as you agree that what is said does not go beyond this room."

"You know we can't agree to that," Grace said heatedly.

He grinned like the Cheshire cat. "Why not?"

It was a game to him, Danny realized. He could have just asked them why or waited until they'd volunteered the information; he probably knew already (he'd have to be pretty dumb not to, Danny thought) but had felt like he had to maneuver the questioning until he could ask.

"These two are the ones robbing the bank."

"Ah," Williams said thoughtfully. "Well that does put a different perspective on it all, I suppose." He got up and crossed to a glass liquor cabinet, and poured himself a generous scotch on the rocks. "Drink?"

"No, thanks." The heat from the fireplace and the remarkably comfy chair were already combining to make Danny feel drowsy. Alcohol was the last thing he needed.

"How about you, Agent Cory?"

Grace's voice was tightly controlled. "You're wasting time, sir."

"I'll take that as a no."

He returned to his seat, leaned back again, and sipped his scotch. "As you know, Sheriff," he began, "Percy Hamilton travelled the world quite extensively. He collected a wide assortment of... *objet d'art*, shall we say? He even went so far to fund some archaeological digs in Europe. Most of the artifacts he recovered he donated to museums, but he kept some for himself."

"Those digs wouldn't happen to be in Greece, would they?" Grace asked.

"Why, yes, some of them. He often told me he felt drawn there. But also Italy, Egypt, even Turkey. What made you say that?"

Grace smiled at him as sweetly as she could. "Lucky guess."

"Well, funnily enough, it was one of his Greek artifacts that Miss Mercouri expressed an interest in."

"Which one?"

He shrugged. "I'm afraid I wasn't there for that part of the negotiation. However, I can tell you Miss Mercouri was quite insistent and offered him increasingly large amounts of money for whatever it was. Not that that fazed Percy, of course. After all, he had plenty of money and wouldn't part with his treasures even if he was dirt poor. The meeting ended up badly. Percy got quite cross and I ended up asking them to leave."

"Was he expecting them?" Grace said. She was scribbling down notes in a lined pad. "I mean, did you get any indication they knew each other before the party?"

"I don't believe so, no."

Danny looked over at Grace. "So Mercouri and Randall visit Hamilton in October and he shows them the door. Then Hamilton dies less than two weeks later in a car wreck."

She nodded, knowing what he was thinking. "I've told you before, I don't like coincidences."

"Assuming Mercouri and Randall arranged the accident, what good would it do them?" Danny looked back at the lawyer. "Wouldn't Hamilton's property just go to Catharine and James?"

"Normally, yes. And Cathy has expressed an interest in auctioning off her father's collection. She got the idea after she was approached with a pre-emptive offer for one of the Greek artifacts. Quite a substantial offer, I understand."

"I wonder who made the offer?" Grace said. "But then I'm also wondering why you're suddenly opening up, Mister Williams."

The lawyer smiled. "I may be a friend of the family but I am not the family lawyer, Agent Cory. I was only Percy's lawyer and what was told to me by Cathy was told to me as a friend, not as a member of the legal profession. I believe both Cathy and James have hired their own counsel."

"And how would you know that?"

"Because the will is being contested."

"Of course!" Grace said. "If the will is contested then his possessions aren't the legal property of his heirs. That means that they'd be somewhere in his house, or, if he was concerned over their safety, they'd be kept in..."

"...the bank," Danny finished her sentence for her. He turned back to Williams. "Tell me, did

Hamilton have a safety deposit box at the bank?"

"That I can't tell you, Sherriff."

"Really?"

"I said can't, not won't. He may very well have had one, but that would be a secret between him and the bank. If he did, I'm sure the bank will make it available to his heirs once the contest is settled."

"Wouldn't the will have to have a box listed on it?"

He shook his head. "The will itself was kept simple, merely stating that all of his belongings would be passed on to his chosen heir. It doesn't go into detail. That's often the way, these days. Simpler, you see. Cheaper, too." He looked regretful at that, seeing as how he would lose money through this simplicity. "His property has been itemized, of course, but that only accounts for items that are openly available to us. If he had a safety deposit box, then chances are whatever is in it, isn't on the list."

"They're still after the same thing, whatever the hell it is," Grace said excitedly. "They've just run into a brick wall and have gotten desperate."

Danny thought about that. "But how can we tell what they're after? Would Catharine know?"

The lawyer shrugged. "I would assume so. Although if time is pressing, then you might be out of luck there. She's currently backpacking across Africa. Finding herself, I believe she described it as." He sniffed in contempt.

"What about *her* lawyer?"

"Finch? I doubt he'd know." He sounded disapproving, but he probably always sounded that way when discussing other, obviously inferior, lawyers.

They took the list, all the same. Danny mentioned the idea phoning the bank's head office in Fargo but Grace disagreed. They might be able to confirm if Hamilton had a safety deposit box or not, but they wouldn't be able to find out what was in it. Not even Mr. Weschler, the bank manager, would know that, assuming they could speak to him. No, what was in that box was a secret that Hamilton had only shared with his daughter, although somehow Mercouri and Randall knew the secret too.

Danny doubted there was anything more that Williams could tell them, or even if he could that he would, so he got to his feet. Grace did likewise, immediately pulling her cellphone off her belt and dialing. She walked away, without a word of acknowledgement to either of the two men, to stand in the study doorway. From the snatches of conversation he could hear, Danny figured she was updating Hudson with what they'd learnt. He thanked Williams, who stood and shook his outstretched hand.



"Are you sure there's nothing more I can do to help, Sheriff?" the lawyer offered.

"No, but if you think of anything..."

"Of course. You know, if Percy's death wasn't an accident, then I can't help feeling somewhat to blame."

"Really? Why's that?"

"I was very vocal in my disapproval of dealing with this pair," he said, handing the photographs back to Danny. He glanced down at the picture of Mercouri as he did so. "Especially her. Something about her unsettled me. Something about the eyes, I think. She had eyes that looked a hundred years older than the rest of her face." He shuddered. "I told him, Perce, she's a phony, I said. Not that he needed much convincing, of course. He'd never part with some of his treasures."

Danny didn't really care about the man's feelings of guilt but all the same felt duty bound to assuage them. "I'm sure that's true, sir. He was a man set strongly in his ways, I believe. Try not to blame yourself." He looked back over his shoulder to where Grace was moving back to them, having obviously finished her call.

Williams say the questioning look in Grace's eyes. "Agent Cory? Was there something else?"

"Yes, just one more thing, Mister Williams, why is the will being contested?"

Danny frowned. He couldn't see where she was heading with this. "Does it really matter?"

"Maybe. Well?"

The lawyer hesitated. "I shouldn't be telling you this but Percy changed his will a few years ago and cut all of his family off. He left all of his worldly possessions to his eldest daughter."

"Catharine?" Danny asked.

"No, she is the prime mover in contesting the will."

Danny scratched his head. Why was he feeling like he was two or three steps behind everyone else? "But she is his eldest daughter... oh." It dawned on him suddenly.

"Yes, precisely," Williams said smugly.

"The old guy had a kid out of wedlock?" Grace asked.

"Some years before he met his late wife, yes. The whole affair was hushed up at the time, as I recall."

"About twenty-eight years ago, I'm guessing."

Grace looked at him, not understanding. "Damn it, Danny, stop pissing around. If you know who he had the kid with, tell me."

"Elaine Wayward."

"You mean..."

He nodded. "Cassie's mother."

\* \* \* \* \*

Zoe was in the vault with Harry and Sam when the cellphone rang again. She pulled it out of her pocket and ran her thumb over the numbers for a moment, thinking about the blonde who owned the phone, then, angry with herself for a reason she couldn't quite pin down, she stabbed at the 'talk' button. She *had* to put Cassandra out of her mind.

"I'm a little busy right now, Hannah," she said bad-temperedly. Sam yanked another safety deposit box out of the wall and passed it to Harry, who started working on the lock. With her free hand, Zoe pulled the last box Harry opened over to her side of the table and started rifling through the contents. Lots of papers, a small gold bar, a passport. Nothing she wanted. She shoved the box back over to Sam, who clicked the box shut and put it back on a neat pile of the boxes they'd already checked through.

Zoe sighed. They'd been through a good three-quarters of the boxes and still no luck. She couldn't help but think what she was looking for might not be here after all. Which in turn would make this whole venture a complete waste of time. Well, she thought, the corners of her mouth turning up slightly, maybe not a complete waste.

Damn it, she was thinking about Cassandra again. The FBI agent was saying something and she had to force herself to concentrate.

"I'm sure. Found what you're looking for yet? Percy Hamilton's safety deposit box has to be there somewhere, right?"

Zoe didn't say anything for several minutes. Sam looked up at her, concerned by the subtle change in her mood. Eventually, she said simply, "That was quick of you."

"You know how these things work, Zoe. Lots of legwork and the occasional lucky break. We also found your car."

"Good for you."

"I must admit I'm impressed. That's one hell of a beautiful restoration job. I might have to bid on it in the impound auction."

Zoe smiled sadly. "Well, good luck with that." She shook her head as Sam showed her the inside of another box. "Take good care of it."

"Anything you want to tell us about it?" the agent asked.

"It's safe, Hannah. But I imagine you'll still check it over."

"We have to, you know that. But I'll take your word for it. "

"Was there anything else?"

"I wanted to thank you for releasing the hostages."

"Again? Is that in the negotiator's manual or something?"

Hudson seemed to ignore the jibe. "Just one hostage left now, Zoe."

"I didn't think we needed more." And, she thought to herself, if you'd ever met this particular hostage, you'd agree.

"You're missing my point."

"No," Zoe said, "I'm assuming you don't have one. There's a difference."

"I'm under pressure from the tactical team. One hostage, several perps; they keep telling me those are good odds."

"And what do you think?"

"I'd like this to end peacefully, Zoe, you know that." Yeah, right, Zoe thought. "But it's not entirely my call. The knots may be loose but my hands are still tied in situations like this."

Zoe hung up. Sam looked at her.

"This will be the third lot of boxes we've looked through, Zoe," he said. "There's not many left. Are you sure it's even here? This could be a huge waste of time."

Zoe frowned. It was scary how often their thoughts ran along similar tracks. Only difference was her mind was the express, his the passenger train. "Beginning to have doubts, Sam?"

"Never about the job."

"About me, then?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

Harry had stopped opening boxes. He looked between the two, concerned at the signs of a potential argument.

"You were with that blonde for a long time. And a dumb blonde is enough of a reason to make any man doubt."

"Oh Sam," she said, shaking her head, "you should never, never doubt what no body is sure about. Now, why don't you go and make sure the brothers Karamazov aren't doing anything stupid?"

Sam got to his feet, the metal chair scraping the floor noisily. Without a word he walked out of the vault. Zoe didn't watch him go but instead focused on the next box that Harry gave her. Again, this one was empty, at least devoid of what she wanted.

"Damn it!" she said, shoving the box away from her violently.

Harry looked over at her with a pensive expression. "You okay, Zoe?"

"I'm fine, Harry. Just getting fed up with Prince Myshkin."

He frowned at that, not really understanding. She didn't explain, just asked him to hand her another open box. Besides, she could talk, Zoe thought. She was beginning to think she was the real idiot around here. What the hell was she doing, kissing Cassandra? It was inappropriate at the best of times but right now, in the middle of a robbery it was downright stupid. It was just that when she spoke to her, when she got close to that infuriatingly perky little blonde, she felt the same sensation of calm and serenity that she'd felt in Nea Potidea. Was there a reason for that? Was it just because Cassandra happened to be interested in Ancient Greece? No, damn it, Zoe thought, remembering what had caused the problem in the first place. She'd been reading about reincarnation, hadn't she? There was no way that could be a coincidence.

She thought about Cassandra again as she rummaged through the next box Harry handed her. Thought about her soft skin, the warmth of the blonde's small, pert body pressing against her own, the incredible sensation of the kiss that had almost made her knees buckle...

She shook her head violently, trying to dislodge the thoughts and feelings, like a dog shaking itself in a vain attempt to get dry after a dousing.

Damn, damn, fuck and damn. She really needed a cigarette.

## 10: Jamais Vu All Over Again

The harsh Mediterranean sun beat down on Zoe's shoulders as she dropped down. It had been quite a trek up through the hills from the coastal village of Nea Potidea. She was already hot and sticky, her top drenched with sweat. The rocks she sat on, once part of a dwelling, now nothing more than calf-high walls, felt hot even through the fabric of her shorts. She stretched her legs out, her boots scuffing the dusty dirt. She glimpsed Michi looking at her legs and smiled. That did an older woman's ego a lot of good sometimes. She pretended not to notice, of course, and instead just crossed them at the ankles teasingly.

Michi had dropped her backpack on the ground and was stretching too. She raised her arms above her head and interlocked her fingers, reaching as high as she could, arching her back, causing her small breasts to jut out. Zoe, unlike the young Japanese-American archaeologist, made no effort to hide her interest.

"Don't overdo it," Zoe teased.

"Are you complaining?"

Zoe took a long drink of water from a bottle. "Not at all," she said. "It's just unlike you, I need some recovery time."

Michi laughed at that, cricked her neck in one final stretch, and then looked over the ancient ruins. "I'm amazed you got permits for this."

"All legal and above board. One of your conditions, remember?" Zoe said, offering her the bottle. Michi took it, drank a sip or two, and then moved closer, making sure that her bare legs rubbed against Zoe's.

She raised an eyebrow, looking doubtful. "Honestly?"

"Well, we have the correct permits; let's just leave it at that." What she wasn't saying was that it took an awful lot of bribes to get them.

"So what do you think?" Michi asked, changing the subject. She half-turned and swept a hand across the vista before them.

"I've seen it before," Zoe said, smiling. There was something about this place that felt right to her. It wasn't quite a feeling of belonging, more one of acceptance. And that was everything to her. It may not have felt like her home, if she could even remember what that felt like, but she couldn't deny that it felt as if she'd been welcomed into a close friend's home after a long

absence; hugged, loved, and most importantly, forgiven. She let out a long deep breath and closed her eyes, tilting her head back and letting the sun warm her face. It was so peaceful.

Her brief daydream was interrupted by a sharp nudge.

"You haven't seen it through an archeologist's eyes," Michi said, grinning evilly.

"Maybe that's because I'm not an archeologist, did you ever think of that, Michi-chan?" she said sarcastically. Then she wearily climbed to her feet. "Alright, alright. You could give me a minute. Some of us aren't as young as others." She turned around and stared across the plain. "What am I supposed to be looking at?"

Michi was in her element. She spread her arms wide, spilling water from the bottle, but she didn't seem to notice. "The village of Potidea. Several thousand years ago this was a living, breathing village and now it's in ruins. But there are ruins and there are ruins, you follow me?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, let me put it this way. Some sites are always going to be busy because they're important culturally. Rome, Jerusalem, Athens, Pompeii, Thebes..."

"Yes, yes," Zoe said impatiently, "I get the general idea."

"Then there are others, sites that have little import but which are extremely rich in historical details."

"Import?"

"Yes, it means..."

"I know what it means. It's just not every day you hear it used in a conversation."

Michi punched Zoe playfully on the shoulder. "Anyway, those sites are just as fought over by archaeologists. Then you have sites like this. Sites that have little or no historic significance and certainly no cultural value. No one wants this site, Zoe. Worse still, it's already been picked over. There was a dig here, more than twenty years ago. An American professor..."

"Percy Hamilton," Zoe interrupted.

"You know this already?"

Zoe smiled. "I told you, I like to plan things out in advance. Percy Hamilton led a team from North Dakota State University in a dig here back in 1986. Put a lot of his own money into the dig too, but had to quit when the local authorities refused to renew his permits. But they were only here for a short time, comparatively speaking, less than a year, and they didn't make any major in-roads."

"Even so, you know what I'm driving at. Even with such little time, Professor Hamilton must have stripped this place bare of what little it had to offer."

"Then why did he want to stay on?"

She frowned. "I hadn't thought of that. You think he might have missed something?"

"You never know," Zoe said, flashing the woman a mischievous grin.

"But why here? This is the backend of nowhere. Why was he interested in this place?" She looked seriously at Zoe for a second. "Why are you?"

"Well, I can't speak for Percy Hamilton," Zoe said honestly, "but I was drawn here."

Michi looked at her, taken aback. "You want to say that again?"

Shrugging, Zoe said simply, "It's a long story."

"Most of them are. Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining. Your money's good as anyone else's. Besides, the perks alone are worth it."

Zoe laughed at that. "I aim to please."

Michi finished off the remaining water, then rummaged through her backpack for another bottle. When she had found it and cracked the seal, she sat cross-legged on the ground and looked up at Zoe.

"So, tell me a long story."

\* \* \* \* \*

When Danny and Grace finally got back to Main Street after another wild ride, they were met by Hudson, who was smiling from ear to ear and pulling off her phone headset.

"You took your time," she said as the pair clambered out of the SUV.

"Bad roads," Danny said simply and Grace shot him a wicked look.

"Mercouri released some more hostages."

"How many?" Grace asked.

"Three of the four."

"Cassie?" Danny immediately asked.

Hudson shook her head. "I'm afraid not, Sheriff. But I'm still having my doubts about her."

"You can't be serious!" Danny said. It was almost laughable.

"All I'm saying is that it's suspicious that it's her phone being used, she's the only hostage left, and she and Mercouri share a common obsession. Added to that, from the preliminary interviews with the hostages, we've learned she and Zoe have been bitching at each other all day but still disappeared together into the restroom for a good twenty minutes."

"Maybe she needed to take a leak, did you think about that? And why would she remain in the bank if she was in on this?"

Grace put a restraining hand on Danny's arm, hoping he'd take the hint and keep his temper. He looked at her and nodded. "And get this, Hannah. Wayward is Percy Hamilton's illegitimate daughter. Turns out that's why Mercouri is robbing the bank. The old man left everything to Cassie and so the will's being contested by his other children. Some of his shit is stuck in that bank."

"Such as?"

"We still don't know. But Mercouri does and it's what she has to be after."

"Which proves Cassie is not involved," Danny insisted. "Firstly, she doesn't even know who her father is, and secondly, even if she did she could just wait until the will was settled."

"Provided it was decided in her favor," Grace observed quietly. She saw Danny's disappointed look and smiled at him, hoping he understood that she had to be impartial. "But you're right, she'd still be better off waiting even if it didn't. Robbing a civilian is a lot less trouble than this."

"Well, as it happens I've got another theory." That was about as much of an apology, and an admission of a mistake, that Hudson was going to give him, Danny supposed. "I've just finished speaking to the U.S. Embassy in Greece for the third time."

"What the hell for?" Whatever Danny had been expecting, this wasn't it.

Hudson held up an evidence bag with a black cellphone in it. "One of the four phones we found in the trunk of Mercouri's car. This one is Mercouri's. Only two numbers on it and only a dozen or so calls. Most of them..." She pressed a button and they heard a ringtone come from behind her. Looking, Danny could see several other phones, each in their own plastic bag, lying in the footwell of another SUV with its doors open. "...were made to that phone, which is Randall's. A few, however, were made today to Hopkirk's Detective Agency in L.A."

"A detective agency?" Grace said. "What the..."

"Yep, my thoughts exactly. Mercouri's been searching for someone."



"Who?" asked Danny.

"Apparently, while in Greece, Mercouri had a fling with a Japanese-American woman, name of..." She looked at her notes. "Izanami Michi. An archaeologist, which fits in with what we've found so far, as it turns out. Specializing in the ancient Greek and Roman cultures. I won't bore you with the full bio. Anyway, she and Mercouri parted ways in Greece, not on happy terms. When Mercouri came back to the States she tried to find her."

"The agency told you all this?"

She nodded. "They were very keen on co-operating. Seems like they've been trying to get hold of Mercouri for over a week now, but she's been unobtainable."

"Planning all this, no doubt," Grace said thoughtfully.

Hudson nodded. "Uh-huh. And maybe her curiosity got the better of her and she tried calling them today, right before all this went down."

"Checking to see whether she could proceed or not, I suppose."

"That's what I thought too. But she didn't get to speak to anyone. Who knows why. Not that it would have mattered, as Hopkirk told me that they'd run into a dead end. As far as they could tell, this Izanami woman had bought a last-minute ticket on a connecting flight from Athens to L.A., by way of London and New York, but somewhere along the way she'd vanished. All they could say for sure is that she never got off the plane at LAX."

"What about her family?" Danny asked. "Weren't they looking for her?"

"They thought she was still in Greece. Apparently the woman's father disowned her many years before. Hopkirk hasn't told them any different."

"And is she?" Grace said. "Still in Greece, I mean?"

"You could say that. I called in a few favors and spoke to some of the embassy staff in Greece. Apparently, she never boarded the plane in Athens. After a little digging, they found that she'd just disappeared. But here's where it gets interesting."

"You already have our undivided attention, Hannah. Do you want to get to the point?"

"They got in touch with the Athens police, just in case." She saw Danny and Grace looking at her in disbelief. "Did I mention they were some pretty damn big favors? Anyway, it turns out that they knew nothing of Izanami's disappearance but when checking their files, they did come up with a Jane Doe on their books that matched her description and who turned up around roughly the same time. They'd found her in a back alley in a bad part of town. There was no ID on the body, so they'd assumed she was as an unlucky tourist who'd been on the wrong end of a fatal mugging. They did the rounds with all the embassies but not the American. Needless to say, they

ran into a dead end."

"Shit," Danny said quietly. "You think Mercouri killed her?"

"I don't see it. I told you," Grace said. "Mercouri's not the killing type."

"No, she's not," Hudson agreed.

"So who did kill her?"

"Good question."

Danny's cellphone rang, startling all of them. Hudson drew it out of her inside jacket pocket and looked at the screen. She raised the phone to her ear and mouthed the word 'Mercouri' to the others. "Yes?" she responded to the caller. "What do you mean, this isn't over yet?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The dig had been active for more than two months now, although it had only finally taken on a full complement of workers the week before last. Most of the work was down in the central part of the ruins, concentrating on what the survey team had insisted was the core of the village. As that corresponded with the findings of Professor Hamilton's previous excavations, Zoe didn't argue. But inwardly she believed that nothing would be found there. Well, nothing that interested her, at any rate.

Which explained why she had been working on her own little side project, further up in the hills, away from the main site. She couldn't explain why, only that she felt deep down in her gut that this was right place to dig. Sam thought he knew, of course, and chances were he probably did, but he'd been in a foul mood for weeks and was hardly speaking to her.

She had made quite an impact on the area, roping it off into foot-long squares as soon as she started and tackling each one in turn. Over the course of three weeks, she'd managed to dig down about six inches in more than thirty of the squares. The earth was remarkably easy to get through, almost as if someone had dug through it before. She doubted that though, as Hamilton's excavation was the only prior one worthy of comment, and none of his notes mentioned this location. And of course, she was being a lot more careless than the diggers down on the main site were being. They had the forceful personality of Michi to contend with and woe betide them if they stepped out of line. She wasn't really sifting through the earth, only picking out large pieces of pottery when she found them, and even then she tossed them aside.

She wasn't even sure what she was looking for. She'd know it when she found it, as the saying went.

No one else was helping her. Hell, no one else had dared come up here. She knew she wasn't popular among the workers. That was fine; another reason to be where she was. And she didn't mind the solitude too much; she was used to being on her own. It gave her time to think about things and the calm feeling she got whenever she was up here was always welcome.

She scraped away at the edge of a new square with her trowel, then sat back. She was getting tired. It was late in the afternoon and she'd been working non-stop for most of the day. When she saw Michi climbing up the path towards her, she opted to take a short break. She clambered to her feet, her muscles aching, and walked over to her rucksack. From inside that, she took out a bottle of spring water and a sandwich sealed in a plastic container.

"What are you doing up here?" Michi said as she reached the crest.

Finally, Zoe thought irritably. It had taken her long enough to ask. She wiped a hand across her sweaty brow, leaving a streak of dirt across her forehead. Her hair was tied back with a blue and white bandana but strands still kept falling loose and getting in her eyes. She shrugged and pulled her gloves off, then twisted the cap off the bottle and took a long cool drink. "Excavating," she finally said. Some of the water had dribbled down her chin and fallen onto her shirt. "As best I can, anyway."

"I told you before, you don't know what you're doing." She smiled as she spoke, to reassure Zoe that she was only joking and meant no offence. "Seriously, we're shorthanded as it is. We could use you down there, on the debris sorting team. There's nothing up here worth looking for, Zoe."

"I feel different."

"Hamilton didn't even give this area a second look."

"Maybe that's why."

Looking back down the slope, Michi tried to change the subject. "Sam doesn't look too happy, does he?"

"Sam's used to the finer things in life. He doesn't like the heat."

"Prejudicist against the great outdoors, is he?"

"If there's no air conditioning, he's downright bigoted."

"I don't think it's the heat that's bothering him." She could see Sam over on the other side of the dig, glaring up at her. Zoe didn't say anything and when Michi turned back to look at her, she saw the older woman had her head tilted to one side. "Zoe?"

"Did you hear that?" Zoe said quietly.

"Hear what?"

"Creaking. Like an old door being opened."

"I didn't hear anything," Michi said impatiently. "Look, Zoe, most of Professor Hamilton's finds

were written off as modern forgeries. If you've read his notes, you'd know that. And even if they weren't, what are the chances of you finding something more here? It's not a worthy site."

Forcing herself to ignore her complaining muscles and aching bones, Zoe walked over to stand next to Michi. The two of them were standing in the middle of Zoe's little dig, separated by a single strand of twine and about a foot of space.

"There's something here, Michi. I don't know how I know but I know. You're going to have to trust me."

"Trust you?" Michi said incredulously. "You're asking an awful lot. It's not as if..."

Whatever she was going to say was cut off when the ground disappeared beneath their feet. There was a sudden rush of air around them, an explosion of dirt, and a thundering cracking sound. The two women fell about ten feet down, landing heavily on to a solid stone surface. Zoe had the presence of mind to bend her knees but even so the sudden drop and impact knocked the wind out of her. Earth showered around them and debris kept falling for some time. Large chunks of wood and rotting timbers pounded into the floor as both women covered their heads.

Finally, the dust seemed to settle. Zoe dared to look up from where she lay. Surprisingly, there was enough light to see by as the waning Greek afternoon sun was still strong. She found herself in a square chamber (so obviously man-made, she thought) with smooth walls that looked like they could have been limestone or something similar. Faded and cracked murals could just about be seen in the dim light. Underneath the dirt, earth, stones and splintered wood, she could make out a tiled mosaic floor.

Michi coughed, spluttering loudly. The young archaeologist lay on her back amidst the rubble. One sleeve of her shirt had been torn badly and there was a few cuts and scrapes on her bare skin but other than that she looked in good shape.

"You okay?" Zoe asked, scrambling to her feet. Surprisingly, she was unharmed aside from some aches and pains.

"I think so," Michi said, then groaned. "My ankle hurts."

"Which one?"

"My right."

Zoe crossed over to where the woman lay and knelt beside her. She lifted a piece of dividing twine, still tied between two wooden pegs, off Michi's legs and peered down, squinting at the right ankle. "It's a nasty scrape. Fair bit of blood. Could be sprained, so don't try to stand up."

"I wasn't planning on it. Any ideas how we're going to get out of here?"

"Sam knows we're up here... well, down here now, I suppose. What the hell is this place?"

"A cellar, a tomb. Your guess is as good as mine. This isn't usual."

"Doesn't happen to you on every dig then?"

Michi laughed and then started coughing again. She groaned in pain. "Christ that hurts. Don't make me laugh again, please."

Zoe looked up at the roughly circular hole they had fallen through, noting the broken pieces of timber that seemed to make up the ceiling of this unusual room. "How long do you think that wood has been there? It can't be that old, can it?"

Michi shuffled a little to the left and pulled a piece of wood towards her. "Nope. This is a modern plank. It's been cut with a machine and..." She sniffed loudly. "...soaked in a preservative."

Zoe looked at her in disbelief. "You can't smell anything!" she finally said.

Laughing, Michi admitted the truth. "No, but it sure sounded impressive, didn't it?"

Something caught Zoe's eye a little way from the woman's resting head. She leaned forward and brushed at the loose dirt. It seemed to be a stone slab and as she moved closer to it she ran her fingers around the edges, scraping away the earth that was packed around it. It was rectangular, flat and smooth. If Michi had fallen a few inches to her left, she might have cracked her skull open on it.

"This is interesting," she said.

Michi tried to roll over so she could see but only ended up swearing as her ankle jarred against the ground. "What have you got over there?"

"An inscription." Zoe had brushed all the debris on top of the slab away to reveal the words.

"In Greek?"

"Uh-huh. But modern Greek. Looks pretty crude too. Actually," she realized, "it's a cement slab."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense."

"'Death is a debt which all of us must pay'," Zoe read aloud.

"What's that mean?"

Zoe shrugged and then, realizing the action went unseen, said, "A warning, I suppose."

"Cement, modern Greek writing, and a machined wood covering," Michi said, mulling it over.

"You know what that means?"

Zoe was only half-paying attention, thinking hard about the cement block and what it could mean. "Hmm?"

"It means Professor Hamilton must have found this before and covered it up."

"That would be my guess," Zoe said. "I think there's something under here."

"Probably," Michi said mockingly. "Unless people are in the habit of just discarding their cement hazard signs. But why cover this place up? Do you think he didn't have time to finish excavating properly and didn't want anyone scooping his discovery before he could come back?"

"Could be," Zoe said. "But he never did come back, did he?"

Michi gulped nervously. "Or because he didn't want anyone else finding what he found."

\* \* \* \* \*

Although she hadn't been keeping exact track of the time, Cassie knew she had been on her own for quite a while; maybe half an hour, maybe more. Not truly on her own, she admitted, as Ted and Ivan had been in the lobby with her, but she felt as if she was alone.

The brothers had not talked to her at all and she had not attempted to engage them in conversation. They had talked to each other though, mostly trivial stuff concerning the money they were going to make, what they were going to do with the money they were going to make, and what women they could get with the money they were going to make. Pretty early on Cassie had managed to shut the droning banal chatter out.

The lights were still off. Cassie didn't understand that. Maybe these guys thought they could be seen from outside if the bright florescent overheads were switched on. Or maybe, she thought, it was like those detective shows on TV where the police knocked out the lights before bursting in. Which made sense, as the criminals would be blinded for a short while, their eyes having no time to adjust to the darkness. This way, that couldn't happen. Of course, it didn't make the simple act of moving around easy. Quite a few times Cassie had heard, rather than seen, one of the brothers swear loudly after banging into a piece of unanticipated furniture.

When Sam had come back in he'd been in one hell of a bad mood. Not that Cassie had ever seen him in a good mood, so it was feasible that this was his good mood. If that was true then, she didn't want to make him mad. She kept her head down and didn't say a word. It made no difference, as he had approached her immediately and she hadn't been able to stop herself from shrinking back, fearing that he might take out his anger on her. He hadn't, thankfully, although at first he had opened his mouth as if to say something and then shut it just as quickly. In the end he contented himself with looking through the blinds every few minutes or so.

Ted and Ivan's conversation had died away when Sam had walked in. Sensing his foul temper, they kept well out of his way. She can't say she blamed them.

After being alone for so long, Cassie actually felt a surge of relief when Zoe came back into the room, which she kind of felt guilty about. She watched as Zoe leaned over and switched on one of the free-standing lamps, smiling at everyone. She got nothing but scowls in return. Harry was right behind her, carrying both of the bags he'd originally walked in with. Cassie guessed they'd found what they were looking for. Zoe's smile strongly suggested as much.

"You finally done?" Sam growled.

"Yep. Got what we wanted." She had something in her hand but in the gloom Cassie couldn't see what it was. She walked over to where her jacket lay on the counter and dug through the pockets. When she finished, the small object had disappeared.

"What *you* wanted," Sam said with a scowl, stressing the last two words individually.

She smiled at him sweetly. "Whatever."

"So what now?" Ivan asked.

"Good question. And I don't think you're going to like the answer, boys."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Zoe's smile broadened. "It means that it's time for you and Ted and Harry to leave."

Both men looked at each other and swore simultaneously.

"Leave?" Ted shouted. "Are you fucking crazy?"

"How are we supposed to do that?" Ivan said at the same time.

Zoe ignored both of them and fished the cellphone out of her pocket. She hit redial and held the cell up to her ear. When Ted opened his mouth to speak again, she held up a hand. He obediently fell silent, although he obviously wasn't pleased about it. Ivan turned away and swore again under his breath.

"Hannah?" Zoe said. "This isn't over yet, I want you to know that." She listened for a moment and then interrupted the voice on the other end of the line. "Shut up and listen, Hannah. This isn't over but three of us are willing to surrender." She looked over at Ted and Ivan, who were both looking at her in stunned silence.

"I want you to know that I coerced these three into participating in this. I threatened their families and loved ones. They were forced into being involved. All three regret their actions." She was silent for moment, listening. "Good. They'll be leaving in a few minutes, unarmed. Yes. Yes, hands on heads. We understand. Now do you understand that I'll still be in here with our remaining hostage? No funny stuff, Hannah, I don't want anyone harmed."

She hung up and returned the phone to her pocket. "Well, there you go, boys. All sorted."

"Lady," Ted said slowly, "you are certifiably crazy."

Zoe looked put out. "Well, not officially."

"I mean, totally batshit loco."

Ivan spoke over his brother. "You seriously think they're going to buy any of that?"

"They might," Harry said quietly. Zoe smiled at him, knowing that he would have been the easiest to convince.

"Okay, fuck this." Ted pointed his gun directly at Zoe. "We ain't going nowhere, bitch."

Ivan was reluctant to start gunplay, Cassie could see it on his face, but she also saw where his sense of duty lay. He had to back up his brother. Fraternal loyalty would almost always trump money, after all. The bald thug now also pointed his gun over towards Zoe, although his was only pointed in her general direction. That was something at least.

Cassie saw Sam reaching for his own pistol and she cringed, dreading the thought of a shootout occurring with her stuck in the middle. However, Zoe reached out and put a hand on his arm to stop him. Harry was still behind the pair, frowning, deep in thought.

"Put your guns down," Sam ordered.

"Why?" Ted said, gesturing angrily with his gun. "Why the fuck should we? Listening to you two hasn't done us much good up until now, has it?"

"Because you don't have any choice." Cassie couldn't believe how calm and relaxed Zoe looked, as if she didn't have two hardened criminals pointing loaded pistols at her and threatening to shoot her at any moment. "Think about it for a second. What are you going to do?"

"Not fucking surrender, that's what!"

Harry piped up from his corner. "Why not hear her out?"

"Shut up, old man! No one cares what you think!"

"Easy, Ted," Ivan said.

"Let me put it another way," Zoe said. "You have two choices. One, you could shoot me and Sam here. Hell, probably Harry too if you felt like it." She grinned over her shoulder at the older man. "Sorry, Harry. Then the police tactical teams would storm in here, probably killing you both. Even assuming they didn't, you'd end up in prison for several years. And believe it or not,



I'd rather that didn't happen. Or two, you could leave here now and surrender to the police. You don't get hurt that way."

Ivan pointed out the obvious problem. "We'd still go to prison though."

"Probably," Zoe said agreeably. "But I've arranged for a good lawyer to represent you."

"And when she says good, she means the best," Sam said. As an aside to Harry, he said out of the corner of his mouth: "Eddy Roberts."

Harry gasped. "Really?" When Sam nodded, he looked at the brothers. "He is *really* good, guys."

"And needless to say, he's already been paid a substantial amount."

"Already?" Ivan said quietly. Cassie knew what he must have been thinking - just how far in advance had this move been planned, she wondered?

"No one's been hurt today and no one's died," Zoe said. "No money's been taken either. If you voluntarily surrender after being coerced into this job, then the law will go easy on you."

"The Feds aren't stupid," Harry said. "They'll have already spoken to our families."

"Indeed. Which is why I spoke to some of your family members yesterday, while you were all being briefed by Sam."

"Shit!" Ivan exclaimed.

Zoe smiled at him. "And Sam's right when he says that this lawyer is the best. Chances are you won't get that heavy of a sentence. And better yet, when you get out, he'll give you each an offshore account number. You'll get one point two million dollars each."

The room was quiet for a long time. No one seemed to know what to say. Eventually, Ivan broke the silence.

"One point two million? Are you serious?"

"Trust me when I say that's more than the entire take would have been for this job. It's not a round figure, unfortunately, but the most I could manage." Zoe paused, pursing her lips. She looked miserable, almost as if she regretted not being able to give the men more. "So your way you end up with no money and a hefty prison sentence, if you live of course, while my way means you're guaranteed to walk out of here alive, ending up with a small amount of jail time and a large amount of money. Which is it to be?"

"You're lying," Ted said flatly. He may have thought so but Cassie could see she wasn't. Still, she couldn't blame the man for thinking like that. It's not every day someone offers you that much money.

"I could be." Zoe said. "But even if I am, my way you have a better chance of living through the night."

"She's got a point, Ted," Ivan said, albeit reluctantly.

"It's still prison time. And there's no parole from Federal prisons, remember?"

"You can still get good time, though," Sam told him. "You'll probably get less than five years, knock off a year or more, and you could be looking at serving only two or three."

"That's a long time for someone of my age, Sam," Harry said with a heavy sigh.

"That's a long time for all of us," said Ted.

"Better than twenty to thirty."

"Even better with a nice payday waiting for us," Ivan said. He seemed thoughtful, scratching his chin.

"Are you going along with this?" his brother asked.

"Do you want to get shot, Ted? 'Cos I know I don't."

Ted looked his brother in the eye for a moment, then visibly caved and relented. He swore loudly for a second, then caught Cassie's eye. "What about her?"

Zoe stepped forward, almost protectively. "She's not going to say anything, trust me." She looked down and caught Cassie's eye. "I told you it would end badly, didn't I?"

"And you don't lie," Cassie said softly.

Zoe smiled at her. "That's right, sweetheart." Unseen by the others, she winked.

\* \* \* \* \*

The night was surprisingly chilly, which was a relief after yet another oppressively hot day, and the gentle sea breeze wafting through the open French windows helped matters immensely. Standing on the balcony with a cool drink in hand, Zoe could see the moon reflected in the calm Mediterranean Sea. Loud Europop music could be heard thumping from a garishly lit nightclub two or three doors down. Groups of noisy tourists thronged the street below. At this time of year, Nea Potidea was a popular European vacation spot.

She turned and walked back into the brightly lit hotel room. It was far too small of a room to comfortably accommodate all three of them really, but Sam's single room was even smaller, so they were stuck here for now. All three of them were trying their best to avoid the tiny circular table on one side of the room, or rather, more accurately, what was resting on top of the table.

It was a wooden box, cornered in corroded metalwork. There was no lock, as none was needed, for whoever had hidden the box had no doubt thought it would never be found. The top of the box, pitted and scarred from age, had an almost half-spherical hollow in the centre, but whatever might have rested there once was long since missing.

Sam was sitting on the end of the queen-sized bed, doing his best not to look at the box at all. He was smoking what must have been his tenth cigarette since he'd come by. The ashtray was almost overflowing.

In contrast to Sam's sedate state, Michi was anxiously pacing up and down the length of the room, although seeing how small the room was she was spending more time turning than walking. If she kept it up, Zoe thought, she was going to wear a tread in the carpet. Sam was having to shift his knees every time she passed him. You'd think he'd be sick of it by now but he didn't seem to be learning.

"We should put it back where we found it," Michi said as she made another turn.

Sam shook his head and stubbed out his cigarette. "Can't do that. Too many people saw us bring it up. Practically everyone at the dig, plus others."

"Then we should get rid of it."

"How exactly?"

"I don't know," Michi said desperately. "Burn it."

"We don't know if it can be burned."

"Then throw it in the trash or the sea or something."

"And what if someone finds it? You don't want us dealing with it but you don't mind some innocent kid finding it?"

"That's not what I mean, Sam, and you know it. No one should have to deal with this. It goes against God."

"Getting religious on us, are you?"

She turned on him. "Against nature then!"

"Yeah, I've heard that before," Zoe said quietly. She leant over and stole the new cigarette Sam had just lit for himself.

Sam had a better idea. "We should sell it."

Both Zoe and Michi spoke at the same time. "No."

"Why not? We're intending on selling everything else we found down there, right? The metalwork, the tools, the scrolls by Leela..."

"Lila," Zoe corrected.

"Whatever. Hell, I'll even agree to selling it to a museum if you want. Money is money, after all."

"This is way too valuable to sell, Sam."

"For fuck's sake, Zoe, what else are you going to do with it?"

"Use it, of course."

Michi looked at her, astonished. "You're crazy."

"Yeah, I've heard that before too."

"You can't seriously be thinking of trying this," Michi pleaded. "You don't know it works. You don't even know if it's what you think it is."

"Well, I'm guessing we'd test it first," Sam said. "Obviously."

Both women ignored him.

"I may not know it here," Zoe said, tapping her forehead, "but I feel it here." She tapped her chest.

"Is this to do with your near-death experience?" When Zoe didn't say anything, she added. "It is isn't it?" Her voice was getting louder.

"So what if it is?" she yelled. "I have to find the truth, Michi. I've told you that."

Michi took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. "Listen to me, Zoe, the truth is whatever you want it to be at this moment. You don't have to go searching for it."

"Easy for you to say. I've been looking for it as long as I can remember and I've never found it."

Michi sighed. She walked over to the dresser and picked up her purse. "Maybe that's because you don't look in one place long enough."

"Where are you going?"

"Nothing I can say can persuade you to be rid of that... thing?"

"No." She wouldn't look at her.

"Then there's nothing more to be said, is there?" Michi told her and walked towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Zoe repeated, more quietly this time.

"Athens, I think, then back to the States," she said without looking over her shoulder. "Don't worry about my things. There's nothing I need here."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Tired?" Grace asked Danny, seeing him yawn.

He nodded. "I need to get to bed."

"Well, maybe later, if you ask nicely," she said and winked at him.

He laughed but only half-heartedly. It was all he could bring himself to do.

"Something bothering you?" she said. "Well, aside from the obvious."

Danny looked over at where the three prisoners were being herded into the back of a black van, ready to be driven off to the FBI branch in Fargo. They looked tired too but other than that all three had different expressions. The older man looked defeated, the bald man looked surprisingly content, while the last looked angry.

"I don't like what they said about her. Mercouri, I mean," he said. The three men had been more than helpful. They'd almost been regretful in their role in this, although the youngest culprit a lot less so than the others.

"What?" Grace said, puzzled. "They just said she was almost ready to give herself up."

"No, they didn't. They said she said she was almost ready to give up."

"Same difference..." It sank in. "Oh."

Just then, Hudson joined them. She seemed oblivious to anything going on between them. "Well, I spoke to Hermes and Wak??y? back in L.A.," she informed them. "They've been talking to Esme Croker, that's Harry's wife, and the Abrams family. Turns out their story checks out. Looks like Mercouri and Randall were strong-arming all three." Finally, she noticed the concerned looks on both their faces. "What's going on?"

"We think you should tell Mercouri what we found out," Grace said quietly.

"I thought we agreed that would only make things worse."

"Right now, I don't think things can get worse," said Danny.

"Why?" Hudson said, frowning. "They're ready to give up. There's nothing else they can do. We have every exit covered with marksmen. Trust me, Sheriff, unless she chooses to surrender, Mercouri can't get out of there alive."

"That's what we're worried about."

Grace nodded. "Make the call, Hannah."

\* \* \* \* \*

Zoe yawned loudly. Thankfully she and Sam were almost finished here and soon she would get all the rest she needed. Sam was busy packing up the dark blue duffel-bag, stuffing the various firearms back inside. The only weapon not packed away was the security guard's revolver, which he left on top of the counter. Once he had finished with that, he pulled the zipper shut and then walked over to kick Harry's discarded bags into a corner, dumping his own bag on top.

The cellphone rang suddenly. Sam looked over curiously at Zoe, who shrugged, but answered the phone anyway. She might not have expected the call at this time but she only would have been really shocked if the voice on the other end hadn't belonged to Agent Hudson.

"Zoe?"

"Still not letting Grace do the talking, eh?"

"You know how it is, Zoe. She's the one who does all the hard work. So we've gone over your car with a fine tooth comb. We found all the cellphones in the trunk."

"Really?" Zoe said cagily.

"There was one call made on your phone this morning that was very interesting. To a detective agency in L.A." If Hudson was expecting Zoe to say something at this juncture, she was going to be disappointed. She continued after a short pause. "Funny thing is, they've been waiting for you to call them. I'm guessing the call didn't go through, right? They've been trying to call that number back all day, apparently."

"What did they tell you?"

"That you hired them to find someone called Izanami Michi, who you met in Greece last summer. And that they've had no luck."

Zoe felt her heart sink. She couldn't bring herself to say anything.

"Turns out Izanami left you in Greece, so you've been searching for her since you got back to the States, right?"

"If you say so," she heard herself say.

"Trouble is, the detective agency found nothing. So after a while they went back to the airport. She never got off the plane. As far as we know, she never got *on* the plane."

"What?" Zoe was confused and she snapped irritably at Hudson, drawing the attention of both Sam, who looked over at her with his brow furrowed in anger and impatience, and Cassandra, who looked up in concern. "What are you saying?"

Hudson's voice was flat. "She's dead, Zoe."

Zoe could feel the color draining from her face. Her chest hurt like hell all of a sudden. She couldn't tell if that was because her heart was pounding too damn fast or because it had stopped altogether. Either way, the pain made her almost drop the phone.

"No. No, you're lying." Even as she said it, she knew it was a false hope. She saw Cassie staring up at her, looking fretful, and turned her back on her.

"You know me better than that, Zoe," Hudson said quietly. "This isn't some cheap trick to get you to give yourself up, if that's what you're thinking."

It wasn't. If they were trying to fool her, they would have claimed to have Michi outside, waiting for her. Or maybe on her way there, so she couldn't be put on the phone. That would have been better.

"Obviously we have a little more pull than a cheap detective agency, especially internationally," Hudson went on. "Is that why you did this, Zoe? You needed someone with more authority to look into things and didn't know how else to make that happen?"

Zoe ignored the question, instead asking one of her own. "How..." The words caught in her throat, trapped by the constricting chest pain.

"How did she die?" Without waiting for confirmation, Hudson continued. "We've talked to the Hellenic Police in Athens. Turns out they found the corpse of an Asian Jane Doe in September last year. No ID, so they couldn't trace who she was. But with our input, one of her colleagues from a previous dig identified the body an hour or so ago."

"No," Zoe said again, as if her denial could change things. Her voice trailed off into a whisper. She was finding it hard to breathe. The pain in her chest was only getting worse. She could hear herself gasping, her breath rattling against the cell's microphone.

"Zoe, I want you to listen to me very, very carefully, understand?" Hudson said. When she got no reply, the agent barked the question again. "Do you understand me, Zoe?"

Snapped back to the conversation, Zoe replied that she did in a monotone voice. There was a rage inside her, one that threatened to tear her insides apart and burst through into the world, to make her yell and scream and punch and kick... but for some unfathomable reason it did not. Her

anger just sat in a corner of her soul and made plans.

"Izanami had been sexually assaulted but the cause of death was a broken neck. And the Greek authorities are absolutely certain that it was not accidental, that it was inflicted by her murderer. Do you know how strong you have to be to actually wring someone's neck with your bare hands, Zoe?"

Very slowly, Zoe turned to look at Sam.

"Be careful, Zoe."

## **11: Stockholm, Lima, or Something Else?**

Cassie didn't know what exactly had been said during the phone call but she knew it wasn't good. And you didn't need to be a psychologist to know Zoe had taken it badly. Cassie watched her slip the phone back into her pocket. She never took her eyes off Sam.

He, in turn, must have sensed Zoe was looking at him, as he turned around and stared her down.

"What's up?" he said.

"They told me Michi is dead. Someone killed her back in Greece." Her voice cracked as she continued. "But you know that already, don't you?"

Cassie gasped, unable to believe what she was hearing. Her heart went out to Zoe, knowing the pain of losing someone close.

Sam was smiling.

"Don't smile, Sam, please."

"What?" Sam said, spreading his hands wide. "You expect me to protest, to tell you that they're lying to you? You expect me to plead with you? I've never pleaded in my life and I'm not about to start now."



"So it's true?"

He shrugged but said nothing.

"Answer me!" she yelled.

"Well, that depends on what they said, doesn't it? I imagine it is though. Most of the things said about me are true, I found."

"Did you kill Michi?"

"Oh that?" he said, as if he honestly thought it could be something else much more important.  
"Yes, I killed her."

Cassie saw Zoe take a small step backwards, clenching her teeth.

"Why?"

"Her pathetic need to redeem you, why else? She actually said that to me once, as if you were some kind of cheap gift coupon. Jesus." He shook his head disbelievingly. "And you bought into it, hook, line and sinker. You actually believed you could be redeemed."

"Damn it, Sam, I've gone straight!"

He laughed loudly. "Look at where you are, Zoe. Tell me, is this going straight?"

"I had no choice! Hamilton wouldn't sell it to me!"

Professor Hamilton? What did he have to do with this, Cassie wondered? Then it clicked as she mentally chewed it over. Hamilton must have had something Zoe wanted. That made sense; the eccentric old man was known in town for having a bunch of relics from all over Europe, his house was practically a museum by all accounts. But whatever it was that sat in Zoe's jacket pocket now, must have been placed in the bank at some point. Maybe, after refusing to sell it to her, old man Hamilton had got wary and stuffed it in a safety deposit box for safekeeping. But he had died last year. Wouldn't his daughter - what the hell was her name? - wouldn't she get it all?

"Which is why I dealt with him too," Sam said.

Zoe looked shocked. "What?"

"Oh yes. Simple adjustment to his brakes and these treacherous winter roads..."

"You killed Professor Hamilton?" Cassie couldn't help but blurt out.

Sam growled at her. "What's it to do with you?"

"Leave her alone, Sam."

He chuckled again. "Found another abandoned puppy to adopt, Zoe? I should have known. It's pathetic," he said with a sneer. "Of course, this whole mess would have been much simpler if Hamilton's will hadn't been contested. Even so, you could have waited. But then patience was never one of your virtues, was it?"

"Don't speak to me of virtues, Sam, not when you've just admitted murdering the one person who..."

"Who what?" he bellowed angrily. "Who cared for you when no one else did? Who taught you a trade? Who fed you, clothed you, and kept you safe? Who saw something special in you? I'm the only one who has *always* been there for you, Zoe. You owe me." As he spat out each word of this tirade he stepped nearer, closing the distance between him and Zoe.

Cassie saw Zoe's right hand drop down to her side, edging back to the automatic pistol tucked in the back of her jeans.

"And what is it I owe you, Sam?" she said, suddenly calm again.

"What else? Your life. Without me, you'd be nothing."

"Then perhaps nothing is what I want to be."

He punched her then, hard and in the face, catching her completely off guard. Cassie gasped in horror as she saw Zoe's head snap back, the toughened knuckles ramming into the woman's mouth, and she heard the crack of a tooth breaking. Blood sprayed to one side and Zoe staggered backwards, caught off balance. Zoe had barely enough presence of mind to continue reaching for her gun, but Cassie saw that her fingertips had only just brushed the hilt before Sam hit her again. A lip was cut now, perhaps on the broken tooth, and more blood flew in a fine mist. Zoe fell backwards and hit the floor with a hefty thump and she cried out in pain. Cassie saw the gun hit the floor, bounce, and then skid across the floor.

Sam kept advancing on her, pausing only briefly to grab the security guard's revolver from the counter. As he moved past her, Cassie stuck out her legs and tripped him. He didn't fall, managing to somehow keep his balance, but it slowed him for a second. He snarled angrily and lashed out at her with a foot. Cuffed in a single position as she was, she couldn't really avoid the blow and the toecap of his boot opened up a painful gash on her forehead above one eye. It hurt like hell.

He might have kicked her again but at that moment he caught sight of Zoe trying to crawl away. He leapt forward, slamming one foot into her chest, and then booted her hard over and over again. She tried reaching for her pistol but he kicked it away. It skidded across the floor towards Cassie, eventually sliding under the table. She tried to reach it but her hand couldn't stretch quite far enough. "You ungrateful little whelp! I made you! What am I if you're nothing?" he roared, looming over Zoe.

Sam rammed his fist into her head and twisted his hand around, grabbing a thick fistful of black hair. He pulled her up and shoved the gun under the chin. Without hesitating, he pulled the trigger. The hammer clicked on an empty chamber. Angrily he threw the gun to one side and turned away.

Cassie shifted around and stuck a foot under the table. Her toes could just about reach the pistol and she tried to pull it in closer. Blood was dripping into her left eye and she blinked it away as best she could. When she next looked up, Sam was unhitching the velvet ropes and picking up one of the heavy metal poles.

"You think she was the first one I killed?" he shouted. "You think I was ever going to share you with anyone else?"

Cassie desperately scraped her foot over the pistol but it skittered sideways and she had to reach out just to find it again.

Sam hefted the thick pole in his hands once, testing the weight, then turned back to face the fallen Zoe.

"Like my parents?" she asked him.

He didn't say anything; he just smiled broadly and raised the pole up above his head, ready to bring it down as hard as he could to smash her skull open.

Cassie finally managed to get her foot around the pistol and she kicked it as hard as she could. It slid quickly over the slick floor towards the combatants, hit one of Sam's boots, and then spun upwards, right into Zoe's outstretched hand.

Sam grinned when he saw her point the pistol at him. "You know that's not going to do any good, Zoe."

"Good enough for now." She clicked the hammer back.

Sam dropped the metal pole and it hit the floor with a dull metallic clunk before rolling away. "I didn't kill your parents," he said, "but I know who did."

"Liar," Zoe said and shot him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cassie had never seen someone fire a gun before, much less someone actually being shot. Oh, sure, she'd seen it in movies and on television, but never in real life. It came as something of a shock, despite her being well aware that it was going to happen. The flash had temporarily burnt itself onto her retinas and she could see its outline even when she screwed her eyes shut tight. The sound had been deafening, a loud thunderclap in the confines of the bank lobby, unexpectedly making her ears ring for a few seconds. And there was a bitter, burning smell,

which she supposed was the gunpowder.

She watched Sam and for a very brief moment, despite the fact she'd seen the gun fire, she doubted he'd been hit. He stood there, swaying very slightly. Thick dark blood, more purple than red she noticed, trickled from the tiny circular hole in the left side of his forehead.

She'd expected the back of his skull to explode and shower the venetian blinds behind him with a mist of red blood and grey brain matter. She was kind of surprised when it didn't happen that way. She found out later, when she asked Danny, that the caliber of Zoe's gun was so small that the bullet was slowed considerably on impact and instead of causing a huge exit wound, merely rattled around in his skull for a short time, killing him instantly. Real-life hitmen often favored smaller caliber guns for the certainty of the kill, Danny told her. Dirty Harry could keep his magnum.

Sam's eyes rolled up, looking for all the world as if he was trying to see the bullet hole, but in reality just a nerve impulse. Then he collapsed suddenly, like a puppet whose puppeteer had suddenly lost all interest and dropped him. His corpse, as she supposed she should think of it now, fell across Zoe, who hefted it off her and away, before sitting back against the wall.

The cellphone began ringing almost immediately. Sometime during the scuffle, it had fallen from Zoe's jeans pocket and scattered over the floor. It was about midway between them, a little too close to the dead body for Cassie's liking, but as Zoe had sunken against the wall with her head hanging low, and seemed unlikely to be answering the phone anytime soon, she stuck out a foot and pulled the phone over to her until it was near enough for her free hand to pick it up.

She looked at the screen and saw it was Danny calling. Or more likely, the FBI agent who had spoken to Zoe during the day.

"Hello?" she said hesitantly.

"Who is this?"

"Cassie Wayward," she said quietly, never taking her eyes off the disconsolate Zoe.

"The hostage? Shit! What the hell is going on in there?"

"There was... a fight."

"Is anyone hurt?"

More than you could possibly know, Cassie thought, but she said instead, "Kind of. The man's dead."

"His name was Sam," Zoe said quietly.

"Of course, sorry. Sam is dead."

"Mercouri shot him?" the voice on the phone asked.

"Who? Zoe, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Yes, she shot him."

"Okay, that's it. I'm sending in the tactical team. Keep low to the floor, miss."

Cassie panicked. "No, wait!" she screamed.

Up until then, the gun had been hanging loosely from Zoe's hands, almost as if she'd forgotten she was holding it. At the mention of the SWAT teams however, she looked up at Cassie, their eyes met for an instant, then she looked down at the gun and took a firmer grip on it. She began to raise the gun a fraction, until Cassie said: "Please, don't do that, I'm begging you." She was speaking into the phone but as her eyes never left Zoe's, she was uncertain whether she was talking to the FBI agent or the bank robber. Maybe it was both.

"A firearm's been discharged and the life of a hostage is in peril. We don't have any choice."

"Yes, you do. I'll be perfectly safe, I promise you. Just leave us alone for a while, please."

There was a long pause from the other end of the line. Then Cassie could hear muffled voices in an urgent discussion and although she couldn't make out the words, she could tell that Danny was one of the people speaking. It was as if the woman on the other end of the line had her hand over the phone. Then she heard the woman's voice say, "...but I don't like it."

Then the woman came back on the phone, her voice clear and loud again. "Cassie?"

"Yes?"

"You have five minutes to convince Zoe to give herself up. After that I can't make any promises. Do you understand, Cassie?"

"Yes, I understand."

Cassie hung up and dropped the phone. It cracked loudly on the floor but she no longer cared if it was broken or not.

For what seemed like a long while both women just sat there, one still handcuffed to the table, the other resting her back against the wall, but both equally exhausted. Zoe's shoulders began to shake and Cassie realized that she was crying.

"Tell me about her," Cassie said.

"Who?"

"Michi."

With watery eyes, Zoe looked over at her. "What's the point?"

Cassie shrugged. "In a few minutes or even sooner, this is going to end. And I don't imagine it will end well."

"What makes you say that?"

"I can't see you giving up. You're not the type."

"Shows what little you know."

"Well, whatever happens, we have five minutes. Consider me to be a cut-price Scheherazade."

Zoe actually laughed at that, if only briefly. She seemed ashamed that she had laughed. Wiping her eyes on her arm, she said, "Wouldn't that mean you'd have to be the one telling me stories?"

"I suppose it would," Cassie conceded. "But I don't think any tale I could tell would interest you."

"Don't be so sure. I think you could entertain me for a while, if not for a thousand and one nights."

"Charming," Cassie said, smiling to show she was only joking.

"I'd rather not talk about Michi," Zoe began. "I loved her but..."

"You think she didn't love you?"

"No, she loved me, in her own way. It was just that she couldn't keep loving me, certainly not all of me. I should have let her go sooner." She chuckled self-deprecatingly. "I should have let her go, period."

"What do you mean, all of you?"

Zoe shrugged. Then she struggled to her feet, leaving the gun on the floor. She crossed over to Sam's corpse and started pawing through the inside jacket pockets. "I guess she never really believed me when I told her about past lives and the rest of it. I could see it in her eyes every time we spoke of it. Not like you. You're stupid enough to believe anything I say, I think." She smiled over her shoulder at Cassie. "Ah, here we are." She pulled out a half-full pack of cigarettes and a Zippo lighter. She lit a cigarette, caught Cassie's eye and then looked suitably apologetic. "I have been trying to give up, I swear" she said.

She inhaled deeply and smiled, enjoying the sensation of hot, acrid smoke filling her lungs. "Man, that's good." She delved back into Sam's jacket and this time dug out a silver hipflask. "Where there's smoke, there's firewater," she said, unscrewed the cap and took a long swig. Cassie said nothing, just waited for Zoe to speak.

"After my parents died, I had to live on the streets for a while," she said. "I was only a kid at the time, so you can guess it was pretty terrifying at first."

"I can't even begin to imagine."

She might as well not have been listening. "You get used to it though, after a while, just like anything else. There were moments that were always frightening, even when I think about them now. But the absolute worst thing, the thing that gave me nightmares every time I closed my eyes, was that I didn't know who I was any more. Anyway, after slightly less than a year, Sam here," she tapped the body at her feet with a toe, "found me and took me under his wing. I felt safe again and the nightmares went away."

"Until prison," said Cassie. It was more of a statement than a question.

"Uh-huh," Zoe said, nodding. "Twenty years later I died, if only for a few seconds. And after that I was no longer safe. The nightmares returned, and this time there was nothing I could do to be rid of them. They still haunt me, every night, because I know now that there's only one thing more terrifying than not knowing who you are."

She was silent for a while. The tip of the cigarette glowed bright orange as she inhaled more smoke.

"Which is?" Cassie prompted, conscious of the minutes ticking by.

"Well, Cassandra, it's discovering you're someone completely different to who you always believed you were. And worse still, that someone is someone you desperately don't want to be."

There was nothing Cassie could say to that. She wanted to say that she knew how Zoe felt, but how could she? Sure, at times she'd felt as if she didn't know who she was - never knowing the identity of your own father would do that to you - but it wasn't the same. Not even close. And even if she voiced that feeling, she knew that it would just seem like a meaningless platitude, might even be meant as one, and so it was the last thing she wanted to do.

Despite being bullied, threatened, scared, and accosted by this woman, for some unfathomable reason Cassie's heart was telling her that the last thing she wanted to do was hurt Zoe. She wanted no harm to come to her. She wanted to comfort and protect her, to give her the one thing she'd never really had. Safety. The knowledge that someone else trusted her and the absolute certainty that that would never waver.

She felt like crying and she wasn't sure why. Perhaps because five minutes just wasn't long

enough. She bit her tongue, hard, just a few seconds until she could bear it no longer, in the hopes it would focus her mind on other thoughts and stop the tears from coming.

"What was the first mistake?" Cassie asked suddenly. The memory was the first thing that popped into her head.

"What?" Zoe looked startled.

"Earlier, you said my mother naming me Cassie was her second mistake. What was the first?"

Zoe smiled and there was a trace of pity and sadness in that smile. She didn't answer but instead glanced over at the clock.

"Time's almost up. And I'll be damned if..." She smiled to herself. "Well, let's face it, I'll probably be damned." She took one last draw on her cigarette and then stubbed it out on the countertop, after looking around unsuccessfully for an ashtray. Was there any bank left in the world that still allowed smoking? Zoe pulled on her jacket, then walked over to the duffel-bags in the corner, knelt down and unzipped the dark blue bag that Sam had thrown there earlier. She rummaged around for a second or two until she found what she was looking for: one of the machine-guns that she and Sam had used earlier to scare off Danny.

"Don't do this, Zoe," Cassie said. It was the first time she had used the woman's name and she could tell Zoe knew it. However, she didn't hesitate for long, pulling out the empty magazine from the gun and slotting home another.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. If they shoot me, it's only going to be their first mistake."

Zoe got to her feet and walked over to the door, clicking the lock open. Cassie watched her go, saying nothing. Zoe lowered her head, closed her eyes, and took several deep breaths. Cassie could see her chest rising and falling. After a second or two, she opened her eyes and glanced over at Cassie without raising her head.

"This is the end. But the moment has been prepared for." Zoe grinned suddenly, her face alive with a joy so strong that Cassie wanted to weep right there and then. "I've always want to say that."

Then she pushed the door open and stepped out. One second she was here, the next she was gone.

From where she was, Cassie couldn't see outside, but she could hear what went down. A voice, distorted beyond recognition, crackled out through a loudspeaker. Then there came the rattling fast retorts of gunfire. Cassie screamed and tugged frantically at the handcuff but it wouldn't come loose. There was a single louder shot, then silence for a long time.

She gave up tugging at the cuff and started to cry.



## **12: How to Enjoy the Interval**

Danny was waiting for Cassie when she walked out of the interview room at the Wilusa Sheriff's office, just as she knew he would be. He'd hardly left her side ever since the bank siege ended. The FBI had pretty much taken the whole building over and Danny had been relegated to one of the benches that sat outside the custody area. It was pretty much the only free space left. His office was being used as the press room, he had told her earlier. He jumped to his feet when he saw Grace and Hudson bringing her out.

"She can go home now, Sheriff," Hudson told him, then looked down at Cassie, and said, "We told him to leave hours ago. He wouldn't hear of it though."

Grace grinned at that. "Sorry for all the questions, Cassie."

Cassie shrugged. "It's not a problem, I understand. I had a few of my own, didn't I?"

"Shame you had to find out this way though."

"You okay?" Danny asked her. He looked exhausted but then he had been on his feet for forty-eight hours straight.

"Just tired. I could use a drink."

"You want to get a beer?"

"Sure."

Grace clucked disapprovingly at that. "I'd recommend a good night's sleep. And we can provide grief counseling, if you feel you need it."

"I'd rather just get away for a while," Cassie said, shaking her head, "but I doubt that's possible, right?"

"I don't see why not."

"But won't you be needing me as a witness? In the trial, I mean."

"Maybe," Hudson told her, "but I doubt it. Mercouri and Randall are both dead. The others are already stating they'll plead guilty in the hopes of getting reduced sentences, so chances are it won't even go to trial."

"I can't believe their story checked out," Danny said, stifling a yawn.

"Yeah, well I had my doubts too. After all, their relatives could have been lying about being threatened by Mercouri, but it turns out that Esme Croker actually called LAPD early yesterday, explaining how her husband had been blackmailed. However, seeing as how she didn't know Mercouri's identity, nor which bank was going to be robbed, nor where her husband was at the time, they wrote it off."

"You only just found this out?" Danny asked.

Hudson's face colored a little, either from embarrassment or anger. "We're not perfect. Communications sometimes break down."

"Of course, the investigation into Hamilton's..." Grace started to say, then stumbled over her words as she caught Cassie's eyes. "I mean, your father's..."

"He's not my father," Cassie told her. "He never was."

Grace looked at Danny worriedly, not knowing quite how to respond to that. Eventually, just to fill the uncomfortable silence, she finished her thought. "That investigation may be reopened, but I doubt it will involve you."

"I'm sorry, Grace. It's just... well, he chose not to involve me in his life, so I shouldn't be surprised." She smiled at the woman weakly. "So no threats that I shouldn't leave town?"

Hudson grinned. "No, nothing like that. Although we would like to know where you are, just in case anything changes."

"Sure, no problem." Cassie sighed. "I'm glad no one... well, none of you were hurt."

"There was no chance of that, it turns out."

Cassie was puzzled. "What?"

Grace had already reached over to retrieve a plastic evidence bag from a nearby desk. She held it up so Cassie could see that it contained the machine-gun and magazine Zoe had used in her final act. "The clip she used had nothing but blanks in it."

Cassie couldn't believe what they were saying. "You mean..." she said quietly. "She..."

"'Suicide by cop', they call it," Grace said. "It's a lot more common than you would think. Still, I never would have thought she was the type."

Hudson was shaking her head in disagreement. "Ah, she was..." she tapped her forehead with two fingers. "...in the head, you know? There was no telling."

"No, I suppose not."

Danny handed Cassie her coat. "You ready to go?"

"Yep," she said simply.

She was taken by surprise when Grace pulled her into a tight hug. "Take care of yourself, Cassie." When she pulled away, she patted Danny on the chest and grinned at him. "You too, Sheriff. I'll be seeing you."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was past two in the morning when Cassie finally walked into her own kitchen. Danny followed close behind her, checking that the back door was firmly shut behind as he always did in his protective manner. She had had to use his set of keys to get in as hers were still sealed up in an evidence bag back with the FBI, like practically everything else in the bank. Crap, she thought frustratedly, that also meant she had nothing to read.

Danny had gone straight to the fridge, plucking two beers from the inside shelf. Cassie sank down in a chair and shrugged off her coat, taking the icy cold open bottle when he offered it to her. The Sheriff took his own seat opposite her, and then popped his bottle open on the edge of the metal table.

Cassie's kitchen was tiny, barely large enough to fit the both of them and a cat, let alone allow either of them to swing the interloper. It was decorated in a faux fifties-diner style, with bright whites and reds and a strong contrasting black, and despite the cramped space, she usually found it one of the most cheerful rooms in her apartment. Not this morning, however.

They sat in silence for a long while, just drinking and thinking.

Cassie looked over at Danny as he chugged his beer. If she felt half as tired as Danny looked, then she must have been dead on her feet. On the plus side, she thought, trying to remain positive, at least she didn't have to go to work tomorrow.

He caught her looking at him. "What's so funny?"

"Just wondering if the bank will dock me a day's pay."

He grinned. "Not exactly the easiest of days, was it? Being a hostage in a bank robbery, then

finding out who your real father is. That's got to be tough on anyone."

"I've had worse."

"I doubt that. You sure you shouldn't take the Feds up on their offer of counseling?"

Cassie shrugged, then said, "There are probably better days to come. That's what Mom always said."

Danny raised his bottle in remembrance at the mention of Cassie's mother, then took another long gulp of beer. "Cassie, can I ask you something?"

"Sure. Take advantage of a drunk girl, why don't you?"

He laughed. "Yeah, right. And how would I explain my black eye to the FBI tomorrow?" She half-smiled and he continued. "Did anything happen in the bank? Between you and Mercouri, I mean."

"Her name was Zoe," Cassie said firmly. That was enough of an admission for him; she saw that in his eyes. He looked disappointed. For her, she hoped, rather than in her. "And yes, something happened." Let him draw what conclusions he wished from that vague statement, she thought. It was true enough. After all, something had happened. Exactly what though, she wasn't sure. It was late, she was tired, and thinking straight had never been one of her strong points even at the best of times.

Danny sighed. "Jeez, Cassie, you can sure pick them."

She tried to change the subject. "Like you can talk. I think that FBI agent had her eye on you."

"Yeah, I got that general impression." He took a piece of paper out his shirt pocket. "Especially seeing as how she slipped me her phone number while hugging you."

Cassie burst out laughing. "Oh, I needed that," she said when the laughter had finally subsided. "You should call her, when you can, Danny,"

"I don't know. It wouldn't feel right."

"If there's one thing today has taught me, Danny, it's that life's too short."

"Maybe you're right. After all, we only ever regret our first mistakes, right?"

She looked up sharply at him. "What?"

Danny, his mind befuddled by a lot of weariness and a little alcohol, took a moment or two to answer. "What?"

"What did you just say?"

He floundered for an answer. "Oh, well, you know, once you've screwed up once, you no longer worry about screwing up again."

"But you said mistake," Cassie insisted.

"Did I?" He scratched his head. "I don't remember. Sorry, Cassie, but I'm exhausted."

"Danny, I need a favor."

"Anything for you, Cassie, you know that. But can't this wait until tomorrow morning?"

"Sorry, Danny, but no," Cassie said excitedly. "Can I borrow your car?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The morgue attendant had to wait until everyone else had gone home before he dared to act. It had taken hours for the building to finally empty; over the course of the night it had been crawling with FBI, Sheriff's deputies, staff from the coroner's office, and people he didn't even recognize. And then, when he finally had breathing space and thought he was in the clear, the Sheriff's girlfriend had turned up in the early hours of the morning insisting that she be allowed to go through the corpses' personal effects. He'd given in, of course. Anything to be rid of her and back to the quiet routine.

The seemingly endless waiting had irritated him. Normally he didn't mind. He liked working nights and the quiet solitude gave him time to study. But he was nervous, knowing what he was planning on doing was unseemly at best and illegal at worst. And over the night, surrounded by noisy, bustling people, his nerves had become more and more frayed.

On the other hand, he thought, he was paid so little for this work, barely a livable stipend, that sitting in the cold of the morgue for eight hours every night of the week seemed almost pointless. The wage barely made a dent in his medical school bills. That was why he'd readily agreed to do this. He was being paid a large amount of money to betray his employer's trust. And over such a small, silly thing too.

Now he was summoning up the courage to proceed. The company of dead bodies didn't bother him, not after a year of working in this dump. No, it was the fear of discovery that gave him pause. He pulled the drawer open. It was 2C, which had a dodgy roller and always stuck after being opened an inch or so. He had to exert himself to get the drawer to slide open fully. He hadn't been involved in the arrival of the corpses, but all the fuss made around them meant he knew exactly where they had been placed.

He pulled back the white plastic sheet, revealing the naked corpse of a woman underneath. Like her many tattoos, her dark hair stood out against her pale skin but it did little to hide the large gaping hole in the side of her head. She'd been shot by a police sniper, he'd heard. The high velocity rifle round had torn out most of her brain and ripped apart a good part of the top of her

skull. That meant she was something to do with the bank robbery in town, he supposed. Not that he cared, so long as he got the second half of his money as she had promised.

Tomorrow she'd go under the knife. Quite why they needed an autopsy, he didn't know, considering the state she was in. It was pretty clear to see how she died. Odd, really. He'd only talked to her the week before, when she and her friend, 3B, gave him the first half of his money. That was one thing he'd never gotten used to, the fact that one minute people were up, walking around, talking, laughing, loving, making the most of life, the next they were nothing more than decaying slabs of meat lying on a cold metal rack.

He opened the velvet bag the woman had given him, pulling the drawstring loose. He took out one small squarish lump of the substance within, then placed the bag on the slab beside the body. The substance looked like clear jello although it sparkled strangely in the harsh light of the fluorescent tubes overhead, as if some over eager child had tipped an entire packet of glitter into the mix before it set. It was the weirdest thing though, because no matter how much he studied it, he couldn't actually spot the shiny flecks themselves. He saw the light reflecting within it but not what was reflecting. He didn't know what this stuff was but he didn't like it. It certainly didn't feel like jello. It felt almost powdery under his fingertips.

This was a simple enough task. A national tradition, he'd been told, although it baffled him why anyone would want this, even the Greeks. All the same, it was a little daunting. He'd handled dead bodies before too, of course, but this seemed somewhat... invasive. He held the corpse's lower jaw with his free hand, pulling the mouth open as wide as he could, and dropped the substance in. It caught on a broken tooth and he forced himself to push it down with a finger, past the teeth and over the tongue, closing his eyes as he did so, revolted. Strangely, even though the inside of her mouth was dry, he could feel the substance beginning to dissolve almost instantly.

The attendant crouched down to heave open drawer 3B. He bent to pull back the plastic sheeting that covered the male corpse but paused when something caught his eye. A thin trickle of a black liquid was pooling underneath this drawer and then oozing down the fractional slope built into the tiled floor and towards the drain at the center of the room.

"What the hell?" he said under his breath. He looked up and saw more black fluid dripping from the drawer he'd already opened. His eyes widened in astonishment. It was ink. The woman's tattoos were disappearing, the ink within each one liquefying, seeping out of each pore of her skin and running in thick rivulets down over the side of the metal table, leaving the skin beneath perfectly clean and clear.

He stood up and looked closer. There was no trace of some of the smaller tattoos and the larger ones were now growing faint and indistinct. It was then that he heard a weird cracking sound. He looked up and saw that the hole in her skull now seemed a lot smaller than he remembered. That couldn't be right, could it? As he watched, there was another small splintering sound and the hole got even smaller, almost instantly, as if the bone and flesh was knitting itself back together somehow. The tooth that had been broken was now whole. The small cuts on her face were no longer there. The large bruises had already faded and there was even some pinkish color

returning to her skin. Within minutes, there wasn't a single sign she'd ever been hurt.

There was a long drawn out hiss and he watched a thin mist spiral up out of her partly open mouth towards the extractor fan in the ceiling.

And then she moved.

"Holy crap," the attendant said, thinking his heart would stop for sure.

She convulsed, arching her back and letting out one horrible long gasp for air, almost as if she had been underwater for far too long and had finally broken the surface. A flood of black ink from the tattoos that once adorned her back flooded over the edge of the table as she shifted position. Her breathing seemed to stabilize as she sank back, her chest rising and falling regularly.

The attendant stepped forward and reached out a trembling hand to test for a pulse. There had to be one; she was breathing. But there couldn't be one; because she was dead. His head hurt. As his two fingers were almost touching the woman's neck, her eyes flickered open. He gasped in shock again and tried to snatch his hand away but she moved too fast and grabbed his wrist.

"I wasn't entirely sure that would work," she said, her voice a dry rasp. She let him go and rubbed her throat.

The dazed attendant could only stutter. "I... I..."

"No one likes an egotistical conversationalist," the woman said, twisting around so she could sit up with her legs hanging off the side of the metal drawer. Her naked skin slid a little in the ink and she looked down at the black liquid, then at her now unmarked bare arms.

"Interesting. I wasn't expecting that little side-effect," she said, then touched a hand to her head, feeling the left side of her skull all over as if to make sure it was completely whole. Her tongue then ran over her front teeth. "Huh. Everything back the way it should be."

"How is this possible?" the attendant said, having finally managed to find his voice.

"A gentleman would get me some clothes instead of asking stupid questions." She slid off the table and staggered slightly. "Whoa, dizzy," she exclaimed, grabbing hold of the table edge to steady herself.

The attendant returned a few minutes later with her clothes, still wrapped in large plastic evidence bags, only to find the naked woman kneeling by the lower drawer. She'd pulled back the white sheeting and was looking at the burly male corpse.

As she dressed hastily, he said, "I still need to give him some of that stuff. Will it work the same way on him?"

The woman shook her head. "Small change of plan. We'll let him stay dead."

He looked about to argue but she stared at him for a second and he wilted. "You're the one with the money."

"Do you have my stuff?"

He nodded and fished out another evidence bag from one of the pockets of his lab coat. She ripped open the bag and tipped the contents out on the nearby desk. She smiled to herself almost immediately.

"Something wrong?" the attendant asked.

"No," she said as she started pocketing the items, "just something unexpected."

"One question - how am I supposed to explain a missing corpse?"

She smiled at him. "You'll figure something out. After all, you're being paid enough."

\* \* \* \* \*

As she ran up the steps leading out the morgue, Zoe found herself feeling grateful that the snow had finally stopped falling. The cold air felt good in her lungs. She turned the collar of her jacket up and thrust her hands deep in its pockets. The black tarmac was slick with ice and her boots only gave her limited traction. As she walked across the parking lot, she almost slipped over, falling against a white sedan. When she pushed herself back up, she saw the smiling Cassandra leaning against the wing of a battered jeep, her arms folded.

"You don't seem surprised to see me," the blonde said.

"Yes, well, not everything worked out as I expected," Zoe admitted, conscious of her empty hands stuck in her empty pockets. "So what have you got in mind, Cassandra? Are you going to call up your Sheriff friend and ask him to arrest a dead woman? That's going to take some explaining." She walked up to the other woman, ending up only a foot or so away.

Cassandra shook her head. "I wasn't planning on it. Unlike you, I like to play things by ear." She reached up and brushed Zoe's hair back over her shoulder gently. Zoe almost shied away but stopped herself. She saw the younger woman's eyes falling on the bloodstained white shirt beneath her jacket, then moving up to where the jacket collar hid her neck. "What happened to your tattoos?"

Zoe couldn't help but laugh at that.

"What's so funny?"

"Of all the things you could ask, and you choose that."



Cassandra pouted a little. "I liked your tattoos."

Holding up her hands to show she meant no harm, Zoe asked her, "So how did you figure it out?"

"I didn't want to make a second mistake."

"About time," Zoe said, pleased at the comment.

"So I know what you did," Cassandra said, "I just don't know how you did it."

"A magician never reveals her tricks."

"Coming back from the dead is no mere trick."

Zoe took the velvet bag from her back jeans pocket and passed it over to Cassandra, who untied the drawstring and looked inside. A small dim light spilled out from within the bag. The young woman stared at the sparkling gelatin cubes that seemed somehow, impossibly, to have their own light source.

"It's ambrosia," Zoe told her. "I found it in an ancient chest in Nea Potidea."

Entranced by the light, Cassandra seemed to have to force herself to pull the string shut. She looked up at Zoe, her incredulity clear on her face. "Ambrosia? As in the food of the Gods?"

"You don't believe it?"

Cassandra smiled ruefully. "After today, I think I'm willing to believe anything. And I can't really deny what's standing right in front of me, can I? But how could you be sure this would work?"

"I couldn't," admitted Zoe. "Lucky for me, it did."

"And was the risk worth it?"

"Maybe. I haven't decided yet." Zoe shivered. "It's freezing. Aren't you cold?"

"A little. Do you have somewhere to go?"

"Well, that all depends."

"On what?"

"On whether or not I have a reason for staying."

Cassandra smiled and pulled a small brown pebble out of her pocket and turned it over in her

hand. There were a myriad of scratches gouged into the surface: on one side, there was the familiar double-headed axe symbol; on the other side were two rows of crudely scratched Greek letters. "Is this a good enough reason? It's what you found in the bank, isn't it?"

Instinctively, Zoe reached out to take the stone but the blonde snatched it away with a cheeky grin.

Zoe smiled back at her. "You know, if I did know you in a previous life..."

"Yes?"

"I can't imagine you being any more troublesome."

She seemed to take that as some kind of compliment and her grin widened. "It's a Kafkania pebble, isn't it?" she asked.

Zoe nodded. "Similar, yes. But I think this one was part of the ambrosia chest. Hamilton found the chest twenty years ago and hid it, but he took the pebble as a keepsake."

"Why?"

"Beats me. But I thought it might provide me with answers to the questions I keep asking myself." She saw Cassandra understood her. It might have been clutching at straws but when straws were the only thing the world gave you, you had little choice. "You know, it's funny. I went to an awful lot of trouble to steal that and what happens? It gets stolen from me. Not that it matters, as I can't figure out what it's supposed to mean."

"It's a map," Cassandra said simply, although she had a smug grin on her face.

"How could you possibly know that? Never mind, tell me later."

Cassandra reached out and took one of Zoe's hands in her own, which was unexpected. Zoe almost pulled her hand away but then relented and decided just to go with it. Why not play things by ear, she thought, just this once?

"So what now?"

"I don't know," Zoe said honestly. "I didn't plan this far ahead."

**The End...?**

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