



Private Deceptions

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Category: Erotic, Adult, Crime And Mafia, Action, Suspense

Description: Gabriel Childers finds out her brother is missing the first person she suspects is her husband Chilly, a major player in the drug game. Chilly of course denies any involvement in her brother's disappearance. She hires Nick and his team to investigate. Along the way Nick becomes the only suspect in four Drug Related murders.

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Chapter One

"Okay, Nick, you're free to go," Detective Kirkland said.

I stood up and looked at my watch. For the last seven hours I had been in the interrogation room with Wanda, answering all of the questions that Detectives Kirkland and Richards had to offer. Kirk opened the door for Wanda and they walked out of the interrogation room together. I followed them.

Thinking.

"It's really not necessary for you to walk me out detective," Wanda said, and looked back at me.

"These halls are filled with dangerous criminals." Kirk always did have a thing for Wanda, so he had to escort her out the building.

Dealing with Kirk was nothing new to her. "I've played this game with Kirk before," Wanda said once we were out of the building. "So don't worry, I got this."

I wasn't worried. I've known Wanda Moore since I was eleven. She's a good lawyer, and like she said, she's played this game with Kirk plenty of times during his attempts to make a case against Mike Black. Ten years ago I was an enforcer for Black. He controlled a profitable gambling, prostitution and number running business. But that was then, now Black is semi-retired and living the good life in the Bahamas. "Thanks for hanging in there with me," I said, as I started to walk away.

There were still too many unanswered questions that I had to have answers to. The most pressing of which, is how I got to be the only suspect in four murders.

I needed to think, retrace my steps; do something, anything to get myself out of this. Or maybe I'll just go straight to the airport and catch a plane to the Bahamas to become Black's new permanent houseguest.

"Not so fast, Nick." Wanda grabbed me by the arm. "You're coming with me. You need to tell me everything. Not those covert army, need to know, bullshit answers you just fed Kirk. The whole story."

I looked at Wanda, thinking about giving her some covert army, need to know, bullshit answer, and hailing a cab.

But I knew she was right.

Wanda led me to her car and she drove me to her house in the old neighborhood. It had been ten years since I'd driven through these streets. A strange kinda chill came over me that started me thinking about the old days.

"Black know about this?" I asked Wanda, but I already knew the answer.

"Of course he does. Who do you think put up your bail? You know anybody else with a million dollars? He wouldn't turn his back on you when you need him. Even though you ran out on him when he needed you. First Jamaica, then you."

"Lighten up on me, Wanda. I've been draggin' around that burden for the last ten years."

"I'm sorry, Nick. I didn't mean to go there. I just—"

"It's okay, Wanda."

"What happened, Nick?" Wanda asked as soon as we got in the house.

"There must be something I missed," I said and sat down in the first chair I got to.

"What is it?" Wanda sat across from me.

"I don't know."

"Start at the beginning, Nick. Don't leave anything out. Even if you didn't think it was important at the time."

"It started when Mrs. Gabrielle Childers sat down in front of me. No. That's not right, it really began two weeks before when Uncle Felix called and said he had a job that required our talents. 'A simple job,' he called it, and it was.

"You see, Wanda, until about a year ago, I'd been a part of a special operations unit. Things went wrong on our last assignment and only three of the members of our unit got out alive. Jett Bronson, Monika Wynn, and me. We were flown back to Fort Bragg, where we were promptly debriefed and processed out. Uncle Felix approached us the day after. He recruited us to do jobs for him that required our skills. Jett's specialty is electronic surveillance, computers, and all that high tech stuff. Monika's specialty is munitions. The girl really gets a rush out of watchin' things blow up. Me, my specialty is weapons, commando tactics."

"Commando tactics?"

"You know, Wanda, the killer."

Wanda smiled. "Oh. Go on, Nick."

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"At Felix's request, I convinced Jett and Monika to come with me back to New York. Felix set us up in a front business as private investigators. To maintain our cover we actually did some surveillance jobs. Some insurance jobs, a few skip traces. Nothing major, but it paid. Besides, the real money was in doing those little jobs for Uncle Felix."

"Whose uncle is he?"

"What?"

"Uncle Felix. Whose uncle is he?"

"Nobodies, that's just what he said to call him."

"Okay," Wanda said and rolled her eyes. "Where did you run into him?"

"When they processed us out Felix walked up on us at a bar. He said that General Peterson recommended that he talk to us. Felix told us just what we wanted to hear."

"What was that?" Wanda asked.

"He was talkin' real money for doing the same things we'd been doing. Hack into computer systems, some light demolition and the occasional termination. We would do the jobs that couldn't be done through normal channels."

"What was the job this time?"

"Just acquire the target, a guy named Norman Vogel and deliver. A walk in the park. And it was. A simple surveillance to get his pattern down and decide when to snatch him. Jett installed a remote video system in his house. Once it was installed, the system used standard phone lines that provides transmission and monitoring in real time at 28.8 kbps."

"In English, Nick."

"Sorry, Wanda. It operates at high speed, so the transmission provides clear color images at up to fifteen frames per second over a single phone line."

"Thank you, Nick," Wanda said.

"I'll try to keep it simple." Wanda let out a little laugh. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," She laughed. "I just remember when you could hardly read."

"Yeah, well, things change."

"Go on, Nick."

"It went off just the way it was planned. We picked him up at his house, and then Monika blew it up so there wouldn't be any trace. She made it look like there was a gas leak that caused the explosion. We made sure that the house burned to the ground so there wouldn't be too much looking for a body. Then we left him alone, as instructed, in a car on pier 17 off of Fulton Street."

"Did he explain why he wanted the his guy brought there?"

"Nope. And we didn't ask. It was a mission like any other."

"No questions asked."

"Right. We were soldiers, Wanda, trained to follow orders."

"So the three of you kidnap this man and deliver him to who ever. What happened after that?"

"The next afternoon I went by the office to type up my report for Felix and get out of there. But I was tired, so I sat back in the chair and before I knew it, I was asleep. I had been asleep for at least an hour before I opened my eyes and there she was, standing in the doorway."

Thursday, July 9: 3:47 PM

"I'd like to hire a private investigator." Her voice was deep.

"That would be me. Come in. Please, have a seat."

In my dimly lit office, it took my eyes a minute to focus while I shook off my nod. She walked toward me. From my vantage point, I could make out only that she was very well dressed, tall and slender, but not skinny by any definition I'd ever heard. She had the type of legs that I'd probably enjoy watching when she walked out, but I couldn't tell much more about her. "Tell me what I can do for you, Miss?"

"Mrs.," she said with attitude. "Mrs. Gabrielle Childers. And I'd like to hire a you to find my brother."

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I started to tell her that I don't handle cases like that.

But I didn't.

With my eyes now focused, I could see her face. I wanted her to stay.

Mrs. Childers, huh

?

The way she said it, with so much attitude about it. So I decided to have some fun with it. "How long has he been missing, Mrs. Childers?"

"About two weeks."

"Any possibility that he could have just gone out of town? Took a vacation and not told you?"

"It's possible, Mr.?"

"Simmons, Nick Simmons." I liked the sound of her voice. It was soothing. "Please call me, Nick."

"Okay, Nick. It's possible, but it's not like Jake to be gone like this. Neither me, nor my sister, Chésará, have heard from him. Jake is kind of — well, anal. You know, everything in its place, all about details."

"Have you gone to the police, Mrs. Childers?"

"No. I haven't gone to the police."

"Mind if I ask why?"

She looked at me for a while. She had pretty eyes, but they weren't soft. They were cold and distant. But there was something enchanting about the way she smiled. She shifted around in her chair and crossed her legs.

She dug around in her purse and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "You mind if I smoke?" she asked, almost as an after thought.

"Please, be my guest."

She lit up. "I think my husband might be involved."

"All the more reason to go to the police."

"I don't want to go to the police until I'm sure that he's involved. That's why I want to hire you to prove that he's involved in it."

"Are you afraid of your husband?"

"Yes," she said quietly and looked away. Her fear came through loud and clear. "My husband is a very dangerous man, Mr. Simmons."

"Nick. Please, call me, Nick. What's your husband's name?"

"Alvin, Alvin Childers."

I laughed to myself, thinking how dangerous could somebody named Alvin be?
"What makes him so dangerous?"

"He's involved in drugs. If he even thought I was talking to you about him or his business he'd —"

"Has he hurt you before?" I asked, and she dropped her head a little. I had taken notice of the dark circles under her eyes that her makeup didn't quite hide.

"I don't see what that has to do with anything." The fear in her voice quickly gave way to attitude.

But I like a woman with a little attitude.

"Look, you want me to prove that your husband is involved in your brothers disappearance, and prove it to the police at that. You have to tell me everything."

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She took a deep breath. "All right. What do you want to know?"

"Answer my question."

"Yes, he's hurt me before."

"Once, twice, daily?"

"More than once, and let's leave it at that," she said quickly, and defiantly.

"All right, Mrs. Childers. Tell me about Jake then. Where he lives, where he works, his girl friends, who he hangs out with?"

"He has an apartment on Bronxwood." She wrote down his address and handed it to me.

"You got a key?"

"No."

"Know of anybody who does?" I asked.

"Jake is too particular about his things for him to let a lot of people have a key."

"He have a girlfriend?"

"Lisa Ellison," Mrs. Childers replied. I could tell by the way she said it that she didn't

like her.

"What about her? She got a key?"

"I don't know."

"You know if she's heard from him?"

"I don't know."

"You ask her?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Mrs. Childers rolled her eyes. "I don't like her." At least she was real about it.

"What about friends? Anybody he hangs out with?"

"I don't know," she said quickly. Then she said, "He's got a friend, Rocky. He grew up down the block from us in Philly. Him and Jake hang sometimes, but not that often."

"Do you have a picture of Jake?" Mrs. Childers reached in her purse and handed me a picture. "Looks like the bomb party. What's the occasion?"

"Jake's last birthday. We never had birthday parties when we were kids. So we really make a big thing of them now."

"How old is he?"

"Jake's thirty."

"He the oldest?"

"Yes."

"Whose that in the picture with him?"

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"That's our sister, Chésará."

"Him and Chésará close?"

"Yes." She sounded offended by the question. "All of us are very close."

"How old is your sister, Mrs. Childers?"

"Chéz is twenty-three." Mrs. Childers leaned forward and went cleavage on me. "Are you trying to find out how old I am — Nick?"

The way her voice dropped when she said my name. Nick. It overcame any objection I still had about taking her case.

Since I was trying to find out how old she was, I asked. "How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-seven."

That sounded good too, but not as good as, Nick.

"When was the last time you saw Jake?"

"About two weeks ago, he came by the house. He told me that Chilly had been looking for him."

"Chilly?"

"My husband."

"Go on. What did your husband want to see him about?"

"He wouldn't tell me. But Chilly wantin' to see Jake was unusual. Jake doesn't have much to do with Chilly."

"Is your brother involved with drugs too?"

"No. Jake is a chemist at Frontier Pharmaceuticals."

"Any reason to think that your brother is dead?"

"No!" Mrs. Childers said.

I wasn't sure what to read into the way she answered, but there was something about the look in her eyes that screamed that there was something she wasn't telling me. I knew then that this was something that I didn't want to get involved in. But still, there was something about her that cried out for my help.

"All right, Mrs. Childers, I'll look into it. Give me a day or two and I'll get back to you."

"When you need to contact me, leave me a message on my voice mail and let me know when and where I can meet you. Or call my sister; she'll give me the message. I really don't want to come back here." Mrs. Childers reached in her purse again, this time to retrieve her checkbook. Without asking what my rates were, she wrote out a check and handed it to me. "I hope this will cover your fee, or at least get you started. Money isn't a problem, so if you need more — "

I looked at the check. "No, Mrs. Childers, I think ten thousand dollars is enough to

get me started." She stood up and I escorted her to the door. As expected I enjoyed watching her walk. "One more question, Mrs. Childers. Why do you think that your husband is involved?"

"Just a feeling. But that is why I hired you."

I left my office thinking. Not about the case I had just taken on, but about Mrs. Gabrielle Childers. I found her to be a very attractive woman to say the least. Thinking about how any man could do anything to hurt someone as beautiful as her, or any woman for that matter. The way she sat there with confidence and poise. Until she started talking about her husband, then her whole mood changed. Whatever he had done to her had left her with a lasting impression.

Now I had a real missing person's case. We'd done a few skip traces, but this was different. My first thought was to tell Jett and Monika about it, but it made more sense to find out what, and who, I had gotten them involved with. Suppose Mrs. Childers was right? Suppose her husband was involved?

This could get hectic with a quickness.

Jett and Monika grew up in the burbs. They came from nice middle class families and knew nothing about the dope game. But not me. I knew the game all too well, being a soldier for Vicious Black before joining the army two weeks after André Harmon, who ran most of the illegal activity in the area met his untimely demise.

I drove to Jake's apartment to have a look around. I put on my gloves, let myself in, and proceeded with my search. The place was immaculate. Everything in place, just as Mrs. Childers said it would be. I ran my finger across the coffee table. Very

little dust. I went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. The date on the milk bottle had expired ten days ago. The bathroom was next. Sink and shower were bone

dry. The toilet had that blue water in it, so I flushed it. It came back even bluer. I moved on to the bedroom. There was nothing out of place in the closet. Bed was made. It was a safe bet that no one had been there in at least a week.

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I went back into the living room and turned on Jake's computer. Once Windows finally opened, I went into all the items on his desktop. I used an old DOS command to show hidden directories. Then I ran a search on all documents modified in the last thirty days. There was a directory filled with word document files, and a directory with spreadsheet files. There was one file in each directory whose last modified date was eight days ago. I tried to open them, but they were both password protected. I turned the computer off and decided I would come back tomorrow with Jett. I felt someone come up behind me. "Ouch!" I got hit in the back of the head and was out like a light.

* * *

Chapter Two

"How long were you out?" Wanda asked. She had changed into her robe, made a cup of coffee, and had made herself comfortable on the couch.

"Not long. Ten, fifteen minutes maybe."

"Any idea who it was?"

"No."

"What happened then?"

"I could feel the blood running down my neck. That's when I realized that I only had on one glove. The right hand glove was on the floor."

"So we know somebody wanted your finger prints. What'd you do then?" Wanda asked questions just like Kirk. Hard and fast.

"I took a quick look around the apartment and got out."

"Where'd you go when you left?"

I stood up and walked around the room. Deciding how I was going to answer the question. "I drove to the Childers' house."

"Why'd you go there?"

"To get a feel for the layout. Just being thorough, Wanda."

I couldn't bring myself to tell Wanda that I went there to see if I could see her again. But it was the truth; there I was sitting outside her house.

In complete darkness.

I opened the trunk, got my bag out, and took out my camera. This gave me an opportunity to try out my new Predator night vision goggles. Jett says they'll give me high performance in low light.

"These are great, Nick!" Jett said, louder than he needed to, as he handed them to me. "Check them out. They're lightweight, only 550 grams. They are powered by a single 1.5-volt AA alkaline battery. Their design is great for helicopter pilots flying night missions. But you should be able to carry out search operations under low light conditions."

Time to see if he was right.

It was a big house. I hopped the fence and walked around the house looking around for any security. "I hope they don't have no dogs out here." Which was a great time to think of it because I hate dogs.

I got a few shots of the house. It was surrounded on all sides by trees. The long driveway led to a big garage and more trees behind it. There were six cars in there.

I walked back to the house surprised that there was nobody patrolling the grounds. The alarm system was nothing fancy. I disabled it and was inside in two minutes.

"Nice set up. These drug dealers sure know how to live," I said.

With my night vision goggles on, I walked around the house planting listening devices and taking pictures of the entire house. Timing myself as I moved from room to room, until I reached the master bedroom. I checked the closets. The really big one was hers naturally. I can't really think of a word to describe her wardrobe, but both expensive and extensive came to mind.

I put a listening device behind a picture of her and Chilly next to the bed. "What did she see in him?"

The curtain was opened so I looked out of the bedroom window at the trees over the garage. I bugged the phones before returning to the car and waited. It was one thirty-four when she drove up in a white Porsche.

I put the goggles back on.

What was I doing?

She stopped to open the gate. I watched as she opened the car door and her leg appeared. First one, then the other. Her outfit matched the car. I wondered if she

coordinated her outfits with which car she was going to drive.

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After awhile, lights began coming on inside the house. She immediately closed the curtain in the front room. Ten minutes later, the downstairs light went out. I wanted to see her one more time, and then I would go. I got out of the car and went over the fence again, heading for the garage. But I was too slow. The bedroom curtain closed just as I walked up. I turned in time to see headlights stopped at the gate. I ran behind the garage and made my way back to the car. There were now four cars other than hers parked in the driveway. A sound check of each room let me know that there were eight, maybe nine people in the house other than Mrs. Childers. She was still upstairs alone. I sat there for the next ninety minutes listening and trying to place voices with names. Picking up on Chilly was easy. He was the loudest, and did most of the talking. "I don't think I like him."

Chilly announced that he was going to bed, and awhile after that most of the people left. I got pictures of each of the players as they came out of the house. The lights stayed on downstairs, but I didn't hear Chilly's mouth. I switched to their bedroom.

"Gee, you sleep?"

"No. Just watching TV."

"What you watching?"

"Forensic Files."

"That shit again. Forensic Files, The System, Cold Case Files, all that Court TV shit. Why you always watchin' that shit?"

"So I can figure out how to kill you. And do you always have to turn on every light in the room?"

"I gotta see."

"I know, but why every light? All you need is one."

"Yeah, well, you'll be a'ight."

I heard Mrs. Childers mumble something under her breath. But I couldn't make it out.

"I thought you were coming to the club tonight, Gee?"

"I just didn't feel like being bothered with all of those people."

"So where you been?"

"I went by Chéz."

"What y'all do?"

"Nothing."

"Chésará didn't have nothing to do on a Friday night? That ain't possible. What y'all do, Gee?"

"I told you, we didn't do anything. We just talked."

"She's good at that. 'Bout all she good for is talk."

Followed by more mumbling from Mrs. Childers.

"I want you to do something for me tomorrow."

"I have plans for tomorrow."

"Well cancel them. This shit is important."

"And what I have to do isn't?"

"Nope. Just more of your usual bullshit."

"It's your usual shit that's bullshit," she whispered.

"What you say?"

"Nothing, Chilly. What do you want me to do?"

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"You just be dressed and ready to go by eleven."

"Yes, your majesty."

"That's right. I'm the King here. Your ass be forgettin' that shit sometimes."

There was a long silence. Then, "Stop!"

"You the one that needs to stop."

"Stop it, Chilly. I'm tired."

"Come on, now."

"No, I said I was tired. — Ouch! — You're hurting me."

"Stop fightin' me. — Come on now."

"All right, all right. Go ahead."

There was more silence. Followed by a few minutes of Chilly grunting like an animal. Mrs. Childers made no sound. I imagined her lying under him, eyes closed, wishing it were over. Then, "The least you could do is move, Gee."

She didn't answer.

"Ahhh!"

I started my car and went home. I was sure now. I don't like him.

* * *

Chapter Three

Friday, July 10: 7:04 AM

I called Jett and told him to meet me at Monika's house so I could tell them about the case. When I got there, I laid it all out for them. I left out the part about me listening while Chilly forced himself on Mrs. Childers. "Come on now, Nick," Monika said. "We ain't no real private investigators. This is just a cover. What you know about finding somebody anyway?"

"It's no different then them skip trace jobs we did," I said, pleading my case.

"Sounds like fun to me," Jett said. "Besides, Monika, what else do we have to do?"

"Shut up, gray boy," Monika said, rolling her eyes at Jett. "You got a weird sense of what's fun." Monika frowned at me. "What are you gonna do now?"

"I wanna go back to Jake's apartment and have another shot at his computer. And I could use some help."

"I'll go with you, Nick," Jett said, enthusiastically. Which saved me the trouble of having to convince him. "Come on, Monika, it will be a blast. Do something different for a change."

"Let's go, Jett. I want to get finished at Jake's in time to pick up a tail on Chilly around eleven."

As we started out the door, Monika said, "Y'all wait up."

"Thought you weren't interested?" I said smiling at her.

"I'm not. That don't mean I'm not part of this team," she said grabbing her bag and joining us at the door. "Somebody has to keep you two fools out of trouble."

On the way to Jake's I filled them in on the rest of what happened there the night before. "Any idea who hit you or what they hit you with?" Monika asked.

"Don't know who it was, but I'm pretty sure it was the butt of a gun. Heavy caliber, forty five maybe."

"You know what this Chilly guy carries?" Jett asked.

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"No, but I can find out. I'll ask Mrs. Childers."

"You got a picture?" Monika asked.

"No."

"You don't have a picture of the guy you're looking for? How do you expect to find him?"

"Oh, him."

I handed Monika the picture of Jake and Chésará at the party. Both Monika and Jett looked at me like I was crazy. I thought they wanted a picture of Mrs. Childers.

"Not bad. That the client, Nick?" Jett commented as he dissected the picture with his eyes.

"No, that's the client's sister."

"What does the client look like?"

"An older version of her."

"What's her name?"

"Chésa

rá."

"Wouldn't mine tailin' her. If you know what I mean."

"See, that's why I'm here," Monika said, as we arrived at Jake's. "Nick already got his nose up ones ass. Now you dyin' to get your head up the sister's ass."

"Calm down, Monika."

"This is a serious matter. These people are drug dealers, and if they are involved, they're not gonna think twice about killin' you for stickin' your nose in their business."

"I was thinkin' more about stickin' other parts of my anatomy in her," Jett said, still looking at the picture of Chésará.

Once we got to the door, I went to work on the lock. "Don't you have a key?"

"No, Monika. I don't have a key." I replied, as I opened the door and went inside.

"That is breaking and entering. Now we're about to tamper with evidence in what may be a crime scene. How much she payin' us?"

"Ten thousand, to get us started. There's more if we need it. Money is not an issue."

"Still, I don't like the way this is goin' already."

"Tell you what, Monika," Jett said, as he prepared to hack into Jake's files. "If shit gets too thick, we'll let you blow up the building."

"Very funny, Jett." She looked around. "This place is cleaner than my house."

"Yeah, Mrs. Childers said he's kind of anal like that."

While Jett worked on the computer, Monika and I searched the apartment again. "I'll have it in no time, this is pretty simple stuff. Just hack into this password file and — damn! It's encrypted."

"Pretty simple stuff," Monika said.

"Yeah, he'll have it in no time."

Monika looked in the bedroom, while I went through his file cabinets and the mail. Ten minutes or so had gone by when I heard Monika say, "Well now, what do we have here?"

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"What you got?"

"Safe."

"Where?" I asked, joining her in the bedroom.

"In the closet under this box. Guess you missed this, huh, Nick?" Monika started digging in her bag for something.

"What are you looking for?"

"What do you think I'm lookin' for? Something to get this safe open."

"Jett, come open this safe, before she slaps some C-4 on it."

"Na, C-4 would be too messy for a small safe," Jett said, while he wrote a program to decrypt the file.

Monika gave us the customary rolling of her eyes and attached a small device to the safe. "Bet I have this safe open before you get the password."

"You're on," Jett yelled.

"Beat ya. Ha, ha."

"That wasn't fair."

"Fair? What you white folks know about fair?" Monika asked.

They were fun to work with. Although Jett thinks Monika is mean, overbearing at times, and has a tendency to be a pain in the ass. And she holds Jett personally responsible for the sins of the white man; they would do anything for each other. That's why we're alive today. On our final mission, Monika fell on approach to the objective. Her ankle was broken and she couldn't continue. She wanted us to leave her, but Jett refused. While the three of us had a philosophical debate over the need to follow orders and proceed to the objective, the objective blew up. Jett got on the radio and tried in vain to raise any member of our unit. They were all dead. Jett's loyalty to Monika saved our lives.

Monika handed me some papers from the safe to go through while she examined the rest of the contents. She opened a box that had a large envelope in it. It contained pictures and three videotapes. "Hey, Nick."

"Yeah."

"Who's that in the picture?" she asked, pointing at the picture next to the bed.

"I guess that's his girlfriend, Lisa Ellison."

"Then who is this?"

Monika handed me the pictures. "Damn. When Mrs. Childers said he was anal, I didn't think this is what she was talkin' about."

Monika laughed. "Looks pretty anal to me."

All of the pictures were of Jake having sex with the mystery woman. In an interesting variety of positions. "I'm willin' to bet these tapes are more of the same."

"Got it!" Jett yelled.

I took one of the less intense pictures of Jake and the woman, and joined Jett at the computer. "What's in those files, Jett?"

"You did say this guy was a chemist. Formulas, looks like. And each doc. file has a corresponding spreadsheet. I'll make a copy and show it to a chemist Monika knows."

"You done, Monika?"

"Just about. I need to take pictures of some of these papers. They look like formulas too. If we can find out what he was working on, maybe we can find out what happened to him."

"Very good. Nancy fuckin' Drew here."

"Fuck you, Jett."

"Two things prevent that," Jett said, as we left the apartment and headed for the car. "Good taste, being one of them."

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"What's the other, Jett?" I asked, expecting another snappy come back.

"It would be too much like fuckin' my sister."

It was eleven thirty when we arrived at the Childers residence. We were late, but so were they. We parked the car down the street to the sound of Chilly yelling. "I ain't gonna call you no more, Gee! Get your ass down here right now so we can go!"

"Go without me, then!" Mrs. Childers screamed back.

"You just get your ass down here, right now."

"You set this up, Nick?" Jett asked.

I nodded, trying to hear the argument.

"Not bad work. A little staticy, but not bad. You set up cameras too?"

"No, but I got pictures of each room."

"We need to go over those pictures. It will make it easier to complete the set up."

"No time now. I gotta follow them. Find out what was so important that she had to go with him."

"Get your head out her ass, Nick," Monika said. "You go with Jett. I'll follow the happy couple."

I started to insist that I had to go, but she was right. The sooner we could go over the pictures, the sooner we'd have the place covered.

When Mrs. Childers came to open the gate, we got out, and Monika took off behind the Childers. Me and Jett went back to the office to develop the film. "How'd you get in, Nick?"

"Simple alarm and cheese ball locks."

For the next hour I went over the set up of the house with Jett. Once he was satisfied with my review of the set up of the house, he prepared to implement his plan to maximize coverage. "Where are you going?" Jett asked.

"To see Lisa Ellison. Then I thought I'd talk to the sister."

"Not without me, you're not."

"Jett, you heard what Monika said, and she was right. I know these people, some of them I probably know personally. They will kill us for involving ourselves in their business."

"Come on, Nick. We can handle them."

"I know you're a tough guy and all, Jett. But we are out-numbered and out-gunned." The way I left Black. "We need to be a step ahead of them all the way," I said, as I armed myself. I did know these people, and when the guns started coming out, I wasn't about to be the last one to pull his. "We need to stay on task. So, I'll go talk to the sister. And you get your head out that woman's ass and set up the surveillance."

* * *

Chapter Four

"So you and your partner are strung out on these women," Wanda said.

"I wasn't strung out on her, Wanda. I thought she was a very attractive woman, but I think strung out is a little strong." Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. But one thing was certain; I was very interested in Mrs. Gabrielle Childers. More interested than I've been in any other woman in a long time.

"Okay, Nick, whatever you want to call it."

"Wanda, I —"

"Anyway, Nick. You left Jett, and you were on your way to talk to Lisa Ellison."

"Yeah, but I was thinkin' that we were gettin' ready to go up against Chilly and his crew. Other than Mrs. Childers' feeling, I had no other reason to suspect him. That wasn't good eno

ugh. If I was gonna play private investigator, it was time I started investigating. I had to consider the possibility that Chilly wasn't involved. I still thought covering the house was a good idea, just in case he was."

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"That was a good idea. So where did you go after that?"

"To see the sister."

"What's her name?"

"Chésará Rollins."

Chésará lived on Manhattan's Upper East Side. None of that suburb shit for her. When I arrived at her building, a doorman met me. He announced my arrival and asked Miss Rollins permission to send me up. She consented to see me and I was on my way.

She opened the door wearing a blue silk robe, "Hello, Mr. Simmons." And as near as I could tell, nothing on under it. "So you're Gee's private detective. I've been expecting you."

"Can I come in?"

"Of course. Please make yourself at home."

"Thank you, Miss Rollins. I'll try not to take up a lot of your time. I just have a few questions to ask you."

"I'm all yours," she said, locking her arm in mine and leading me into the living room. She led me to the couch and sat next to me. "Tell me what I can do to help." She looked a lot like her sister. Only her look was soft and playful. Not the hard edge

her sister had. Jett would be losin' his mind right about now. As a matter of fact, I was having a hard time maintaining my composure, and her hand on my thigh wasn't helping.

"When was the last time you saw your brother, Miss Rollins?"

"The week before last. He was on his way to Gee's house."

"He come by here often?"

"Often enough. Maybe once or twice a week."

"Jake like to travel much?"

"Jake, no. He never went anywhere. Unless you call goin' to Jersey traveling."

"Has he ever been gone this long before without you or your sister hearing from him?"

"No. Like I said, Jake is over here at least once or twice a week, and he calls just about everyday. I think Gee is right, that bastard she calls a husband had something to do with it."

"What makes you say that?"

"If you ever met Chilly, you'd know what I mean. He's an asshole. I wish Gee could get away from him."

"I guess you don't like your brother-in-law much."

"That's a good guess. But hate him would be more like the truth of the matter. The

way he treats Gee is terrible. I wish he were dead."

"Okay. Other than that, any reason why you think Chilly is involved?"

"When Jake left here he said he was goin' to see Chilly. Then he disappeared. Chilly is, well, —, he's a drug dealer, but I guess you already know all of that."

"Your sister did mention that."

"I'm sure Gee told you alotta stuff. I know I would tell you anything you wanted to know. You married?"

"No." I smiled and she licked her lips. "I've never been married."

"Good for you."

"Do you have any idea what your brother was goin' to see Chilly about?"

"No, Jake never talked to me much about what he was doin'. I always thought that all those computations and calculations was pretty boring stuff. I like things, and men, that are a bit more exciting in my life."

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"Just what excites you, Miss Rollins?"

"One day, when you have some free time, I'll have to show you just what excites me." She smiled at me and stood up. The sash on her robe came free. "I'm going to get a drink. Can I get you something?" she inquired, as she took her time retying it.

"Johnnie Walker Black, straight up, if you have it." I was wrong. She had on a blue bra and panties under the robe, but they were see-through. She turned and walked over to the bar. "You know Jake's girlfriend, Lisa Ellison?"

"Yeah, I know her."

"You talk to her much?"

"We speak when I see her. Which isn't very often."

"Are they close?"

"If you're asking me if she was the only one he was seeing, I couldn't say. Jake keeps his business to himself." She sat down and handed me my drink.

"You know who this is?" I handed her the picture.

"Ooooh, Jake." She looked up at me and smiled. She handed the picture back to me.

"No, Nick, I don't know who she is. You show that to Gee yet?"

"No. But I will next time I see her."

"Rocky might know who she is."

"Rocky, that's Jake's friend from Philly. You know him?"

"Sure, I know Rocky. He used to live down the block from us. Him and Jake ran track together. He works for Chilly now."

"What does he do for Chilly, Miss Rollins?"

"Chésará, please, Chésará. Say it with me, Che - sa - rá." I smiled and laughed a little at her. "He sells dope for him. I hear he's a good earner."

"This is a very nice place you have here."

"Thank you. I decorated it myself."

"You have excellent taste."

"In more ways than you can possibly imagine." Chésará said, and repositioned herself on the couch.

I chose to over look the tone of her remark. "What do you do, Chésará? You a part of the family business?"

"No. I'm not part of the family business. Gee pays for all this. Didn't she tell you?"

"No, she didn't."

"Well, Nick. You mind if I call you, Nick?"

"Not at all."

"Good." She declared, and moved closer to me. "I hate to be so formal. But like I was sayin', I have no desire to be involved in their business."

"Just spend the money," I said with a smile.

"You know what they say, Nick, OPM."

"OPM?"

"Always use other peoples money."

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"You something else, girl."

"You talk real nice to me and I just might have to show you just what that something is."

"You talk real nice to me and I just might think about letting you. But I have work to do first."

"Hmm. Go ahead, keep talking. I like the way you work. But I warn you, I like to talk."

"So I've heard."

"Gee say that about me?"

"No, she didn't."

"Then who?"

"I have ways of finding out things I need to. That is, like, what I do. Find things out about people." Chésará tipped her head and looked strangely at me. Why don't you just tell her that you have her sister's house bugged and her brother in-law said that about her? I didn't mean to say it, but it was out there now. The telephone rang.

"Hello."

Saved by the bell.

"Hi, Gee."

It was her. I sat up straight. I got excited just knowing she was on the phone. Chésará looked at me and smiled. I tried to hear what Mrs. Childers was sayin', but I couldn't.

"Your private dick is here. You sure know how to pick them."

Whatever Mrs. Childers was sayin' to her, it wiped the seductive smile off her face.

"Bye, Gee." Chésará hung up the phone. She looked at me, the seductive smile returned just as quickly as it left. "That was Gee on the phone."

"Really, what did she say?"

"That I should stop tryin' to flirt with you and cooperate."

I smiled.

"You like my sister don't you, Nick?"

"What makes you say that, Miss, I mean, Chésará?"

"The funny look you get on your face anytime I mention her."

"How do I look?"

She made a funny face and laughed. "Your know, eyes all glazed over. Gee has that effect on men. So do I."

"I noticed."

"Once we have a man, it's hard for him to resist us. Like this guy Gee kicked it with for a while. He just won't leave her alone."

My back stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"If Gee knew I told you this, she'd freak." Chésará repositioned herself on the couch, which only proved to expose more cleavage. She was flirting even when she wasn't.

"While Gee was in St. Martin, she met this guy at the hotel bar. He was there with his wife and kids. Well, he told Gee that he was from Brooklyn. That he owned a used car lot on Utica Avenue. He gave her his card. So Gee called him and they got together a few times. Now he won't leave her alone."

"Why doesn't she want to see him anymore?"

"'Cause he can't fuck. Gee said that he couldn't keep it up long enough to do anything for her. Gee said she rocked the house two times and he came."

"Don't you hate it when that happens?"

"I'm sayin'."

"Why doesn't she just tell him that? If a woman ever said that to me, I'd stop bothering her."

"But no woman ever told you anything close to that, have they, Nick?"

"No. They haven't."

"I bet you put on a good show." There she goes with her hand on my thigh again. "But I promised Gee I'd stop flirting." She didn't move her hand though. "She did tell him that. Told him to his face that his dick was little and he couldn't satisfy her."

"How'd he take it?"

"Bad. So now he's blackmailing her."

"Blackmail?"

"That same night before she told him that, somebody took a picture of them. But right before the picture gets snapped, this fool kisses her."

"Now he wants money or he'll show it to Chilly," I said.

"And Chilly will kill her."

"What's his name?"

"Ben Josephs."

"Did she pay him?"

"Of course she did. At first Gee threatened to tell his wife, but he didn't seem to care. Told her to go ahead and tell her. She won't believe it anyway. Besides, Gee couldn't take that chance, Chilly would kill her. So she paid him, but now he wants more."

"How much?"

"She gave him five thousand dollars the first time, and ten more last night. She just told me that he wants another twenty."

"Where would I find him?"

"I don't know where he lives, but I guess you can find him at the car lot he owns in Brooklyn."

"Why are you telling me all this, Chésará?"

"'Cause if you really like Gee, you'll take this guy off her neck."

>

"Maybe I'll talk to him."

"If you do, don't say anything about me telling you this to Gee. She would be mad at me."

"It'll be our little secret."

"Something we can share. I like the thought of that."

"Thanks for seeing me, Chésará." I stood up and finished my drink. "And for the drink."

Chésará stood up; her sash came free again. She didn't bother to retie it this time. She locked her arm in mine and walked with me to the door. "You come on back when you have more time. To talk."

"I just might."

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"You make sure that you do. You'll find me to be a brilliant conversationalist. People tell me that I'm very oral, when the conversation is stimulating."

"I'd be interested to see."

Wanda shook her head disapprovingly. "I see you still have a way with the women, Nick." She mentioned. "Why didn't she just come right out and say she wanted to fuck you."

"I don't know, Wanda. Why don't you ask her?"

"I don't think so, Nick. I learned a long time ago not to get between you and your women."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I demanded, but she and I both knew she was talking about Camille.

Now why she wanna go and do that?

"Nevermind, Nick. What did you think of the sister? Other than the obvious, I mean."

"What do you mean?"

"Open up, Nick. I'm not Kirk. This is me, you know, Wanda. I'm only trying to help you. We go too far back for you to be so defensive with me, Nick."

"I'm sorry, Wanda."

"I just wanted to know if you thought she was telling you the truth, that's all."

"I thought so. I didn't think she had any reason to lie about what she told me."

"It seemed like she wasn't all that concerned about her brother being missing. I think she was more concerned with gettin' her freak on with you."

"Whatever gave you that impression?" I smiled.

"Come on, Nick. Very oral. If that wasn't an invitation to come back and get some head, I don't know what it was. I'm very oral."

"Like you said, Wanda, I just have that affect on women."

"Yeah. I guess you do."

* * *

Chapter Five

The more I thought about it, the more I knew that I needed to know who and what I was up against. I knew where to go, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to go there. Freeze would know, I knew he would. Freeze always knew everything about everybody. If he didn't know, he either knew how to find out or it wasn't worth knowing. It had been ten years since I'd seen Freeze. Ten years since I had tried to close the door on my past. Maybe it was time to re-open that door.

Besides, I was hungry and I hadn't eaten anything all day. So I drove to Cuisine. I entered the supper club and looked around for Freeze. I was surprised at what a nice place it was. Nothing like the spots we used to run back in the day. Not seeing Freeze anywhere, I allowed the hostess to seat me at a table.

"Is Freeze here?"

"Who?"

I smiled and continued to look over the menu. "Just tell Freeze that Nick Simmons would like to see him."

The hostess walked away.

It wasn't too long before I looked up and saw Freeze coming toward my table; wearing a suit. "Nick! What's up?"

"You tell me. You're the man. In a suit no less."

"Fuck that shit. How the fuck are you, man?" Freeze sat down and motioned for a waitress. Two responded to his motion. "What are you drinkin', Nick?"

"Johnny Black, straight up."

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"Bring me the usual. You hungry, Nick?"

"Yeah, I haven't eaten all day."

"You see anything on the menu you want? Never mind, I know you'll eat anything," Freeze said, turning his attention to the waitresses. "Tell the cook to make whatever he's best at for Nick, and you know what to bring me. You, get the drinks." And with that both women rushed off to carry out his orders.

"Do two waitresses always come when you call? And what's up with the suit?"

"Hey, this is a legitimate, upscale supper club. I gotta look the part. But nevermind all that, Nick. What's up with you?"

"I've been all right, man."

"Damn, it's good to see you, Nick. You should come around more often."

"You know what's up with that."

"That stupid shit between you and Bobby." Freeze shook his head. "You need to let that shit go."

"Has Bobby let it go?"

"Not far as I know. He doesn't talk about it. He gets all quiet and shit when you bring it up."

"Then it's still on."

Freeze laughed. "Yeah, I guess it is. But that shouldn't stop you. You and me been through too much."

Knowing Freeze was right; I let it pass without comment. "How's Black?"

"Doin' good. Island life agrees with him."

"When's the last time you talked to him?"

"Talked to him this morning." Freeze announced as our drinks arrived. "Black calls me every morning. He likes to keep his hand in. You know how Black is. Shit ain't changed."

"He get up here much?"

"Every once in awhile. He don't like bein' away from Shy for too long."

"I can't believe Black's strung out like that."

"You ain't seen Shy."

"She all that?"

"She's worth the price of admission. You oughta go down there. Ain't like you ain't been invited."

"Black don't wanna see me. I called him a few times when I got back, but we never hooked up. Then he was gone."

"Shit was crazy back then for him and Shy." The waitress returned with our food, Prime Rib. I started eating it like I hadn't eaten in weeks. "You think Black is still mad at you 'cause you left?"

"Ain't he?"

"Hell, no. He wasn't mad at you, not really anyway. He understood why you felt you had to go like that. He knew that shit with you and Bobby was gonna end with one of y'all bein' dead. What Black couldn't understand was why you joined the army to fight for the government when your homies was fightin' a war right here. But he respected your decision. Shit, Black respected you. Said you were the most disciplined man he ever met."

"I was a soldier even then. That's why he made me work with you. Your ass was wide-open back then. Wanted to blast everybody."

"Damn near did."

"Black thought you needed discipline. And he was right, but look at you now."

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"A lot's changed since you been gone."

"I see this. This is really a step up from The Late Night."

"Damn, The Late Night. I haven't thought about that place in years. We had some good times —" Freeze paused and looked at me. I guess he remembered the last time I was there that Bobby tried to kill me. "And some bad times." Freeze laughed a little. "Anyway, this ain't that type of place. The Late Night was just that. A late-night hang out. We are marketing to a different clientele."

"Listen to you."

"Wanda taught me to say shit like that. She's a trip, but she was right. She's right about most things. She made us all a ton of money over the years. Anyway, I know you didn't come here just to talk about old times. What's poppin'?"

"You know somebody named Alvin Childers?"

"Chilly?"

"Yeah, Chilly."

"I know him and so do you, Nick. You remember he used to deal for André back in the day. He's the one who made peace with Black, and they set up the dead zone where nobody deals. Bitch nigga had to make peace; 'cause Black was gonna blast that ass next. Now he runs most of the drugs uptown. What's your interest?"

"Business. His wife is my client."

"Gee. What Gee hire you for?"

"Find her brother."

"Didn't know Gee had a brother."

"Didn't think you would, he's not part of the family business. His name is Jake Rollins, he's a chemist."

"Never met him, just her sister, Chésará

."

"I just left her."

"She's a bad mutha fucka."

"So I noticed."

"Wild as hell. Into everything."

"I could see that, yeah."

"Pussy was good though."

"You fucked —" Freeze looked at me like I was stupid. "Nevermind. She got anything to do with the family business?"

"No, Gee's breakin' her off. You think Chilly had something to do with it?"

"Mrs. Childers does."

"If Chilly did have somethin' to do with it, your job is easy. All you gotta do is find the body. Chilly likes to make his shit real public. Make a statement, like André used to, you know what I'm sayin'." Freeze laughed. "I know you do, that used to be our thang. Remember?"

I laughed. "Yeah. I remember."

"So let me get this straight. Gee hired you to find her brother. Gee don't think Chilly's involved, Gee knows he's involved. So what does Gee want with you?"

"So I can prove it to the cops."

"Nick. This ain't nothin' you want any parts of."

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"I see this. I'll leave it alone."

"You a lyin' mutha fucka, Nick."

I got up from table. "Thanks for dinner, Freeze."

"Nick."

"Yeah."

"If shit gets wild," Freeze stood up. "I'm with you."

"Thanks, Freeze."

I left there thinking about Black.

Whether he respected me or not, the truth of the matter was that I ran out on him when he needed me most. But I wasn't about to let Bobby kill me over Camille just to save face with Black. But in spite of all that, Freeze was still for me. It would make my burden just that much heavier.

It started me thinking about the old days, the old crew. Black and Bobby. Jamaica and Freeze. I thought about the first time Black told us he was going to kill André. We knew he was planning something big when he called a meeting at The Late Night. Black never had meetings. In spite of that, we were late. Waitin' on Freeze, of course.

"Now that we're all here," Black said, as soon as we came through the door. "I bet

you all are wondering why I got you all over here."

"The thought had occurred to me," Bobby said, staring at me. The way he was looking, I knew then that he knew I was fuckin' Camille.

"I'm gonna kill André," Black declared.

There was complete silence in the room.

We all sat there looking at Black and one another, until Bobby started laughing. Everybody did at first, until we noticed Black wasn't laughing.

"You serious, Black?" Freeze asked.

"Deadly." Black flashed a rare smile.

"How you gonna do it?" I asked.

"What you gonna do? Just walk into his office and blast him?" Bobby inquired, but his eyes were still on me. Then he slowly turned to Black.

"No. I have a plan," Black said.

"You plannin' on taking over after he's dead, Black?" I asked.

"The gambling houses and the women, yes. But I'm gettin' out of the dope game."

Nobody was really surprised by that. We'd all seen it coming. After Vickie died in his apartment smoking cocaine, Black turned totally against drugs. He even stopped smokin' weed. And Black loved to smoke weed.

"We'd be givin' up a lot of money, Mike. I don't think that's good for business," Bobby said.

"Maybe. No. You're right, Bobby, it's not good for business. We'll just have to find different ways of making money. But when I walk around here and I see what it's done to the neighborhood." He looked at Jamaica. "To people. I just can't be involved in that anymore. Anybody who wants to is free to do whatever he wants once this is over. As long as you don't do business around here."

Black looked around the room.

"Bobby, you with me? I can't do this without you."

"You don't even have to ask me, you know I am," Bobby said.

"Even though it's not good for business?" Black asked him.

"Business will just have to suffer."

"Anybody else?" Black asked.

No one said a word.

"All right then. My plan is based on the fact that for every action there is a reaction. If certain things happened, I can get people right where I need them to be. Now, there are enough people who hate André to go around. Cops won't care, and as long as business doesn't suffer, no one else will care either."

"Just as long as everybody continues to get paid, you're right. Nobody will care." Bobby added.

"We have to kill Ricky. Him and André started out together. He'll try to take over. Benny and Dupree were loyal to André, so they gotta die too. And that's it. Now if André dies, Cazzie will try to move on us. So we have to kill him too. Killin' Cazzie will be harder, but not impossible."

"Go on," Bobby said.

"All right now, everybody pay attention. Benny and Dupree are the key to it all. They make the rounds every night to collect the money from all the houses. On Friday nights there's more than a quarter of a million dollars. They start at one o'clock, and by three thirty they'll be coming out of the last house. That's where we'll hit them. Nick, you, and Freeze will be waiting for them. As soon as they get to the car, you and Freeze blast them. Nick, you cover while Freeze gets the money."

"Done," I said. Good soldier, you know.

"Now, Benny and Dupree are dead and the money is gone, what's gonna happen next?" Black asked.

"Somebody will call Ricky's punk ass," Freeze said.

"Exactly. Someone in the house will call him to tell him about the robbery. Ricky will be at his after hours spot. Sitting in that office, just like he does every fuckin' night. As soon as he gets the call about the robbery, he'll call André and they'll meet at André's office. Bobby, when Ricky comes out of the office and starts to make his way through the crowd, you and Jamaica take him then."

"What about Cazzie?" I asked.

"He's the wildcard in all of this. Problem is, there's no way I can control his movements the way I did everybody else."

"Black," Jamaica said. "Let me take care of Cazzie. I know how to take him."

Black looked at Jamaica for a long time. He knew Jamaica was off the chain with that heroin. We all did. "Okay, I'll leave that all to you, Jamaica."

"What about your boy, André?" Freeze asked.

"When he gets to his office, I'll be there waitin' for him. Now for this to work, everything has to run on schedule." Black gave me, Bobby, and Jamaica a pager.

"What're these for?" Bobby asked. "I already got a pager."

"When you complete your assignment you page the next man. Three sevens if everything goes as planned. If anything goes wrong, you page the next man with all nines. When it's over, we all meet here. Anyone get nines, we abort and meet back

here. Any questions?"

It all worked out just like he planned it. Except for Jamaica disappearing, it all went off clean and easy. When he didn't show up afterwards at The Late Night nobody really gave it much thought. We all just figured he was off somewhere getting high. Like I said, we all knew Jamaica was off the chain with the heroin since Vickie died. He and Vickie were real close. They used to get high and hang out all the time. But, shit, hangin' out was all Vickie ever wanted to do anyway. I laughed out loud.

"What's so funny?" Wanda asked.

"Nothing really. Just thinking about Vickie."

"Vickie? What brought that on?"

"Been thinkin' a lot about the old days. You know. How Vickie died and the effect it had on things."

"It affected all of us."

"Yeah, I guess, but not like it did Jamaica. How is he anyway?"

"He says he's all right, but the last time I talked to him, I don't know, there was something funny about the way he was talking. Something about his tone brought me right back to when Vickie died."

"Where is he?"

"He's in the Bahamas. Black says he has gotten himself into a few things down there. I just hope that whatever he's into doesn't involve drugs, is profitable, and doesn't cause any of us any grief."

"You think he's back on?"

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"I don't know, Nick. It would be a real shame, because he worked very hard to get himself clean," Wanda said and she paused. "But Jamaica wasn't the only one who took Vickie's death hard. The one who took it the worst was Mike."

She was definitely right about that. And to be honest, I can't say I would have been any better. After all, she died in his apartment. Overdosed on pure cocaine he had there. Black never did any caine, but those days he would always keep some around 'cause women would do all kinds of shit for it.

That night we were hangin' out; when Black saw André, he gave him some pure. Black didn't get home until nine the next morning. He said he was getting ready to put a cut on it, but he was blasted and didn't feel like it. So he threw the bag on the coffee table and crashed on the couch. He had been asleep a couple of hours when Vickie came in. She had a key to all of our apartments. They kicked it for a minute, and then Black passed out again. When he woke up again and decided to get in the bed, the door to his bedroom was locked. Black knocked on the door but Vickie didn't answer. When Black noticed the bag was gone from the table, he kicked the door in and found her laying on the floor naked with the pipe still in her hand.

After that it was like something snapped inside of him. You wouldn't know it to see him or talk to him, but that was when he really earned the name, Vicious Black. The first time I really noticed it, he had called me and said, "Come scoop me up, I gotta make a run." Whenever he said that, we knew he was going to either collect money for André or hurt somebody for not paying. And you hated to see Black coming, 'cause you knew why he was there, and it was all bad. I picked Black up and we were on our way to see an old hustler named Wilson Goode.

"So what's up with good old Mr. Wilson?" I asked.

"He owes André fifty large," Black replied.

"For what? Wilson's a pimp. How'd André get his hooks into him?"

"Says Wilson came to him, wanting to borrow fifty grand. You know at twenty-five cents on the dollar André was more than happy to front it to him. When he couldn't pay, André put that ass to work. But he's been playin' André off for a couple of weeks now. Cynt said that Wilson was at her spot late one night and he dropped ten grand playing poker. Said he ha

d some young girl with him."

"Young girl and a old man, cause of trouble since the world began," I said laughing.

"I thought it was a two faced woman and a jealous man, that was the cause of trouble since the world began."

"Whatever, Black." We both laughed.

"I know the little honey he got himself hooked up with," Black said. "She's a fine ass bitch."

"Can I fuck her?"

"Don't waste your time. She thinks she is too pretty to move. Wasn't even worth the time it took for me to get undressed."

"I hate it when that happens."

When we got to Wilson's apartment I knocked on the door, but nobody answered. "I know he's in there. I hear them talking." Black stepped up to the door and listened for a second or two, then he put both of his hands on the door and pushed it. "Move back." Then he took a step back and kicked it in. Black stepped aside and I ran in with my gun out. Black followed me in calmly with his hands in his coat pockets. There was Wilson and two very pretty young ladies. Both of them were naked, and all Wilson had on was his underwear. On the coffee table was cocaine. Some rock and some powder and two or three pipes.

"What the fuck!" Wilson shouted. "What the fuck you mutha fuckas doing here? And my fuckin' door! Y'all gonna fix my door."

When Black saw the dope on the table his eyes narrowed.

"Black! You hear me talkin' to you nigga! Black! What the fuck is goin' on here?"

But Black didn't answer. He just stood there staring at the dope.

"André sent us," I finally said. "He wants his money."

"I'm a get him his money, Black. I just need a day or two to make some things happen. You tell him that."

"You two get dressed and get outta here," Black said to the women.

"They ain't gotta go nowhere. Y'all ain't gotta go nowhere. They were just about to leave."

"I ain't gonna say it again." And with that, both ladies got up and went in the bedroom. "Go with them, Nick." I did so, gladly.

While I was in there watching the ladies get dressed, I could hear Wilson yelling at Black, but Black never said a word. Once I escorted the ladies out, Black took a gun and a silencer out of his pocket. "Search the place, Nick. Find me some money." Black put the silencer on the gun, but the whole time he's staring at the table. I put on my gloves and tossed the place.

By this time, Wilson's whole attitude had changed. Now, with the ladies gone, he was beggin' Black to give him a couple of days to come up with the money.

"I found this under the mattress," I said, handing Black twenty grand.

"On the real, Black, I need that money to make this thing happen. Give me 'til tomorrow, Black. I'll make it worth while for both of you."

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Black stood up. I started for the door thinking that Black would just take the money and be back on that ass again tomorrow. But not this time. Black raised his gun and fired two shots to Wilson's head.

This is how it went. André would send Black to collect, and Black would kill them. After awhile, André sent Black away before he killed everybody that sold for him.

Wanda yawned and got up from the couch. "I'm going to get some coffee, you want some?" she asked.

"No, Wanda, I'm fine."

"I know." Wanda whispered.

She turned away and walked into the kitchen. I watched her walk. Although we had spent the last nine hours together, this was the first time I noticed how pretty Wanda was. Not the tall skinny girl we used to tease as kids. Before yesterday, it had been ten years since I had seen her. And I probably wouldn't have called her if I weren't in this trouble. I felt pretty selfish. She had spent the night fencing with Kirk. I know she's tired, but she has no plans for sleeping until she has the whole story. Black posted a million dollars to bail me out. They were my family and I would never turn my back on them again.

"Sure you won't have some?" Wanda said, with a deep yawn.

"I'm sure. Why don't you get some rest? I know you must be tired. Get some sleep and we'll start again in the morning when you wake up."

"I don't think so, Nick. You wanna know why?"

"Yeah, Wanda, tell me why."

"Because as soon as I went to sleep, you would leave and I'd never get the whole story. And I need to know the whole story. You do understand that, don't you, Nick?"

"I understand, Wanda."

"Good for you. Which reminds me. Why didn't you tell me about killing André?"

"Black said not to. He said if you ever asked, to ask you if the words conspiracy to commit murder mean anything to you counselor?"

Wanda rolled her eyes. "That's the same ten cent answer I got from him. Even though it didn't turn out that way."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." Wanda looked away.

Whatever it was, it was something to her, but I didn't push it. "Black's always thinking ahead, ain't he? Always thinking about us."

"That's just how he is, you know that. He cares. Even though he'll never admit to it. That's why this thing with you and Bobby over Camille hurts him so much."

"I'm sorry."

"Why don't you tell him yourself?"

I didn't have a reason.

* * *

Chapter Six

Saturday, July 11: 3:28 PM

The next afternoon I drove to Brooklyn to see Ben Josephs. I gave some thought to what I was doing. I was driving to Brooklyn to see a blackmailer. In Brooklyn, of all places. I hate Brooklyn. I pulled up in front of the lot. I didn't want to just walk in there and ask for him. So I decided to call and pose as a businessman who wanted to buy no less than five cars for a Limo service. That should be enough to get him to meet me somewhere. "Ben Josephs, please."

"He's out on a test drive with a customer. Can one of our other salesman help you?"

"He's not the owner?"

"No, Sir. Can one of our other salesman help you?"

"No, that's all right, thanks."

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Just a salesman, huh. Men will say anything to get some pussy. But the plan is still sound. What salesman could resist a five-car afternoon? So I parked my car, waited long enough for him to get back for his drive, and walked up on the lot. When a short balding white man approached me, I went into my act. "Hi there." Big smile, hand extended, "My name is Patrick Mitchell."

"Well, Mr. Mitchell, what can I show you?"

"Those Cadillac's there. I need five of them. I was looking for Ben Josephs, is he around?"

"He's right over there. I'll get him for you, Sir."

He practically ran to tell him. And good ole Ben did a trot over to me. "Mr. Mitchell." Big smile, breathing hard, hand extended. "I'm Ben Josephs, what can I do for you?" After what Chésará told me about his performance in bed, I had to bite my lip to keep from laughin' in his face.

"Well, Ben. You don't mind if I call you Ben?"

"No, Sir. Not at all."

"I run a Limo service and I need to buy five of your Cadillac's there."

"I'd be happy to show them to you, Sir."

I'll just bet that you would Ben. To sell me five Cadillac's you'd probably kiss my

ass from here to across the street.

I test drove one car, I liked it, I thought about actually buying it. Then reality set in and I remembered why I was there. I got out and picked another Caddy. Ben went quickly to get the keys. While he was gone I thought again about what I was doing there. The thought had occurred to me that this wasn't what I was hired to do. Mrs. Childers hired me to find her missing brother. Plain and simple. Not take some low rent blackmailer off her neck.

Mrs. Childers.

I closed my eyes and I could see her sitting in front me. Saw her smile, the need in her voice, calling out to me. Nick. That's why I was there. As Ben approached I closed my eyes again. This time I saw us naked and making love. Laying on my back with her lay on top of me. I touched her face with both hands and drew her closer. Our lips m

et.

Ben threw me the car keys. "You drive," I said, throwing him back the keys.

"Huh?"

"I wanna see if it's comfortable in the back seat."

"Okay. Yeah, this is for a Limo, right?" Ben asked.

We got in and Ben drove away. "What do you drive, Ben?"

"Black Acura."

"Ooooh."

"Yeah, boy, the women really go for it."

"Probably the only way a can't keep it up mutha fucka like you can get a woman."

"What you say to me, nigga?" Old Ben turned around and looked into the barrel of my .9.

"I said, it's probably the only way a can't keep it up mutha fucka like you can get a woman."

"Yeah, man, whatever you say. You can have the car. Please, just don't kill me. I got a family."

"Calm down. I don't want the car, Ben. But there is something I want from you."

"What, man?"

"You have a picture I want."

"What picture?"

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I hit him in the back of the head. Not hard. I didn't want him to wreck the car. "Don't insult my intelligence, Ben. The picture of you and Mrs. Childers. You're gonna give me that picture, now. You're gonna give me any copies you have, and if there is a negative, I want that too. And if I hear of you ever tryin' to contact Mrs. Childers again, I'll kill you. Slow. You feelin' me, Ben?"

"Yeah, man, I feel you."

"But to show you what a nice guy I am, Ben, I'm gonna let you keep the money you blackmailed outta her. All I want is that picture."

"I don't have it with me."

"Well, where is it?"

"At my house. I can get it for you and bring it to you tonight."

"I don't think so, Ben. Let's just go get it now."

"I can't go now. I don't get off work until six. I'll get fired if I leave now. Give me a break man."

"Give you a break." I looked at my watch. It was almost four. "I guess we'll be test driving cars for the next couple of hours, huh, Ben."

For the next two hours, Ben chauffeured me around Brooklyn and we got better acquainted. He wasn't a bad guy, for a blackmailer. He was ex-army, so we had

something to talk about. We even knew some of the same people. If it wasn't for the fact that he was blackmailing Mrs. Childers, we could have hung out.

Mrs. Childers. I couldn't get her out of my mind. I wanted to see her, talk to her, get to know her. Here you are again, fallin' hard for another man's woman. I imagined, but still couldn't imagine her being with him.

Once six o'clock rolled around we got in Ben's Acura and he drove to his house. He lived in a nice house in the East New York section of Brooklyn. "Wait here, I'll be right back," Ben said, and started to get out of the car.

"Yeah, right." I got out too.

"Wait a minute, man. My wife and kids are in there."

"What's your point?"

"I don't want her involved in this business."

"Good, then you'll be a good boy and get that picture. I'd hate to have to kill your wife and kids, but I will. Now let's go."

Ben unlocked the door to the house and we went in. The house was immaculate and smelled of dinnertime. "Your wife a good cook, Ben?"

"Yeah, good down home cook. Met her when I was stationed at Fort Mac in Georgia."

"Ben!" His wife yelled from the kitchen. "That you?"

"Yes, Renée."

"You're home on time for a change. You must not be feelin' well." She came out of the kitchen; she was a pretty woman. Naturally pretty, not done up, you know what I'm sayin'. No make up, no fake hair or nails. None of that. "I'm sorry, I didn't know you had company." She came toward me with her hand out. "I'm, Renée, Ben's wife."

"Patrick Mitchell. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"We were just about to have dinner. Have some?"

"No, I just came to get something from Ben and then I have to go, but everything smells delicious."

"We're having fried pork chops, baked macaroni and cheese, candied yams, collard greens, corn bread and freshly squeezed lemonade."

"Mmm, sounds good, but I really can't. But maybe you'll give me a rain check?"

"That's right, honey, Mr. Mitchell has to go."

"Nonsense. You know you want to. I can see it in your eyes. You look like a man who appreciates a good meal. You married, Mr. Mitchell?"

"Please call me, Patrick. And no, I'm not married."

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"When was the last time you had a home cooked meal?"

"I couldn't even tell you."

"Then it's settled, I insist."

"Well since you put it that way, Mrs. Josephs, I accept."

"Good. You just have a seat at the table. Ben, you call the children." I looked over at Ben as his wife went back in the kitchen. The frown on his face let me know how he felt about me staying for dinner. I didn't care; I was having fun with this. And besides; I was hungry and everything did smell delicious. Ben rolled his eyes and went to call the children to dinner.

Everything was wonderful; I made a complete pig of myself. She really was a good cook. Ben was pretty quiet during the meal, as one might expect for a man in his position. But his wife was a very entertaining conversationalist. I'm a sucker for a good conversation. Ben had a nice family, two very polite kids. After dinner, they excused themselves. His wife got up and cleared the table. "Ben always has a brandy after dinner. Would you like one, Mr. Mitchell? I mean Patrick."

"Thank you, that would be nice."

"What you think you doin'?" Ben whispered.

"Having a brandy after dinner, — with Ben." As soon as his wife and the children were out of eye and earshot, I took out my gun. "You go get those pictures. I'll be in

the kitchen with your wife."

Ben got up and walked away, while I joined her in the kitchen. "I just wanted to thank you for twisting my arm and having me to dinner, Mrs. Josephs."

"Please, call me Renée."

"Well, Renée, everything was wonderful. Where did you learn to cook like that?"

"I'm a country girl. My grandmother taught me. Didn't you know, all us country girls can cook like this?"

"Where you from?"

"Flowery Branch, Georgia. I know you never heard of it."

"No, I can't say that I have." I laughed, as Ben returned with an envelope. He handed it to me and I opened it and looked inside to verify the contents. I thought Ben was gonna faint. "Well, people, I really do have to go now, but, Ben, Renée, thank you very much for having me to dinner."

"It was our pleasure havin' you." Renée said, leading me by the arm to the front door.

"Anytime that you're in the neighborhood, promise me that you'll stop by."

"I don't get out to Brooklyn much, but I won't hesitate to stop by if the need arises. Right, Ben?"

"Right," Ben said, as he walked out the house.

"Pleasure meetin' you, Renée." I smiled seductively, her left eyebrow went up, and she blushed.

Once we reached the sidewalk, I stopped and turned to Ben. "That's a real nice family you have there, Ben."

"Thank you. You got what you came for, now get out of here," Ben said looking away. Tryin' to sound tough.

"Renée seems like a good wife. Too nice for you to be cheatin' on her and blackmailing women."

"Yeah, sure."

I took out my gun again and pointed it at his head. It was dark and besides, I got what I came for so I really didn't care who saw me now. "Don't act tough, Ben. You deserve to die for what you've done, and I will come back here and kill you if I hear that you've even called Mrs. Childers again. Get me?"

"You won't."

"When were you supposed to see her again?"

"Tonight."

"Where and when?"

"Ten o'clock at Halcyon."

And with that I walked to the train station.

* * *

Chapter Seven

Halcyon, on Smith St. in Brooklyn. I got there a little before ten and went inside. I looked around for Mrs. Childers, but she was nowhere to be found, so I took a seat in the back of the room so I could see the entrance. It was about eleven twenty before she finally showed up. She was wearing a powder blue dress that showed off her legs. Mrs. Childers had a seat at the bar, looking around for Ben. She ordered. For the next half hour I sat and watched her. I wanted to be sure that Ben didn't have a change of heart and show up. During that time I watched as she dismissed man after man who approached her. The list was long. Knowing I wouldn't fall prey to the same fate, I got up and approached her. I tapped her on the shoulder. "Mrs. Childers." She turned quickly and smiled when she realized who I was.

"Nick. What are you doin' here?" Mrs. Childers asked.

"I stopped in for a drink. Mind if I join you?" I asked quickly before she asked why I was in Brooklyn.

"Well." She scanned the room again. "I was supposed to be meeting somebody here, but I guess they're not going to make it."

"Then this must be my lucky night." I sat down next to her and signaled for the bartender. "Johnnie Black, straight up. Can I get you something?"

"Hennessy Martini, with a twist."

"So tell me, Mrs. Childers, what man would be foolish enough to stand up a beautiful woman like yourself?"

Mrs. Childers turned away and made one last look around the room for Ben, shrugged her shoulders, and turned to face me with a smile. "Who said I was waiting for a man? So, Nick, have you found out anything about Jake?"

"Not really. I did have a chance to look around his apartment. Do you know if he was working on something?"

"No. I really didn't get into all that stuff he was into. A little too far over my head."

I reached in my pocket and took out the picture of Jake and the mystery woman. "Do you know who this is in the picture with him?" I handed her the picture. She glanced at it for a second.

"I've never seen her before. Where did you get this?"

"That doesn't matter. Has he ever mentioned dating any other woman, other than Lisa Ellison?"

"I'm not my brother's keeper. He's very private."

"So how do you know Lisa?"

"He's been seeing Lisa for years now. He brings her around to parties, family gatherings, things like that."

"Now let?

??s talk about you, Mrs. Childers."

"Me? What about me?"

"You haven't exactly been honest with me."

"What do you mean? I've told you everything I know."

"About your husband, Mrs. Childers."

"Chilly. What about Chilly?"

"Well, Mrs. Childers, he's a little more than just involved with drugs. He controls most of the drug traffic uptown."

"And?"

"Don't you think that was worth mentioning?"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I didn't want to scare you off."

"I don't scare easily, Mrs. Childers. But that does change things."

"You want more money." She frowned and looked away, then turned back with fury in her eyes. "Is that what this is all about? Money?"

"No, Mrs. Childers, it's about you telling me what I need to know to do what you hired me to do."

"What do you want to know?"

"Well, let's start out with what I know and you can fill in the blanks. Chilly was a forth-level dealer for André Hammond until him and Ricky Combs were assassinated ten years ago. Vicious Black declared a dead zone where he wouldn't allow them to sell drugs." Mrs. Childers sat up straight in her chair. I had her attention now. Funny how the words Vicious Black have that affect in people. "Stop me if you want to add something."

"No, you're doing just fine," she said while playing with the straw in her drink.

"When Jimmy Knowles, Charlie Rock, and Vincent Martin attempted to kill Black, that started a war between him and what remained of André's and Cazzie Riley's organizations. Well, Black was successful in eliminating his enemies and Chilly took over. He made peace with Black and agreed to respect the dead zone."

"How do you know all this?"

"I have my sources, Mrs. Childers. So with all that history out the way, let's begin again. Why do you think that Chilly has something to do with your brothers disappearance?"

"Like I said, it's just a feeling, that's all." I could tell that I was making her uncomfortable, but she was cute when she squirmed, so I continued my line of questioning.

"That's not good enough, Mrs. Childers, there must be something else. Something you're not telling me. I've heard that if Chilly had something to do with this, I should be looking for a body."

"Don't say that, please. Jake is not dead."

"How do you know that? You know how your husband works. Public execution is his style. So if he were involved, a simple kidnapping wouldn't cut it. Now you tell me, what did Chilly want to see Jake about?"

"I don't know!" she said louder than she needed to. I finished my drink and waved the bartender over to bring me another.

"And one for the lady?" the bartender asked.

"No, I've got to go," she said, standing up to gather her things.

"No, please don't go. I didn't mean to upset you, Mrs. Childers. I just need to know what you know. Please, have another drink with me. I promise I won't push you."

She smiled at me.

It made my heart beat faster.

"Okay, but just one, then I really do have to go." Mrs. Childers reclaimed her seat and ordered. "Bring me another Hennessy Martini."

"With a twist," I said and smiled. And she smiled back. "So tell me about yourself. Your sister tells me y'all are from Philly. How'd you get to New York?"

"I wanted to get out of Philly." She let out a little giggle. "Had to really. Our parents were really tough on us. Never let us go anywhere, do anything. It was like being on lock down. One by one, they drove us all out of the house. When Jake graduated from high school, he just never came home that night. No one knew where he was or what happened to him, he was just gone. About six months later he came to my school to let me know that he was all right and that he was going to a small college in Pennsylvania. He told me where, and he made me promise that I wouldn't tell our parents. Jake said they didn't have a son anymore."

"Kinda cold."

"They deserved it. They're dead to me now. Two years later, I left too. I hated to leave Chéz, but she was too young for me to try to take care of both of us. So I did what I had to, to get enough money to get up here."

"What did you have to do?"

"That doesn't matter. I'm not proud of what happened. That was a long time ago. It's in the past and that's where it will stay."

"How'd you get hooked up with Chilly?"

"You really want to hear this, huh? — Okay. So I caught the first thing smokin' and

came here. When I got off the bus at Port Authority, Chilly was the first person I met. I was young, barely seventeen. I'd never been anywhere and he offered me the world. See my father was the type of guy who was always waitin' on some big deal or another he was tryin' to put together. But it never happened. He was always this close to movin' us up out the projects and into a nice house in the suburbs. He hated livin' in the projects. Said it wasn't a safe place to raise the three of us. That's why they were so hard on us. Especially me. He didn't want me to get involved with the wrong kind of guys. Well look at me now daddy," she said and raised her glass. "Anyway, Chilly was different. If Chilly said he was gonna do something he got up and made it happen. I liked that. He was nice at first, then." Her eyes dropped into her drink. "That war started and changed everything. Power changed him. I was just his showpiece, his toy. Something to show off to his boyz. But that was all show. Then the beatings started."

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"Why don't you leave him? Get away, go somewhere, start a new life for yourself."

"Sure. Just like that."

"Leave New York."

"I have, a few times, but he always finds me. Brings me back," she said matter of factly. "Or he gives me a reason to come back."

"How does he do that?"

"He hurts the things that are important to me."

"Chésará and Jake."

"Once I thought it was over. I went to Kansas City. I didn't tell anybody where I was going. I got a job as a teller in a bank. They were even talking about promoting me to customer service. You know, sit at a desk, open accounts, that kinda stuff. I had been there for six months when he found me. I told him I was happy and I wasn't coming back. Usually he — yells, he grabs, shakes me, hits me. But I was ready for that. He was going to have to kill me. But he said okay and left. But it wasn't over."

"I didn't think so."

"The next day Chéz called me crying. She said Chilly brought Jake to her apartment and he had a gun to Jake's head. He told her that if I didn't say I was coming back right now, he was going to kill both of them while I listened. I said no. Then I heard

the gun go off. Then Chéz screamed and said he'd shot Jake in the leg. I was back the next day."

I didn't know what to say.

"You want more? I got more stories just like that one. That was just one of his masterworks. That's why you have to get proof that will stand up in court. I've seen him go to jail and come right back."

"Now you're talking like you think Jake is dead."

"I don't like to think about it. I know it's possible. The longer he's gone, the more I think about it." Her smile was gone. I thought I saw a tear run down her cheek, but she wiped it away quickly. "So, you tell me your story, Nick?"

"Well, there's not much to me. Ex-army, we've been doin' this for about a year now."

"We?"

"I have two partners."

"They have names I'm sure." Her smile had returned as quickly as it left.

"Monika and Jett."

"Monika? A lady private detective, huh. That's something that you don't hear of very often," Mrs. Childers smiled and gave me a wide-eyed innocent look. "I used to read Nancy Drew when I was a little girl."

"I used to read Mickey Spilane mysteries."

"You have any family?"

"Yeah."

"It doesn't sound like you guys are one big happy family."

"Not them, me."

r /> "I see." She finished her drink and signaled for the bartender. "Looks like there are some things you don't like talking about either."

"You're right, there are some things about me that I don't like talkin' about. But I think everybody does."

"That's true. Everybody has secrets. Something only they or maybe one other person know. I know I have some secrets that will die with me."

I smiled to myself knowing that not only did I know one of her secrets, but it was also the reason I was here. "Tell me one," I said.

"No, then it wouldn't be a secret any more. You tell me one of your secrets."

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"Okay, but just one. I didn't just happen to be here."

"What?"

"I knew you were going to be here, so here I am."

"How did you know I was gonna be here?" she leaned forward and asked.

"I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"You said tell me one, if I told you that would be two."

"That's not fair. Come on, tell me. And don't give me that line about having to kill me. That line is so worn out."

"All right, I'll tell you," I leaned forward and motioned for her to move closer. Mrs. Childers leaned toward me and I whispered, "I'm a private investigator, I wanted to see you so I found out where you were going to be."

"You're not goin' to start stalking me, are you, Nick?"

I love the way she says my name. "No, Mrs. Childers, nothing like that."

"I don't have to be afraid of you, do I?"

"You never have to be afraid of me. I'll never let anything happen to you."

"Oh, so you're my own personal protector, huh?"

"At your command," I replied quickly and playfully. But I knew that at this point I would have done anything for her.

"Well if that's the case," Mrs. Childers said and smiled at me. "I could think of a person or two that I wouldn't mind getting rid of."

I thought about Chésará, Something we can share. I like the thought of that. "Now see, I could say something now, but then I'd be giving away somebody else's secret."

"So," she said. "Tell me anyway. Then it will be a secret we can share."

"No. Who do want to get rid of?"

"My husband. Remember, that is way I hired you."

"To get rid of your husband."

Then Mrs. Childers got very still and looked me straight in the eye. "Yes."

We sat there staring at each other for a few seconds before she sat back and said. "And don't try to change the subject. Tell me is this secret somebody, somebody your involved with?"

"No. She's just somebody I met on a case."

"A woman. Is she pretty, Nick?"

"Not as pretty as you."

"Then I know you don't look at her the way you look at me."

"How do I look at you?"

"Like you want me."

"Do I really? And what if I do?"

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"If you do, then that would give us something to talk about," Mrs. Childers said softly. She was seducing me with the sound of her voice and her eyes. "But not while you work for me. Isn't there some type of ethical thing that says we shouldn't become personally involved?"

"No, that's doctor/patient confidentiality that you're talking about. It's almost required for you and me to become personally involved."

"Maybe, Nick. But not tonight. Besides, I'm ready to go."

"Where do you want to go?"

"It's not where I want to go, it's where I'm going. And that place is home."

I signaled for the bartender and paid the tab. We walked slowly to her car and talked. Talked about nothing really.

"Good night, Nick."

"Good night, Mrs. Childers." What else could I say?

* * *

Chapter Eight

Thoughts of that night haunt me like a bad dream that never goes away. I know I'll never forget that night. Bobby with his gun in my mouth, screaming that he was

gonna kill both me and Camille. It should have never happened. But I was gone, too far gone. Camille had me, and I couldn't leave her alone. I knew when I met her that she was with Bobby, but it didn't seem to matter to me. It definitely didn't matter to her.

I had never met any woman like Camille. She was fascinating to be around and to talk to. And her voice, the way she spoke with that Barbados accent, Shit! It simply blew me away. Her dark complexion, her flawless body, and those dark eyes. The way she'd look at me when we'd make love. For too long after that, when I'd close my eyes, I'd see those eyes looking up at me.

It began the first time I saw her. I was with Black in his office at The Late Night when she came in with Bobby. Camille walked right up to me. "Bobby, introduce me to this handsome specimen of a man."

Bobby's eyes narrowed when he looked at her. "That's, Nick."

That look was my first warning, but I ignored it and each warning that would follow. Camille stepped closer, put her left hand on my chest and looked up at me. "That's no way to introduce somebody, Bobby. My name is Camille Augustus. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, and what is your name?"

"Nick Simmons." I answered, and quickly backed up off her. But she had me then and she knew it. Each time I saw her after that, Camille made that point clear.

When she'd call me, I'd come.

What she wanted, I got for her.

What she said, I did, without so much as a kiss.

I was riding with Black the night Camille decided she would have me. She paged me at 2:45 in the morning and I quickly called her back.

"Come see me. I want to talk. We never have enough time to just sit and have a chat."

"Now?"

"Of course, now. Now is when I want you." Camille hung up the phone and I turned to Black.

"Booty call," he said.

"No, just a chat."

"Yeah, right. Nobody calls at damn near three in the morning to just talk. Talk about fuckin' maybe."

I don't know if he knew where he was dropping me off and at the time, I didn't care. I knocked on her door, but there was no answer. Maybe I had taken too long and she had fallen asleep. I waited awhile and knocked again. She opened the door dressed in a red gown and robe, which left nothing to the imagination. "Come in, Nick. I was beginning to think that you weren't coming."

We talked and laughed until the sun was shining brightly the next morning. I admired her beauty, the way her dark skin over powered the red of her gown. Camille commanded my attention in more ways than one. Then she touched my hand and drew me to her. I ran my hand across her shoulder. "Kiss me, Camille." She patted my hand and stood up. "Stand up, Nick." I complied. Camille looked up at me and undressed me without breaking eye contact.

I stood naked before her and she ran one hand across my chest while the other glided

effortlessly along my length. She gently grabbed the back of my neck and drew our lips together, but only for a second. Camille eased me back down on the couch and ran her tongue over her lips. Then Camille introduced my length to her moistened lips. Her eyes still locked in mine. She slid her lips across what seemed to be every inch of it. Then she smiled and opened her mouth. It was soft and wet; if she had teeth I never knew it. She moved her head up and down in a very slow almost methodical motion. My excitement only intensified as I watched her, watching me. It was like slow motion, prolonging each stroke.

"Nick!" Wanda yelled.

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"Huh?"

"Try to stay with me here. This is a little too important for you to be day dreaming."

"I'm sorry, Wanda, I was just thinking, that's all."

"You were just telling me that you went to your office to meet Monika and Jett. And
— "

Sunday, July 12, 8:19 AM

The next morning I arrived at my office to find Monika waiting for me. She had followed Chilly, and I not only wanted, but needed to hear her report. On the way home the night before and on the way there that morning, I gave some serious thought to this thing I was developing for Mrs. Childers and my promise to leave other men's women alone. No one really understood, and I never tried to explain it to anyone, except Monika. She understood. Over the years that promise has kept me from becoming seriously involved with many women. Seems like the women I take an interest in are all married, living with a man, got a man back home or whatever.

When I arrived at the office, Monika was there waiting.

"It's about time you dragged your ass in here," Monika said.

"Report."

"Yes, Sir." Monika smiled and rolled her eyes. "I followed Chilly and wifey to

Aureole, a restaurant on East 61 street. They met a man and a woman, both of Hispanic decent. The male was approximately five feet ten inches tall, dressed in a two-piece dark blue suit, light blue shirt, and enough jewelry to make you notice. The female, approximately five six, red dress, fuck me pumps. I got video and still pictures, they should be ready soon."

"Video?"

"Yes video. Jett gave me these photosensitive sunglasses with a micro-miniature camera. The images are recorded using a standard video recorder, or it can be fed into a video transmitter in a remote location."

"Have to start callin' that boy Q."

"You keep givin' him money, Mr. Bond, he keeps buying new shit. Anyway, I was able to drop a bug on the back of Chilly's chair. There's the transcript."

"Anything we want?"

"Maybe. Page five. I circled it."

"Hispanic male: I took care of mine, Chilly. What about yours? Chilly: Not yet, should be another day, maybe two. But I don't see a problem here."

"It's pretty thin, right?" Monika asked.

"You're right. He may be talking about Jake, maybe not. There's just not enough here."

"The rest of the conversation was just small talk."

"Okay. You stay on Chilly. See where that leads us. Anything on those files? You find out what that formula is for?"

"Nothing yet. I should hear back from my guy sometime today I hope."

"Let me know as soon as you hear from him."

"What about you? What did you do?"

"Talked to the sister, Chésará. Other than trying to flirt, I didn't get anything we didn't already know. You heard from Jett?"

"Said he'd be here early. He should be here soon."

Almost on cue, Jett came through the door.

"Morning, people."

"Report."

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"I'm fine, Nick, and how about you, Monika?"

"I'm fine, Jett." Monika giggled.

"Report."

"Completed surveillance set up of the house. I was able to pick up cell phone frequencies for Chilly and two guy's that appear to be his top lieutenants. I reviewed the tapes of the house. Noda. But that wasn't the highlight of the evening. I copied and reviewed the videotapes we found in Jake's safe. Bad boy, that one."

"Figures, watching other people fuck would be the highlight of the evening for a pervert like you," Monika said.

"That ain't it. I think I found something interesting." Jett handed me two pictures.

"Damn, she got a big mouth. Is that what I think it is?" They were stills he had extracted from the videos. "What's so interesting about this?" I asked, and handed the pictures to Monika.

"Look close. I don't think that's the same mystery woman from the first picture."

"I think he might be right, Nick. I think I saw a picture of this one too, but she had clothes on so I didn't pay her much attention. And there was a picture with the two of them. Looked like it might have been taken at the same party as the picture you been showing of Jake."

"Where is it?"

"I put it back in the safe."

"Great. I'd rather not show this picture around."

"Guess you gotta go back and get the other pictures, Nick," Monika said. "Want me to go with you?"

"No, you stay with Chilly." I got up and started for the door.

"How are you and the Mrs. doin'?" Jett asked.

"There's more to this than she's tellin' me."

"How do you know?"

"Just a feeling," I said, closing the door behind me.

I drove back to Jake's apartment, let myself in, opened the safe, and got the pictures that I had come for.

"That's strange."

I was on my way out the door when I thought about the fact that we never found any camera equipment in either of our searches. I went through the apartment again. Nothing. So I walked out of the apartment and two white men in suits met me.

Cops.

"Shit."

"Hold it right there, pal."

"Can I help you gentlemen?"

"Yeah. Assume the position. I'm sure it ain't your first time."

I hit the wall with a little help from my new friends. One looked over my ID and the other looked at the pictures in my pocket. "You mind coming with us?"

"Am I under arrest?"

"No. We just want to ask you some questions."

"What type of questions?"

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"We'll talk about that when we get there."

So there I was sitting alone in the interrogation room, waiting. It had been more than an hour before the door opened and Detective Kirkland walked in with that shit-eating grin on his face.

"Nick Simmons. What's it been, ten years?"

"Ten years, Kirk.

"Pat, this is one of Vicious Black's old foot soldiers. But he dropped out of sight ten years ago."

"Where you been, Simmons?" Detective Richards asked.

"Army training, Sir."

"Oh. Another smart ass, huh."

"Yeah, yeah, Kirk. What's this all about?"

"I just wanted to see you, Nick. It's been a long time. So when I heard you were in here, I just had to stick my hand in. And what do I pull out? Do you know?"

"No. But I'm sure you'll enlighten me."

"Tell me something, Nick, what were you doing when the detectives picked you up?"

"Visiting a friend."

"They tell me that you're some type of private investigator. You working on something? Maybe something having to do with your friend?"

"Just visiting, Kirk."

"What's your interest in those women in the picture the detectives took off you?"

"They were cute. I happen to like women."

"Why do you say, were?"

"Excuse me."

"I'm sorry. I forgot you went to Vicious Black University. I'll break it down for you. Why are you referring to those women in the picture in past tense?"

"I didn't mean anything by it. Why?"

Richards dropped the picture I took from Jake's safe on the table in front of me.

"What's your interest in these two women?"

"Why?"

Richards drew back his hand to hit me, but Kirk grabbed him. Vintage good cop bad cop. Corny, but I played along. "What's with him, Kirk? I just wanted to know why. Am I being changed with something having to do with those two women?"

"Nick, I know you know something you're not telling me. I'm thinking that since you call yourself a private investigator, that you got a case and you're trying to protect

your client."

"So far your right."

"I thought as much." Kirk pulled out a chair and sat down next to me. "But here's the problem with that, I know more about these two women than you do. So you need to know what I know."

"I'm still with you."

Kirk held out his hand and Richards handed him more pictures. He handed them to me. The same two women, but these weren't taken at some party. These were taken at the morgue. "Both of them died of an overdose of cocaine."

"You think I had something to do with it?"

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"No. But one of them had your friends card on her person at the time of her death."

"Were they found together?"

"I will only answer your questions if you answer mine," Kirk said.

"Fair enough."

"What is your interest in these women?"

"I'm trying to find a missing person and I have, or should I say had reason to believe that these women may be able to help me find him."

"Jake Rollins, he the one you're looking for?"

"Were the two of them found together?"

"Answer his question!" Richards yelled.

"What's with him, Kirk?"

Richards came at me again, but good cop held him back. "They were found about two weeks apart. Now, Jake Rollins, is he the one you're looking for?"

"Yes."

"Who's your client?" Richards asked.

"What's your interest in two women that died of a cocaine overdose?"

Kirk smiled. "These weren't your everyday overdoses."

"What do you mean?"

"Who's your client?" Richards asked again.

"That comes under the heading of privileged information." This time Richards swung on me, so I put him on his back.

Kirk grabbed me.

"Get out of here, Richards!" He picked himself off the floor and left the room. Once he was gone Kirk smiled at me like a kid who knew a secret. "What makes these different is that they had all the symptoms of a cocaine overdose, but there wasn't any trace of cocaine in their systems. And there are more just like them. We just found this one last night. Now, what do you know about that?"

"I don't know anything about it, Kirk. I'm just looking for Rollins. I found that picture in his apartment, and I thought they might know where to find him. I don't know anything about any cocaine." I knew from the start that this had a cocaine flavor to it and it wouldn't be long before Kirk connected Jake to Mrs. Childers and then to Chilly. But now wasn't the time for me to tell Kirk that. Right now, I had to get out of here and talk to Mrs. Childers.

"Okay, Nick, you're free to go. But I need answers."

"Can I have my picture back?"

Mrs. Childers had the answers we both needed.

* * *

Chapter Nine

I left a message on Mrs. Childers voice mail, telling her to meet me at Jimmy's on Fordham Road, "Now!" I drove straight ther

e and waited. She arrived two hours and forty-three minutes later. I'd had dinner, barbecue ribs with onion marmalade, autumn salad with raspberry vinaigrette and read over the transcript of lunch at Aureole, with the Childers and the Hispanic couple, while I waited. The food was good, so the wait, although long, wasn't too bad. Mrs. Childers arrived dressed impeccably, as usual. Her makeup was flawless, but in good taste. Her eyes were ablaze as she came toward me. Each step she took was taken to send a message. She was mad at me.

"So what's with this now business?"

"You want to start telling me the truth now, Mrs. Childers?"

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"This again." She gave me attitude and I loved it. "Look, I already told you, I don't know anything else to tell you. My brother is missing. I want you to find him. That's it."

"Good night, Mrs. Childers." I got up from the bar.

"Where are you going?" She touched my hand. The helpless Mrs. Childers had returned. I continued the game.

"I'll have a courier deliver a check for the refund of your retainer." I even started to walk off. She held my hand tighter.

"Please don't go. Sit down, please."

I sat down, trying my best to act like I was reluctant. "Now, you have to start telling me everything you know. Now."

"Nick, I have told you everything I know."

"Okay, lets start with what was your brothers involvement with your husband?"

"I don't know. Neither of them would tell me anything about what they were doin'."

"What was your brother involved in?"

"This is stupid, Nick. How many times can I say this? I just don't fuckin' know any thing. Jake never told me anything about what the fuck he was doin'. Do you

understand me now?"

"This picture was taken at the same party as the picture you gave me. I got it out of your brothers safe." I took out the picture and handed them to her. "Who are they?"

"This one is Pamela Hendricks. And that looks like LaShawn. I don't know what her last name is. She came to the party with Pamela."

"Does your brother know them?"

"I don't keep up with all of Jake's friends."

"Does your brother know them?"

"He might have met Pamela at some party. And LaShawn runs with Rocky, so he probably knows her too."

"What were they doin' at the party, Mrs. Childers? Who invited them?"

"I did."

"Who are they? How do you know them?"

"I've known Pamela for years. She was my supervisor at the bank when I was in Kansas City."

"What does she do, fly in for parties?"

"No, Pamela got a job at Manhattan Bank as an Area Manager and she moved here years ago."

"Banker, huh. She have any involvement with your husband?"

"Not that I know of. She knows him, naturally. But I don't involve myself at all with Chilly's business. So even if she did have some business with Chilly, I wouldn't know it."

I was starting to believe her. She really didn't know anything or she was giving me an academy award winning performance. Either way, it didn't change anything.

"What's does any if this have to do with Pamela?"

"She's dead." I dropped the morgue pictures in front of her for impact. I picked them up along with mine. I figured Kirk must have wanted me to have them since he left them sitting there.

"My God."

"The police think she died of a cocaine overdose."

"The police."

"Yes, the police, Mrs. Childers."

"What do the police know about Jake?"

"They know he's missing."

"So they're looking for him?"

"In connection with these overdose's. Pamela had Jake's card on her when the police found her body. LaShawn, whoever she is, died about the same time Jake is supposed to have disappeared."

"And you think that has something to do with Jake disappearing?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Childers, I was hoping you would tell me."

"I don't know." She looked away.

"Well tell me something you do know."

Mrs. Childers looked back at me and smiled playfully. "I know how you know so much," she said, as if nothing that I was sayin' had any importance.

"Excuse me."

"I know some people too, Nick."

"And what are they telling you?"

"That you used to roll with Mike Black. Not only that, y'all came up together. Lived on the same block. They tell me that you were his enforcer. You were good at it too."

"Oh really."

"Yes, really. André's muscle. Let me see." She was having fun with this. Too much fun. But at least she had a playful side. She always seemed so distant. Like there was always something else she was thinking about. But she was all smiles now. "It was you, Vicious Black, Bobby Ray, Jamaica and Freeze. You and Freeze used to work together." She laughed. "So you're no stranger to how Chilly does his business. You used to work the same way. I heard you and Freeze were bad boys back in the day." She waved a chastising finger at me. But she was right; me and Freeze have done some shit for Black.

While André focused his attention on selling drugs, Black chose to make his money on gambling, prostitution, loan sharking, and number running. More so after Vickie OD'ed in his apartment. I remember one New Years Eve, Black closed all the gambling houses, in spite of the money he knew he'd make that night, and had a party for everybody that worked for him. Which was nice, or so we all thought. The party was held at one of the house that was run by Gary Banks. Like everybody else, Banks made a pledge to Black not to sell drugs, which to Black was rule number one.

The party was wild, with plenty of food, drink, and woman naturally. Everybody was having a good time, except Black and Bobby. They, for the most part, sat at a table in the back of the room and talked quietly amongst themselves. At one point in the evening, Black walked up to me at the bar and asked, "You havin' a good time?"

"Yeah, man, shit, havin' a ball," I said to a very serious looking Black. I then turned my attention back one of the women that worked at the house. I began to walk off and take her upstairs to one of the rooms, when Black grabbed me by the arm.

"Nick! Have fun, but you and Freeze don't drink too much tonight, I got something important I want y'all to do later."

"No problem. Drinkin' ain't what I got in mind right now," I replied then went on to handle my business.

At midnight everybody got together in the main room to drink champagne and bring in the New Year. Black said a few words, and then he went and reclaimed his seat next to Bobby. About three in the morning, Wanda went around and said goodbye to everyone and Black walked her to her car. When he returned he looked at Bobby and nodded his head. Bobby got up and the two of them started goin' around room to everybody and handed each one an envelope. After receiving it, each one quietly left the house. I called Freeze over, "Something's about to happen," I said.

"What you talkin' 'bout, Nick?"

"Check it. Everybody's leavin'. Either Black or Bobby hands them an envelope, and then they leave."

"I know. Black just givin' everybody a little somethin', you know, breakin' them off a little change."

"Oh, okay, cool," I said to Freeze, but I had a feelin' that it was more than that. He waited until Wanda was gone, which meant he planned to do something that he wanted Wanda to have no part in. Black always has been very protective of Wanda and her involvement in the business. His waiting until she was gone only meant one thing.

After a while, almost everyone was gone. All of the women, which let me know the party was over, except Cynthia. Cynt is still the only woman that runs a house for Black. In fact, the only people left were the ones who ran houses and a few of the guy's that ran numbers or did loan sharking.

Jamaica walked over to the band and sent them home. He said a few words to Bobby and left with them. Once Bobby locked the door, it was on. Black got up and walked to the front of the room. "I wanted to thank everybody for comin' out and spending the New Year with us."

"We gonna get a bonus too, Black?" Banks yelled out.

Black looked annoyed by the question.

"Everybody is gonna get theirs, nigga, trust me," Bobby said.

"I've known everybody in this room for a long time," Black continued. "I even like most of you. I don't know if y'all like me or not, and to be honest, it really doesn't matter. What does matter is that you trust me, and that I can trust you. That's what makes us a family; trust, loyalty, and honor."

With that Bobby began walking around the room and continued to pass out envelopes. He stopped in front of me and Freeze and handed us our envelope. "You and Freeze go stand by Mike," Bobby whispered before moving on. We got up and walked over to where Black was standing. He motioned for us to sit down and he continued talking.

"In order for us to continue to earn a livin', we have all chosen to live by certain rules. Rules that were put in place to insure that we can do that. Rules that each person in this room has sworn to me that they will uphold over everything else." Black started walking around the room. "Anybody who doesn't follow these rules puts all of us in danger. I spent a lot of time thinking about this; tryin' to give the betrayal of these rules a name. I even went to the library and did some research on the subject."

Even though everybody laughed, this really didn't surprise anybody. Black going to the library, I mean. Although he basically stopped going to class when he was fifteen, Black read everything he could get his hands on.

"The word I came up with is treason. According to the American Heritage dictionary treason means, the betrayal of ones country, by aiding the enemy. It comes from the Latin word traditio, which means a handing over. But I prefer the Columbia Encyclopedia's definition better. Treason is the legal term for various acts of disloyalty. English law originally distinguished high treason from petty treason. Petty treason was the murder of one's lawful superior, or the murder of his master by an apprentice. High treason was a serious threat to the stability or continuity of the state. Shit like attempts to kill the king, or the queen, or to wage war against the kingdom. Especial

ly cruel methods were used in executing traitors.

"Now to avoid the abuses of the English law, treason was specifically defined in the U.S. Constitution. Article 3 of the Constitution says that treason shall consist only in waging war against the United States or in giving aid and comfort to its enemies. And that conviction may be had only on the testimony of two witnesses to the same overt act or on confession in open court.

"The most treasonous activity in American history was the planned surrender of the fort at West Point to the British. It was to be carried out by a general, who I'm sure all of you have heard of, named Benedict Arnold. His plan was discovered when a British soldier was captured with a document detailing the surrender. I bet most of y'all didn't know that," Black smiled. "I know I didn't."

He was right, 'cause I sure didn't know that shit either.

"Nick, you and Freeze get a bottle and pour everybody a drink," Black said. Once the glasses were filled, Black raised his glass. "By the way, several men were convicted of treason in connection with the Whiskey Rebellion," Black laughed and downed his drink. "But they were pardoned by George Washington."

Everybody laughed with him.

Now Black was standing right in front of Banks, and Bobby was standing behind him. "I like the British laws on treason better than the American. So, I consider selling drugs to be a serious threat to the stability or continuity of this organization. All of a sudden, Bobby grabbed Banks and held his arms. Black hit him in the face, once, twice, three times, four times. "Gary Banks," Black said and hit him again. "You're being charged —" Black hit him again. "With treason!" and he hit Banks again.

Bobby let Banks go and he fell to the floor. "Pick him up and tie him to a chair," Bobby commanded as Black walked away. Freeze and I followed Bobby's order and put Banks in a chair.

"Wait a minute, Black. I swear to you, I quit dealin', man," Banks said in protest, as we tied him up.

Black simply said, "Freeze." And Freeze went to work on Banks. Freeze had learned his craft directly from Black; and Freeze was brutal. Betray, — Mike Black, — shit, Freeze lost his mind beatin' Banks.

Bobby stepped up to me and handed me an eyedropper. "What's this?"

"Acid," Bobby said quietly.

The beatin' went on for a good five minutes while everyone in the room looked on. Some people started to leave, but Black stopped them. He wanted to be sure that everyone there saw what was happening. Banks was gonna die that night and Black wanted to be sure all of them knew why. Then Black said, "Freeze." And with that Freeze stopped.

"I swear, man, I quit dealin'," said a now bloody Banks.

"I knew you were gonna say that," Black said. "And I figured that it wouldn't be fair if I were judge, jury and executioner." Bobby cleared his throat. "Okay, Bobby thought it wouldn't be fair. So, you are being judged by your peers. Once you're found guilty, Freeze and Nick will execute you."

Bobby walked over and pulled up a chair next to Banks. "What you have here is an opportunity to admit what you did and accept the consequences."

"What's the difference; y'all gonna kill me anyway!" Banks shouted.

"No. If Black can't prove that you're sellin' drugs, you can walk out of here with my humble apology," Bobby explained.

"No," Black said. "The difference is that I'm givin' you a chance to man up and admit that you betrayed everybody in this room. Does that sound fair to you?" Black asked sarcastically.

Banks didn't answer.

"Nick."

I stepped up to Banks and tore the shelves off his shirt. I held the eyedropper over his arm. I squeezed the dropper once and one drop hit his arm.

Banks screamed in pain.

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"Does that sound fair to you?" Black asked again.

"Yes, shit, yes!" Banks yelled.

"Nick." I hit the other arm this time. Banks screamed again. There was no sound in the room. No one said a word, nobody moved. They all stood and watched as me and Freeze took turns beatin' Banks and then burnin' him with acid.

"Admit what you did, Banks, so we can all go home," Bobby said.

"I didn't do nothing, Bobby, I swear."

"Freeze," Black said, and Freeze happily resumed his brutal beating.

After what seemed to be a long time, Black stepped up to Banks, "Are you ready to man up, Banks?"

"I keep telling you, Black! I didn't do shit!" Banks protested.

"Doc," Black said.

"Yes, Black," Doc said, with a very scared look on his face. Doc ran the gambling in the house and was probably thinking that he would suffer the same fate as Banks.

"I want you to go behind the bar and reach your hand behind the bottle setup next to the cash box. Let me know what you find."

Doc walked very slowly to the bar and did what he was told. He reached behind the setup. "There's another cash box back here."

"Pull it out and open it," Black demanded. "Tell us all what you find."

Doc opened the box, "Drugs and money, Black."

"That shit ain't mine, Black," Banks screamed. "I swear on my mamas grave, I don't know nothing about that! You planted it there."

"Doc, has anybody other than the bartender been behind the bar tonight or any night for that matter?"

"No," Doc said.

"How do you know that?" Black asked, knowing the answer.

"It's a house rule," Cynt said. "Nobody goes behind the bar but the bartender. How stupid can you be, Banks? Bad enough you're dealin', but why you gotta do it in the house. It ain't gonna do nothin' but bring the cops down on all of us. Fuckin' fool. You deserve to die."

"Thank you, Cynt," Black said. "I'm glad I didn't have to be the one to say it."

"Fuck you, Cynt!" Banks yelled.

"Fuck you, Banks. Stupid mutha fucka," Cynt responded as she stepped up and slapped Banks in the face.

"Black, you gotta believe me. I don't know nothin' 'bout that shit. It must be Earl's dope."

"Jamaica," Black said.

We all looked around and there stood Jamaica with Earl. He too had been beaten badly. "You know I was selling that shit for you, Banks! You said we could make that paper and Black would never know it, " Earl said.

"Any questions?" Black asked as he looked around the room.

Again, no one said a word.

"Tie him up next to his friend," Black said to Jamaica. When he finished, Jamaica moved away and Bobby handed me and Freeze each a .9. "Gary Banks, a jury of your peers has found you guilty of treason. The sentence is death."

Bobby walked behind the chairs and placed a black hood over their heads and moved out of the way.

Black looked at me and Freeze, "Fire."

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We both emptied a clip in them.

When it over, I drove Black home. I asked him, "How'd you know Banks started dealin' again?"

Black just looked at me like I was stupid or something. "I know everything that goes on in my organization. Remember that. Never get to far removed from anything you're in charge of, Nick."

Mrs. Childers was right I knew exactly how Chilly handled his business. But by now, she was talkin' all over herself, "The story goes that you and Bobby Ray fell out over some woman and you cut out."

"True story." It made me a little uncomfortable that she knew.

"Tell me about it, Nick."

"You seem to know the story, so there's nothing to tell."

"There's more to your dark side. That the family you don't like talking about, Nick?"

"If you really gotta know, yes, Mrs. Childers, that's the family I don't talk about. I ran out on Black when he needed me most."

"Mike Black," she said in a way that made me a little jealous.

"You know him?"

"Of course I know him, everybody knows Mike Black. After Chilly made peace with him, we got invited to all his parties. He always threw the best parties. He used to have them at some mansion out on the Island."

"I r

emember those parties. Those were the days. But those days are dead and gone. You and I need to focus on the here and now. I need to know how to find Rocky."

"Rocky doesn't come around much. He just shows up when he needs to. I really don't know how to contact him. Even though he buys from Chilly, he doesn't like him."

"I haven't found anybody who does like your husband, Mrs. Childers. But we'll pass that for now. How does Rocky do business?"

"He usually sends somebody."

"Do you know if he knows Pamela Hendricks?"

"If he knows her, they met the same way, at one of our parties."

"It's not gonna take the cops long to put all this together and tie it all back to Chilly. But that's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Yes, but there is no evidence. Nick, I've seen Chilly walk in and out of jail too many times to be excited about this. If they pick him up now, it will just make him mad and he'll take it out on me."

"You're right. Rocky is the one who's tailor made to step off for this."

"What do you mean?"

"Two women OD on cocaine, both of them know your brother. Rocky, his childhood friend is a dealer and one of the dead women works in a bank. It has money laundering written all over it. What is Jake's involvement in this? I know. You don't know, but if I do find him, he is poised to take a fall for conspiracy."

"I never thought about it that way. Nick, you just have to find him."

The longing in her voice set me off.

It made my will stronger, more determined to find him. Mrs. Childers was right about one thing, as far as the evidence went; none of this had anything to do with Chilly. The more I thought about the transcript and that thing about problems being taken care of, the more I was convinced that it was Jake he was talking about.

With all that had happened, I had completely over looked the one person who might be able to put all this together for me.

Lisa Ellison.

She would be my target for the night.

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I looked at Mrs. Childers. I wanted to stay and talk to her. But I put aside that thought and focused on what I was doing. It was better that way.

"Tell me about Lisa Ellison."

Mrs. Childers rolled her eyes and called for the bartender. "Hennessy Martini with a twist."

Without answering my question, she waited for the bartender to return with her drink. I thought about asking my question again, then I decided to rephrase it. "Why don't you like her, Mrs. Childers?"

"Because she's a dizzy air head bitch, who thinks she's the shit, but she's not. She's just a stupid air headed bitch, who's so caught up in her own quasi bourgeois lifestyle, that she don't know her ass from a hole in the ground. The fake bitch."

"So you don't like her, huh?"

"No, Nick, I hate the fake ass bitch."

"What does she do for a living?"

"She works for Armstrong Direct."

"What's that?"

"It's some bullshit marketing firm. She's some type of bullshit director."

"Hmm."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, hmm."

"You know what I mean, Nick, don't be funny."

"I mean your brother seems to have a thing for professional women with lofty positions. They even look alike."

"That's just how Jake is."

I picked up my pictures. "Good night, Mrs. Childers."

"You're leaving?"

She didn't want me to go.

Maybe she wanted me?

What's more likely is that she's just lonely and wants to talk. "I'm not gonna find your brother sittin' around here."

"Where are you goin' now?"

"Goin' to see Lisa Ellison."

"I have a better idea," Mrs. Childers said and stood up.

I got up, too. "What's that?"

"Come ride with me."

* * *

Chapter Ten

We rode in silence while Mrs. Childers drove us nowhere fast. She drove out of the city, across the Tappanze Bridge to a small house in Nyack. When we went inside the house, the first thing that hit me was the smell. It didn't smell bad; it was more like the stale odor of some place that had been closed up for awhile. The living room was well furnished and none of it looked like it had much use. Mrs. Childers turned on some music and went around the house turning on ceiling fans and opening windows.

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"This is my little hide away," she said, opening the French doors that led to the deck.

"Hide away?"

She smiled and went out on the deck, seemingly to avoid my question. So I followed her outside and asked it again. She looked irritated by my question as well as my presence on the deck. "I come out here to get away."

"Get away from what, Mrs. Childers?"

"More to get away from all the stress and pressures, you know, and be by myself. It's so peaceful out here, it gives me a chance to relax and think."

"Bullshit." I said to myself. "Yes, It is very peaceful."

She went back in the house and I followed behind her. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Thank you. Do you have Johnnie Walker Black?"

"No, will Hennessy do?"

"Hennessy is fine."

I sat on the couch and watched her as she poured. She looked in my direction, but she dropped her eyes when she saw I was looking at her. She handed me my drink and sat down across from me and started to talk. So we drank Hennessy, quite a bit of Hennessy and laughed and talked for hours. Talk about nothing, really. Mostly a lot

of reminiscing about her, Jake, and Chésará growing up dirt poor in Philly. "Dirt poor and on lock down. That was us, couldn't go anywhere. Except this one night I snuck out and I went over my girl Tina's house. Naturally she was shocked to see me. She says she was gettin' ready to go ride with Beverly. I couldn't stand that bitch but her and Tina were cool and I didn't have nothing else to do. So we're standin' outside waitin' when this burgundy Dodge Daytona hack back pulls up. I never forgot that car," she paused. "Beverly was sittin' in the back. I don't know who the two chicks in the front seat were. But I jumped in the car anyway. They said they were goin' to get some weed."

"You smoke weed, Mrs. Childers?"

"Every once and a while," she said and raised her glass. "This is my drug of choice. Back then never. I had only heard other people talk about it. But I was excited about tryin' it, cause you know I never did anything. I was gonna be in trouble when I got home anyway might as well go for it all."

"You might as well have some stories to talk about when you're back on lock down."

"You know what I'm sayin'," she smiled. "Anyway, I started chokin' the first time I hit it and didn't want anymore." Mrs. Childers laughed and got up to fix us another drink. While she was gone I got up, took a quick look around and quickly reclaimed my seat. When she returned with our drinks Mrs. Childers handed me mine and sat down next to me. We talked our way through that drink and then the conversation turned. "I remember the first time I caught Chilly with another women. I was so mad I wanted to kill him. We were at a party at one of his friend's houses. It was the usual dope boy party. People doin' drugs, listening to music, and having sex all over the place. The place was packed, and it was so hot in there and the air wasn't doin' any good. After awhile I noticed that I couldn't find Chilly. So I went looking for him. I looked outside, didn't see him. Then I started going from room to room, that's when I saw him coming out of a room with some ho. Both of them still putting their clothes

back on."

"The least they could have done was get dressed before they came out of the room."

"I thought so too."

"What did you do?"

"I slapped the shit outta him, cursed both of them out and left."

"That was it?"

"No. Chilly ran after me, and started with the, you know, 'Baby I'm sorry, I didn't mean for you to see that, she didn't mean nothing to me' and all that shit."

"The usual."

"But I was young, stupid, and in love. A deadly combination. So I bought it, I went back inside with him, and everything was cool. We hung out the rest of the night like two lovebirds. Until most of the people left. So there I am standing by the kitchen, right." She lit up a cigarette and blew the smoke in my direction. "Chilly was sitting on the couch. So I waved to him and smiled. He got up, walked over to me, and back handed me down to the floor. He yelled for me to get up, I tried to crawl away from him, but I couldn't. He grabbed me and pulled me up by my hair. This time he punched me in the face. He kept on punching me. I don't know how many times he hit me. Then he stopped. He looked at me and said 'bitch don't you ever raise your hand no higher than your waist to me,' and he walked away. Here's the funny part."

"There's a funny part?"

"So there I am lying on the floor, crying, face swollen and bleedin'. Blood all over

my clothes. People walking by me. The only one who helped me was that same ho he came out the room with. She helped me up off the floor, took me into the same room they were in, and cleaned the blood off my face. She even gave me some clothes to put on. After awhile Chilly knocked on the door, wantin' to know if I'm ready to go home."

"I guess I don't have to ask if you went with him."

"What else could I do? I was scared to death of him. On our way home he was just as nice to me like nothing ever happened."

"Why do you stay with him?"

"Please, Nick, where am I goin'? What am I gonna do? I tried to get away before and he always comes after me. There's no telling what he'll do if I try it again."

"When are you gonna tell me what's really goin' on, Mrs. Childers?"

"I have told you everything, Nick."

"I don't think so. You're lying about something, or at best you're not tellin' me everything."

"Can't you just listen to what I say without trying to read something into it? But no, you have to analyze every word I say? Can't you stop being a detective for awhile? Can't you just hold me?" She moved closer to me and put her head on my shoulder. I felt her heart pounding along with her hand on my chest. I wanted to say something, but nothing came to mind so I put my arm around her. After awhile she fell asleep. I sat there holding her for awhile.

Suddenly she jerked away from my embrace and grabbed a pillow from the couch. Maybe she can't stand to be held either.

While she was asleep I searched the house. After I searched the bedroom I took the sheet off the bed. When I turned around, I was startled to see her silhouette leaning against the door. The light from the hall seemed to cling to each curve of her body. "Are you lookin' for something, Nick?"

"I was just getting something to cover you with." I held up the sheet. "You were asleep," I said as she walked toward me.

"I was. But I'm awake now." She stopped in front of me. I thought about trying to kiss her. "I don't think we'll need this." She took the sheet out of my hand and let it drop to the floor. I could feel the warmth of her body. She looked up at me and exhaled. "Besides, it's time we start back to the city."

* * *

Chapter Twelve

I looked at Wanda. Her head was back and her eyes were closed. She had stopped taking notes awhile ago. "Wanda."

"I'm still awake." Wanda answered without opening her eyes. "Where did Rocky go in Soundview?"

"He stopped at a house on Buckner Blvd. I don't know what he went there for, he was only inside for two minutes."

"Where'd he go then?"

"Back to his spot. I followed him there and talked to him."

"Did you find out anything?" Wanda yawned.

"You know, we can stop for awhile if you want to, Wanda. I can tell you're exhausted."

"I'm all right, Nick, really. I just need a quick shower and a cup of coffee and I'll be all right. So why don't you make another pot of coffee while I take a shower."

"Okay, Wanda."

"And, Nick."

"Yes, Wanda."

"Please don't leave."

"Yes, Wanda."

"All right now. I'm trusting you."

While Wanda showered, I made a fresh pot of coffee. While it was brewing I wandered around the house. It was fabulous. "I guess it ain't just drug dealers who know how to live." It was just a house in the old neighborhood that Wanda had restored in grand style. Sometimes I used to wonder what my life would have been like if I hadn't cut out. Not that I regret the choice I made. The way things were, I didn't want to live like that, but I wonder. Would I be in jail or dead? Or would I be as fortunate as my friends and grow old and respectable in the game?

I was starting to feel a little tired myself, so I poured myself a cup of coffee. I went back into the living room and stared out the large picture window. Wanda returned to the living room and stood next to me. She looked at me and put her arms around me. Maybe I had that, 'I need a hug' look on my face. "What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"Just thinkin' about the way things turned out."

"What do you mean?"

"You, Wanda. All this. You're a successful lawyer. You're all so respectable now. Black and Bobby married. Shit, Bobby's a father."

"He's a good father too. You should talk to him."

I chose to ignore her comment.

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"Freeze walkin' around in a suit like a legitimate business man."

"That one wasn't easy."

"I can imagine."

"Cuisine is a nice place. I thought Mike was crazy when he told me that he wanted Freeze to run the restaurant. But Freeze stepped up," Wanda continued.

"I don't think he's happy about it."

"Maybe. He may not be happy, but what he is, is fiercely loyal to Black."

"Unlike me, right?"

"You tell me, Nick? You're the only one who can answer that question."

I walked away from the window and sat down. Wanda followed behind me and reclaimed her spot on the couch.

"Regrets?" Wanda asked.

"No. Not really. I mean, the way things were. Everyday was the same, more violence and more murder."

"The only difference is, your life didn't change. You did your violence and murder for the government."

"Yeah, right."

"Well, it's true. The Army recognized your skills. Enforcer, soldier, killer, assassin. Call it what you want to, Nick. But they programmed you with their objectives and put you right back to work. But you see, things changed here after André. We were out of the drug business and we started moving into more legitimate businesses."

"That's the part I didn't see coming. When Black said we were getting out of the drug business, I thought it would just be gambling and women and he'd just go right on high jacking trucks and robbin' warehouses. 'Cause let's face it, Black was a thief." I started laughing.

"Always was." Wanda joined me; laughing so hard she almost spilled her coffee.

"Damn the nigga could steal."

Although Black made most of his money on gambling, he was always on the lookout for something he could steal. His preference was high jacking trucks. He knew a woman who worked as a waitress at a truck stop. She would feed Black information. Using her feminine charms she would find out from truckers what they were going to be carrying, and what route they were going to take. This was the most important factor in his plan. With that information, Black would set it up so the truck would have to stop and then we'd have them. His favorite was a half-naked white woman in distress. You know, short shirt, titties hangin' out all over the place. What man could resist a white woman in distress? Once the driver was out of the cab, either me, Jamaica or Bobby would come up on the driver from behind and take it him.

Once the driver was secure, Bobby would drive the truck away. Which didn't go smoothly at first, but it got better as Bobby learned how to handle the big rigs. Now, once Bobby was gone in the truck, Black would always ask, "Is that your rig or the companies?" If it was the driver's rig, Black would tell the driver where he could find

it, if not, he would sell the truck for parts.

Even though he didn't like doin' it, Black would sometimes rob warehouses. But only if it presented a tempting enough prize, and it definitely had to be minimal risk involved. Black was never one to take risks that would put himself or his organization at risk. "Remember, no risk," Black would say before we went on any job. "Bail ain't cheap." The reason that he didn't like robbin' warehouse was because; "Time waitin' to load the truck was time waitin' to get caught," he'd say. And gettin' caught was never on his list of things to do.

Black had gotten some information that there was a warehouse that offered just such an opportunity. His first thought was to wait and see if his informant could give us a target to hit, but when that didn't happen, Black decided that it was too much money involved to pass on, so it was on.

The information came to from a woman who worked as a routing supervisor at the warehouse. Black got his hooks into her because of her favorite pass time. Gambling. She owed Black five grand, so one Sunday afternoon, around dinnertime; Black and I paid her a visit.

After a very filling meal, Ayana was a great cook; she set it out for us. "Black, look, I know I owe you some money. And to be honest with you, I just ain't got it." Which caused Black to put his gun on the table. Which wasn't any big deal, 'cause Black would never shot a woman. If that became necessary he'd get me or Freeze to do it for him. "But I do have something that maybe worth something to you."

"And what might that be, Ayana?" Black asked.

"Yow know I work at a warehouse in Jersey. Well there's a shipment full of electronic equipment comin' in. You know, flat screen televisions, DVD's boom-boxes and digital cameras, just come in from China. After the shipment passes though

customs and all that shit, it's taken to this warehouse and I schedule it to be shipped out to locations around the country. My position gives me the inside track on what's in house, and what's worth taking."

After making sure that he wasn't playing in anybody else's backyard, Black formed a plan. He got her to draw a map of the warehouse and to identify the good stuff from the junk by marking the target pallets with a piece of black tape. This saved us a lot of time. Black simply walked around

and told me, 'cause I learned to drive the forklift, which one to pick up, while Bobby took over the security shack at the gate and Jamaica stood guard at the door.

By one o'clock the truck was half full and everything was going smoothly until the forklift died on me. Black and I looked around for another forklift. "You find one?" Black asked.

"No," I told him.

"Try to get this one working." I tried everything I knew, which wasn't much, to get it running.

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"We're wasting time, Nick, get down from there. Jamaica, come here," Black said as he took one gun out of his pocket and took off his coat. "We're gonna have to do this the hard way. I saw some hand jacks while I was looking for another forklift. We'll each get one." Black looked at his watch, "It's a little after one. I want to be out of here by three. We got about two hours to get as much as we can and get out of here."

We all got busy, we we're done by two-thirty. Black and Bobby left in the truck while Jamaica and I followed in the car. We'd been driving for a half-hour maybe when we passed through a small town. Once we got a little ways out town Bobby began to slow down and came to a complete stop. "What wrong now?" Jamaica asked.

After a while Black came to the car, "What's goin' on, Black?" Jamaica asked.

"There's a road block. We passed a bar a little while ago, there just out here harassing drunks. I don't think they'll bother us, but to be on the safe side, Nick, you wait 'til I'm gone and make your way around through those trees just across from them. If Bobby opens his door, fire a couple of shots in the air over the truck. Then you get away from there in case they shot back. But I'm betting that these local will just take cover. That should give Bobby a chance to drive off."

"What if they come after you?" I asked.

"Then we'll bail," Black said as he walked away.

Once Black was gone I got out and headed for the trees. I took up a position across from the road block and waited for Bobby to get there. The cop talked to Bobby for

less than a minute before letting him drive on without incident. Jamaica and I weren't that lucky. When it came our turn to go through the roadblock they made us get out. The cops searched us and looked in the car, but not closely enough to find the guns under the back seat. Then they made Jamaica take the breath test and walk a straight line, even though either of us had been drinking. After that twenty-minute ordeal, Jamaica took off and tried to catch up with Black and Bobby. What we found we'd never saw coming. About twenty miles up the road we saw Black and Bobby walking.

"What now?" Jamaica asked.

"Maybe the truck broke down," I replied as Jamaica slowed down.

"What happened to the truck?" Jamaica asked as they got in the car.

"We got jacked, that's what the fuck happened," Bobby screamed. He told us that they had to stop because a car was blocking the road. Two men were standing in the middle of the road arguing. Once they stopped two more men, one on each side, opened the truck doors and ordered Black and Bobby out of the truck at gunpoint. They took their guns and jumped in the truck and drove off. The other two returned to their cars in the road and then they drove away, too. "They ran it like clock work, just like we would have." The whole thing was over in less than a minute.

Bobby cursed and complained the whole way back to New York. Black on the other hand, never said a word. But we knew, in his mind, he was goin' over every minute of the robbery. And you knew he was pissed. He already had a buyer; they'd agreed on a price. Him and Bobby were supposed to meet with him in the morning and drop it off.

Once we got back to The Late Night, Black told me to drive him somewhere. I had a good idea where we were goin', and sure as shit, I was right.

Black pounded on Ayana's door and after a while she opened it. "Black?" a half sleep Ayana said. "What you doin' here? Did something go wrong?"

Black didn't say a word. He just kept walking toward her, and Ayana kept backin' up, until she backed her way into the bedroom. Black closed the door behind him.

I propped up some pillows and made myself comfortable on the couch. Every once and a while I would hear Ayana yell, "I didn't tell nobody! I swear, Black. I didn't tell nobody!"

I awoke to what smelled like meatloaf cooking, "Good morning, Ayana," I said. "Where's Black?"

"It's afternoon and Black's in the bedroom. If you want to take a shower or whatever, you can use the bathroom down the hall. Lunch should be ready in a soon," Ayana said.

I took a good look at her; she didn't look like Black beat her down. Ayana was in her late thirties, early forties, maybe. But she was still an attractive woman. She was probably a very pretty women when she was younger.

I made my way to the bathroom and took a quick shower. When I got out, as promised, meatloaf, along with mashed potatoes, collard greens, fried okra and cornbread were on the table, but no sign of Ayana. Not wanting the food to get cold, I sat down to lunch. It wasn't too long before Black and Ayana came out of the bedroom. She went in the kitchen and Black sat down and began eating. "Well?"

"I don't think she crossed us," Black replied. "But we'll talk about that later."

After we finished eating, I took Black home. On the way there, I asked my question again, "Well?"

"I been thinkin' about this all night. I haven't even been to sleep."

"Well?" I asked a third time.

"You heard what Bobby said. They ran it like clock work, just like we would have. The bandits were organized; other than 'get out'; they never said a word. It happened so fast, I couldn't really tell if they were black or white, but the one that took my guns sounded like he might be black, but I shouldn't say for sure."

"You sure she didn't tell anybody?"

"I just spent all night making sure she didn't," Black said like I had asked a stupid question. "Now if she didn't tell anybody, somebody had to figure it out. He's the one we're looking for." I drove a while longer; thinkin' that Black had simply stated the obvious. But I should have known better.

"I want my truck back, Nick. And I'll have it," Black said.

That night when I got to The Late Night, the kid was there talkin' to Black. The kid, that's what we used to call Freeze back in those days. Back then, all Freeze did was run little errands for Black and hang out at the club messing with the ladies. They were seated in the back of the club. Black was doing most if not all the talking. Freeze just did a lot of nodding. When I walked up they stopped talking and they both looked at me like I had no business there. I spoke and walked away and began doin' my usual, which was hanging out, messing with the ladies. They sat there for most of the night, then suddenly Freeze jumped up and rushed for the door.

It was quiet for the next couple of days; nobody even mentioned the robbery, especially around Black. Then Black called me and told me to, meet him at The Late Night before it closes in the morning. We never closed before eight in the morning. I was with a girlfriend of mine and she wasn't too happy when I rolled out of bed at,

"It's six-thirty, Nick. Where you goin'?"

"Out."

"Out?" she pulled back the covers. "Only place you need to go is in, back in this bed. I want to feel you inside me."

"I'll be back," I said and armed myself. "You'll want to feel it even more when I get back." I left there and was up in there about seven that morning, wondering what was goin' on. I asked if Black was there and Sammy told me that he'd been there earlier and said that he'd be back. Right after I got there, Bobby arrived, and Jamaica wasn't far behind. They had got the same call from Black, and neither of them knew what was up. Which shocked the hell out of me. Bobby was in on everything.

We all took a seat, had a drink, and waited. When everyone was gone, Black came in. he went straight to the bar and poured himself a drink. He came over to where we were sitting and sat down. "So you gonna tell us what is so important to get me off some pussy at six in the morning?"

"Mine if I finish my drink first?"

"No, by all means, finish your drink," Bobby said. "This better be good; that's all I'm sayin'."

We talked while Black finished his drink and let Sammy out. Then he led us in the back to the storage room. Black knocked on the door twice and opened the door. There was The Kid, sitting in a chair by the door. As we got in the clear, I saw four men kneeling down on a large piece of plastic. I recognized one of them right away. He dealt blackjack at Cynt's. Which is Ayana's game and where she likes to play it.

Bobby started smiling, "What we got here, kid?"

"These the mutha fuckas that robbed us," Black answered.

"You caught them?" Jamaica asked and took out his gun. So did Bobby. Black already had both his guns out, so naturally I pulled mine.

"Freeze did," Black said.

We all looked at Freeze. "By yourself? All at once?" Bobby asked sarcastically.

"By myself. One by one over the last couple of days," Freeze said quietly but proudly.

After that there was no more talk. No questions of how he found them. Me, Black, Bobby, and Jamaica lined up across from them and opened fire.

I saw Freeze a few days later and I asked him how he found them. Freeze said, "Black figured it out. That night you walked up on us at The Late Night, he was lyin' it all out for me. Keep your enemies close, but watch your homies. See Black knew if Ayana didn't tell nobody, then it had to be somebody who knew she owed Black that money and knew the broke bitch had to have something else to deal with. That's what led me to your boy at Cynt's. He's the one that gave Ayana the idea. They had them a little robbin' crew, so once I had him, catchin' the rest of them were easy. Black told me that there ain't too many mutha fuckas that would want to touch a shipment of electronics like that. Black told me who the people were that could handle that type of merchandise. Then Black told me to start with the guy he had a deal with. He called me right after they called him. I got the last one when he rolled up in truck."

Wanda looked at me and shook her head. "I never heard that story," she said. "That's how things were then, but they changed."

"But you can see why I thought we were out of the dope game and nothing would change."

"None of us saw it coming, Nick. But Mike had a plan. Don't get me wrong, after the shooting stopped, he went right back to work, robbin' everything he could get his hands on. But we took that money and started buying property, opening businesses in the neighborhood. We tried to make things better."

"Just like that? Clean and easy?"

"

"Of course not. We were still had the women, still brokering loans, still into the numbers and running the gambling houses. We still had enemies and Mike still dealt with his enemies in the same old way. But as time went on, that got to be less of an issue," Wanda continued. "Bobby met Pam, got married and opened Impressions. A few years later, Mike opened Cuisine, and they were both basically out. Freeze started running the day to day operations. And then Mike met Shy."

"Tell me about Shy?"

"She's all right," Wanda said matter of factly and looked away.

"What?"

"What do you mean what?"

"You know what I'm talkin' about, Wanda. I didn't just meet you. Give it up."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about, Nick."

"Your whole facial expression changed when I mentioned her name." Wanda frowned up and looked away again. "You don't like her, do you, Wanda?" I said and laughed.

"I didn't say that. What I said was, she's all right. Anything else you chose to read into my answer is pure speculation on your part."

"Whatever you say, counselor."

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"It's not that I don't like her, Nick, really. She's a nice person."

"But you're jealous of her."

"No I'm not," Wanda said, but her eyes told a different story. "Me and Mike had our time, remember. And we both agreed that we were better off as friends."

"You must not remember that I was there. So forgive me if I remember it a little differently from that."

"What do you remember?"

"I remember Black saying you two would be better off as friends. I also seem to remember you nodding your head on the verge of tears when he said it."

"You noticed that?"

"Yes, Wanda, I noticed that. I noticed a lot of things about you."

"I didn't think you noticed. I know Mike didn't."

"I always thought you and Mike would make it back, the two of you are like two halves of the same mind."

"I thought so too. But if you breathe a word of that to Mike or anybody else, I'll kill you, Nick."

"You wouldn't hurt a fly, Wanda."

"That's what you think," Wanda said and smiled. "But anyway, I've adjusted and gotten comfortable with the fact that he's married now and that's that."

"Mike Black married and retired to the Bahamas. Hard to believe, that's all, Wanda."

"Make no mistake about it, Mike still runs things."

"Freeze said he likes to keep his hand in. I kinda figured that's what he meant. But you, Wanda."

"What?"

"I hear you're the mad scientist that made everybody rich."

"It wasn't just me, Nick. Sure, I handled the money, made some good investments, but everybody did their part. We changed with the times, Nick, which is how we all got to be respectable, as you say. Part of what we built here belongs to you. You just need to recognize. And ask for it."

"What's that supposed to mean? What am I supposed to be asking for, Wanda?"

"When you recognize, you'll know what to ask for. Now, let's get back to it. You followed Rocky to Soundview to some house and then back to whatever hole in the wall he hangs at. And —."

"And the whole time I couldn't stop thinking about what he said to Chilly."

"It's about that shit ain't it? Told y'all that shit wasn't gonna work."

What shit? What ever it was, it was the missing piece of this puzzle. Whatever it was, it involved this Diego Estabon guy that Chilly met for lunch.

"I took care of mine, Chilly. What about yours?"

Jake was Chilly's and he hadn't taken care of him. It was all starting to make sense to me. Jake wasn't missing; he was somewhere hiding. For all I knew, he could be out of the country. I called Mrs. Childers and told her to meet me later at my office. Then I entertained the idea that Mrs. Childers hired me to find Jake and she would turn him over to Chilly.

"Don't you mention anything about Jake being missing or me looking for him to Gee. You feel me?"

I remembered the fear in those eyes whenever she talked about him. I couldn't be sure. And that's when that programming kicked in. I wasn't there to choose whose right and whose wrong. Pick out the good guys from the bad guys. This was a mission like any other. Mrs. Childers was the client and my orders were to find Jake Rollins. What the client did with him once that was done, was their business.

With a newfound sense of clarity, I went inside to talk to Rocky. I could tell from the stares I got when I walked in that this was Rocky's spot and I was the only one that didn't belong there. The Spot was crowded with Ballers, male and female, along with the usual array of wannabes and hangers on. Rocky was seated at a table in the back, surrounded by his crew. I stepped up to the table, and guns were drawn immediately.

"I want to talk to Rocky."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:06 am

I put my hands up and allowed them to take my gun. Thinking that I could take out most of them, if not all them, before they got off too many shots. Unarmed would be little tougher. But I wasn't worried; I always carry a spare.

"Who are you?" Rocky asked smiling.

"I'm the guy Lisa Ellison called you about."

"Let him come!" He shouted, no longer smiling.

I sat down at the table across from him. "I'm looking for Jake Rollins."

"Haven't seen him."

"What was he involved in?"

"Who are you?"

"I told you, I'm the guy Lisa Ellison called you about."

"She said you were some kind of private investigator. Who you workin' for?"

I looked around the table.

With a wave of his hand, Rocky dismissed everybody.

"What was Jake doin' for Chilly?"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about. You got a lot of heart to be involving yourself in this shit. Who hired you?"

"Mrs. Childers." Since Rocky and Jake were friends, I didn't see any harm in telling him that I was working for Mrs. Childers. Besides I thought that I would get more out of him that way.

"Gee hired you, huh?" Rocky sat back in his chair and thought for a second. "Well if I find out anything about Jake, I'll tell Gee myself."

"Fair enough." I got up from the table, unsure of whether he would he kill me as soon as I got outside. Two women were dead. It's about that shit. Maybe another, at the hands of Diego Estabon. "I took care of mine, Chilly. What about yours?"

I walked over to the guy that had my gun. "Can I have my gun back."

It was a statement, not a question.

The guy looked at Rocky, who shook his head no. So I rammed my left elbow into his face and took back my gun with my right hand. Just in case anyone in the room thought I was going to do something stupid, like try to shoot my way out of there, I held my hands up quickly. My finger was on the trigger just in case I had to. Rocky held up his hand and laughed, so naturally everyone else in the room laughed too. I pointed the barrel at Rocky. Once again, every other gun in the room was pointed at me. Rocky smiled at me and walked forward. He stopped before me. "I like you." He looked around the room. "You got heart." Repeating the words Chilly said to him. His crew laughed. "Let's see if you know when to back down."

I did. But this wasn't the time. I was a player in this game now. I couldn't fold. I had to stand, but not be stupid. I lowered my gun, but just a little, and started backing out of the room slowly, watching Rocky's eyes. His eyes switched to the right. I felt

somebody coming up on me. I quickly extended my arm and caught him in the neck. I was lucky, but they were impressed.

I made it outside without getting shot. I started for my car, but something told me to keep walking. I walked down to the store on the corner. I went inside and looked through the window. Rocky had sent three men after me. Two arranged themselves outside the store, while the third came in after me. Over the objection of the clerk, I went in the back room looking for a door. I opened the door and pushed down a trashcan before moving into

the shadows inside the store. As the man ran past me, I grabbed him. With my arm firmly wrapped around his neck, I had thoughts of breaking it, but I didn't. I hit him twice in the head with the butt of my gun.

I went out the back door and moved slowly down the alley. Staying in the shadows. The second man approached. I froze. He walked past me. I watched him pass and he went in the store. They both came out firing blindly down the alley. I aimed and fired a few near misses. They took cover. I continued to fire and moved very quickly out of the alley. I took the long way around the block to get back to my car. The third man held his post outside the store in spite of the shooting. I got in the car and drove away.

* * *

Chapter Thirteen

When I got back to my office, I immediately checked my messages to see if Mrs. Childers had called, which she hadn't. It was late and she might not be able to get out of the house to meet me. What I had to tell her would keep until morning anyway, because to be honest, it wasn't much. And on top of that it was only speculation. I could only speculate that Jake was hiding. And if Rocky was a man of his word, which I couldn't count on, he would tell Mrs. Childers all about the events of the

evening, anyway. Still, I decided to wait awhile, just to see if she would show.

It still bothered me that we never found any camera equipment in Jake's apartment. The pictures and the video were quality. It was obvious that Jake took his photo sessions seriously. I got the pictures from the file cabinet, along with my bottle of Johnnie Black. As I sat there drinking and looking at the pictures, two things hit me all at once. The pictures were definitely taken in at least two different places. I popped in the videotape we copied from Jake's apartment. I sat watching, without really watching, fast forwarding for the most part. Comparing the video to the still pictures that I had, and tried to get a sense of where they were taken. I turned off the video, I had seen enough. I began to sort the pictures into piles based on outfit or the lack of one. The difference in location was apparent now. The second thing that hit me was a bit more subtle. Some of the pictures appeared to be taken in rapid session. Maybe taken with a high-speed shutter. That in itself wasn't all that, but it was the angles they were shot from. The camera wasn't on a tripod, or some other stationary object. Somebody was taking the pictures. Pamela taking the pictures while Jake did LaShawn and vice versa?

"But, no it isn't."

I looked closer at the pictures and thought back to what Lisa Ellison told Rocky. He thought it was Pamela, but it was LaShawn. It was LaShawn in every picture with Jake. What little outfit there was may have been different, but it was LaShawn. If it was LaShawn in every picture having sex with Jake then what was Pamela's involvement in this?

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:06 am

Other than the one picture of her and LaShawn at the party, there wasn't anything to connect Pamela with Jake. LaShawn came courtesy of Rocky and Mrs. Childers couldn't say definitely that Pamela knew Jake. The cause of death connected her to LaShawn, but not Jake. "Pamela Hendricks, you begin to interest me." Now I needed to know where Pamela lived, and I didn't want to ask Kirkland. The need for Mrs. Childers to make an appearance just became more business than personal. It was better that way. Keep it strictly business.

But my mind was on Mrs. Childers. Wondering why she hadn't at least called. Maybe Rocky told Chilly that she had hired me to find Jake and he did something to her. I was surprised that he didn't want her to know anything about Jake being missing, or that he was looking for him. He didn't seem to be the type of guy that it would matter to.

What was going on between Chilly and Jake? What shit wouldn't work? The answer to one would lead me to the other. And that would lead me to Jake. By two in the morning I had given up on her, and had begun to nod out. "Time to get out of here." But I wanted to finish up my case notes with my new observations before I left.

But my chair was so comfortable.

Thursday July 16: 10:05 AM

The next thing I knew, the sun was shining bright, I had fallen asleep.

I left another voice message for Mrs. Childers. Since I hadn't heard from her, I didn't have much of a choice. I either had to ask Detective Kirkland for Pamela Hendricks

address or make my third search of Jake's apartment. I chose the latter. This was starting to get old. I was on my way to search this apartment for the third time, and was starting to realize it took more than just the title to do this type of work.

But I liked it.

So if I was going to continue doin' it, I would have to be more thorough, more organized. I arrived at Jake's apartment, but this time I was prepared to stay awhile. I brought a camera, tape recorder, and a pad. This time I went from room to room and took pictures of and cataloged everything. I wrote down and recorded my observations, no matter how small or insignificant. Everything mattered.

I came across what I was looking for, Jake's address book. There under H, as it should be, I found Pamela's address. Determined not to have any need to return, I photographed the entire book. I was about to leave when I looked out the window. There they were. The police. I should have known that they would have the place under surveillance. I knew as soon as I walked out, they would take me into custody for questioning, and my notes, pictures, and the tape would become evidence in the investigation. I turned on Jake's computer and scanner. I could scan the notes and made a wav file of the tape. Then I downloaded the pictures from the camera and e-mail them to myself.

"Did Kirk give you much grief?" Wanda asked.

"Nah, threatened to lock me up for breaking and entering. But he really just wanted me to give him something. Kirk already knew, but he made me tell him that Mrs. Childers was my client."

"Kirk's good, Nick. Very good. How long did they hold you?"

"A couple of hours, more or less."

"What did you give him?"

"Nothing really, 'cause that's what I had, nothing. He had connected Pamela Hendricks to Mrs. Childers and wanted to push the money laundering angle down my throat. But I got the feeling that he really didn't buy into it and wanted to know if I did."

"Did you?" Wanda asked.

"I was starting to, but I needed to be sure." I was starting to get a little tired myself. I closed my eyes and leaned back.

"What else?"

"The coroner still hasn't officially assigned a cause of death in any of the cases." I was getting tired of answering questions.

"Did Kirk think that you were a suspect in the deaths of Pamela Hendricks and LaShawn?"

"No. If he did he never said."

"Other than Pamela Hendricks and LaShawn, how many more were there?"

"Five."

"He share any of the details?"

"Just time frame." I opened my eyes and Wanda was staring at me. But she looked away quickly. "He said the first five died within a 48 hour time frame. LaShawn died two days later and Pamela died almost two weeks after that."

"I got the impression that Rocky didn't seem surprised to hear that LaShawn and Pamela were dead."

"I got the same impression. And after looking at the pictures, I needed to know what Pamela Hendricks involvement in all this was. I thought that if I knew more about her and why she died, I would be closer to the answers that I needed. Kirk let me go with his blessings to take a look around in Pamela's apartment."

"His blessings?"

"Crime scene. That's where her body was found."

"Ooh."

When I got there, I was met by a uniformed officer who let me in and told me that the scene had been tampered with once already.

"By who?" I asked.

"Seems she had a roommate." The cop said. "Chick named Felicia Hardy. She got in, took her stuff, and disappeared."

"Any idea where she went?"

"Nope. She just vanished. She used to be a cop. Quit the force a few months back to go to school full time."

"Any relatives?"

"What do I look like, huh? Check with personnel."

"Well, you knew all that other stuff." He unlocked the door and I followed him in.

"Yeah, well, Kirk told me all that stuff and said to help you anyway I can. So I figured he wanted you to know."

Kirk was helping himself by helping me. Nevertheless, I didn't think he'd let me have a look at an ex-cops file. I looked around the apartment. As promised, most of the roommates stuff was gone. The room looked like it had been hit by a very focused

hurricane. Once I had my gloves on, I rambled through it, looking, but really not expecting to find anything. If she was a cop, she wouldn't leave any clues to where she was goin'. There wasn't so much as a piece of paper. I left the room and closed the door behind me.

Everything else in the apartment was untouched. I looked in the kitchen, there were signs of a struggle. Then I checked the spot where her body was found. "Do you know if they found any drug paraphernalia?" The officer checked the inventory sheet. "I don't see any." I went in Pamela's room and sat down on the bed. I was sure now that the pictures and the video hadn't been taken here.

Sitting on the dresser was a picture of Pamela and a woman I'd never seen before. She was pretty, very pretty. It was taken in the living room. Maybe it was Felicia Hardy, maybe not. Since I was collecting pictures, I took the picture out of its frame and put it in my shirt. I would give it back to Kirk if he let me see her file. After one last turn around the apartment, I thanked the cop and left. I figured I'd check out LaShawn's apartment.

"Nick! Nick Simmons!"

I didn't recognize the voice. I turned around. The mailman was walking quickly toward me. "Nick Simmons, how you doin', man?" he grabbed my hand and shook it. It was obvious that he knew me, but I had no idea who this man was.

"I'm okay."

"You don't remember me, do you?"

"I sure don't," I said reluctantly.

"It's me, Reggie."

"Little Reggie McCray."

"Yeah."

"I sure didn't recognize you." Little Reggie McCray was now about six three and all muscle. "And look at you, Reggie. How you been?"

"Been doin' good, Nick. What about you? You look good, prosperous, you know."

"Thanks, man. I been doin' all right, Reggie." Seeing Reggie took me back to the old days coming up on the block. "You get around the way much? How's your mother?"

"She's fine,

Nick. Still living in the same house. Me, my wife and my son live upstairs."

"How's that lyin' ass brother of yours?"

"Frankie's dead."

"I'm sorry, Reggie. I didn't know."

"Frankie got shot when Black took the neighborhood to war."

"I'm sorry. How'd it happen?"

"You know Frankie always wanted to be down with Black, but you know Black wasn't havin' it. He tried to get all of us to stay in school. Make something of ourselves; you know what I'm sayin'? Black was the one who got me this job. But anyway, Frankie was on his way to bein' a thug nigga. Used to hang outside y'all's old spot; what was it called?"

"The Late Night. I remember. We wouldn't let him inside, so Frankie used to hang outside with the rest of the wanna-bees."

"Yeah, that was Frank. Well that night I saw him take a gun from between the mattresses. I asked him what the gun was for? He said that Jimmy Knowles and Charlie Rock sent some people to kill Black outside his house. But Black killed them. Later that day Black caught them at some restaurant on White Plains Road and Black killed both of them. Frankie said that was gonna start a war and Black would need him. He said that he was going to prove himself to Black. That he had to be ready when his chance came. That night Frankie stepped up.

"Black told me that he had just sent Freeze to get the car, and him and Bobby were waitin' outside. He didn't see the car coming, but Frankie did. He yelled, 'GET DOWN, BLACK!' Everybody dropped except Frankie. He pulled the gat and started bustin'. He got hit with three shot's. By that time Freeze rolled up with the car and Black and Bobby went after them. They caught up with them on bumpy ass Barnes Ave. Black said they lost control of the car and ran into a parked car. After they got out the car and started runnin'; Black and Bobby went after them. Freeze drove up ahead and cut them off, and killed the driver when he tried to run. Black and Bobby

followed the other one into a building. The guy ran up the steps to the roof, bustin' shots all the way. So when he gets to the roof he's out of bullets. He starts backin' up beggin' Black and Bobby not to kill him, until he gets edge. He tried to run again and almost falls off the roof, but Bobby grabs him."

Black said, "Who sent you?"

"Vincent sent me! Please don't let me go!" The guy yells.

"Who?"

"Vincent, Vincent Martin! Don't tell him I told you; he'll kill me." Black said he was cryin' and shit.

Black said, "He ain't gonna kill you, 'cause he's a dead man. Stop cryin' like a bitch and die with some honor. Drop him, Bobby."

"When they got back to the club they told Black that the ambulance came and they did what they could but Frankie was dead."

"I'm sorry," I said again. I didn't know if I was apologizing because his brother was dead or because I ran out on the war to fight someone else's. It didn't matter, it was probably both and I felt guilty for not being there.

"Don't sweat it, Nick." Reggie said, as if he were absolving me of both crimes. "It was a long time ago."

"Thanks, Reggie." It did make it a little easier. Everyone had moved past those years. Everyone but me. "Reggie, you know the girl that got killed in this building?"

"Yeah, Pamela was cool people."

"Did you know her?"

"Enough to know she was cool. I've been delivering her mail for seven years. We'd talk sometimes, you know."

"You know her roommate?"

"I seen her. She only been staying there for a few months."

I looked around to make sure the cop was gone and pulled the picture out of my shirt.

"That her?"

"That's her. What's your interest in this, Nick?"

"I'm a private investigator. Somehow Pamela's death is tied up in a missing person's case I'm workin' on."

"Oh, yeah. I heard that you started doin' that after you got out the army."

"If I could find out a little more about Pamela, it might lead me to my guy. You wouldn't know if Felicia Hardy filed a change of address card?"

"Cops asked me that already. I told them no."

"I knew it was a shot in the dark."

"I said I told the cops that. And she didn't fill one out. But what I didn't tell them was that a couple of days after that, Felicia met me outside the post office."

"What did she want?"

"She said that she was leaving town and didn't want to leave a forwarding address, but she was waiting on some important mail. She gave me a hundred dollars and an address if I'd send it to her and forget about it."

"Where'd she go?"

"LA."

"Can you give me the address?"

"I think — wait a minute." Reggie dug around in his bag and pulled out a piece of paper. He handed it to me. "That's the address."

"Thanks, Reggie."

"No problem, Nick. I got get movin'," Reggie said, as he walked away to continue his route. "Hey, Nick!" he shouted. "Come around the way sometime."

"I'll do that. Hey, Reggie. Thanks for reminding me of what I should already know."

As I drove back to the office, I looked at the picture of Pamela Hendricks and Felicia Hardy. I didn't think her having to go to LA right away was a coincidence. I gave some thought to what was going on around me. If there was no drug paraphernalia found in the apartment, how did Pamela die? Kirk had to be thinking murder. In an ex-cops apartment.

Once I was back in the office, I left another message for Mrs. Childers that I would be out of town for a couple of days. Then, I called Chésará, but she wasn't home either. Next I called Jett to let him and Monika know what I had found out, which wasn't much, and told him I was going to LA. With that taken care of, I called to make airline reservations and got a room at the Marriott Courtyard near the airport.

* * *

Chapter Fourteen

While I was on the plane, I thought about the fact that I had been around the world a few times, but I'd never been to LA. So in addition to the case, I decided to do a little site seeing, play tourist. It was late when I arrived at LAX too late to try to see Felicia Hardy. So I rented a car, blue Mustang convertible, bought a map and rolled around to get the feel of the place.

Friday July 17: 8:59 AM

By nine o'clock the next morning, I pulled up in front of the Victoria Aveune address that I had gotten from Reggie. I walked up to the door and rang the bell. It wasn't too long before the door opened. But just a crack.

"Felicia Hardy?" When she didn't respond, I continued. "Miss Hardy, my name is Nick Simmons and I'd like to talk to you about Pamela Hendricks."

"Just a minute. I gotta put something on," she said and closed the door. I stood there thinking that she didn't have to go to any trouble on my account.

"Come on in." She opened the door a little wider and I stepped inside. I heard the door close and felt the barrel of what felt like a 44-magnum stuck in my back.

Naturally I raised my hands.

"Just keep walking toward that wall and assume the position." I complied with her request. Felicia proceeded to search me, a very thorough search at that. Not the kind of pat down you'd get from a man. With her gun in her right hand, she ran her left hand over every inch of my body. Which included a handful of groin.

"Huh," she mumbled as she continued.

When she was finished, Felicia had relieved me of my ID and all three of my guns. Most people miss the holster that hangs midway down my back.

Felicia slowly backed away from me. "Now turn around. Nice and slow."

I complied.

Without breaking eye contact, she carefully picked up a set of handcuffs. I watched her move. Her picture didn't do her justice, even in a big tee shirt and sweats; she was much prettier in person.

"Hold out your hands."

Once again I complied with her request. I was impressed as she put the handcuffs on me. Still staring into my eyes. Still pointing that big ass gun in my face. "Sit down over there."

&nb

sp; "Thank you," I said, remembering my manners. I sat down in the chair closest to me, and Felicia sat across from me.

"Give me a reason not to shoot you and call the police."

"Believe me, Ms Hardy, I mean you no harm. I'm a private investigator. I'm looking into a missing persons case and I believe there is some connection to Pamela Hendricks."

"Who are you looking for?"

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:06 am

"Jake Rollins. Do you know him?"

"For the time being you let me ask the questions. How did you find me?"

"I'd rather not say." She raised the gun. "I saw your file," I lied.

"Bullshit! How'd you find me?"

"Change of address card."

"Bullshit! If you got the information from the post office, the police would be here."
She pulled back the hammer.

"Somebody owed me a favor."

"Reggie."

I smiled.

"I knew I shouldn't have trusted him."

"Don't be too hard on Reggie, he didn't tell the cops. Or anybody else."

"But you, he just up and told you."

"Like I said, he owed me."

"What do you know about Pamela?" Felicia demanded.

"I was going to ask you that."

"It's early and I'm not in the mood for games."

"I know she died of what appeared to be a cocaine overdose, but the police didn't find any traces of drugs in her system. I know you and her were roommates and that you most likely found the body and called the police. I know you used to be a cop." I raised my cuffed hands. "You quit the force to go back to school. How's that going by the way?"

"About Pamela." She lowered the gun, but just a little.

"I know her and Mrs. Childers used to work together at a bank in Kansas City. I know that she came to New York from Kansas City to work for Manhattan Bank. But what I'd like to know from you, is who she was, how and why she died, and who killed her?"

"What makes you think I could tell you that?"

"Well, your roommate was most likely murdered in your apartment. You called the police, but you didn't wait around to talk to them. Then you break into the crime scene, take your stuff, and come out here. If I wasn't convinced by all that, then the fact that I'm wearing handcuffs and you're pointing a gun at me, pushed me over the edge."

"Is that a fact?"

"Was it you who found the body?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you stay?"

"Who hired you?"

"Jake Rollins sister."

"Which one? The wannabe lady or the tramp?"

"The lady. She used to work at the bank in Kansas City with Pamela."

"What makes you think Pamela knew anything about Jake's disappearing?"

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:06 am

"I've got pictures in my jacket pocket of her at Jake's party."

Felicia stood up and walked toward me. I was smiling, enjoying the view until she put the gun to my head. "Don't even think about doing anything stupid. I don't mind killing you."

"Believe me, that wasn't what I was thinking about." Felicia carefully removed the pictures from my pocket and returned to her spot.

She rested the gun on the table and glanced at one of the pictures. "LaShawn. I knew the girl was wild, but damn." She glanced at the rest and put them down.

I made note of the fact that even though she had only glanced at them, Felicia knew it was LaShawn and not Pamela right away. "She died two weeks ago under the same circumstances as Pamela. Pamela had Jake's card on her when the police found her body."

"How do you know that?"

"The police told me."

"You're working with the police?"

"Unofficially. I guess you can say that. My guess is they weren't getting away with linking Pamela to Jake so they threw me the bone."

"Why you?"

"Other than Mrs. Childers being my client, I know a little something about the people involved in this."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"How long were you a cop?"

"Four years. Why?"

"You've heard of Mike Black?"

"Vicious Black."

There it is again. Why does every woman say his name like that?

"Who hasn't heard of him?"

"He's an old associate. Reggie owes him a favor too."

"So you used to run with Vicious Black, huh?"

"Yes," I said, with a newfound sense of pride. "But not for the last ten years."

"Why not?"

"Joined the army."

"So now you're a private investigator and the police have been feeding you information." Felicia stood up again. I was hoping she was coming to take the cuffs off. They were starting to hurt, but she picked up the gun, walked toward the window, and looked out. "I didn't think the police had anything." She turned around and came

back toward me. It produced the same response as it did the first time. She stood before me and raised the gun. "How do I know I can trust you? I mean how do I know that whoever killed Pamela didn't send you?"

"Then you do think she was murdered?"

"I know she was murdered. Pamela didn't do drugs."

"But that's not why you think she was murdered. Why'd you leave before the cops came?"

"Other than that innocent look in those brown eyes. Tell me why I should trust you?"

"I can't think of any right now, but if I had to come up with something," I paused to give it the desired effect. "First of all, I wouldn't have come here alone. I wouldn't have let you take me without any resistance. And if I had come here to kill you, I would have just blasted you at the door."

Felicia smiled at me for the first time. She had a pretty smile. Then she laughed a little, but I guess it wasn't enough to make her take the cuffs off. She simply returned to her spot and put the gun down. I was happy for that much.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:06 am

"Mind if I ask you a question, Ms Hardy?"

"Go ahead."

"You just glanced at those pictures."

"So."

"You can barely see her face in most of them. How did you know it was LaShawn?"

"LaShawn always wears her hair like that."

"So does Pamela."

"No, she doesn't."

"In one of those pictures. The one with two of them."

Felicia picked up the pictures and fanned through them until she found it. "This one?"

"That's the one. See, same ponytail. And the picture I got of the two of you out of Pamela's room. By the way, your picture doesn't do you justice, but she's wearing a ponytail."

"That doesn't mean that's how she always wore it. Both of those pictures were taken on the same day. I remember that day. She was going to Jake's birthday party and she didn't have time to get her hair fixed. I told her with her hair pulled back like that she

looked like LaShawn."

"Why didn't you go to the party?"

"I knew the type of people that would be at any party Gee was throwin'. Pamela would always ask me if I wanted to go, but I was a cop. I wouldn't be caught dead up in there."

"Mind if I ask you another question?"

"I'll save you the trouble. No, to my knowledge Pamela wasn't laundering money. That is what you and the police want to know, isn't it? What is your name, again?"

"Nick Simmons. I'm pleased to meet you. And yes, that is what I was going to ask you."

"Cops think so?"

"I got that impression."

"That's why I don't want to talk to them. Once they figured out she was murdered and it was drug related, they'd start thinking money laundering and then they'd start looking at me. I'm sure someone has gone through my file and my arrest records looking to link me to this shit. And if they really want to, they'll find something, whether its there or not."

"Do you think that your leaving the way you did helped?" But Felicia didn't answer me.

"I used to tell her all the time that it didn't look good for her to be in her position at the bank and be associating with a known drug dealers wife, and goin' to their

parties. But she would always say that for that to be a problem, she'd have to be doing something wrong, and her record at the bank would speak for itself."

"You mind if I ask you another question?"

"You don't have to ask me that every time you want to ask me something. Go ahead."

"Have you had breakfast yet?"

"No." Felicia let out a little laugh.

"I haven't either. And I'm hungry, so can we finish this conversation over breakfast? I promise I'll behave myself even without handcuffs."

Felicia looked at me as if I had lost my mind. She picked up her gun and walked toward me again. She stood in front of me, not speaking. As if she was deciding right then how it was goin' to be between us. She looked into my eyes. I locked my eyes in hers. She exhaled and left the room.

"Shit," I said quietly.

For a second there, I thought we were having a moment. You know, the kind that James Bond always has when the girl kisses and then releases him. I felt the pain in my wrists. "Live in reality, Nick. This ain't no fuckin' movie." I didn't think she was going to kill me, so I didn't try to leave. I couldn't, not after coming all this way. She knows

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something. Something major, and she was scared because she knew it.

Twenty minutes later, Felicia returned to the room. She had changed into black jeans and heels. She still had on a tee shirt, but this one fit her. She had a holster on and had traded her 44 for a .9. "You better be real." She leaned forward and unlocked the cuffs.

"Thank you. They were starting to hurt," I said rubbing my wrists. I stood up and started walking toward the table to collect my hardware.

"Hold up," she said, as I reached. "We haven't gotten that far yet."

"No guns, huh."

"For the time being, I think it's best if I carry the gun. But I tell you what." She moved closer to me. "Pick one."

"One?"

"Yes. One. And I'll hold on to that. If you're a good boy and you don't give me any trouble, I may let you earn it back."

"Either one of the .9's will do." Felicia stuck my gun in her jacket pocket and left the other two on the table. I stood for a second, looking at my guns. I wasn't getting a good feeling about leaving them.

"You coming?"

I turned around and she was pointing my .9 at me.

"Yeah, I'm coming."

I walked out of the house feeling naked. I tried, but couldn't remember the last time I went some place unarmed.

"Which one is yours?" She stopped and put my gun back in her pocket. "No, let me guess. First time in LA?"

"Yes." I stopped and frowned.

"Blue convertible." She was playing me like a tourist. Which I was, but she didn't have to play me. I unlocked her door and she got in. As soon as I got in she said, "Go ahead and drop the top. I know you want to."

She was right, so I dropped the top.

Once we pulled off, Felicia took my gun out of her pocket and rested it on her lap. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"Simply Wholesome on Sousean, make a left here."

We arrived at Simply Wholesome and were promptly seated. We sat quietly as our waitress arrived to take our orders. She filled our coffee cups and left us.

"You never did answer my question."

"Which one? I haven't answered several of your questions."

"I noticed. How is school going?"

"It was goin' fine until all this came down."

"What were you taking?"

"Law school. I've been meaning to do it for years, but I got caught up in the job. Out there in the streets doin' the job."

"Do you miss it?"

"Not as much as I used to. I missed the feeling you get when you knock on a door or walk up on a car."

"What's gonna happen next. I know what you mean. You're excited and apprehensive all at the same time."

"That's right, you're ex-army. What did you do?"

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"Special operations unit."

"Trained killer. Should I be scared?"

"No, you have the guns, remember." Felicia laughed. "What turned you? What made you decide to go back to school?"

"One day I had finally seen enough. Did enough. Too much."

"Sounds like you got a story."

"You don't want to hear about that."

"Yes I do, Felicia. I love a good story."

"Well, I'm not sure I want to tell you."

"What? You think it will scare me. I don't scare easy."

"No kiddin'." Felicia took a playful swing at me. "You could probably tell me stories that make mine sound like a church social."

"Maybe."

"I'll try and stick to the highlights, so stop me if I bore you."

"I'm sure I won't need to."

"Alrighty then. I've told this story so many times, one more time ain't goin' hurt. Officer Morgan and I, Morgan, that was my partner, we responded to a domestic disturbance call. When we got there, Officer Morgan knocked on the door and identified himself. They opened up on us right then." She giggled. "I mean, the suspects began firing at us through the door."

"All right now." I kept thinking Felicia was much too pretty to be a cop. "Try to keep it real for me."

"Anyway." Felicia cut her eyes at me.

"Why'd they just start blastin' like that?"

"Drug deal, in progress." She had pretty eyes, very expressive eyes. "I was goin' to call for back up, but Morgan kicked in the door and went in. By the time I got in there, one of them was tryin' to gather up the drugs from the table. He fired at me. I returned fire and hit him with two shots in his chest. I looked for Morgan; he was runnin' up the stairs. He yelled, 'They're goin' out the back!' I ran down the hallway. I could see the back door was open. Then I saw someone run out, but they were gone by the time I got there. I started back up the hall, when one of them came runnin' out. I shot him, kicked his gun away, and kept moving up the hallway. I yelled for Morgan, but he didn't answer. Shots were still bein' fired. I heard footsteps coming down the stairs. When I cleared the hallway, I saw one on the steps. He shot at me, and I ducked back in the hallway. I shot back blindly. I hit him in the back before he got out the door. There was still shooting upstairs. I moved toward the stairs. I looked up and saw Morgan chasing one down the stairs. I fired at him, he went down, and I took cover to reload.

"After awhile, Morgan came and sat next to me. It was over. I killed four people that day, Nick. Morgan killed three more. We just sat there looking at each other. Both of us knew we'd had enough. There was an investigation and it was ruled a clean shoot.

But it was ugly. Very ugly, what I had to go through before they cleared me. Two days later I quit. Morgan quit about a month after that."

The waitress returned with our meals. We ate, talked, and laughed at this and that. I liked her laugh. I was starting to like her. Picture that, me liking somebody who wasn't married.

"You know what, Nick? You don't look like the type that used to run with Vicious Black."

"I don't?"

"No, you don't.' Felicia smiled at me.

"Just what does that type look like?"

"I don't know, I just know you don't look like it."

"I guess that makes us even. I think your way to pretty to be a cop."

Felicia smiled, but looked away this time. "I actually met him once a couple of years ago."

"Who; Black?"

Felicia simply nodded her head.

"Really, where was that?"

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"At the police station; where else? When I was a rookie. I had just gotten off my shift and was on my way out of the building. There was this man walking in front of me. There was something about the way he walked. So confident, so regal, it was almost like he was saying, I command all I survey."

"That's Black."

"I remember thinking that it struck me as being odd because most times when people leave the precinct, they walk out like they're beaten, defeated and glad to be out of there. But not him, he walked with his head held high and his shoulders back. And his stride commanded your attention and respect. Then he stopped and turned around and said 'That fragrance you're wearing, is it bora, bora?' I told him that it was and he told me that it smelled beautiful on me. He introduced himself and asked me if I worked there? I said Yes, I'm a cop. He said that's a shame. So I asked him, 'Why? Don't you like cops?' he said as a rule, no I don't. And I can't make an exception, even for very pretty cops like you. It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms Hardy. And then he walked away."

"That's Black," I said and smiled.

"The next day I asked my training officer, Dan Cavanaugh, now that was a piece of work." Felicia dropped, and then shook her head. Having the pleasure of meeting Cavanaugh I knew what she meant. "Anyway, I asked Cavanaugh about Black and he told me this story about how he was called to a domestic disturbance at Black's apartment. One of his neighbors called the police, 'cause some woman was out in the hall beating on his door and yelling and screaming. But by the time Cavanaugh and his partner arrive on the scene, the woman is gone and Black is there in the hall with

some guy. So Black tells him that he talked to the

woman and he was able to convince he to go home quietly. But Cavanaugh says he didn't like Black's attitude, so he tells he partner to go on back to the car. Well when he turns around, Cavanaugh gives Black and the other guy one in the gut. He said they took it, not because they were afraid of him or anything, but Black was just showing respect for his authority," Felicia gave me her version of a girlish giggle. "Well that's my Vicious Black story. I don't know how true it is, but that's my story."

"Well, Felicia, that's not exactly true."

Felicia sat up straight, "Its not?"

"No, its not."

"How do you know?"

"I was the other guy in the hall."

"Really."

"Really. That night Black called me and told me about the woman. Black told he that he came out and tried to talk to her, but it only made it worst. He told me he had something goin' on and didn't have time to deal with her. So he told me and Freeze to come get her before somebody called the cops."

"What was wrong? Did he have another woman in there?"

"No. He had something goin' on in there, but there was no woman involved. Anyway, when we got there she's still in the hall, raisin' hell. Freeze walks up on her, puts his hand over her mouth, and carries her outside. I knocked on the door and let

Black know that it was taken care of. I went inside and talked to him and Bobby for a minute, then I walked out with Black. That's when your boy Cavanaugh gets there. Black did explain things just like you said. And Cavanaugh did say, I don't like your attitude and sent his partner back to the car to wait, just like you said."

"At least that part is true."

"Yeah, but that's where the story changes. After his partner leaves, Black went in the apartment and came back with an envelope and gave it to Cavanaugh."

"Cavanaugh?"

"Cavanaugh."

"Cavanaugh, huh? I guess you just never know."

As much as I was enjoying the conversation I worked it back to the business at hand.

"How long did you know Pamela?"

"We were play pen buddies."

"Really?"

"We go back a long way. I grew up in that house and Pamela lived three doors down."

"What was her involvement with Jake?"

"As far as I know, they were just friends. She met him at one of Gee's parties. There wasn't anything physical, if that's what you're asking."

"What about LaShawn? Were her and Pamela close?"

"Yes, unfortunately. She met her at one of those parties and they became instant friends. LaShawn was nothing but poison. But Pamela seemed fascinated by that whole lifestyle. Not that she was a part of it or wanted to be. But she just liked being around them. She had never been around people like that and she just got caught up."

"Hmm. Growing up in LA, I would think she met plenty of people in the game."

"Pam's mom didn't play that. She kept a pretty tight reign on her kids. They weren't on lock down or nothing, they did stuff, but they did it as a family and her moms was always around."

"What about Mrs. Childers?"

"Her and Gee were close. Pamela looked out for Gee when they worked at the bank in Kansas City together. She said Gee was pretty helpless when she first got there. She'd never had a job before and she was a nervous wreck."

"By the way, you said those pictures were taken the same day."

"And?" Felicia leaned forward and smiled.

"Who took the pictures?"

"I was wondering if you had picked up on that. I would have been disappointed if you hadn't."

"Well?"

"Pamela did. Taking pictures was sort of her hobby."

"You think she took those pictures of Jake and LaShawn?"

"Maybe."

"You wanna tell me now?"

"Tell you what?"

"Why you left?"

"How long are you goin' to be here?"

"I'd like to say until you tell me why you left. But it'll probably be more like a couple of days."

"I don't know if I can trust you."

"Well, Felicia, you can tell me about it and I can go back to New York and do something about it. Or you can stay on the run until whoever it is you're running from, catches up with you."

"There in lies my problem, Nick. Even if I tell you, they still may come. I ain't trying to testify against nobody and live my life in witness protection. No, no, not a life for me."

I looked at my watch.

"What are you gonna do now?"

"That depends on you, Ms Hardy. What are you doin' the rest of the day?"

"Since you're out here, and it's your first time and all, I was gonna show you around. Maybe you'll like it enough to come back. Look in on me every now and then. Make sure I'm still alive."

"I'd like that."

She caught me a little off guard with that one.

Maybe we did have a moment.

We talked about a little bit of everything while Felicia drove me around to all the tourist spots in LA. I felt comfortable talking to her. So for once, I let my guard down and opened up to her. "Listen, I know a quiet little spot on the beach."

"I'm not dressed for the beach."

"That's why they made malls."

Felicia and I spent the rest of the afternoon and the early evening at the beach. Laughing and talking like neither of us had a care in the world. She sat with her head on my shoulder and watched the sun set. We drove to a Chinese restaurant in Torrance called Szechwan. I had Kung Pao. She ordered the Sweet and Spicy Shrimp. The food was excellent. After dinner, Felicia drove quietly back to her house. "I had a nice day, Nick," she said and got out of the car.

"I did too," I said as I walked her to her door. "But it's early, I was hoping you'd show me some of that famous LA night life."

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"Not tonight, Nick. I'm tired. I got a lot on my mind and I wouldn't be good company. Will you come see me tomorrow?" she asked, as she got to the door and unlocked it.

"Sure." I was disappointed for more than the obvious reason.

"Then I'll see you in the morning." Felicia kissed me on the cheek and went inside. I had just turned to walk away when I heard the door opened.

"Nick."

"Yes, Felicia," I said excitedly.

"Here are your guns." She handed them to me, one at a time. "Good night, Nick." And once again the door closed. I walked away thinking of my bad luck. I had just spent the day, a great day, with a woman I was really interested in, who seemed to be interested in me. The problem is she may be involved in a murder, not to mention that I lived six thousand miles away.

* * *

Chapter Fifteen

Saturday July 18: 10:59 AM

The following morning I picked up Felicia around eleven. A bright red sundress and pumps was her attire for the day. "Not that I'm complaining or anything, but its kind

of hard to hide your gun isn't it?" Felicia rolled her eyes at me, and without hesitation, pulled up her dress. Just enough to show me that she had a .25 strapped to each thigh.

"So, Ms Hardy, tell me what's going on."

"Well, since you're leaving in the morning, I was hoping we could spend the rest of the day together."

"That wasn't what I was asking and you know this."

"I know that, Nick. But trust me."

"Okay."

I didn't really want to leave her and I didn't want to leave without hearing her story. What else could I do? I put on my seatbelt and relaxed. We did a long lunch at a place called Killer Shrimp, on Colfax Ave and Ventura Boulevard. After lunch, Felicia drove around for a while before driving out of LA on the 101 for a little over an hour until we got to the Town Center Drive exit. "Where are we going?"

"Back to LA," she said, and got on California State Route 1. "I wanted to share one of my favorite places with you."

"Where is that?"

"Shhh. You just trust me. I trusted you. You're not afraid, are you?"

"No," I said louder than I needed to. "I just like to know where I'm goin' that's all." My sixth sense was kicking in. For all I knew, she could be taking me some place secluded so she could kill me. Wasn't like she couldn't do it. After all, she was an ex-

cop on the run. But on the run from what?

"I've never taken anybody here before." She smiled a very soft and satisfied smile. It caused my apprehension to subside, but just a little. Apprehension. The rush. Something else we shared.

We had driven a short while when Felicia said, "This is part of what I wanted to show you."

I looked and saw what was probably one of the most beautiful sights I'd ever seen. The Pacific Ocean on one side of the highway, and the mountains on the other. Felicia tapped me on my thigh. "How do you like it?" she asked me, as she drove down the curvy stretch of highway.

"It's breathtaking." I replied, thinking that she either needed to slow down or drive with two hands.

"No, breathtaking comes a little later."

"Well are we in a hurry to get there?"

"Kinda, well yeah, we are in a hurry. Why, you a nervous passenger? I mean you're not scared or anything?"

"No. I just want to enjoy the view. You did want me to see this, didn't you?"

"Yes. But there's more. You just gotta trust me."

"That's funny coming from the woman who had me in handcuffs first thing yesterday morning."

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"Stop being such a punk. I gave you back your guns. You'll be all right."

Felicia slowed down, but only a little. We drove for awhile longer until she got into Malibu. She made a left off the highway and started to drive up into the hills.

"Excuse me, that sign says private property."

"And?"

"Where you takin' me?"

"Trust me, Nick. If it makes you more comfortable —" Felicia let go of the wheel, reached between her legs and handed me her guns. "There, that should help."

It did.

"Thank you. But I still want to know where we're goin'?"

"Some place breathtaking."

I decided to relax and roll with it. If I couldn't take her, and whatever she had waiting, I deserved whatever I got. Before too much longer we passed a sign that read, SERRA; A Franciscan Retreat.

I was more curious now. She parked the car and led me by the hand toward the building. As we walked past the building, I followed her up a small hill, Fe

licia said, "Now this is breathtaking."

And she was breathtaking.

She walked ahead of me and sat down on a bench at the edge of the mountain. "I used to come here all the time. Get away from it all. Gives me a chance to think."

From where we were, high in the mountains, the view was spectacular. Surrounded on three sides by mountains and the ocean was dead ahead. It was breathtaking. The only sound was the sound of her voice. And to top it off, the sun was just starting to set. "I've been out here every night since I've been back."

"Guess you got a lot to think about?"

Felicia smiled that smile I was getting fond of seeing.

I lost track of time as we sat there in silence until the summer sun dropped out of sight. I don't know what she was thinking about, but I couldn't stop thinking about what she knew. I played out several scenarios while I took turns admiring Felicia's profile, painted with a backdrop of sunset. Then she got up abruptly. "You ready to go, Nick?"

"No." I stood up and faced her. "I could stay out here and look at you all night."

She turned and walked away, and I followed her back to the car. Once we were back on the highway I thanked her for bringing me. She didn't answer. She turned onto Sunset Blvd. and took the scenic route back to her house. She invited me in this time and offered me a drink. "Johnnie Black, if you got it."

"A glass of white wine will have to hold you."

Felicia returned with two glasses. She handed me one and took a sip of hers. "When are you going to tell me what you know?"

Felicia put her drink down and then she put her arms around my neck and kissed me. There was real passion in her kiss. More passion than I'd felt coming from any woman I'd kissed in a long time.

"I will tell you everything you want to know," Felicia said then kissed me again. "In the morning."

She kissed my lips and then down to my neck. I unzipped her dress and allowed it to fall to the floor. I paused to admire her body. Felicia was beautiful. I ran my tongue along the edge of her bra, while reaching behind her back and unhooking her bra at the same time. Her breasts were firm and her nipples grew harder when I ran my tongue across them. Felicia moaned quietly, wiggling her way out of her panties.

We kissed our way into the bedroom and we fell on the bed. I kissed her calves. The closer I got, the more Felicia squirmed. I started working my way up to her thighs. I slid my tongue around the edges of her pubic hair, then spread her lips. Her back arched as I stuck my tongue inside of her. Her stomach muscles tightened, her thighs pressed together as her back arched, and she screamed in ecstasy.

I stood up took off my pants, and laid down next to her bed. I rolled on top of her, and put the weight of my body on my arms. I entered her slowly. She arched her back slightly and began to rotate her hips. We began to move slowly, then faster and then slow again. Her body began to quiver again. I placed my hands gently on her face and kissed her. We continued to make love until we both passed out.

* * *

Chapter Sixteen

Sunday July 19: 5:27 PM

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I was tired when I got off the plane. I was up all night with Felicia and I got up early again in the morning. But it was worth it. In more ways than just the obvious. I wanted to go home and get some rest, but I went to the stake house first. Things were quiet when I arrived at the house. Monika was sitting in front of the console, but not really looking. Jett was sitting on the floor, goin' through the paper. It didn't matter where in the world we were, or what language it was in, Jett always went through the paper, page by page. You never know what's goin' on unless you read the paper, he'd always say.

"Evening, people." I said and made myself comfortable.

"Where you been?" Monika asked excitedly.

"California."

"California?"

"Yeah. Jett didn't tell you?"

"Oops," Jett said, and buried his head back in the Times.

"What were you doin' in Cali?"

"I went to follow up on a lead I got on Pamela Hendricks. Why? Did something happen?" My first thought was for Mrs. Childers safety. "Is Mrs. Childers all right?"

"Nick, take your head out that woman's ass for a minute and take a look at this,"

Monika said, and handed me a piece of paper.

I looked at it and shrugged my shoulders. "Is this supposed to mean something to me?"

"I'll say," Jett said. "That paper is the missing link. It puts it all together. It's the answer we've been looking for."

"Are you gonna let me in on it or do I have to guess?"

Felicia was true to her word. She told me everything she knew once she got me up this morning. But they seemed so excited, why blow it for them.

Monika smiled. "That is the formula for what appears to be some type of synthetic cocaine."

"Synthetic crack to be exact," I said. "Jake developed it for Chilly."

"How did you know?" Monika asked.

"That's what I was doin' in California. Chilly got the formula from a chemist named Rodriguez who used to work for the Peruvians."

"Used to? I didn't know that was possible."

"He was on the run. There was a bounty out for him. He had started a new life, quiet, and low profile. But Chilly spots him at some mall up state. Rodriguez gave Chilly the formula so he wouldn't give him up. But it didn't work."

"Damn right, it didn't work," Jett said. "It was killin' people, and dead customers are bad for business."

"After the first five died from smokin' it, Chilly gives him up to the Peruvians. That's what Diego Estabon was talking about when he said I took care of mine. Apparently, they agreed that everyone involved had to die."

"So what do we do now?" Jett asked.

I looked at Jett and Monika. Jett dropped his head.

Monika shook hers in semi disgust. "I told you that this wasn't something we needed to be fuckin' around in. I say we back all the way up off this. Shut all this down and go back to doin' what we do. Jett hacks our way in, you kill them, and I blow it up so there's no trace."

"Jett?"

"I think she's right, Nick. The shit didn't work, so if Jake ain't dead, he's gonna be."

"How 'bout it, Nick?" Monika asked.

I didn't want to admit it, but they were right. If Jake was still alive and he had any sense, he'd be so far away that Chilly would never find him and neither would we. "I'll call Mrs. Childers and give her back her money."

"Why?" Monika asked.

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"We earned our money," Jett said. "Her brother took off before her husband could kill him. Case closed."

"You're right, Jett, all this set up does cost money."

"And our time." Monika added and she started helping Jett pack it up.

"All right, case closed," I said and got up and started to help.

"No, no, Nick, you just go on and tell Mrs. Childers what ever you need to tell her. We'll take care of this. You give me a call when Felix has something for us."

"So, like, what are you sayin'? I can't call you until then?"

"That's not what I'm sayin'," Monika said, shaking her hands. Monika walked over and put her arm around me. "Don't stand there lookin' like we're runnin' out on you, 'cause we're not. You can call me anytime, Boo. But this private eye stuff, ain't for me."

"She's right, Nick. This is too much like work," Jett said. "But if you're diggin' it, hey, that's cool too."

"Okay. I'll get with y'all later."

What else could I do? I was diggin' this. But I had to keep my prospective clearly in focus. Jake was gone, long gone. And if he had any sense, he would stay that way. The only thing left to do was to break it down for Mrs. Childers and move on. But

there were still some things about all this that I couldn't shake. Something about Pamela Hendricks, or maybe it was just the personal feelings I had developed for Felicia Hardy that was clouding my judgment. Either way, I knew it wasn't over. At least not for me.

So I drove to Rocky's hang out. I wasn't exactly sure why I was going there; much less what I would say when I got there. I walked in and got the same reception as the last time, it seemed like every eye in the house was on me. That's when I saw him, Chilly, the man himself.

He was standing at the bar enjoying the company of two very attractive young ladies. Rocky was seated in the back at what I assumed was his regular spot. As soon as he was alerted to my presence, he made a B-line straight to Chilly.

I went and sat down at a table as far away from them as I could and still keep them in sight. A waitress came to take my order. "Johnnie Walker Black, straight up." I started to ask her if she would tell Rocky that I wanted to see him, but I kinda figured that he'd get around to it sooner or later. Chilly looked over his shoulder as Rocky pointed me out to him. I didn't think he'd do that, but fuck it. It was time I got this over with. Chilly dismissed Rocky with one hand and patted one of the ladies he was with on the ass, then started for me.

"Mind if I sit down?" Chilly asked.

"Be my guest," I replied, as the waitress returned with my drink.

"No check for this table. His money's no good here." Chilly said, as he took a seat. "Nick Simmons. I haven't seen you since the old days. I thought Bobby killed you and that army shit was just a cover."

"No, Chilly, I'm still alive."

"Rocky's snitchin' ass told me you're a private investigator now. That's a long way from where you came from. What's the matter, Freeze and them ain't got no spot for you, or is Bobby still tryin' to kill you?" Chilly laughed. "Let me quit fuckin' with you. Shit, if Bobby really wanted you dead, you'd be dead."

"Good point."

"So what brings you here?"

"Stopped in to have a drink." I raised my glass and downed it. Chilly smiled and motioned for the waitress.

"Ain't too many of us old heads left in this game. Mutha fuckas now ain't got no honor. No respect for the game. Niggas like you and me got to keep it real, you know what I'm sayin'?"

"Yeah."

"What's up with you? Like you mad at me bout something. That shit between me and Black is over with. I got nothing but respect for him," Chilly said as the waitress arrived. "What you drinkin', Nick?"

"Johnnie Black, straight."

"Johnnie Black, straight up and bring me a Crown on the rocks. You know I was the one who made peace with Black?"

"So I heard; why don't you tell me about it."

Chilly looked at me for a while. "That's right, you were gone when all that went down, so I guess you don't know. After Black killed Jimmy Knowles and Charlie

Rock, Vincent Martin kept it goin' for a long time. I kept tellin' Vince dumb ass that all that war shit was bad for business, but he wasn't hearin' me. Him and Charlie was like brothers, so Vince was takin' the shit way too personal."

"So you gave him up to Black?" I said coldly.

"Shit no! I ain't that type of mutha fucka. But after a while it didn't matter anyway. One night Black caught Vince and his whole set laid back. They was all at Vince's house chillin', Black busted up in there and killed them all."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:06 am

The waitress returned with our drinks, served them, and departed quickly. She glanced over her shoulder and smiled at me. I winked in response.

"Black, Bobby and Freeze walked in blastin'. Like they was playin' a video game and shit." Chilly began making shooting motions with his hands. "Boom, boom, boom. I hear nobody even got off a shot. Must a been eight, ten mutha fuckas in there. They killed everybody quick, except one guy. He said he was layin' on the floor shakin' with his gun in his hand. Said Black walked up to him and sat on the floor next to him."

Bet you wanna know why you're still alive.

"But the boy is so petrified that he can't even talk; he just shakes he head. He said all Black said was, 'Tell Chilly to come see me'." Chilly motioned for the waitress. He finished his drink. "Bring us around round," he told her and handed her a twenty dollar bill. "That for you, baby." We both watched her as she walked away. "I might just have to fuck her tonight. Anyway, me and Black always been cool. We wasn't never close like y'all or nothin' like that. But Black gave me my respect. And you know how he carried his. I ain't ashamed to say that the only reason I ain't dead is because Mike Black didn't want to kill me. He did right by me."

Damn right, Black let you live to make all that money. "There ain't too many like Black."

"That's what I'm sayin'. These young bucks like that bitch made nigga there." He pointed at Rocky. "Ain't loyal to shit but money."

"It's a new day. With new players."

The waitress served us another round of drinks. Chilly raised his glass. "To the old days."

"I'll drink to that." All that talk about honor and loyalty was starting to wear on me for personal reasons.

"Let's cut the bullshit. I know why you're here. Same reason I'm here. Jake. I know Gee hired you to find him."

"Rocky tell you that?"

"Naa. But that's exactly what I'm sayin'. He got no idea who you are or where you come from. That bitch ain't have no business tellin' me that you was a private eye. Him and Gee go back some years. He should be loyal to her over me. But as soon as you came through the door, he comes runnin' to me like a little bitch and told me everything. But you see, Nick, I already knew all about that."

"Did you?"

"Shit yeah! What, you think I just let Gee run wild, doin' whatever she wants? Hell no! I keeps her on a long chain. I knew she wrote you a check for ten thousand dollars. So I did some checkin', that's when I found out you was a private investigator. I figured she hired you to look for Jake. I got me a little honey at the bank. She keeps tabs on Gee's account for me. Gee will fuck up some money if you let her. But that's my fault. She was a young girl when I met her. She didn't know shit. I should have taught her the value of money, instead of just throwin' it at her. But that's my problem."

"It's probably too late now."

"You got that right. You have any luck findin' Jake?"

"Not a clue," I lied. I started to lay it all out for him. Cut the bullshit. But I thought better of it. "I figure he's some place hidin' out, what I don't know, is why. What was he into Chilly? Was he doin' something for you? The way I get it, you were the last person to see him before he dropped out of sight." I was pushing my luck and I knew it. But I had that I don't give a fuck attitude in full effect.

"You take chances, Nick. But I know what kind of nigga you are, so fuck it. I respect a mutha fucka that gets right to it."

"I'm glad to hear that. So what was he doin' for you?"

Chilly laughed. "He wasn't doin' nothin' for me. I just wanted to talk to him about some shit I been hearin', that's all. I want you to find Jake. And I want you to let Gee know where he is. After you tell Gee, then I want you to tell me."

"Why, so you can kill him." It was a statement, not a question.

"No, I'm not going to kill him. You have my word on that. I just want to talk to him. He was into something, I just want to know what."

He reached in his pocket.

I put my hand on my gun.

He dropped a stack of money on the table in front of me. "That's five thousand dollars there. Take it."

I complied.

"I'll give you five more when you tell me where he is. And there's something else I want you to do for me."

"What's that?"

"In the last three weeks, Gee's been takin' a lotta money out her account. Cash money, twenty thousand dollars. You tell me where that money went, and that twenty is yours."

I thought about making a quick twenty grand right there and tell him about how Ben Josephs was blackmailing his wife. But what honor I had left, and my loyalty to his wife stopped me. "I'll look into it."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:06 am

"You know me, Nick. I'm a man of my word and I pay."

"Thanks for the drink." I got up and walked out, with the five grand in my pocket. I got in my car thinking how things had just taken a weird turn. At this point, I was sure that Jake had just taken off. So I drove by Cuisine to see if maybe Freeze had anything for me.

Cuisine was crowded and I couldn't find a place to park. So I drove around finally finding a spot about two blocks away. I had walked about a half a block when I heard somebody say, "Got a light, man?"

I turned around and was met immediately by a fist in my face. There were three of them, one grabbed me from behind and held me while the other two hit me repeatedly. I recognized one of them from Rocky's joint. I fell to the ground and they started kicking me. Once that was over he said, "Chilly sends his regards."

They left me lying there and walked away laughing. I struggled to my feet and breathed deeply. I would have to repay their kindness. I started walking the rest of the way to Cuisine. I made it as far as the lobby before I passed out.

When I came to, I was lying on a couch, a woman was tending my wounds, and Freeze was standing over me. "What happened to you?"

"Some of Rocky's boyz tried to warn me off and blame it on Chilly," I said, and stood up slowly.

"How you know it wasn't Chilly?"

"'Cause Chilly just —," I got up and reached in my pocket. I still had the money.
"Chilly gave me five thousand dollars to find Jake."

"I thought you was workin' for Gee?"

"I am. He still wants me to tell her where he is, as long as I tell him too." My head was still spinning, so I sat back down.

"I told you not to fuck with this, now look at you." Freeze laughed. He walked over to the desk, put the phone on speaker and dialed a number. "Fucked around and got your ass kicked."

"I think my ass was the only thing they didn't kick."

Freeze just shook his head. "This is Freeze, let me speak to Rock."

"This, Rock. What's up, Freeze? I ain't —"

"Shut the fuck up nigga and understand what I'm tellin' you. You sent your boyz after Nick Simmons to

night."

"I didn't have nothing to do with that, Freeze. I —"

"Shut the fuck up, bitch! Nick Simmons is family to me. You feel me, Rock? So I'm tellin' you now, if that shit happens again, fuck peace. I'll kill you and your whole set. Got that!" Freeze hung up the phone and started laughing. I laughed too, but it hurt.

Freeze took me out to Perry's house so he could check me out and give me something

for the pain. It was damn good seeing Perry again after all these years. Like everybody else, Perry treated me as if I never missed a day.

"I brought somebody by to see you, Perry." Freeze said.

"Yeah, who's that?" Freeze stepped aside. "Nick! Damn its good to see you. Y'all come on in. Hold up, neither one of y'all shot or bleeding?"

"No, man. We just came to visit." Freeze said as we went inside Perry's house.

"Okay, 'cause I still remember the last time you two came to my house this late."

"So do I. How could I forget," I said to Perry. I looked at the smile on Freeze's face and I could tell he hadn't forgotten either.

"Couldn't forget what, Nick?" Wanda asked. "Y'all were just full of stuff I didn't know about. I'm starting to feel like an outsider."

"Don't feel like that, Wanda. We never even told Black. But you know Black, he found out anyway."

"Found out what, Nick?"

"Back in the day, me and Freeze did a little freelancing."

"What kind of freelancing, Nick?"

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:06 am

Even though we still sorta worked for André, who was one of the biggest drug dealers around those days, Black absolutely forbid any of us to have any direct involvement with drugs. Black made his money highjacking trucks, robbing warehouses and payrolls. We all made crazy money, but me and Freeze wanted to, needed to, make some money on our own.

"So what we gonna do, Nick? We can't roll, so how we gonna get paid?" Freeze asked.

We kicked around a bunch of stuff, but everything we thought of, either wasn't worth the risk or wasn't enough paper to make it worth the effort. It all came back around to the fact that fast, easy money was spelled D-R-U-G-S. Then it came to me. "Look, who's making the money?"

"Dope boyz," Freeze replied.

"Right, so why can't we get that money?"

"'Cause Black will kill us if we started rollin', that's why. And don't you say that he'll never find out. That mutha fucka is psychic about that shit. You ain't forget what we did to Banks when Black found out he was dealin'?"

"No, I ain't forgot. But who said anything about us dealin'?"

"You did."

"No, I didn't. I said why can't we get that money. There's a difference. You

interested?"

"I'm listening."

"Dope boyz rollin' around everyday with stupid cash on them. I'm talkin' about rollin' up on them, and robbin' them niggas while they laid back."

"You talkin' about rollin' up on a bunch of heavily armed mutha fuckas while they do business? That ain't no plan, that's suicide."

"You ain't scared are you, Freeze?"

"Hell no!"

"I didn't think so. But I ain't talkin' about hittin' them while they doin' business, that would be suicide. I'm talkin' about catchin' them comin' out their cars. They get out the car. Bam, we hit them quick and bam we out."

"That could work. I mean we know who they are. I don't like most of them niggas anyway. And as long as we don't take their dope, Black won't have shit to say."

So it was set.

Me and Freeze became stick up kids. We'd hit two or three a night some times. And the money was good, three, four, five grand a pop for a minutes work. Most times we never had to fire a shot. But after awhile, word got around and things started to dry up. The money was less and the security was more. But we were addicted to that cash. So the plan changed. We started robbin' them while they were selling quantity. Things were going good; it was easier than we thought. Except this one time. We over heard a guy, used to call himself Forty-eight, who had a real high, squeaky kinda voice, talkin' about he had some white guys on the hook and he was gonna retire on

the money he was gonna make.

"You mean we gonna take." Freeze said to me, making fun of the way Forty-eight talked.

We sat and watched as the players went into a motel room on Boston Road. Once the deal was in progress, we busted in.

"Nobody move! Nobody gets hurt!" Freeze shouted.

I looked at the guy carrying the briefcase with the money. Forty-eight and his boy raised their hands and backed away from the dope. But the two white guys with the money started beefin'.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll walk out that door quietly." And then he made a play for his gun.

Freeze wheeled around. "Shut up, white bread!" He hit him in the mouth with the pump. "You're speaking out of turn."

I covered with the semi while Freeze grabbed the case and we backed out of the room. It wasn't long after we got out of the room before somebody started blastin'. I fired back while Freeze headed for the car. The firefight continued until we were in the car and away.

We both looked at each other and started laughin'. "That was gettin' kinda hectic." Freeze said as he drove away. "Must be a lotta money in that case for them to have backup outside."

"I think this is the biggest score we ever had," I said, as I opened the case. "Maybe we can retire." Making fun of the way Forty-eight talked.

We were both laughing so hard that neither of us noticed the black Ford that pulled up along side of us. Until they started blastin'. With the first shot, they busted out the back window on the passenger side. "Where the fuck did they come from!"

"I don't know!" Freeze yelled as he floored it. He sped away down Boston Road with the Ford on our tail.

"Get us out of here, Freeze!"

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"What you think I'm doin'; writin' a love song?" Freeze turned sharply against traffic, but they stayed right with us. He turned on 222nd and then back onto Boston Road. "You see them?" Freeze demanded to know.

"No, I think you lost them."

"Damn right, I did! I told you I'd lose them!" That was when the back window got shot out.

"Shit!"

Freeze turned on Eastchester Road and kept going until he hit Laconia Ave. "I thought we lost them?"

"You did. These are different guys."

"What do you mean, different guys?"

"That it's not the same guys. It's a different car. Blue Chevy, coming up on your right." I began firing through the now opened back window. Trying to get them off us. But they kept coming. "Turn here! Try to lose them in the projects!"

Freeze turned on 229th street and drove through Edenwald Projects. "Damn! These guys are good." But he couldn't shake them. We came out of the projects and back onto Laconia, up 219th and onto Bronxwood Ave.

"Who the fuck are they?" I asked.

"I don't know. How the fuck should I know?"

"You just lose them." A car pulled out in front of us and we crashed into a parked car. I grabbed the case and we got out blazin'. "This way!"

"I ain't goin' down there, there's dogs down there!"

"Shoot them! Lets go!" I yelled as I started running down the alley.

"Look out!" Freeze yelled. I turned quickly, in time to see that two more guys were shooting at us. I caught one in the shoulder. "Ahhh! Shit!" If I hadn't turned when Freeze yelled it would have hit me in the chest.

"You hit?"

"Yeah, in the shoulder! I'm all right, keep goin'!"

I could hear the dogs barking in front of us and the guys firing behind us. I started firing in both directions. The barking stopped and the dogs ran in the opposite direction. But the guys kept coming. Freeze ran toward the building and shot the lock off. We ran through the building and out the front door. A car came down the street. Freeze stood in the middle of the street with his gun drawn.

The car stopped in front of him.

"Get out!"

Both doors swung open and the people ran away from the car.

The guys came out the door and opened fire on us again. This time it was Freeze who got hit. He went down.

"Freeze!" I yelled and ran toward him, shooting that semi-auto wildly in their direction.

They took cover.

I kept shootin'.

I pulled Freeze up and pushed him in the car, got in and drove away. I looked over at Freeze. "Where you hit?"

"In the gut! Shit that hurts. They got me in the leg too."

"Who the fuck are they?"

"How many times you gonna ask me that shit? I told you I don't know."

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"They still on us?"

Freeze struggled to turn around; he was bleeding pretty bad. "I don't see anybody."

I drove around for awhile to make sure we'd really lost them, who ever they were, this time. Then drove as fast as I could to Perry's house. Freeze had passed out at some point, so I had to carry him. He was in pretty bad shape. Perry said if it had been any longer he'd be dead. He took care of our wounds and I made him promise not to tell Black, but he found out anyway.

"You saved his life, and he saved yours."

"That's just one more reason why we're so tight."

"You ever find out who those guys were?" Wanda asked.

"Yeah. They were cops. They had a sting set up on Forty-eight. We just picked the wrong guy to rob that time."

* * *

Chapter Seventeen

Monday July 20: 4:42 PM

I slept late the next day. It was well into the afternoon before I finally rolled out of bed. It was almost five and I was still feeling a little groggy from the pain pills I had

gotten from Perry. I thought about going back to bed, but I picked up the phone and checked my messages.

Felicia had called and left me this message;

"The least you could have done was call me and let me know that you made it back safely. Anyways, I didn't call to fuss. I just wanted to say that I miss being with you. Bye, bye, honey."

I was really starting to like Felicia Hardy and I missed being with her too. I started to call her back, but then I remembered the last time I started feeling this way about a woman. I hung up the phone and called Mrs. Childers instead. It had been more than a week since the last time I saw or talked to her.

I left a message on her voice mail and asked her to meet me at Sparks Steak House on 46th Street around nine. I was a little late getting there and much to my surprise she was there, looking impeccable as usual. "Hello, Nick."

"Hello, Mrs. Childers. I hope I didn't keep you waiting very long?"

"I've been here about a half hour. But that's okay, I wanted to get out of the house anyway. Have a seat."

"Thank you." Once I was seated, her smile turned to a frown. I guess she noticed the cuts and bruises on my face.

"What happened to you?"

"I ran into some people who had something to prove."

"It looks like they did a good job. Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine."

"What have you found out for me, Nick?"

"Well, Mrs. Childers, I don't think your brother is missing, or that anything happened to him. I think Jake is somewhere hiding."

"What makes you say that?"

"He was involved with Chilly in some type of scheme to develop synthetic crack."

"Synthetic crack?" she looked at me strangely. "I've got a good idea, but just what exactly is synthetic crack?"

"Basically, Mrs. Childers, it's crack without the cocaine."

"How is that possible?"

"I really don't understand how the formula works, your brother's the chemist. But the long and short of it is, that it didn't work. At least seven people have died from it."

"Pamela?"

"Yes."

"That's not possible. Pamela didn't use drugs."

"I know that, but I believe that anybody who knew anything about it had to die. Pamela was just runnin' with the wrong people."

"I'll try not to take that personally." She rolled her eyes at me and turned away, but she turned back quickly. "If that's the case, then what makes you think that Jake isn't dead too?"

"Because Chilly is still looking for him."

"How do you know that?"

"Trust me." I thought about telling her that he gave me five grand to find Jake, but she didn't need to know that. Or the fact that he had somebody keeping tabs on her account and that Chilly wanted to know about the money that she gave Ben Josephs. "Anyway, as far as I could tell, Chilly hasn't killed him. But he is nowhere to be found. So I guess that concludes our business."

"I guess it does" Mrs. Childers said and gave me a strange look. "Did you talk to Rocky?"

"That's something else I wanted to ask you."

"What's that?"

"What type of relationship do you have with Rocky?"

"He's a friend of Jake's. Why?"

"Your friend?"

"Well — "

"Well?"

"Well, not really. Me and Rocky don't speak to each other anymore. We haven't spoken since before I left Philly."

"Why?"

"I don't think that's any of your business."

"Mrs. Childers, you made all this my business. What happened between you two?" She frowned up and looked away. The waiter finally came to take my order. "Hennessy Martini for the lady, and I'll have Johnnie Black, straight up." Once the waiter departed to get our drinks, I went back to the question. "What happened, Mrs. Childers?"

She rolled her eyes and looked away. "Do you remember me telling you that I did some things that I'm not proud of to get away from Philly?"

"And?"

"I asked Rocky for the money so I could get away from there. He told me he would

give me the money and that I should come by his apartment to pick it up. When I got there he tells me to come in the bedroom. When we get in there, he tells me that I could have the money, but I had to fuck him first."

"Pathetic."

"I was a virgin, Nick, so I told him that I couldn't do that. I started to leave, but I wanted to get away from there and I knew that nobody else was gonna give me the money. So I did it. I cried the whole time, but he didn't care. After he was done with me, Rocky said he was sorry and gave me the money. I took it and left."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pushed it." What else could I say?

"No, you shouldn't have." When the waiter returned with our drinks, Mrs. Childers drank hers down like water. "Can we get out of here?"

"Sure. Where do you want to go?"

"I don't care, anywhere." She threw some money on the table. "Just come ride with me." She got up without waiting for an answer. I shot my drink and headed out the door behind her.

We drove around for a while and ended up at her house in Nyack. After she opened up the house she went to make us a drink. I sat on the couch and watched her as she poured. I had noticed that she wasn't making eye contact with me when she talked. There was fear and uncertainty in her eyes. She handed me my drink and sat down across from me and started to talk.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:06 am

We drank, and like I said, she talked for over an hour and then she stopped. She got up and walked over to the French doors. I walked over to her and touched her arm. It seemed to startle her.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, just wondering what you must think of me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what do you think of me, Nick?"

"I don't know, I think you're nice. Very pretty."

"Is that all you see in me, Nick. A pretty face, — nice. Nice to look at, but not much more, right?"

"I didn't say that."

"You don't have to, because it's the truth. That's all I've ever been, pretty. Oh, look at Gabrielle, she's so pretty. All my life I've gotten by on my looks."

"You ain't all that now." I knew I had touched a nerve, so I tried to make light of it. "I was just being nice when I said you were pretty."

"Very pretty, that's what you said, Nick." She laughed. "You said I was very pretty."

"I was lying, 'cause you look like you been hit in the face with a bag of quarters. I bet little children scream and run to their mothers when they see your ugly ass."

"Stop it, Nick. I'm not that bad. And besides it wasn't a bag of quarters, it was a fist."

"I know, I was trying to be nice about it. But I can see. And I see that make up doesn't hide everything."

She looked away from me and stared into her drink. "I've never been in control of my life, Nick. I went from my father's house to Chilly's. The first day I met him, he told me that I was the prettiest woman he'd ever seen. From that day on, I never wanted for anything. After a lifetime of being told no, you can't, that's not for you, Gabrielle. Everything was yes. All because I was pretty. But that's all I was. All I've ever been. I was just something for him to show off to his peeps. To look good on his arm. I don't have a life of my own. That's Chilly's wife, Mrs. Childers, even to you, Nick. To you I'm Mrs. Childers. Well I'm not, my name is Gabrielle. My friends call me Gee. Since I'm not your client anymore it's time you started calling me Gee too."

"Okay, Gee. Why don't you get me another drink?"

"I didn't say you could start ordering me around," she said, snatching the glass out of my hand. "Want any ice?"

"No, just Hennessy will be fine."

Mrs. Childers handed me my drink and sat down next to me. "You've never told Chilly that story about you and Rocky, have you?"

"He'd kill Rocky if I told him. I never told anybody. Not Jake, not even Chéz. You're the first."

"What makes me so special?"

"I don't know. I've told you a lot of things about me, Nick. Shame that none of it is good. But that's the way it is."

"There must be some happiness in your life."

"You tell me what there is to be happy about? I live in fear, Nick. I never know when Chilly's gonna snap. Sometimes he can be so sweet to me and other times he's like a nightmare."

"Maybe it's time you wake up."

"Maybe. Maybe it is time to get my life back."

She began to cry.

"I never meant for things to turn out the way they did. You have to believe that, Nick. It was never supposed to happen."

"What are you talking about?"

"Huh?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing." She got up and poured herself another drink. "I've been babbling on like a fool. I am a fool."

"When are you gonna tell me the truth, Mrs. Childers? I mean, Gee."

"I have told you the truth, Nick." The tears were gone.

"I don't think so. I can't help you if you don't tell me the truth."

"There's nothing else to tell. Jake is gone. You said it yourself, it was all about this synthetic crack."

"Okay, if that's the way you want to play it." I finished my drink and stood up. I was ready to go. I wanted to call Felicia. But she got up too and took the glass from my hand. I looked at her. I mean really looked at her for maybe the first time. She was miserable. The more she talked about her life, the more I wanted to, needed to talk to Felicia, hear her voice. Hear something positive. Mrs. Childers returned my glass to me full. I thanked her and took a sip of my liquor.

"Maybe now that you don't work for me, you'll start paying me some attention."

"Just what makes you think I haven't been payin' attention to you?"

"I see the way you look at me."

"I —" she put hand over my lips.

"I'm hot." She stepped closer, resting her chest against me. "And I'm sticky. I'm goin' to take a shower." I took a moment to contemplate the way her moods took dramatic swings. Not five minute ago she was crying. Now she was almost predatory. She stepped away and turned around. "Unzip me." I unzipped her dress and she walked away as I lost site of her in the darkness. The light came on in the bathroom. I stood motionless, watching as she turned on the shower. Then she looked back at me. I took that as my invitation to join her.

She kissed me. Then she put her arms around me and kissed me again. "Undress me, Nick."

I took my time undressing her slowly. Once I was done, she stepped into the shower. "Aren't you coming?"

I undressed myself very quickly and followed her into the shower. My presence was met immediately by her arms around my neck and her tongue in my mouth. I picked her up by the waist, and she wrapped her legs around me. I angled her back against the wall and entered her. Despite the lack of foreplay, she was dripping wet. I like it like that.

"Harder, Nick! Fuck me harder!" I pounded her furiously against the wall. "Yes, Nick! Yes!" she screamed her delight. We went at it in the shower for awhile before we got out. Without bothering to dry ourselves, she hopped up on the bathroom vanity and spread her legs. "Come here," she said, motioning with her finger. I quickly complied. I placed my hands on the mirror to steady myself as well as get some added leverage. She lifted her legs and grabbed her ankles.

For reasons which I can't explain, Ben Josephs crossed my mind. I thought about what Chésará said, "'Cause he can't fuck. Gee said that he couldn't keep it up long enough to do anything for her. Gee said she rocked the house two times and he came."

Well, she was rockin' that house with a vengeance, but I was hanging right in there with her. Then her eyes bucked open, her body began to quiver, and her mouth opened as if she wanted to scream, but no sound came out.

Mrs. Childers picked up a towel and walked out of the bathroom without a word. I grabbed a towel and followed her out, drying myself as I walked. She wrapped the towel around her and headed for the bar. She poured a drink for each of us and handed me one. I drank mine, and watched as she came from behind the bar. She poured her drink across my chest and then she proceeded to lick it off. Once she was satisfied that she had gotten every drop, she led me into one of the bedrooms, and we went for it again. "Your turn now."

Mrs. Childers laid down on the bed and she climbed on top of me. I felt her ease herself down on me. She grinded her hips into mine, pinning my shoulders against the bed and stared in my eyes. I felt paralyzed, I couldn't move and I didn't have to. She rode me furiously until I felt myself expand and explode inside her. I had to laugh, because when I came, she screamed louder than I did.

* * *

Chapter Eighteen

Mrs. Childers dropped me off at my apartment about two in the morning. She was nervous during the ride about what Chilly might do if he were home when she got there.

I had drunk my share of Hennessy and could feel the makings of a serious hangover coming. I popped a couple of aspirins, took a shower, and crawled into bed. I went to sleep thinking, not only about what I just did with Mrs. Childers in the shower and in just about every room in the house. But I thought about Felicia mostly. Although I found Gee, now it felt funny saying it, very attractive, I missed Felicia. I just had sex with Gee and it was great, but in some strange kind of way, Gee's sex made me long for Felicia's touch even more. I wanted to see her face, hear her voice, to see her smile and be excited by her touch. I rolled over, I didn't understand it and I was too buzzed to try.

Tuesday July 21: 8:03 AM

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I dragged myself out of bed and made my way toward the door. What I found was two uniformed cops informing me that Detective Kirkland wanted to see me at the station right away. Once I got through cursing them out for makin' all that noise so early in the morning, I told them to wait, and I would be right out. I gave some thought to getting back in the bed. But that would only make them bang on the door some more. Still, I took my time about getting ready.

An hour later, I found myself sitting alone in an interrogation room waiting for Kirk to show up. But as luck would have it, Richards walked through the door.

"What happened to you, Simmons?" Detective Richards asked.

"I walked into a door?"

"Yeah, right. Looks to me like that door worked you over pretty fuckin' good, Simmons."

I didn't see any point in commenting, so I didn't. Richards was an idiot anyway. Finally Kirk came in and slammed the door behind him. "Sorry to keep you waiting." He stopped in his tracks when he saw me. "Shit, what happened to your face? No wait. Let me guess, you cut yourself shaving."

"No, he walked into a door." Richards laughed.

"Had to be one or the other." Kirk said, and took a seat next to me. "Anyway, Nick, I had you brought down here to see if you found out anything more about Jake Rollins."

"Why do you want to know, Kirk? What do you care about my missing persons case?"

"Because your missing persons case may be tied to several drug cases and a murder."

"I know about the drugs. What murder are you talking about?"

"Pamela Hendricks," Kirk said.

"Wasn't that one of the people who you told me died of this mysterious drug overdose?"

"That was our first impression." Richards chimed in.

"Why are you calling it murder now?"

"Nick, in case you haven't noticed, we're the police. That means we investigate." I guess Kirk was trying to be funny, but he wasn't successful. "That investigation has led us to come to a different conclusion."

"What brought you to that conclusion?"

"As near as we can tell, this Hendricks woman didn't use drugs." Kirk asserted. "There were signs of a struggle in the general area where the body was found. So, I'll ask you again, what have you found out about Rollins?"

"Nothing really. I've been working on another case. The more I talk to you guys, the more I'm convinced that I don't want any parts of this. As a matter of fact, just last night, I told my client that I don't think Jake wants to be found."

"You can say that." Richards laughed, and Kirk shot him a look. The more he talked the more the sound of his voice annoyed the shit out of me. Maybe Kirk felt the same way. "Your client thinks her husband, Chilly, is involved, doesn't she?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

Richards jumped out of his seat. "You're startin' to piss me off with that privilege shit, Simmons."

"So."

Kirk looked at him and shook his head. "Sit down, Richards."

"Like I said, Kirk, that's all I know."

"What about Felicia Hardy?" Kirk asked.

"That's the roommate, ain't it? Wasn't she a cop?"

"Yeah, you talk to her?"

"No."

"What were you doing in California?"

"I told you, I have another case. Why, is she in Cali?"

"We think so," Kirk said. "Her and the Hendricks woman grew up there. I think maybe she went back there."

"Hmm. Sorry I can't be any more help to you, Kirk. But like I said, I backed off of this."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:06 am

"Then you wouldn't be interested to know that Jake Rollins body was found last night. He was shot, once in the head with a heavy caliber weapon. At fairly close range."

"Has anyone informed my client?"

"Somebody is taking care of that as we speak."

At least I didn't have to be the one to tell Mrs. Childers that I was a fool. Or at the very least, I was a lousy detective. Yesterday I told her that her brother was alive and hiding somewhere from her husband. Now the cops were there to tell her he's dead. She's probably screaming Chilly did it right now.

Maybe I was just kidding myself into thinking I could be a detective. I had to start facing the reality that I'm not a detective. I'm a trained killer, that's what I am.

If it wasn't for Reggie, I would have never have found Felicia, and I wouldn't know anything about this whole synthetic crack thing. "Where was the body found?"

"Behind a dumpster at a restaurant on Third Ave. The body had been there awhile."

"You know how long?"

"Not yet. Few days at least. People at the restaurant said they'd smelled it for days before they finally checked it out. Here's what makes this whole thing a little more interesting. It seems that Rollins worked for the same company as another body we found three days ago with his throat slit from ear to ear."

"Coincidence?" I said nonchalantly. As far as I was concerned, I was out of it.

"I don't think so. They were both chemists, working for the same company. They didn't work together, but still, I'd say that was a bit more than just a coincidence. Wouldn't you say so, Nick?"

"Maybe." The shit was starting to get deep now. The other guy was probably this Rodriguez guy that Chilly's Peruvian friend, Diego Estabon, was supposed to have taken care of. If that was the case, maybe Chilly did take care of his, as promised, in a couple of days. I began to consider the possibility that maybe Chilly had found and killed Jake days ago and he was just setting me up to be part of his alibi.

"You ever seen this guy before, Simmons?" Richards asked.

He walked up to the table and handed me a picture of the dead man. "His name is Norman Vogel."

My heart stopped.

"We fished him out of the East River near Pier 17."

The shit just went from deep, to fucked up. If Rodriguez and Norman Vogel were the same person, then Felix had us deliver him gift wrapped to the Peruvians. And if that was the case, we were in this up to our necks. I picked up the picture as causally as I could. "No, never seen him before." I dropped the picture. "You finished with me?"

"No, Nick, we're just getting started," Kirk said.

"You think I killed them?"

"Not necessarily. But I'm not ruling you out. I'll tell you what I do think though. I

think you know exactly what's goin' on here."

"What makes you say that?" I tried to laugh it off, but he was right. I knew exactly what was goin' on here. I just wasn't about to tell him.

"These are your people, Nick. Scum bags and drug dealers, all of them. So let's start with what happened to your face?"

For the next hour, Kirk and Richards asked me questions that I knew the answer to, but refused to tell them. Anything I said at this point would lead right back to my front door. So my answer to every question was the same. "I don't know anything about it." I knew they had nothing to hold me on, not yet anyway. The only thing that was on my mind at that point was Felix.

As soon as the police released me, I called Monika. "Monika, this is Nick."

"No need to be so formal, Nick. How you doin'?"

"Not good. I'm on my way over there now. Call Jett and tell him to meet us there as fast as he can."

"My house? What's goin' on, Nick?"

"We have a problem. Jake is dead. Police just found the body."

"Good for them. How is that a problem for us?"

"I'll explain everything when I get there. Just call Jett. I'll be there in about twenty-five minutes." I must have been driving faster than I thought, 'cause I was there in fifteen minutes. Jett was there when I got there, which would save me the trouble of telling the story twice.

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"Are you sure it's the same guy?" Jett asked pacing back and forth around the living room.

"Yeah, I'm sure. It's too much of a coincidence not to be."

"Something ain't right about this. It's too messy, too public. The police can tie this back to us. Felix should never have put us in this position," Monika said.

"Have you tried to call Felix?" Jett inquired. "Find out what the fuck is goin' on?"

"Not yet. And if I did, what's he gonna say? I don't know anything about it, this shouldn't have happened. Best he doesn't know that we even suspect he had any part of this."

"If the cops connect us to Vogel, the shit is over. Fuck Felix. He set us up to take this fall," Monika said.

"We don't know that," Jett said.

"The hell we don't, who else could it be? I never did trust Felix," Monika said as she got up and looked out the window. "I mean what do we know about him anyway?"

"It all goes back to that last mission."

"What are you talking about, Nick?" she asked.

"The way the whole thing went down. I mean, what were we really doin' down

there?"

There was silence.

"We've all thought about it. I know I have. There we were in South America killing drug dealers, blowing up drug plants and seizing their financial records. We were small teams, each working independently. But all of a sudden, the entire unit is needed to take out one plant. Then boom, everybody dies."

"Except us." Monika asserted.

"And we'd be dead too if you didn't fall on approach and break your ankle."

"I never will forget searching the area for survivors," Jett said. I looked over at Jett; he looked like he was in another world, sitting there in the middle of the floor. "Knowing that there wouldn't be any," Jett continued. "But the whole time I'm thinkin', Nick. I'm thinkin', something ain't right. Something in the milk ain't clean."

"I hate it when you say shit like that, Jett. Like white milk is so pure, so clean that—"

"Give it a rest for now, Monika. Okay! We pick up the whole black, white thing at 0700 tomorrow," Jett said and bounced up from the floor. I had to agree. This wasn't the time.

Jett resumed his pacing routine. "Then the way they got us out of there. Quick and quiet. Like we were down there doin' somethin' we didn't have no business doin'. But shit went wrong and everyone died but us. Well shit, we don't know what we know, so what could we tell anybody. And who's gonna ask? You have to know what was goin' on to even ask the damn questions."

What he said was confusing at first, then I realized just how right he was.

"Then we get processed out. And the very next day there's Uncle Felix. But the money's been good so I ain't sayin' nothin'."

"Imagine if we had told Felix no," Monika said.

"Like I said, it's not like all of us haven't thought about it. But that's the case with any of the shit we've done, in or out. If we become expendable, we die. More so now."

"We don't know who the fuck Felix is. He never identified himself as a representative of — shit, anything!" Monika exclaimed. "We all just went along with it for the money. The fact of the matter is that we're mercenaries."

"She's right Nick."

"Don't you think I know that? We aren't some kinda high-powered secret government agents. They didn't recruit us into the CIA or any shit like that. They pushed us out and threw some bones our way to keep us happy and quiet."

"I need a drink." Monika picked up a bottle of gin. "What do we do now?"

"Make it two." Jett got up and followed Monika to the kitchen. She poured herself and Jett a glass. "You want one Nick?"

"Hell no. I don't know how y'all drink that shit anyway."

"Like this!" they both said almost at the same time and drained their glasses. "I got some Johnnie Black for you, Nick."

"Thanks."

Monika handed me a glass. "So what are we gonna do?" she asked.

"For the time being I need to stay as far away from this as possible."

"You a suspect, Nick?" Jett asked.

"And I quote, 'I'm not ruling you out'."

"That's not good, Nick," Monika said.

"Jett, start diggin' into Felix. Find out everything you can about him, bank records, property he owns, the whole nine."

"I'll crawl up his ass with a microscope."

"That's disgusting gray boy," Monika said.

"We got to start covering our tracks. But first we need to be sure that Vogel is the one that Estabon was talking about."

"How we gonna do that?"

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"We can't send Jett."

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"Oh, I forgot to tell you, Chilly gave me five thousand dollars to tell him where Jake was after I told his wife."

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"Tell me about it."

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Chapter Eighteen

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"I need a drink." Monika picked up a bottle of gin. "What do we do now?"

"Make it two." Jett got up and followed Monika to the kitchen. She poured herself and Jett a glass. "You want one Nick?"

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:07 am

"Hell no. I don't know how y'all drink that shit anyway."

"Like this!" they both said almost at the same time and drained their glasses. "I got some Johnnie Black for you, Nick."

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Monika poured herself another shot of gin and shook her head. "This shit gets weirder and weirder as we go along."

"Tell me about it."

* * *

Chapter Nineteen

Wednesday July 22: 7:21AM

With nothing else to do, I went by Freeze's apartment and beat on the door. For fifteen minutes. It was early, but I knew he was there. He opened the door and put a gun in my face.

"Why all the tension and animosity? Show me love, nigga."

"Fuck you, Nick. What you doin' here? You know what fuckin' time it is?" he walked away from the door and then flopped down on the couch.

"Which question do you want me to answer first? What am I doin' here, or what time is it?"

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:07 am

"Start with what time it is."

"It's almost seven thirty."

"Now, what the fuck are you doin' here so fuckin' early in the morning?"

"I came to visit you, man."

"You know, Nick, it ain't that I'm not glad to see you. But, shit, most people don't beat on the door for fifteen minutes. After a minute or two they just go away."

"I knew you were here."

"How you know I was here?"

"The rug. You still turn the rug over when your home."

Freeze looked at me and frowned. Slowly, the frown became a smile and turned into a laugh. "Glad you back, Nick."

"You hungry?"

"Why, you gonna cook?"

"Hell no. But I'm buyin'."

"Good, 'cause there ain't no food here anyway."

"Well, get dressed then."

About a half-hour later, Freeze came out of the back, escorted by a very attractive young woman. I stood up to meet her. "Nick, this is Paulleen. Paulleen, that's Nick."

"Nice to meet you, Paulleen."

Judging only by the way she rolled her eyes and sucked her teeth, I could tell that Paulleen wasn't glad to meet me.

"I'll be right back, Nick. I just need to roll her home."

"How long?"

"Fifteen minutes."

Once Freeze got back from droppin' off Paulleen, we set out to eat breakfast. While we ate, Freeze told me about his night. Before Paulleen, I mean. She was the closer. There was a problem at Cuisine. A customer had a complaint with their meal and the manager had gone home sick. The only one left to talk to him was Freeze.

"So, Nick, the guy starts yellin' at my ass, talkin' 'bout how the service was fucked up and the food was cold. Nick, I'm talkin' 'bout right up in my face."

"I know you can't stand that. What did you say?"

"I was cool. So I back up off him and I go through the whole nine, apologizing for the food, and the service and shit. I tell the waitress, no check for this table. Then I tells him, get this, to call ahead for a reservation the next time he wishes to dine with us, and he would be my personal guest for the evening."

"You said that shit?"

"Shit yeah! I'm fuckin' tired of hearin' Wanda's mouth 'bout this customer service shit. But I ain't feelin' that shit, Nick."

"Why you do it then?"

"That's where Black wants me."

"End of story. So what happened with you and old boy?"

"Okay, after

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I told him all that shit, he jumps up in my face again. Only this time he got his finger in my face. Now it's all about how I better be glad I did that, because he's some fuckin' body and what a word from him would do to my business. Then the mutha fucka poked me in the chest. Nick!" Freeze started laughing.

So I laughed too. "What?"

"Nick, I reached for my four five."

"No you didn't."

"Nick, I was about ta pull and blast, but the waitress said, 'Freeze', and I chilled. But I was about to drop his ass. You know I hate that shit, all up in my face and shit."

"At least you didn't do it. Maybe you should take one of them sensitivity classes or something."

"Fuck you, Nick."

"Just tryin' to help."

"So what's up wit you? You find Jake yet?"

"No, not exactly."

"What's that suppose to mean?"

"I mean Kirk found his body."

"So that's it, right? You through wit that shit, right?"

"No, not exactly. Freeze, there's a whole lotta other shit goin' on with this."

"Like what?"

I leaned forward. "It's all about this pipe dream Chilly had about synthetic crack."

"Pipe dream is right. Mutha fucka been talkin' about that shit for years."

"Jake developed it, but everyone who smoked it, died."

"Chilly kill Jake?"

"I don't know."

"What all that got to do with you bein' through with that shit?"

"Cops found a guy we snatched with his throat slit. He might be the one who created it and gave it to Chilly's stupid ass."

"Cops know you killed him?"

"We didn't kill him. We just dropped him off on Pier 17. But that ain't gonna matter now 'cause we all up in this."

"Yeah, I can see where it could all turn on you," Freeze said. "Maybe you should talk to Wanda about this."

"Maybe I should."

"So what are you gonna do?"

"I'm keepin' a low profile today."

"Fuck that, Nick. Hang out with me."

"Where we goin'?"

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"I don't care. You drivin'. Check!"

We hung out the rest of the day. It's funny, me and Freeze are so different from who we were back then. But it still felt like I never left. Freeze dropped me off at my apartment, before goin' back to the club. I tried to call Felicia, but I got voice mail. I left a message and then I called Jett. He had been trying to get information about our Uncle Felix. "I'm not gettin' anywhere with this, Nick. At this point, I can't even tell you if Felix is really his name. But I'm on it, I'll get him."

"I know you will. You heard from Monika?"

"Not since this afternoon. She said she was goin' to meet Chilly. What's goin' on with you?"

There was a knock at the door.

"Hold on, Jett. Someone's at the door."

"Hope it's some pussy!"

"Let's hope." I thought about Felicia, but that wasn't about to happen. But fantasy is a good thing.

"See if she got a friend." I heard Jett holler through the phone. I went to the door. And looked through the peek hole. The hallway was filled with cops. I went back to the phone.

"Jett, a whole group of cops are at the door."

"What do they want?"

"Whatever it is, it ain't good." The knocking began again. "I'll call you back."

The banging got louder as I walked back to the door.

"Police!"

I opened the door and was met by Kirk.

"Nick Simmons?" A uniformed officer said while Kirk smiled at me.

"What's goin' on, Kirk?"

"We have a warrant to search these premises." The officer said.

"You gotta be kiddin' me." He handed me the warrant. I looked at it. Maybe I shoulda called Wanda. Thinking that I had nothing to hide, I let them in. Cops seemed to swarm all over the place. Kirk was still standing in the hallway by the door. Smiling.

"What's goin' on here, Kirk?"

"We found Lisa Ellison, Jake Rollins girlfriend, dead in her living room. Shot at close range with the same caliber weapon that Rollins was killed with."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"Your fingerprints were found on —" Kirk broke out his notepad. "On a glass, the

coffee table, the phone and the inside door knob."

"Am I under arrest?"

"No. And that's only because I don't think you'd be stupid enough to shoot her and leave prints everywhere."

"So what's goin' on here?"

"Well Nick, you searched Rollins apartment on more than one occasion, and your prints puts you at the Ellison murder scene. That makes you a suspect in both murders, as far as I can see. We're just looking for what you found and aren't telling us about, that's all, Nick. After we're finished here, you're going to ride with me down to your office, where we'll execute this warrant to search your office."

"This is fucked up, Kirk."

"Maybe. But just for laughs, why don't you explain to me when you were there and what you talked to her about."

"I was there last Wednesday night about eight. I asked her a couple of questions about where I might find Jake. I had a glass of water. I used the phone and I left."

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"This may sound like a stupid question, but you never know. Was she alive when you left her?"

"Of course she was."

Once they finished terrorizing my apartment, we went to my office and they did the same. Since I didn't kill Jake or Lisa, and there was nothing in either place to connect me to Vogel or Rodrigez or who ever he was, I wasn't sweatin' the search. Until — "Detective Kirkland, I think we got something here." Kirk looked at me, smiled, and walked away. I had no idea what they had, but I was goin' to see. I fell right in behind Kirk.

"Take a look at this."

The officer had Jake's file in his hand and gave Kirk a piece of paper. At least it wasn't the murder weapon. Kirk looked over the paper carefully, and then handed it to me. It was the formula for synthetic crack. What a time for Monika to start filing.

"What is this?" Kirk asked me.

The officer gave Kirk another piece of paper. It had to be the analysis that Monika's friend had done.

I waited for Kirk to finish reading before I answered. Kirk handed me the paper. "Does the phrase withholding evidence, or obstruction of justice mean anything to you."

"They do now."

"Book him."

* * *

Chapter Twenty

The more I thought about it, the surer I was that Monika, and Jett were right. This private investigating stuff sucked. I hate cops. And I had been spending too much time with them fuckas. Now I had to help them. It just went against everything.

Me and Kirk had a long conversation, during which he threatened to charge me with murder if I didn't start cooperating. I knew he couldn't make a case there. However, withholding and obstruction they had me on, but I still stuck to my story. "I don't know anything about that." I still felt like a snitch sittin' there. This shit sucks. He wanted to know how I got the formula. No biggie there since he already figured I got it from Jake's safe. I gave him that and told him that I had only got the analysis back yesterday. "Jake was already dead. Case closed, so we filed it."

We danced around the same points for hours and then he had some uniforms take me to the holding cell. The benches were cold and hard. Naturally, it was crowded with just us.

Thursday July 23: 12:45 PM

Jett arranged my bail, and I was out by lunchtime. When we got back to my apartment, Monika was there waiting for us. Not only had she cleaned up after the cops, but she had cooked. Monika never cooks. She hates it. So even though I was skeptical about eating it, I know it was made with love. For the rest of the afternoon we sat around and talked about our situation until the sun went down. Monika got up

to leave. "Where you goin'?" Jett asked.

"I'm goi

n' to meet Chilly," she replied, heading for the door.

"I thought you got with him last night?" I asked, getting up to see her out. "You ain't fallin' in love with him, are you?" Me and Jett laughed, but Monika on the other hand, saw no humor in it at all. She stopped dead in her tracks.

"You two silly ass mutha fuckas done lost y'all's goddamn minds! This is strictly business, understand!" With her finger on my nose. I still was laughing. "Business that you're sending me on. So remember that." And with that, she left.

"She's kinda touchy. Must be that time of the month," Jett said as he got up. "I'm outta here too, Nick. I'll catch up with you tomorrow."

"I'll git wit ya, Jett."

With the house now empty, I gave some thought to sleep. Which I hadn't done since the day before. So I put on some music. Freeze had been bumpin' some bootlegged 2Pac, and he let me borrow it.

Jake's funeral was the next day, so I thought about whether I would make a cameo appearance. I took a shower and fell asleep to the sound of Pac tellin' me how I was fuckin' wit the wrong nigga.

I don't know how long I had been asleep; it was quiet, but somebody bangin' on my door soon replaced that quiet. My first thought was that it was Freeze, exacting a measure of payback from the day before. I picked up my gun and opened the door, prepared to shove the gun in his face.

"Remember me?"

"Felicia."

"Surprise!" she threw her arms around my waist and kissed me the kiss I'd been dreaming about since the last time she kissed me. I responded in kind.

"What are you doin' here?"

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"I missed you." Felicia kissed me on the cheek. "Did I come at a bad time?"

"No, not at all."

"Can I come in?"

"I'm sorry. Of course you can come in." I stepped aside and closed the door behind her. "I'm just surprised, that's all. Have a seat. Can I offer you something?"

"No I'm fine. Nice place, mind if I look around?"

"No, be my guest."

Felicia wandered around the apartment with her hands on her hips. Lookin' over her shoulder to see if I was watching. Which I was. She swung her hips harder and I smiled. "What you smiling about?" she asked as she walked past me.

"Just happy to see you, Felicia. What made you come back here anyway?"

"You did."

"I did?"

"Yes, you, Nick."

"How did I do that?"

"Two ways. First, I missed you and I wanted to be with you." She went into the kitchen. She looked impressed. It was clean for a change, thanks to Monika. She came out. "Seems you got a me a little dick whipped."

Felicia wandered into the bedroom.

"Nice bed," she said and came back out, carefully closing the door and tapping the doorknob. Felicia turned around and came toward me. "And second, you gave me a shot of your courage. So I decided to come back and face things head on, you know, take a more proactive approach to this thing."

"Well, it's pretty much over."

"You solved the case?" Felicia's face lit up. She was excited for me. I thought that was sweet of her.

"Nope." Man I was diggin' her. Look at her eyes, her smile. I took a step closer to Felicia. "Cops found Jake's dead body a couple of days ago."

"Oh really."

"Yes really. Cops searched here and my office last night. They found the formula and the analysis of that synthetic crack. So I'm done with it."

"That means you'll have some time to spend with me." She reached for my hand and squeezed it. Then she touched my face with the other hand.

She kissed me on my cheek.

She started to walk away, but I pulled her back toward me.

I touched her face and kissed her lips. It was more like I pressed my lips against hers. I started to walk away but she pulled me back toward her and she kissed me. Believe me, it was more fun this time. I liked it and I wanted more.

She kissed me again.

We stood awkwardly looking at each other for what seemed like a long time. And then, almost at the same time, we both started taking off our clothes. I felt the vibration of my pager, but I didn't seem to care.

Friday July 24: 1:17AM

When I woke up, it was past one in the morning. I looked at Felicia; she was out for the count. I got up and put on my pants, and once again, I felt the vibration of my pager. I checked the number, "Monika." It was late but I called anyway.

"This is Detective Richards."

"I'm sorry, wrong number." And I hung up quickly. What was Richards doin' there? I called again.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:07 am

"Hello," Detective Richards answered.

"Richards, this is Nick Simmons. Where's Monika?"

"You're her partner, right?"

"Yeah, where is she?"

"She's been shot, Nick. Shot five times. Doesn't look good for her."

"When was this?"

"Around ten, we figure." While I was busy laying down my mack with Felicia. I cursed myself for not answering.

"They took her to the hospital."

"What hospital?"

"Lebanon."

"What happened?"

"I'm not at liberty to say. Was she working on the same case?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"Come on, Nick, give me a break, anything you can give us would help."

"Come on, Richards, give me something, That's my partner." My friend. My family.

"You know I can't do that," Richards said. I could hear Kirk's big mouth in the background. I couldn't make out everything he said, but I did hear him say, "There was no sign of forced entry. Nothing appears to be missing. So we can assume it was someone she knew." Which answered all my questions. When I heard him say, "Pick up her partner, Nick Simmons, see what he knows." I knew it was time to hang up. "I'm going to the hospital, Richards. You can catch me there."

I went to Monika's room in the intensive care unit. The nurse stopped me from going in the room. "I'm sorry, sir, family members only."

"I am her family." And pushed by her.

Jett and I are the only family she has, or at least that she communicates with. Monika and her mother fell out long before she joined the army. When she was fifteen, her mother's boyfriend grabbed her ass when she walked by him. She told her mother what happened. But she didn't believe her. She accused Monika of flirting with him and told her that's what she got for dressing like a tramp. They haven't spoken since.

A doctor came in to check on her. To be honest she didn't look old enough to be a doctor. She told me that Monika had been shot five times. Two shots in the chest, two to the head, one hit her above the left ear. She caught the one in her eye. They were not able to save her eye. The other one was in her hand. Knowing Monika, she was probably trying to stop the bullet with her hand. I felt my eyes begin to water.

I sat there with her, holding her hand and talking. I didn't know if she could hear me or not, but I didn't care. I wanted her to know that she wasn't alone. That I was there with her and that she was going to be all right. If 2Pac could take five shots and live,

she could too.

"Nick, 2Pac is dead," Wanda asserted.

"Freeze say's he ain't," I replied.

Monika was strong, in both mind and body. Next to Mike Black, she is probably the strongest person I've ever met. I sat there wondering how it happened. Was her attacker there when she paged me? Was there something I could have done to prevent this from happening? Even if I left right then, the best I could have done was get there in time to talk to the police. "I still should have answered." There was nothing I could have done. But still, I felt like shit. I should have been there. I should have been there watching her back.

"But no, fuckin' Felicia seemed a little more important."

The chair began to feel harder than it had all night, so I walked to the window and watched the sunrise. I don't know how long I stood there, but when I turned around Jett was sitting there.

"How long you been here?" But he didn't answer. He just sat there, kinda stone faced. He was pale. Paler than he usually is. He just sat there staring at Monika, he didn't even blink. Since he wasn't talkin' I went and sat down.

Finally, after about an hour, Jett finally spoke. "I love Monika."

"I do too." I replied.

"I don't think you understand, Nick. I really love her. I love both of you. You and Monika are closer to me than my own family, man. — I was there, Nick. I was right fuckin' there, Nick. Right there."

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"What happened, Jett?" But he didn't say a word. He just kept on staring at Monika. Since he wasn't talkin' again, I told him what the doctor said. I couldn't tell if he was listening or not. I'd never seen Jett like this and it worried me. Jett was always live. This wasn't good. They had been my two closest friends, my only family for years. Now one may die and Jett, I couldn't tell where he was. But it wasn't good. I had a pocket full of questions and no one to ask.

"She called me, Nick. She said things didn't go well with Chilly. She said to meet her at her house. When I got there I heard the shots. I ran to the door, yellin' for Monika. I went inside and saw her. Lying there. I picked up the phone and called an ambulance. She tried to talk. But I couldn't hear what she was sayin'. I did what I could to stop the bleeding and make her comfortable." Then he stopped talking again. He still hadn't taken his eyes off Monika. He still hadn't blinked. Another ten minutes or so went by before Jett started talkin' again. "I heard a noise in the back. I got to the back door in time to see someone drive away. I got to my heap and I followed him. He didn't pick me up. He stopped at a house on 229th street. I put on my gloves and went in after him. He didn't hear me come in. Caught him in the bathroom pissin'."

"Who was he, Jett? Was he black, white, what did he look like?" No answer. Just that pale, glassy eyed look. Like my questions annoyed him. I decided I would save my questions until he was finished. He looked back at Monika. I watched the tears roll down his cheeks. My eyes began to water again. I got up and walked back to the window.

"I popped him in the back of the neck and dragged him into the living room. I put him in a chair and tied him up. I slapped him around until he came out o

f it. I took out my knife. He tried to get free." Jett shook his head. "That wasn't happening. The more he moved the tighter they got. I asked him who he was and why he shot Monika. But he didn't answer, so I cut him. Just a little cut on the arm to get him bleedin'. But he didn't say shit. Didn't even finch. I told him I would cut him everytime he didn't answer me. He just looked at me. So I cut him again. But he wasn't talkin'. I worked him over pretty good, but the bastard wasn't sayin' shit. So I went back to cuttin' him."

"How many times did you cut him, Jett?"

"I don't know."

I forgot my promise not to ask any more questions. At least he answered me. But he stopped talkin' again. Just starin' at Monika. It took almost a half-hour before Jett spoke again. "We had been there for hours, Nick. Blood was all over the floor. He was shakin' and shit. I was really fuckin' pissed when I saw the sun coming up. I walked up to him and cut his throat."

"You killed him?"

"That's what I just fuckin' said. I cut his fuckin' throat."

I sat down in that hard ass chair and buried my head in my hands. "Jett you killed the only person who could tell us who tried to kill her and why."

"He wasn't gonna talk, Nick so he had to fuckin' die."

"You're probably right."

"We don't need him to tell us shit, Nick." Jett finally faced me. The expression on his face didn't change. "That fuckin' Chilly knows why."

"What did you do with the body?"

"I left him there."

"Come on." I got up and walked out of the door. Jett was right behind me. He drove me to the house and we went inside. There he was. The sunlight was shining brightly through the window on him. A pool of blood surrounded the chair. Jett stood there and looked at him, while I searched the house. It was empty. No clothes in the closets, no food in the refrigerator. Nothin' to go on. "Lets go."

* * *

Chapter Twenty-one

I drove Jett's car back to the hospital and left him there to be with Monika. In the condition he was in, that was the best place for him. He would be of no use to me and maybe just a little out of place where I was goin'. My destination was Woodlawn Cemetery, for Jake's funeral. I drove back to my apartment to pick up my rifle. Felicia was gone when I got there.

I stood quietly off to the side and watched Mrs. Childers and Chésará hold one another and cry. But my eyes were on Chilly. There he was, standing there with that smug look on his face. Not consoling his wife in her time of loss. That's because the ugly fuck did it. He probably had Lisa killed, figuring that Jake must have told her what was up.

And Monika.

I was gonna kill him. I looked around the crowd. There was an older couple watching from the other side as Jake's casket was lowered into the ground. The woman was crying and the man just held her close to his chest. I figured that was their parents. I

wondered who called them? Chéz most likely. Mrs. Childers, I mean Gee, wouldn't call them. She said they were dead to her. Maybe she felt they should know their son was dead.

I thought about losing my parents when I was eleven. No one really knew what happened to them. One day they just didn't come home. So my brother and sister went to Mississippi to live with my father's brother and his wife. They didn't want me. My uncle said they were just babies. They would raise them in the church. They would be all right. But I was into too much trouble and he wasn't havin' it. Not in his house. Said I was probably the reason my parents didn't come home.

He didn't know I was listening.

I never saw my brother and sister again. I don't think about them much. But I was feelin' kinda family. Maybe I would go to Mississippi and try to find them. What would I say to them? They probably don't even remember me. It was decided that I would go live with my grandmother. And after awhile, it didn't matter as much. My grandmother was good to me. She showed me much love. She died five years later. But I had a new family by then. And after Black kicked my ass on my first day on the block, they showed me much love too.

While I was daydreaming, the funeral party had broken up and Chilly was safe inside the limo. I followed the limo to their house. I had no idea what I was goin' to do. Would I simply ask him what happened with Monika the night before? Or would I just drop him because he deserved to die. When the limo arrived at the house, it was crawling with cops. I parked the car down the street. As soon as the limo stopped, the cops opened the door and took Chilly into custody.

"Shit!"

The cops put him in the car and I watched as the police car drove past me. I looked at

Chilly, he looked at me. The feelings were mutual. I drove away thinkin' about Monika and before I knew it, I was back at the hospital. When I got to intensive care, Jett was gone and Detective Richards was there.

"What happened Richards?"

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:07 am

"Simmons, I'm sorry about your partner. I know how it feels to have a —"

"Fuck all that! What happened to her?" I yelled and I pounded my fist against the glass. It frightened the nurses, so I tried to calm down. "Just tell me what happened." I expected Richards to be his usual arrogant white boy cop self, but he was cool.

"She was shot in the living room, there wasn't any sign of a struggle. Her gun was still in her shoulder holster. We figure she either knew the guy or he caught her off guard. He came in, she turned, and he shot her. Your other partner," Richards checked his notes. "James Bronson, says the door was opened when he got there. Paramedics told me, he probably saved her life, stoppin' the bleedin', before he left the scene. He wasn't real clear about why he left the scene. Says he went after the guy who did it. He was pretty shook up, so I didn't press him about it. But we're gonna need to talk to him."

"Where is he?"

"He left about fifteen minutes ago."

I started to ask if he said where he was goin', but I knew better. I knew Jett. The only thing on his mind was finding who was involved. And kill them. And he wouldn't be invitin' the cops along. "Thanks."

"Like I was sayin', I know what it feels like when your partner gets shot." Richards walked away. Maybe he wasn't such an asshole.

I talked to the doctor before I left the hospital. She told me the Monika's condition

hadn't changed. "It's all up to her now." She promised that she would do all she could. I thanked the doctor for everything she had done. My mind was on finding Jett.

Where would he go? I drove by the house he followed Monika's assailant to. Looking for anything that might lead me to who was responsible. No cop cars, no yellow crime scene tape. Just in case somebody was watching the house, I parked a couple of blocks away and walked back. When I went inside the body was gone. All the blood was cleaned off the floor. There was no trace that Jett had tortured and executed a man there. I went through the house anyway. Nothing.

"What now?"

I didn't feel like sitting around the hospital, so I drove by Rocky's spot. I didn't think he was involved in Monika's shooting, but I was mad. I had a little payback I wanted to deal out.

When I got there a crowd had formed. The police were standing around a convertible Impala stopped at the light. I parked and approached the crowd. I watched as they took two bodies out of the front seat. "What's goin' on?" I asked an old man in the crowd. "Somebody shot those three men in that car." The third body was removed from the car. It was Rocky. My first thought was Jett.

"You know if they saw who did it? Was he white?"

"I don't know."

I thanked the man and returned to my car. With nowhere else to go, I went back to my apartment. Quietly I was hoping that Felicia had come back. I needed to see her, but that wasn't happening. The place was in darkness.

The phone rang.

"Listen, Nick," Jett said, he still didn't sound good.

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the stake house, by Chilly's. I know who did it."

"Who?"

"I can't talk now. Meet me here."

>

"Jett, wait!" I yelled, but he was gone. I drove as fast as I could to the house. When I got to the house, Jett was gone. I was about to leave when I noticed some papers next to the phone. It the research Jett was doing on Felix. I picked up the papers, walked outside and got back in my car. I drove down the street slowly. I saw Jett's car parked on my right. I parked up ahead of him and walked back to his car. I came around to the driver's side. "What's goin' on, Jett?"

"Jett!"

I looked in the car. His eyes were wide open. "Jett!" I shook him. That's when I saw the trail of blood coming from his ear. I opened the car door and Jett fell into my arms.

He was dead.

I asked a lady walking by to call the police. I sat there in the street holding Jett until the paramedics came. I talked to the police and was doin' an excellent job of telling them as little as possible, until Richards showed up. "What's goin' on, Simmons? First one of your partners, then the other. What are you involved in?"

"I don't know. My case was closed when you found Rollins dead body with a bullet in his brain."

"I didn't tell you this, but Rollins was already dead when he was shot. His neck was broken, that's what killed him."

"How he died don't matter, he's dead. You found that formula and arrested Chilly."

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"You think he's involved in this?"

I looked at Richards like he was stupid. Of course I think he's involved. Monika met him last night. Whatever happened, happened and she wanted me and Jett to meet her. Now Jett gets popped a block from the fuckas house.

"What happened here?" Richards asked, taking the hint that I wasn't goin' to answer his question.

"I don't know."

"Were you with him?"

"No. He called me and said to meet him here."

"Did he say why?"

"No. He hung up before I could ask him."

"Look, Simmons, I'm really sorry for you. I know you think Chilly is involved in this. It's pretty fuckin' obvious that your partner here did too. We're a block from his house for Christ's sake. But please, let us handle it."

"Yeah right." I turned and started back for my car.

"Where are you goin'?"

"I need a drink."

* * *

Chapter Twenty-two

There was no doubt about it, I was drunk. Trippin' over the rug by the door was a real indicator of that. Staggering the way I was, the couch was as far as my drunk legs would carry me. I disarmed myself and sat down. Fell down actually. Fortunately for me, I had left a bottle of Johnnie Black on the coffee table. I picked up a glass and started to pour. I decided that was too much trouble. So I raised the bottle to my mouth. I could actually feel the liquor flowing through my body. The only problem was that it wasn't helping. I had just returned from the hospital, Monika hadn't regained consciousness and was still in intensive care. It didn't matter. I still had to tell her that Jett was dead.

For the second time, I faced myself with the same question. "If I had only got there sooner, could I have saved him?"

I didn't know.

The only difference was that this time I wasn't fuckin' Felicia or some dumb shit like that. I was on my way. His body was still warm when I got there. "If I had only —"

No point torturing myself about it now. Jett was dead and Monika was fighting for her life. I slammed the bottle down on the table. This game had gone on long enough. Somebody was going to have to answer for both of them. But who?

I wanted to hurt somebody, make somebody feel my pain. But who? I was sure that Chilly ordered up both hits, but he was in jail. I gave serious thought to getting myself arrested so I could kill him. But the thought faded quickly. I could get Freeze

to arrange it, but I wouldn't get any satisfaction from just knowing he was dead. I had to do it. I wanted him to feel all my pain. I wanted to look in his eyes before I pulled the trigger.

"Say Good-bye."

I wanted him to know why he had to die. Not just for me, but for everyone he terrorized over the years. Johnnie Black called out to me, as if he wanted to drink to it. I gladly obliged him. "A drunk never argues with his bottle." It was almost a rule. A good soldier always follows rules. No, a good soldier always follows orders. "What do drunks do?"

They drink!

Stupid!

Saturday July 25: 11:19AM

When I woke up, the bottle was empty and I was on the floor. I stood up slowly, and looked around the apartment. I took a moment to think about how I got that far away from the couch and who made this mess. I needed someone to blame. I looked at the empty bottle. "Had to be you."

I was hungry, but I didn't feel like cooking, so I grabbed my keys and looked around for my guns. I didn't see them and I didn't care. I would find them when I got back. The liquor store was my first stop. My first drink of the day convinced me that it wouldn't be my last. I walked to the bar on the next corner.

"Might as well kill two birds with one stone."

Since it wasn't quite time for lunch, and a little too late for breakfast, I had steak and

eggs. Johnnie Black replaced the orange juice. While I sat there gettin' my eat and my drunk on, I gave some thought to, you know, stop feeling sorry for myself and doin' something about it. All this drinking wasn't gonna bring Jett back from the dead or make Monika open her eyes. And on top of that, it wasn't making me feel any better, just drunker.

With that thought in mind, I was able to keep the drinking to two shots. On my way out of the restaurant, a man asked me for some spare change. I made his day with a picture of Alexander Hamilton.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:07 am

When I got back to the apartment, I put my bottle down on the coffee table, headed for the shower, and tried to pull it together. I love long hot showers; it is, to me, the greatest joy next to gettin' pussy. With my head clearing, I began to think about how I was goin' to exact my revenge. I might not be able to get Chilly, but I would tear threw his whole set. I would be their nightmare now, but they wouldn't be wakin' up.

All at once, I became very conscious of the fact that I was just one guy and he had an army. But I knew in my heart that I wouldn't be alone. Freeze had my back, just like the old days. And for that, I felt like shit. I would be draggin' Black's organization into a war. Maybe even, Black himself. "How could I do that after what I did." I turned off the shower and came back to reality. If it was gonna get done, it would be me doin' it. I would have to have a plan. Pick them off, one by one, in methods that were more creative. I put my pants back on and resumed the search for my guns. It wasn't like I didn't have an arsenal here. But it was the principle of the thing. There was a knock at the door. I looked out the peephole and didn't see anybody. "Who is it?"

"It's Gee, Nick. Please let me in." I looked again and still didn't see her. I opened the door, stepped aside, and prepared to receive her. She took a step inside. I looked at her face. Her jaw was swollen and —

"Get in there!" the door swung open and there was Chilly. Gee stumbled to the floor. Chilly pointed the gun at me and grabbed her, jerking her back to her feet.

"I'm sorry, Nick," Gee whimpered.

"You stay right where the fuck you are! You move and I'll kill you."

"You're gonna try to kill me anyway, what's the difference?"

"Right."

Chilly fired at me.

I didn't move. It came close to hitting my arm. I don't think he meant to hit me with that shot. It was meant to get my attention.

It did.

I wasn't afraid to die. I just didn't want to die like this, half-naked and unarmed.

Chilly looked at me and then at his wife. "Get over there with him. You two belong together." He pushed her in my direction. "Ain't neither one of you worth a shit."

"You all right?"

"I'm okay," Gee said softly without taking her eyes off Chilly.

"How'd he get out?"

"Bail," Gee whispered.

"Don't ask her nothin' mutha fucka! You wanta know how I got out, you ask me!" Chilly screamed. "Cops can't hold a mutha fucka like me on some bullshit tip like this! You two dirty mutha fuckas set me up!"

"Set you up?" I had to laugh. It might have been foolish to laugh at a man that's pointing a gun at you, but that shit was funny.

"You two think you're slick. Had this shit all worked out. Neither one of you mutha fuckas can be trusted. Your ho ass, out there fuckin' everybody. And you nigga, everything they said about you is true. But I thought that was all bullshit. I thought you was old school. I came to you on the real, straight up business. Showed you more respect than you deserved. You took my money!"

"You took money from him?" Gee looked puzzled at me.

"Oh, he didn't tell you? That wasn't part of y'all's little plan? Stupid bitch! You always was a stupid bitch, Gee. This nigga been playin' you! I gave him five grand to tell me where Jake was. But the difference between me and this nigga is that I have honor. I still wanted him to tell you where your brother was, just as long as he told me too. You ain't loyal to shit are you mutha fucka? Fuckin' my wife. You a dirty mutha fucka. Bobby shoulda killed your ass." He spit in my face and then moved the barrel of his gun against my forehead, in case I wanted to do something about it. "Yeah, y'all got a nigga set up."

"So I guess Jake didn't develop that shit for you? So, all those people dyin' ain't your fault."

Now it was Chilly who was laughing. "I didn't kill nobody. That's on Jake. Who knew his sorry ass was a sorry ass chemist?"

"You practicin' for your day in court?"

"I ain't goin', you are."

"Who killed Pamela Hendricks?"

"Let's see, — didn't she die from that bullshit her punk ass brother cooked up?"

"What about Lisa?"

"You killed her. Your finger prints were at the murder scene."

&nb

sp; "Rocky?"

"You killed him too, 'cause he sent his boyz after you."

"What about Jett and Monika?"

"I don't know no damn Jett. And Monika," he licked his lips and smiled a smile that annoyed the fuck out of me. "Shit! I had other plans for her fine ass. So you see my nigga, you the one gonna die for this."

Although I hated to admit it, he had a point. He could still walk away from all this. Leaving me to step off for it.

"Get me a drink, Gee."

"What?"

Chilly slapped her to the floor and quickly returned his gun to my forehead.

"I said get me a fuckin' drink."

Figuring it was best to stay low, Gee crawled over to the coffee table and poured him a drink. Gee got to her feet and walked slowly toward him. She reached out to hand him the glass. He took his eyes off me to reach for the glass. "Don't even think about it."

Gee threw the glass in his eye.

Chilly grabbed his eye.

I went for the gun and knocked it out of his hand. It fell to the floor. He punched me in the face; I fell to the floor. Chilly backhanded Gee and she went down too. He was strong as hell. I got to one knee, but before I could get up, he was on me. He rammed his knee into my face and I fell back. I hit my back against the coffee table and rolled over. Chilly came at me, kicking me in the back. Gee got up; Chilly kicked away. She jumped on his back and scratched his face. Chilly shook her off of his back quickly; she hit the floor hard. Chilly turned to look at her; it gave me enough time to get to my feet.

I rushed at him. Clinching both of my hands together, I hit Chilly in the face. He fell back and stumbled over Gee. I went straight at him, hittin' him again and again. Chilly swung at me and missed. I got one arm around his throat and the other around his head. I squeezed with everything I had. He struggled, I squeezed harder. He tried to get my arm from around his neck. I squeezed harder. I could feel him gasping for air. I jerked his head as hard as I could to the side. Chilly stopped strugglin'. I looked at Gee, she hadn't moved.

I let his body drop to the floor.

My back was killin' me.

I looked around for his gun. Conveniently, it had fallen by the couch. I picked it up, sat down, and looked at their bodies on the floor.

Gee began to move and I got up slowly. I helped her to her feet and over to the couch. "Are you all right?" I sat down next to her.

"I think so." Her hands were shaking, so I held them.

"You were all right back there."

"Huh?" she looked at me like I was stupid.

"I mean you didn't just stand back screamin'. You came through for me. Thank you. You saved my life."

"It wasn't all that," she smiled. "My back is killin' me."

"Mine too."

She looked at Chilly. "Is he dead?"

"I don't know. And I'm not all that interested in goin' over there to find out. If he moves, I'll shoot him."

* * *

Chapter Twenty-three

"Was he dead?" Wanda asked.

"Yeah, Wanda, he was dead."

"What did you do then?"

"I called Freeze and told him where I was and what happened. He said he was gonna call you. Then I called the cops. They came and arrested me for murder."

"What happened to Mrs. Childers? Was she taken in too?"

"No. The cops talked to her, took her statement, and then they had an officer take her home."

"Do you know what she told them?"

"We went over our story before the cops came. It was pretty much the truth."

"Did you talk to anyone before I got there?"

"You asked me that already, Wanda. No, I didn't talk to anybody."

"Good."

"How did Black find out I was in jail?"

"Freeze told him. Freeze has been keeping Mike up, all of us really, keepin' us up on what you've been doin'."

"Bet you've all been havin' a good laugh."

"Why do you say that?" Wanda said and laughed. "We all care about you and what you do, Nick." Turning serious, Wanda continued. "I don't know how I can get you to see that. Whether you accept it or not, whether you accept us or not, Nick, we are your family."

I didn't say anything.

What could I say?

I'd been fighting that war within myself for years. "Chilly was right about one thing."

"What do you mean?"

"When he said Bobby shoulda killed me over Camille."

"Camille. Not Camille again. You need to let that go, Nick. She wasn't worth it then, and she damn sure ain't worth it now."

"You've never met Camille, have you, Wanda?"

"Yes I have, twice actually." Wanda smiled and I wondered why.

"When?"

"Before you or Bobby met her."

"Where?"

Wanda took a deep breath. "I met her in Mike's bedroom."

I guess Wanda could tell by the look on my face that I wanted to hear the story. Needed to hear it. "Mike was supposed to be going with me to a fund raiser."

"Black? Back then, at a fund raiser?"

"You know Glynnis Presley?"

"Ain't she an aid to some congressman?"

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:07 am

"Senator now. But yeah, that night began our long association. Anyway, I went there to pick him up. He wasn't ready when I got there, so he got in the shower and told me to pick him out something to wear. I walked in the room and Camille was in the bed. I apologized for walking in on her, but she didn't seem to care." Wanda let out a little laugh. "She invited me to join her in bed."

"That was Camille."

"She was poison, Nick."

"You couldn't possibly understand."

"Yes I can, Nick. More than you know."

"I was sick when I left there that night, Wanda, can't you see that?"

"I know. I don't think I'll ever forget that night. Bobby with his gun in your mouth. Screamin' he was gonna kill you. Mike with his gun to Bobby's head. He just kept sayin', 'Bobby put the gun down.' I remember lookin' at his face, his eyes. I could see the pain he was in."

"My two best friends. Bobby was ready to kill me. And Black, shit! I can't even imagine where his head was, with a gun to Bobby's head. Him and Bobby are like brothers. And the reason was Camille. I called her when I left there. Told her what happened. She didn't care. She laughed at how she had us. And she had us. She told me to come fuck her. I was on my way, but I needed a drink first. Three really. Camille was dead when I got there. Two shots to the head."

"Camille," Wanda said as she got up from the couch. She walked slowly, thoughtfully toward the window. "Oh, Nick. There is so much you don't know about that night."

"Why don't you tell me about that night. I've been talking all night. You talk for awhile, Wanda."

"Do you remember passing Freeze on your way out?"

"Yeah."

"I mean really, remember, Nick? Do you remember him carrying a large envelope?"

"I remember."

I remember it all.

"Bobby put the gun down," Black yelled.

I felt Bobby's hand tighten around my throat.

"I'll kill you!" Bobby screamed.

Black put his gun to Bobby's head. "Bobby please," he said quietly. "Take the gun out of his mouth and put it down."

Black moved his gun away from Bobby's head. Bobby let go of my throat and slowly eased his gun out of my mouth.

I reached for my throat and took a step away from Bobby.

Bobby stared at me. "Don't think this is over."

I started to walk away, trying to catch my breath.

"I'm kill you!" Bobby shouted. "And that bitch!"

I left Black's office at the Late Night and walked across the dance floor on my way out the club. Wanda ran after me. "Nick wait." she said.

I saw Freeze coming, "Yo, Nick, you're gonna wanna to see this." But I just kept walking.

"I remember."

/> Wanda walked toward me and held her hand out. "There's something I want you to see." I accepted Wanda's hand, and she led me into the bedroom. "Don't even think about it."

"Furthest thing from my mind." I looked Wanda up and down and I smiled. "Not until you brought it up."

Wanda led me to her dresser and let go of my hand. She removed the picture from the wall and opened her safe. She took out an envelope and handed it to me. "This is what he wanted you to see."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:07 am

I sat down on the bed and Wanda left me alone. The envelope had a notebook in it. I sat quietly and began to read. It was a journal. A very detailed account of all contact Camille had with any of us. All about our operation. Where our gambling houses were, and who ran them. Everything. From the first time she met Freeze at the Knicks game. She fucked him too. She wrote at length and in great detail about Black. How it troubled her that she never could get Black to talk to her, much less tell her anything important. She wrote, "Black would say just enough to get me out me dress."

Which is how I coulda played her.

Camille wrote about her and Bobby. About how she was so turned on when she met me. She wrote everything, every conversation she'd heard, everything she saw. Everything I ever told her. She even described her desire to seduce Wanda.

I sat there reading for hours. Was she Five-O? Couldn't be. No cop would keep this type of journal and leave it around to be found.

Wanda was back in her spot on the couch and I joined her there. "Where did Freeze find this?"

"Freeze searched her apartment."

"What was he doin' there?"

"Mike sent him."

"Why?"

"Why do you think Mike would? She was a cancer growing in his organization."

"What happened that night?"

"After we read the journal, Mike made Freeze take Bobby home. Then me and Mike went to see Camille."

"To kill her."

"No, Mike offered her twenty thousand dollars to go back to Barbados. She refused. He asked her to explain herself. She said it was just to protect herself. And that she had another copy of that book and she would use it when she needed to, and for more than twenty thousand dollars."

"So Black shot her."

"No. You know Mike would never shoot a woman."

I looked at Wanda.

"I shot her, Nick."

"You."

"Yes, Nick, I shot her. It had to be done. She was poison, and she was eating her way through our entire organization. There's enough evidence in that journal she was keeping to put all of us in jail for long time. I know how you felt about her and I hope you can forgive me, but I did what had to be done."

"All these years I thought Bobby killed her."

"No, Nick, he didn't. I killed her. Bobby said he felt stupid to be so fooled by her. Camille had you all fooled."

"That's all well and good, but it doesn't change the facts. I betrayed Bobby."

"Whatever, Nick. I'm goin' to bed. You're welcome to stay here, if you want. I have plenty of room."

"I might take you up on that." I yawned.

"I hope you do. We still have things to talk about. So I hope you're still here when I wake up. Good night, Nick."

"Good night, Wanda. And thanks."

"For what?"

"For being there." I stood up and hugged her.

"I wouldn't miss it for anything in the world. Just don't run away from us this time. We love you." She kissed me on the cheek. "Good night, Nick."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:07 am

I watched her walk into her room and close the door behind her. I could use a drink, but I really didn't need one. I went to the bedroom next to Wanda's. Kicked off my shoes and laid down on the bed. I had talked out the whole story and I still didn't get it. I thought about what Wanda told me. I tossed and turned, trying to get comfortable. But I couldn't. Everything kept rolling around in my mind. I just kept thinking about Chilly. And Camille. And Bobby. And Gee. Nothing is as it seems.

And then it all came together.

I put my shoes on and left.

* * *

Chapter Twenty-four

"Hello, Gee."

"Nick!"

"Surprised to see me?"

"Yes."

"I just bet you are. Mind if I come in?"

"I'm sorry, Nick, come in please."

"Thank you." I stepped inside the house. Mrs. Childers was dressed to kill as usual.
"You look very nice today. Were you on your way somewhere?"

"No, I just got back. Have a seat. Can I get you a drink?"

"Thank you."

"Johnnie Walker Black, straight up, right?"

"You remembered. I can not help but be touched."

"When did you get out?"

"Yesterday."

"Well, what happened?"

"I'm out on bail." She returned with my drink. "What about you? How are you doin'?"

"I'm okay."

"You should be happy. The nightmare is over. Chilly's dead. That's what you wanted, isn't it?" When she didn't answer, I finished my liquor and said, "Now that it's over, don't you want to tell me what really happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't stutter, what the fuck really happened?" She just sat there and looked at me with those eyes. Those eyes that got me into this mess in the first place. "Look, Mrs. Childers, I mean, Gee, I killed Chilly, he's dead. It's over. So, why don't you tell me

the truth?"

"Nick, I don't know what to say. I —"

"You knew where Jake was all along, didn't you? You knew all about this synthetic crack shit."

"Yes."

"That seems like a good enough place to start."

Gee fumbled around for a second or two, and then she got up and poured herself a drink. "Chilly wasn't there the night Jake came looking for him," she said as she poured. "I asked him what he wanted to see Chilly about."

Wednesday June 30: 9:15 PM

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:07 am

"Come ride with me, Gee. We need to talk," Jake said.

"What's the matter with you?"

"I'm in trouble, Gee. Maybe we all are."

"That's nothing new. What's wrong now?"

"Three months ago Chilly came to me with this formula. Says it gonna make all of us rich. He wanted me to develop it for him."

"What kind of formula?"

"For synthetic crack."

"What do you mean, synthetic crack?"

"It's a chemical compound, that has the same effect as crack, only there's no cocaine in it. All the ingredients are legal, and it is twenty times cheaper to produce. Only problem is people died from using it."

"You did it? You made it for him?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Gee. LaShawn sold some to some people she gets high with, and they all died."

"My god, Jake, why did you do it?"

"Why do you think? He said he would kill Chéz if I didn't do it. What else could I do? Now he says he's got to start covering his tracks. He said there can't be any trace of this that will tie it back to him. That includes me, he's gonna kill me, Gee. He's got to, I would be the only one who can connect him with all of it."

"You've got to get away from here, Jake. Far away, where he'll never find you."

"Live in reality, Gee. Didn't you try that? Didn't he find you? Didn't he shoot me in my fuckin' leg until you said you would come back? You remember that, don't you?"

"All right! All right, Jake. What are you gonna do?"

"I don't know."

"Jake, you got to disappear."

"No, Gee."

"Yes, Jake, listen to me. What if the cops could tie all this back to Chilly? They'd have him for murder. And we'd be free, Jake."

"You want me to go to the cops?"

"No, but the cops need the evidence, and it has to be solid enough so he doesn't get off."

"How we gonna do that without going to the cops? And I'm not going into witness protection. He'll find me and kill me. He'll kill all of us."

I looked at Mrs. Childers thinking that this is the story I've been waiting to hear since this whole thing began. "What happened then?" I asked.

"I told Jake that we're not going to tell the cops a thing. That he had to disappear, go to the little hideaway he had in the Hamptons. Chilly doesn't know about the place. Then I told him that I'd hire a private detective to find him. That you would get the evidence we needed and turn it over to the cops."

"So you hired me. And led me into all this."

"I didn't mean for anybody to get hurt."

"Except me."

"This is your business, Nick. You were getting paid to take the risk."

"Who hit me that first night in Jake's apartment?"

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:07 am

"Jake. He went there to put the formula in the safe so you would find it. But you got there first. He thought Chilly sent you so he took off your glove to get your fingerprints on something, so the police would connect you to Chilly."

"How did Jake break his neck?"

"The night that you went to see Lisa Ellison."

"Yeah, what about it?"

"After you left her house, she went to see Chéz to find out what was goin' on. They argued, but Chéz didn't tell her anything."

"Chésará was in on it too."

"Of course she was. Lisa told Chéz that she thought she knew where Jake might be and she was goin' out there in the morning. Chéz called me and I went out there to warn him."

"Why?"

"She didn't need to know. Lisa is weak. If anybody put pressure on her, she'd give the whole thing up and that would ruin everything. So I went out there to tell Jake she was coming and not to let her know he was there."

"What happened?"

"When I got there, I told Jake that Lisa was coming out there and that he shouldn't talk to her."

Wednesday July 15; 11:45 PM

"Why not, Gee?"

"Jake, don't you see how that will ruin everything? If she knows where you are, she'll give you up the first time somebody asks her any thing. You know how she is, Jake. If Chilly steps to her and says boo, you know she'll drop the whole thing."

"Okay

, okay. Anything else I need to know about?"

"Yes."

"What now, Gee?"

"There is something else I have to tell you." I stood up and walked to the window. I didn't want to be the one to have to tell him, but he needed to know. I took a deep breath and turned to face Jake. "I don't know how to say this any other way, so I'm just gonna drop it. Jake, LaShawn is dead."

Jake jumped up from the couch. "What?"

"She's dead, Jake. And so is Pamela."

"What? How?"

"They both OD'd on that stuff you created."

"That's not possible!"

"I'm sorry, Jake."

Jake ran up the stairs and I went after him. He stopped at the top of the steps. He started to cry. "Why?"

"You said it yourself, everyone who knew about it had to die."

"But Pamela didn't have anything to do with this. Why did Chilly have to kill her?"

"I don't know, Jake."

"You didn't say anything about that. They weren't supposed die." He was getting hysterical. "That wasn't part of your great plan, Gee!" He grabbed me by my shoulders and started to shake me. "Why, Gee? Why? Why did they have to die?" Jake screamed.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:07 am

"Stop it, Jake, you're hurting me."

"Why?" Jake screamed at me.

"He just kept shaking me. He was hurting me! So I pushed him off. I didn't think I pushed him that hard, but he lost his balance and fell down the steps. I tried to grab him; Nick, but I couldn't hold him. As long as I live, Nick, I never will forget how he looked. His head was tipped to the side. Lying there like he was staring at me. I ran down the steps, I shook him. I screamed his name, but he was dead."

She started crying.

I didn't sweat her about it. She killed her brother. I couldn't even imagine the burden she must be carrying around with her. "I didn't mean to kill him. Really, I didn't push him that hard. I didn't! He just lost his balance."

I put my arms around her and held her. Trying to give her a chance to compose herself. I still had a lot more questions to ask. I didn't want to, but I had to. "What did you do then?"

She tried to pull herself together enough to answer me. "I panicked, Nick. I ran out of there."

"Where'd you go?"

"I went to Chéz's apartment. I told her what happened. I was practically hysterical. But Chéz was calm. Calmer than I was anyway. She cried a little and said that we

would deal with it in the morning. Then she gave me some of her sleeping pills and made me go to bed. We went back out there early the next morning. We both cried when we first saw him laying there, staring at us. Chéz rushed over and closed his eyes. Then she turned to me."

"We got to move the body, Gee."

"I can't, Chéz. I can't, Chéz, I killed him."

"Gee, you got to pull it together."

"No! We have to call the police."

"Don't make me slap you, Gee. It's too late for that now. This has gone too far. Jake is dead, Gee. You goin' to jail for life ain't gonna change that. Now help me get him to the car." Chéz went and got a blanket, and we wrapped him up in it. It wasn't easy, but we dragged him out to the car and into the trunk. "We'll make it look like Chilly killed him."

"How we gonna do that?" Chéz didn't answer me. She went back in the house and came back with her purse. Chésará pulled out a gun with a handkerchief wrapped around it. "What are you doing?" She walked up to the car and shot Jake in the head. "Are you crazy?"

"Chilly always carries a 9. Do you remember when Chilly shot Jake in the leg?"

"Yes."

"This is the gun that he used. He left it there. He said it was so I'd know that he will come back and kill me with it. It's his gun, Gee. The cops will think that he shot him."

"We heard a car pull up in the driveway, we turned around and Lisa was getting out of her car. She ran toward us screaming. She saw Chéz shoot him. We tried to explain, but she wouldn't listen. She just kept screaming 'You killed him!' Then she ran back to her car and drove away. We went after her; she drove to her house and went inside. She had calmed down a little by that time, and she let us in. I told her what happened and why we did what we did."

"You two are crazy if you think I'm going to believe that story." Lisa picked up the phone. "All I know is that I saw you kill Jake. I'm calling the police."

Chéz said, "I can't let you do that, Lisa. This is our chance to be free of that animal. Put the phone down, Lisa."

"Lisa, please, I'm not lying to you, it was an accident. Please put the phone down. Lisa don't do this."

She started to dial. "I'm not gonna ask you again, hang up that phone." Chéz pulled out the gun and pointed it at Lisa. "Put the phone down."

When Lisa saw the gun she freaked out, she started screaming. "You're gonna kill me!" Then she ran at Chéz. They fought for the gun.

"Stop it! Chéz, stop!"

"The gun went off. I looked at Lisa. I could see it in her eyes. Chéz dropped the gun and backed away from her. I watched Lisa fall to the floor."

"Don't tell me. It was an accident."

"Nick, you have to believe me. I'm telling you the truth. That's exactly how it happened. We never meant to kill anybody. We never meant for any of this to

happen."

"That's a pretty fantastic story." I got up and looked around. I picked up my glass and walked slowly into the other room. I needed a drink. I poured a glass of Johnnie Black and drank it down. I poured another one. I could hear her crying. I didn't know what I was going to do. I thought about calling the police. But I didn't want to. She was in enough pain. She had killed her brother, and she was just as responsible for Lisa's death as Chésará. Maybe it was an accident; her story fit the facts. I couldn't be sure. She had been lying to me from the start. Everything she had told me was a lie. She was good at it. I poured her a shot of Henessey and took it to her. "Here, drink this, you look like you could use it."

Her hands were shaking. "Thank you." She drank hers straight down and let the empty glass fall out of her hand. She looked up at me with those eyes. They didn't look so pretty now. Her tears left a trail of black from her mascara. "What are you gonna do now? Are you gonna call the police?"

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"No. Well, that depends."

"On what, Nick?"

"You have anything else you want to tell me about?"

"Like what?"

"Did you kill Pamela or LaShawn?"

"No."

"What about Rocky? You and Chésará kill him too?"

"No!"

"You sure?"

"No! I mean yes! I'm sure."

"Who shot Monika?"

"I don't know."

"What about Jett? Who killed Jett?"

"I don't know anything about either of them, Nick. Please you've got to believe me."

"Why should I believe you now?" I had to ask. "You've told me nothing but lies since page one. Why should I believe anything you tell me now, Mrs. Childers? I'm sorry, Gee. Tell me why should I?"

"I have no reason to lie to you now."

I finished my drink and stood up. "Okay." I picked up the phone and dialed.

"Who are you calling?"

"I'm not calling the police." Freeze answered on the first ring.

"Yo."

"I need you to back me up."

"When and where?"

"Now. I'll be there to pick you up in about an hour."

"I'll be here."

I hung up the phone and started for the door. Mrs. Childers got up and ran behind me.

"Where are you going?"

"To a family reunion."

* * *

Chapter Twenty-five

I was tired.

I hadn't slept in two days.

And I needed a shower.

But I didn't care.

I drove as fast as I could to Cuisine to pick up Freeze. As I drove, I couldn't help but think about the story I'd just heard.

"Wow."

&nb

sp; That was about all I could say about it. "Wow."

I had to reconcile within myself the fact that Chilly hadn't killed Jake or Lisa. He probably didn't have anything to do with Rocky, Pamela, or LaShawn either. I pretty much figured that LaShawn's death was, like everything else, an accident. She more likely than not just got hold of the wrong package.

It was Gee who dominated my thoughts. I couldn't turn her over to the police. She had been through enough in her lifetime. Her life to this point had been filled with nothing but betrayal and violence. For the rest of her life, she would have to deal with the site of Jake's dead body, staring at her. Hearing his last words, "Why, Gee?" over and over again. She would have to live knowing that Chésará killed Lisa so she could be free. And all this was the result of her association with Chilly.

That to me was punishment enough.

But now Chilly was dead.

I killed him.

He had caused so many people so much pain. In a way, he was responsible for all the deaths. Maybe he deserved to die, maybe not. It wasn't for me to judge. I understand now why it was so important for Mike to get out of the drug business and go legit. He had too much of a conscience, too much love for life to continue with the legacy that André set out for us. The path Chilly followed. I respected and appreciated Black more now than I had at anytime in the last ten years. When all this is over, I have to call and thank him, not only for bailing me out, but for giving me so much to remind me of who I am and where I came from. Maybe I would even swallow my pride and make peace with Bobby. It was long overdue.

When I got to Cuisine and went inside, I found Freeze sitting by the door, ready to go. "What took you so long?"

"Traffic."

"Well, let's go," he said practically jumping to his feet.

"You drive." We started out the door. "Wait! I need three clean weapons."

"Three .9's?"

"No, .45's."

"You? Packin' a .45? Why the change?" he asked as we got in his truck.

"Kirk knows that a .9 is my weapon of choice. And I'm tired of talkin' to him."

"Oh by the way," Freeze said. "Wanda came here looking for you."

"Did she really?"

"Yeah, she did. She said if I saw you, I should tell you not to do anything stupid."

"Okay, you told me. And I'm not goin' to do anything stupid. I'm goin' to kill somebody. And you're goin' to make sure that I don't do anything stupid."

"You startin' to sound like the Nick I used to know."

"I'm startin' to feel like him too."

"It's good to have you back, Nick. I don't want to sound soft or nothin' like that, but I missed you man."

"I missed all of you."

We stopped at Cynt's; one of the gambling houses we've run for years. "We." I felt a part of all this again. Maybe this is what Wanda meant when she said I needed to recognize.

"Hey, Freeze. And who is this fine ass man you got with you?" Cynt said as she twisted her hips in our direction.

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"How's it goin' Cynt?" She threw her arms around my neck and gave me a kiss that raised an eyebrow on Freeze. Like there was some past thing between us that I never knew about.

"How are you, Nick? I heard you were back in the city. I was wondering, like everybody else, why you hadn't come around. But I see you picked back up with your old thug buddy here."

"Let's go to your office Cynt. I need to get something out of your safe." Freeze said.

"You two, rollin' together, just like old times." Cynt said and turned toward the steps to her office.

I looked at Freeze. He looked at me. We both watched Cynt walk her big pretty ass up the steps. We both smiled. "Just like old times."

Once we were in her office, Cynt opened the safe and stepped aside. She had a small arsenal in that safe. "Help yourself. They're all clean, acid on the serial numbers. Damn near impossible to trace."

I stepped up and picked out three 45's and two silencers. Freeze grabbed one too and an AK47, "Just in case things get thick out there."

"That should thin things out nicely." Cynt threw in.

"Got any gloves, Cynt?" I asked.

"What do I look like, Macy's?"

"Come on Nick, I got some for you in the truck. Lets go."

"Good to see you again Cynt," I said as I followed Freeze out the office.

Cynt grabbed me by the arm.

"You make sure you come back and see me soon, Nick," she said and kissed me on the cheek.

"I'll do that."

As soon as we got in the truck, Freeze turned to me and shook his head. "What's up with you and Cynt?"

"I swear man, I don't know what was up with that."

"Nigga, when you gonna get enough of fuckin' with Bobby's women," Freeze laughed. "I'm just fuckin' with you kid."

"Bobby still fuckin' Cynt?"

"Naa, Pam got that nigga pussy whipped and on lock down since the day she met him."

"Pam, that his wife?"

"Yeah, she's a good girl. Real solid, you know. She's been good for Bobby. Mellowed him the fuck out."

"Maybe after this is over with we can roll by there."

"Time you and Bobby made peace and put that Camille shit behind y'all. Bitch been dead for ten fuckin' years and shit."

"I feel you."

"Where the fuck we goin', anyway?"

"Greenwich."

"Connecticut?"

"Yeah. Wake me up when we get there."

When we got to the house, there was gated entry and a guard posted. I told Freeze to roll by so we could get a look at the place. I sure missed Jett, he would have tapped into some satellite and had a birdseye view of the set up. But that wasn't the only reason I missed him. He was a good friend. I thought about Monika lying in that hospital bed, fighting for her life. I was here for them.

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I didn't see any camera surveillance, but I knew there had to be some. Once I had satisfied myself with the layout of the grounds, I told Freeze to give me five minutes and then drive to the gate and I would join him there. I made my way around to the gate. I put the silencers on the guns and waited in the brush for Freeze to pull up. As he approached the gate, the guard came out and stopped him.

"Good evening, sir. Can I help you?"

"No, but he can." Freeze pointed at me.

"What?"

He turned around and I put two shots in his head. I dragged him into the guard shack and opened the gate. Freeze drove through the gate, I got back in the truck, and we headed for the house. He stopped the truck around the side of the house. "Well what's the plan?"

"Give me five minutes, then come in after me."

"You got it."

I moved toward the house, staying in the shadows. The lock was no problem. I moved quickly through the house, guns drawn, looking for my objective. Checking each room, before moving on to the next. The thought did occur to me that the bastard might not be there. If he wasn't, I'd burn the bitch down.

"Monika would like that," I said to myself.

I heard footsteps coming toward me. I got out of sight. Once he passed me, I put two in the back of his head. I dragged his body into the first room I came to. I recognized him. He was Lieutenant Commander Snow. He was in command of a different Special Ops unit, but he was a part of our little community. At that point, I knew I was in the right place. I had been through all the downstairs rooms and was making my way up the steps, when I heard more footsteps coming. I put my guns in their holsters and went over the rail. I would hold on until they passed.

I watched as they stopped at the top of the steps and talked. I hoped it wouldn't be a long conversation. My arms were starting to hurt. They started down the steps. I was in a bad spot if they saw my hands. I gave some thought to letting go if they did. I looked down. "Bad idea."

Fortunately, they passed me by. Once they were out of sight, I came back over the rail and continued up the stairs. I could have shot them too, but I figured it would give Freeze something to do. He always did like to compare body counts.

I walked down a long hallway until I saw a light coming from an open door. As I got closer, I heard voices. I heard his voice. My heart began racing, I moved faster. I came through the door and there he was, Uncle Felix, seated behind a marble desk. I should have blasted him on sight. But first I had to know why.

"Come on in Nick, we've been expecting you," Felix said smiling. "Have a seat."

I took a step closer.

"Why don't you just put those guns down, nice and slow while you at it, Nick." I recognized that southern accent. I turned to see General Peterson seated on the couch with an M-16 pointed at me. He was my commanding officer for our last tour of duty. It was all starting to come together. I took a deep breath and complied with his orders.

"That's a good soldier, Nick, but you always were," The general said, laughing. "Shit, I got half a dozen men in this house and one at the gate. But you walked right by them like it wasn't shit, didn't you, Nick?"

"Sit down, Nick. Take a load off." Felix said.

"I told you he was the best soldier I ever commanded Felix. Made you a damn good operative, didn't he?"

"Yeah, he was good."

"Tell me about it Felix, why'd you do it?"

"Do what Nick? Oh, you mean Jett and Monika, don't you?"

"Yeah, Monika was too good to be taken by any of Chilly's boyz without gettin' off a shot. It had to be you."

"No, Nick, it was me," the general said. "Monika let me in, no problem. Perkins, that was the boy that Bronson cut up, well she made him while she was out on her little date with Chilly. Once he was compromised, it wouldn't take her long to put it all together just like you did. So we had to kill her. Then Bronson showed up. Perkins covered while I left. His orders were to kill Bronson. But you see how that turned out."

"Then you brought in a cleaner to clean up after Jett. Who killed Jett?"

"Lieutenant Commander Snow had that honor," the General said. "Bronson saw us when we were coming out of the house where he

killed Perkins. So we let him follow us to Chilly's house. Your boy was careless,

Nick. He let Snow walk right up on him and shoot him with a .22 in the ear. Very effective."

"I just want to know why?"

"Well, for that I got to take you back a ways," Felix said as he got up and poured himself a drink. "You see, Nick, the whole time you were in South America, you may have been under the General here's command, but you were working for me."

"Just what were we doin' down there Felix?"

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"You were conducting the war on drugs as a agent of the United States Government, sort of." Felix said and he the General both laughed, but I wasn't amused. Maybe they would let me in on the joke.

"Well, not exactly," the General said.

"You and your unit were there, not to stop the flow of drugs into this country, but to stream line it. You see, Nick, I have a friend down there. He came to me and asked for my help in eliminating some of his competition. In return we would be partners in his rather lucrative enterprise."

"Cocaine."

"Right. So I went to my friend the General here, and he was kind enough to donate the services of your unit. But he said to me that instead of just eliminating some of his competition, hell, let's get rid of all the bastards or at least do damage to their operations."

"So you sent us down there to assassinate key people and destroy drug labs. The whole time we're thinking it's for good old Uncle Sam, we were doin' it all for good old Uncle Felix. Good plan. What went wrong?"

"Who said anything went wrong. You and your unit were doing an excellent job," Felix said smugly. "Especially your team, Nick. The entire campaign was a success."

"That's right. Your team was especially destructive. That Monika sure can blow some shit up." The general added. "How is she doin' anyway, Nick? I understand it doesn't

look good for her."

"She's a fighter. She's gonna make it."

"No, she's not, Nick. If she makes it out of intensive care, she'll be dead before she gets to her room." Felix said.

"We'll see about that. But we'll pass that for now. So you brought us all back together to eliminate the eliminators, but we fucked it up when Monika broke her ankle. We were all supposed to die that day."

"I knew you were smart enough to figure that much out," the general said. "I was just gonna just line you all up and shoot you. But Felix said that he could use your team for some other jobs he had goin'. Said you three had a skill set that he would make excellent use of. So I got y'all out from down there. Handled the debriefing myself and turned you over to Felix."

"I figured that part out too. As long as Felix had his hand around our throats and we didn't know what was really goin' on down there anyway, we were non-threatening. What happened to change that?"

"My friend wasn't the only one with influential friends. There were stories in some circles of American service men participating in a drug eradication effort. If those stories ever made their way to Capital Hill there would be hell to pay," Felix said. "And all that hell would fall on me, Nick."

"You three were the only one's who lived, and like I said you were smart enough to figure it out," the general said.

"And I wasn't gonna take the chance of you bein' subpoenaed to testify before some fuckin' Senate sub-committee," Felix said.

"So you killed Jett and you tried to kill Monika."

"I didn't want to, Nick, but you can surely see where I didn't have a choice in the matter. You three were the best operatives I had. It's gonna be hard to replace you," Felix said.

"What about me? Why didn't you try to kill me?"

"You're a killer, Nick. You would be hard to kill. I thought about asking you to join us, but, as your presence here proves you're too damn loyal to your friends. Even if you said you would go along with it, there would always exist the possibility that you would flip and try to kill us all. Anyway, since you were making a fool of yourself playing private detective, I just figured that either that animal Chilly would kill you, or the cops would have you for murder. But if neither one of those options panned out, don't think I wouldn't send a team to kill you. And they would have to be good to get the job done."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"No problem."

"Well gentlemen, I've heard enough." I started to reach for my third weapon.

"Good, so have I."

I turned around as Freeze came through the door and fired two shots to the general's head. Then he turned to Felix and fired two shots at him.

"What'd you do that for?" I screamed.

"What are you talkin' about? You said you had heard enough. I figured that meant it

was time for them to die."

"Yeah, but I wanted to kill Felix."

"I tell you what, I'll let you kill the next one."

"It's not the same. Fuck it, nevermind. Let's just get the fuck outta here."

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Freeze walked over and looked at Felix. "Why didn't you tell me he was the one you were lookin' for?"

"You know him?"

"Shit yeah. Didn't you hear him? He's partners with Estabon, who supplies Chilly."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask me about him or Estabon. You just asked me about Chilly."

"Damn."

"Sorry, Nick, how was I supposed to know."

"Forget it, man. Thanks for havin' my back."

"Anyway, what were you gonna do with your guns on the floor?"

"I had three guns, remember."

"That's right. Yo, I was listening to them talk about you. You that bad a mutha fucka?"

"Yeah."

"Well, come on Shaft and I'll buy you a drink."

"Okay, but just a quick one. I got one more body to account for."

"You ain't thinking bout goin' to Peru to kill Estabon, are you?"

"No. Something a little closer to home."

* * *

Chapter Twenty-six

"Who is it?"

"Its, Nick."

Felicia opened the door and let me in. She threw her arms around my neck and kissed me. "I'm so glad to see you." Felicia kissed me again and again. I was glad to see her too.

"Surprised to see me?"

"Yes. I heard about Chilly. I thought you were in jail."

"Wanda got me out."

"Who is Wanda? Should I be jealous?"

"No. Wanda is not only family to me, but she's my lawyer."

"All right now. I just want to know who the players are in this game before I get in."

"Baby, this ain't no game."

"Oh, so you the real thing, huh?"

"Is there anything to drink?"

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"Sure, I have a bottle of Zinfandel. You want some?"

"Is that a trick question?"

"What do you —" she looked confused. "Oooohh! You want some?" Felicia got up to get the wine. "Nick, you can have all you want of this. As much as you want of this."

She returned with two glasses and sat down next to me. "Here you go baby. You look tired."

"I really haven't slept in a couple of days." Felicia looked sad. "Smile, Felicia. I ain't ever that tired." She smiled and sipped her wine.

"What happened with the police?"

"I'm out on bond. But Wanda thinks they'll be willing to accept that my killin' Chilly was self defense."

"That's good. What about the rest of them?"

"I think they'll probably drop the whole thing on Chilly and call it day. He was responsible for all of it anyway." I finished my wine. "Felicia, do you mind if I take a shower?"

"Not at all." She popped up from the couch and held out her hand. "Come with me. Let me get you some towels,"

"Thank you. A nice hot shower is what I need," I said as Felicia turned on the light in the bathroom. "It will help me relax."

She turned on the shower and started to undress me. "Not too relaxed that you pass out on me."

I shook my head no.

>

"I could use a shower too. You want some company in there?" She asked as she removed the last of my clothes.

"Is that a trick question?" And I got in the shower.

Felicia bathed me, then we made love in the shower, and again once we made our way to the bed. I enjoyed making love to her. In spite of her tough cop exterior, Felicia was an extremely sensual and highly sexual woman. While we made love, I had to ask myself the question. Was I in love with her? And would it make things any different?

As advertised, I waited until after we made love to pass out. When I woke up, Felicia was gone. "Felicia!"

"I'm in the kitchen. Don't get up, I'm fixing you breakfast." She stuck her head in the room. "How does breakfast in bed sound to you?"

"Great. You're all right, you know that?"

"I'm more than all right, but I'm breakin' it on you slowly. I wouldn't want you to feel overwhelmed. I know how you men are."

Felicia went back to the kitchen while I got up and went to the bathroom. I took care of matters in the bathroom, got back in the bed, and waited for Felicia. She came in carrying a tray with a flower in a vase. She made Spanish omelets, hash browns with link sausages. "Toast, coffee, and a Mamosa."

"All this for me?" I said, trying my best to look surprised and honored all at once. "Will you be joining me?"

"Of course. I'll be right back." She came back with her food and got in bed next to me. She was a good breakfast cook. I'd be interested to see if that translated to being a good cook period. We ate and talked; sausages inspired sexual innuendo, mostly. I told her about Monika and Jett, she cried a few tears for me.

Man I was diggin' her.

When we finished eating, Felicia took the trays back to the kitchen. She came in the room and got back in bed and snuggled up close to me. Felicia told me she had an appointment with her professor the next day to talk about her getting back into law school. "Now that it's over, I want to try to get my life back."

"That's good that you're gettin' your life back. But there's something that always has bothered me."

"What's that?"

"Why did you leave?"

"I told you, I was afraid."

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"You know I don't believe that. But we'll pass that for now. If Chilly had Pamela killed because she knew what was goin' on, what did you have to be afraid of?"

"He might have thought that she told me." Felicia looked away from me.

I touched her shoulder. "Look at me, Felicia. Why'd you come back?"

"I told you, I missed you."

"It's over, Felicia, Chilly's dead. Jett's dead. Monika may die." I put my arm around her. "Please tell me the truth, Felicia."

"Nick." She kissed me on the cheek. "I told you the truth, I came back because I missed you. And you gave me the courage to face things. To finish what I started."

"What was that?"

"I told you why I left the force. Well, I didn't tell you the whole story. Once the shooting stopped, Morgan and I searched the house. I told you about the cocaine, well, there was a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in cash. Morgan said we could split it. He said he had an old friend who could get rid of the drugs for us. But I told him no, I didn't want anything to do with the drugs. Morgan said, fine. I could keep all the money. He could make twice that from selling the drugs."

"That's why you were so worried about the cops investigating you. You were afraid they would find out."

"Yes." Felicia looked away, but she turned back quickly. "So we robbed a bunch of dead drug dealers. Nobody would care about that, right?"

"You would think. What happened?"

"It was Rocky we robbed."

"When did you find that out?"

"I was looking at some of Pamela's pictures. I recognized two of them from pictures she took at Jake's party. Then Morgan called me and said that Rocky knew. He said he would kill both of us if we didn't give back the drugs and the money."

"How did he find out it was you two?"

"Morgan's source. He tried to sell the dope to one of Rocky's people. He told Rocky he got it from Morgan, before they killed him. Morgan called and said he wanted to see me. He had bought into his uncle's bar in Queens, he said to meet him there and we would figure out what to do. But he was dead when I got there. Police called it a robbery."

"What happened then?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"For the next couple of months, nothing happened. Then about a month ago, Rocky called me. He told me he wanted the money back. Or what happened to Morgan would happen to me. I was supposed to meet Rocky here the night Pamela died. I tried to call Pamela, to tell her to stay away from here. But I never did catch her."

Pamela was dead when I got here."

"Is that why you killed Rocky?"

"Pamela died for something me and Morgan did. When I woke up and you were gone that morning, I called Rocky and told him I only had half of the money. He said to meet him at his club that night. I had the money, but I knew he would kill me anyway, whether I gave it to him or not."

"That much was obvious."

"I waited outside the club until I saw him pull up in the convertible. Two of his boyz were up front; Rocky was in the back seat. I walked up to the car and shot the three of them in the head. Then I swung around and put one each in their chests. I threw the gun on Rocky's lap and got away from there."

"Nobody would care if three piece of shit drug dealers got whacked in the street, right?"

"That was my plan, Nick. I made it look like it was just another drug related murder."

So there it is, I had actually solved the case. The big question now was, what was I going to do about it? I didn't know what I was gonna do. I knew one thing for sure, I knew then that I was finished trying to play private detective. Too much like being a cop for me. I looked over at Felicia, I put my arms around her, and she rested her head against my chest. Whether I was in love with her or not I couldn't turn her over to the police for what she'd done. She didn't do anything that I hadn't done. Felicia got revenge for her friend. I couldn't roll her over for that. Or Mrs. Childers, or Chésará for that matter. I just couldn't see myself helping the police. If they figured it out on their own, that would be different. But I knew they would make Chilly the fall guy.

Case closed.

* * *

Chapter Twenty-seven

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"Oh, Nick! That feels so good," Vivian moaned.

I looked down at the dance floor at Impressions. From above the stage, I could see the entire club from where I was standing. I came here with Freeze. He didn't tell me where we were goin', he just said, "We need to ride." Next thing I know, we're gettin' valet parked at the club. "What we doin' here?"

"Time you and Bobby made peace and put that Camille shit behind y'all. Bitch been dead for ten fuckin' years."

Now why he wanna go and do that?

Not this, not tonight. Freeze knew I'd had a rough week. I wanted to relax, clear my mind, and have a little fun. I needed to think about where I was goin' from where I am now. But I got lucky; Bobby had already left for the night. "Good, I wasn't up for that tonight anyway." That's when I saw an old girl friend of mine named, Vivian Merrick.

I just got back from Jett's funeral in Iowa. Explaining to Jett's parents how and why he died was hard. But it was harder to tell Monika. The afternoon she came out of her coma, I ran fanatically down the hall, screaming for a doctor or a nurse or anybody. Once the doctor checked her out, she left us alone. I told her that Jett was dead and how things played out with Chilly. She cried softly when I told her about Jett. "I'm going to take his body home to his parents in Iowa tomorrow," I said. "I talked to them yesterday. The funeral's gonna be on Saturday."

"I'm goin' with you, Nick," Monika said softly as the tears poured from her eye.

"Monika, I don't think you'll be strong enough to leave the hospital in time for the funeral."

"Don't argue with me, Nick. He saved my life and yours, too. He died goin' after the bastard that shot me. I have to go," Monika mumbled, as she began to drift off to sleep.

"You get some rest and we'll talk about it in the morning." I knew better than to argue with her. Even in her condition, Monika was still as strong willed as ever.

As promised, Monika went to Jett's funeral, albeit in a wheelchair and in the company of a private nurse. After the funeral I took Monika back to the hospital and sat with her a while until she went to sleep. I left there and went to check on Gee. I walked up to the house and saw a for sale sign in the yard. I drove downtown to Chezara's apartment building. The doorman told me that Ms. Rollins had moved out and he was not at liberty to say any more on the matter. I was happy for them. They were finally free at last.

"Nick, that feels so good," Vivian moaned. "You're gonna make me cum!"

"Nick! You up here?" Freeze yelled, seeming to appear from nowhere.

"Yeah!"

"Well come on. I'm ready to go."

"Alright — alright —" my voice trembled. "I'm coming."

"Well hurry up then," Freeze said shaking his head as he turned away. "You ain't changed a bit."

Once I finished doin' my thing with Vivian, I met Freeze at the bar and got myself a drink. Freeze looked at me and shook his head. "You ain't changed a bit, nigga."

"Give me a break, I'm tryin' to relax."

"You looked pretty intense from where I was standing."

"Whatever."

"I gotta go by the office, then we outta here. Come on."

"What you gotta go to the office for? Bobby ain't up there?"

"No, Wanda's up there. She got something for me. So stop actin' like a bitch and come on."

I followed Freeze upstairs to the office at Impressions. I didn't appreciate him calling me a bitch. But if I wanted to be honest with myself, he was right. After reading Camille's journal and talking to Wanda about it, it made the whole situation easier to deal with. In fact, it was like a tremendous weight that I'd dragged around with me for years had been lifted from my shoulders. I needed to put this shit behind us and move on. So what's my probl

em? Probably because I was fuckin' Camille behind his back. I didn't think that Bobby would pull out his gun and shoot me on sight. But I wouldn't put it past him. The fact was, I did some foul shit, and now I had to step up and face it.

Freeze burst into the office, "What's up, Wanda! What you got for me?"

I followed him in. There was a woman standing by the window. Tight black mini skirt and black heels. The woman turned around, and to my surprise, it was Wanda.

"I got a message for you. It wasn't anything that couldn't have waited," Wanda said as she walked toward Bobby's desk. "How you doin' tonight, Nick?"

"I'm good. How are you?"

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"I'm tired and I'm ready to go home. But Bobby wants me to see tonight's act. What's he call himself?"

"The One," Freeze said.

"Whatever," Wanda said as she leaned over the desk looking for the message. I'd seen her in a business suit and a big fuzzy robe, but if I had any remaining doubts about how fine Wanda had gotten, the black mini crushed them. Those beautiful legs lead up to a near perfect ass and that slim waist. Felicia Hardy crossed my mind. She jumped back into law school and didn't seem to have a minute to talk. Or maybe she was tryin' to tell me something?

"I'll see what he got," Wanda said. "You two gonna stay and watch the show with me?"

"No, I gotta roll. Doc said some niggas was tryin' to post up in his spot," Freeze said, before I had a chance to say yes. Wanda looked a little disappointed, but she covered it up.

"Here it is," she said, handing Freeze a piece of paper.

"Derrick Washington?" Freeze said in surprise. "What Curl want?"

"I don't know. He just said to call him."

"Derrick Washington. I heard that name before," I said.

"You should have, you made him somebody when you killed Chilly," Freeze spit out.

"Chilly's lieutenant," I had been trying to put all that behind me, but I see that wasn't happening.

"It's probably his boyz that's tryin' to set up at Doc's. I'll be right back, Nick, then we goin' to Doc's." Freeze left the office, slamming the door behind him. I looked over at Wanda, who had taken a seat behind Bobby's desk. I expected her to say something about Chilly, but she didn't.

"You look tired, Nick."

"Yeah, maybe I need a vacation."

"Everything is taken care of with the police so you might as well."

I laughed out loud. "I can't remember the last time I sat around somewhere with nothing to do all day."

"They tell me that's what people do on vacation. Try it, and let me know how it works out," Wanda laughed. "I haven't taken a vacation in years."

"Why don't you come with me?"

"Excuse me? Did you just invite me to take a vacation with you?" Wanda smiled.

"What are you suggesting?"

"I didn't mean anything by it, Wanda. I was just sayin' that since you haven't taken one in years that you could probably use one, too. I wasn't suggesting anything." I looked at Wanda, thinking that it wouldn't be such a bad idea.

"Well, thanks anyway, but I've got too much work to do. Where are you thinking about goin'?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll go to the Bahamas, see Black. Meet our new queen." And I regretted it as soon as I said it.

Wanda rolled her eyes. "That's a good idea. I know Black would like to see you. And when you get back, you and I need to sit down and go over some things."

"Like what?" I smiled and took a seat across from her.

"Business, Nick," Wanda smiled back.

"Business?"

"Just business. I don't know where your head is." Wanda dropped her head, and quickly looked up. "I mean about what you wanna do now, but I know Black has some things he'd like to talk to you about."

"I've been thinkin' a lot about what I wanna do," I said suggestively.

"And what have you come up with?"

Just then, Freeze burst into the office. "Let's go, Nick," Freeze barked.

I got up slowly.

"Goodnight, Nick, we'll finish our discussion when you get back," Wanda said suggestively.

"When you get back?" Freeze asked as we made our way down the stairs. "Where the fuck you goin'?"

"I'm goin' to meet Shy."

* * *

Chapter Twenty-eight

My cab pulled up in front of Black's Paradise, in Freeport, on Grand Bahama Island. I paid the cab driver and tipped him nicely. I opened my suitcase and while the driver looked on in horror, I took my gun and extra clips out of the bag. I got out of the cab, put the gun in my waist and pulled my shirt down over it. I put the clips in my back pocket while I walked toward the door.

As I got closer I could hear the sound of reggae music. I'd reserved a room at The Bahama Princess Hotel, but I decided to come to the club first. I went inside and wandered around looking for Black. Not seeing him anywhere I stepped to the bar to get a drink and ask for him. A very pretty bartender came over to see what I was drinking. "What can I get for you?" the bartender asked.

"Johnnie Walker Black, straight up."

"Comin' up," she replied as she poured my drink. "Can I get you a menu?"

"Yeah," I said. "I heard the food was great here." She handed me the menu and I glanced at it. "What do you recommend?"

"That depends, how hungry are you?"

"I haven't eaten all day, unless you call peanuts on the plane coming down here eating."

"Then you definitely want to try our Bahamian Platter. It's a taste of almost everything on the menu."

"Then that's what I'm having."

The bartender walked away to give the kitchen my order, but returned quickly. "Just got in, huh?"

"Yes," I said, taking a sip of my drink. "Just got in from New York."

"Really, I'm from New York."

"Oh yeah," I said, thinking that it figured that Black would hire somebody from New York to handle his money. "What part?"

"The Bronx."

"I'm from The Bronx. In fact, I came here to surprise an old friend. I was hoping he'd be here."

"Really. What's your friends name?"

"Mike Black, is he here?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm sorry, my name is Nick Simmons."

The bartender smiled, "Well, it's a pleasure to finally meet you. I was beginning to think you were just a figment of everyone's imagination."

"No, I'm for real," I paused. "You seem to have me at a disadvantage here. I mean, you seem to know me, but I haven't had the pleasure of making your acquaintance," I said looking at the huge rock on her finger. Why are all the really fine ones always married?

"Oh, I'm sorry. My name is Shy, Mike Black is my husband," she said extending her hand.

Not only is she married, but she's Black's wife. When will I ever learn? I shook her hand, "So, you're the famous Shy." Shy shook her head and smiled. "Well it is truly a pleasure to finally met you, too. I've heard a lot about you, but I knew that you weren't imaginary. It took a real woman to get Black out of New York," I said finishing my drink. Shy poured me another and left the bottle.

"It was Black's idea to move down here. It seemed like a good idea at the time. You know, fun and sun everyday. But to be honest with you, Nick," Shy paused a second and looked around. "It's boring as hell here."

I laughed. "Really?"

"Yes, and its too hot all the time. Some day's I feel like David Ruffin, singing I Wish It Would Rain. That is until it rains, I never knew it could rain so hard. And these women," Shy shook her head. "Let me stop."

"You just miss New York, that's all."

"You ain't told no lie there. But I guess you know that I'm a fugitive, so I can't go back to the city."

"Wanda hasn't been any help with that?" I asked.

"Not really. I mean, I give her credit, she did get the murder charges dropped, but she can't seem to be able to make no headway on the con

spiracy to distribute. Sometimes I think she's glad I'm down here."

"Why do you think that?" I asked, thinking that she might be right.

"Come on, Nick, you've known her and Michael a lot longer than I have. Even though neither of them will say it and I've never asked either of them, I know at some point there was something goin' on between them. I know that whatever it was is over for Michael, but I think Wanda still feelin' it."

"You sound a little jealous. Are you?"

"No!" Shy said quickly and louder than she needed to. "Well, maybe just a little. But I'm not worried about her. I got more than enough woman to worry about on this boring ass island."

The cook brought my food, before I could ask her what she was so worried about. Shy introduced me to the cook and told him that this was one of Black's best friends, "So the food better be good or he'll fire you," Shy laughed, sending the cook about his business, with very worried look on his face. I tore into the food, like a man who hadn't eaten in weeks.

"Michael said you could eat. I'll let you eat in peace. I'll be back when you're done."

My mouth was too full to answer.

Once I finished eating, as promised, Shy returned and poured me another drink. "So, I take it that Black's not here?"

"He's in New York."

"New York? Can't be, I just left there. Freeze dropped me off at Newark this morning. He can't be in the city and Freeze not know it," I laughed, when I thought better of it. Suppose Black told her he was goin' to New York and went somewhere else?

"No, he's there. Knowing those two, Freeze probably dropped you off at Newark and picked him up Kennedy. You know how secretive they are."

I laughed, but I knew she was right.

Shy looked at me and leaned against the bar. "So, Black says you two have friends since the first day you met."

"He said that?" I looked at Shy. Then it occurred to me that Black wouldn't have his wife bartending. So I put his hand on I gun. "Is that what he told you?"

"Ain't that what happened?"

"No, we had a fight the first day we met."

"I'm glad you said that, Nick cause I was gettin' ready to shot your ass," Shy said and then showed me the pump she kept under the bar. She reached for a glass and a bottle of Bacardi.

"I still might shoot you. Who won?"

"Come on, Nick," Shy smiled at me while she poured her drink. "You know got your ass kicked."

I let go of my gun and laughed, "I'm glad you said that." Lifting my shirt to show her my gun. "So why does Black have you bartending?"

"It's the managers day off. So I'm just filing in for the regular bartender. He should be here by now."

For the next hour, Shy waited on customers and she and I talked and got better aquatinted. We talked a little this and that, Shy told me how her and Black met, and about their adventure together. I talked about the old days running with Black, and about how I'd spent the last couple of weeks. And then the conversation turned. "Mind if I ask you a question?" Shy asked.

"Sure, go ahead."

"It's personal."

"Ask me what you want to know," I said, curious about what Shy wanted to know.

Shy took a deep breath, "What happened between you and Bobby? I know there's some drama with you two, but no one will ever say why."

"Did you ask Bobby?"

"No. Me and Bobby are cool, at least we are now, but I haven't felt comfortable enough with him to ask."

"And you feel comfortable with me?"

"Yes, I do."

I looked at Shy. "I know what Black sees in you."

"What's that?"

"It's your eyes."

"You do know him." Shy leaned against the bar. "He said I have beautiful eyes, very expressive eyes."

"Your eyes say, it's okay, Nick, you can tell me."

"Well?" Shy said.

She listened quietly while I told her the story. Once I finished, she said, "I understand why you're havin' such a hard time facing Bobby."

"You wanna share that wisdom with me?"

"You said it yourself. Betrayal. When you betrayed Bobby's trust, you said you felt like you betrayed everybody."

"And?"

"That includes you. You betrayed yourself. And that's what hurts you. So now that you know the whole story, you're gonna have to forgive yourself for what happened. You were just a pawn in whatever game this woman was playing. Maybe when you forgive yourself, it will be easier for you to ask Bobby to forgive you."

I thought about what Shy said. "Maybe you're right. I dishonored myself and then ran away, like a coward. I have to move past that. Make peace with Bobby and myself. Maybe then I won't feel like such an outsider."

"That right," Shy said, and poured both of us another drink. "You know you have very trusting eyes, too. Or maybe its because I feel like an outsider sometimes, too, I don't know. But I have to talk to somebody or I'll go crazy." Shy took a sip of her drink. "Black's not here because we had a fight last night. He left the house and I haven't seen him since. He may be in New York or he may be right here on this island, I don't know."

"What was the fight about?"

"You hit it dead center when you said I was bored. I miss New York and I want to go

home. I really haven't made any real friends down here," Shy leaned forward and whispered, "Probably because I can't understand what they're sayin' half the time," Shy laughed. "And these woman, oh god, why they all gotta fall all over my man. And it's not just these island bitches, the tourists are worst. Why do they have to have their half-naked asses, all up in his face, gigglin' over every word he says, while I'm standin' right there? I mean, Nick I try to rise above that, 'cause I know he really ain't like that any more, but its hard. Bitches ain't got no respect."

"Sometimes gettin' bitches respect is over rated. As long as Black shows you respect, fuck them bitches. You're his wife."

"I know that, Nick. And Michael shows me nothing but love and respect. And I love him so much for that. I know that's just something I got to past. I guess I'm just a jealous woman and I'm tired of it, you know what I'm sayin'?" Shy poured herself another drink, and then she pushed the glass away. "But that's not the real issue. That was just something I threw in to spice things up a little I guess," she laughed. "The fight was really about me wantin' to go back to New York."

"But you can't, because of the conspiracy charge," I said.

"He lost it when I told him that I would rather go home and do my time then say down here. I don't want to be on the run for the rest of my life, Nick. I want to be free."

"I can understand that. I know what it's like to carry around a burden. Sometimes you got to face it, not runaway from it," I said, knowing that I should take my own advice. Just then, I looked and saw somebody I thought I knew sitting at a table by the door. "Excuse me a minute Shy, I'll be right back." I got up and walked over to him. "Roman, Roman Patterson?" I asked. The man didn't answer at first. He looked at the door and then slowly at me.

"Nick Simmons?" he said quietly and looked back at the door. "What are you doin' here?"

"I'm visiting some old friends." I started to sit down.

"Get away from me, Nick. I'm waiting for somebody," he said practically in a whisper.

"What?"

"I'm DEA, Nick. Get away from me," he said loud enough for me to hear him this time. I turned quickly and walked away, just as three men, one white and two Hispanic, entered the club and sat down at the table with Roman. I went back to the bar and sat down. Shy came over to me, "What was up with that? You didn't know him?"

"He's DEA." I saw the expression on Shy's face. "Calm down, he's not here for you."

We looked on as the four men talked and laughed like old friends, until one of the Hispanic men glanced at me. The man stood up, and looked directly at me, took out his gun and shot the DEA agent in the head. Customers began running out the back door, turning over tables in their wake, while others dove on the floor. He turned and fired on me.

"Get down!" I yelled at Shy.

Shy ducked down behind the bar, while I fired wildly and took cover behind a table. The other two men broke out semi automatic weapons and began firing at me. They had me pinned down as they moved toward the door.

Shy reached for the pump. "Finally a little excitement on this rock." She rose up, took aim, and fired at and dropped the Hispanic man with the semi. Shy took cover, as the remaining two began shooting at her. This time it was me that came up blatin'; hitting the other Hispanic man who shot the agent. He went down.

Shy stayed low as she moved toward the end of the bar. She stood up and fired the pump just as the white man run out the door. I came out from behind the table, as Shy moved toward the door. With her back turned, she didn't see one of the men get up.

"Shy! Behind you!" I yelled and aimed my weapon. But it was too late. The man had grabbed Shy and pointed his gun to her head.

"Drop it!" he yelled. Shy threw away the pump. "You too, drop it!" he yelled at me.

"Let her go!" I said taking a step closer.

The man fired, barely missing Shy. "I'll kill her!"

I knew I should shot the man in the head before he should get a shot off. And I was about to when the white guy burst though the door, firing that semi. It gave them enough time to get out the door. By the time I got outside, they were gone.

Now that the shooting had stopped, people to get up off the floor and began to move around. The cook came out of the kitchen. "Go on and get out of here. I'll take care of things here," the cook said.

I grabbed a tablecloth and picked up the pump. I picked up my suitcase and left the club though the back door. I walked quickly and with my head down, past the crowd, and along the beach until I reached the canal. Carefully I wiped the pump clean and then proceeded to smash it against the rocks. Then picked up all the pieces and put them back in the tablecloth. Then I walked down the canal and dropped broken pieces of the pump into the water. With all the pieces gone, I folded up the t

ablecloth and put it in my suitcase. I made my back to the main road and was able to flag down a cab. "Bahama Princess," I said as I got in the cab. "No, take me to the Lucayan Beach Hotel."

Once I arrived at the hotel, I checked in and went straight to my room. I opened up the suitcase and took the tablecloth and my gun out. I put the gun on the nightstand and took the tablecloth down the hall to the laundry shoot. I went back to the room and sat down on the bed. I tried but couldn't seem to make sense of what had just happened. I picked up the phone and called Freeze at Cuisine.

"Cuisine," Freeze answered.

"Freeze, it's Nick. Is Black there?"

"No, I thought he was down there with you? What's goin' on?"

"Some shooting went down at Black's club. And — "I said, but Freeze interrupted.

"Hold up, Nick. Wanda and Bobby are here, I'm gonna put you on speaker." Great.

"Nick, you still there?"

"I'm here."

"Now what happened?" Freeze asked."

"There was a shooting at Black's club. Bandits killed a DEA agents and took Shy with them when they left."

"What!" Freeze said.

"They took Shy."

"Took her where?" Wanda asked excitedly.

"I don't know." I replied.

"Start at the beginning, Nick. What happened?" Wanda asked.

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"I saw a guy I knew, he turned out to be DEA. He wasn't there looking for Shy, he was just meeting somebody there. One of the people he met recognized me, when he saw me kill shot the agent and started shooting at me. Shy pulled out a pump from under the bar and started shooting back. One of them got behind Shy and grabbed her on the way out the door."

"Did you recognize any of them, Nick?" Wanda asked.

"No."

"What they look like?" Freeze asked.

"One Hispanic male, South American, I think. The other one was white. The Hispanic man's been shot."

"Damn!" Freeze said, "This is fucked up."

"What happened then, Nick?" Wanda asked. "What about the Police?"

"I got out of there with Shy's pump and left the cook to deal with the cops."

"Okay, he's a good man, he knows how to handle the situation," Wanda said.

"That depends on who shows up," Freeze said.

"Where are you staying?" Wanda asked.

"Lucayan Beach."

"Okay, stay there. I'll call you back after I talk to the cook."

Before Wanda discounted the call I heard Bobby say, "What's he been down there, four hours?"

* * *