

Stark in Candyland

by

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Being a private detective can be a dangerous profession - especially when you are investigating a brutal murder which implicates rich and powerful community leaders in unholy sex crimes - crimes of the heart. Sometimes, they will do anything, anything to protect their reputations and jobs, anything at all.

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Thomas Orson Strauss (Stark) rolled over and placed his meaty paw on Abbey's voluptuous hip and felt relieved. He tenderly moved his huge hand along the hairs of her buttery thighs just enough to create a bit of friction as he felt, that tingle he loved. Stark could feel the softness and firmness of Abbeys buttock as she responded to his sensual touch, he withdrew his hand and started thinking out loud: "Abbey, you feel so good I would like to eat you like a birthday cake. Abbey, wake up and lets do a quickie. Abbey, what am I am going to do with myself today?" Today

was a down day and Stark wanted to wake his wife before she went off to Cop-land. Yeah! He wanted to do the nasty nasty! But, he knew Abbey was tired so he just lusted for a few more minutes before he said, "Baby, its time! Hey Baby, Papa is feeling a little horny and frustrated. I have planned nothing for today." Abbey's little voices began warning her:

"Starkie is restless again ... Starkie is gonna go on the prowl again! Do something quick!" To Stark's surprise, Abbey turned over and jumped on top of him. She released her right breast from her nightgown and brushed her nipple across his lips. "What's this?" Stark asked amused and growing more excited by the moment. "I'm gonna make sure Papa don't get into any trouble today," teased Abbey. "What are you talking about?" Stark asked again, feigning innocence. "You know I haven't planned anything special." "That's what I mean, you got too much time and energy on your hands and that means trouble. I am going to make sure you release some of that energy before I go to work so you won't go looking for trouble." "Woman, you are totally crazy! Now I remember why I married you!" Stark never knew why this beautiful, intelligent woman, ever married him ... especially after his troubled and disgraceful past. After all, he was no prize. He wasn't pretty - like some guys. He wasn't rich - like some guys. He didn't have a great

potential - like some guys. He wasn't smooth - like some guys. He was just Stark, a bruiser who would be a loser if it wasn't for Abbey who saved him from himself - time and time again.

What would he do today? Go to the office? He had no clients at all right now. On days like this he just went to the office and read a good book and did a very dangerous thing: some serious old fashioned deep thinking. He thought about everything and everyone - a billion thoughts rushing through his brain about nothing important and everything urgent.

"Hey Stark, try this book," said Abbey, coming from the bathroom. "It is extremely good." She tossed him the book as the towel fell from her still damp body. "Murder in Moscow," Stark said, turning the book over in his hands, but not really looking at it. He was captivated by his wife. Tall and supple, glistening from her shower. Still he could smell the fragrance of the flowery scented shampoo she favored. She was amazing to look at. Her body the shape of a perfect hourglass, long tresses of blonde hair sticking, wet to her shoulders and back. He watched as she picked up the towel and began to dry herself. Feline-like grace was her movement as the towel moved over her tan, well shaped legs. She spoke nonstop as she continued to ready for her day at the office. Her voice lulling soft, but holding that bit of stern. "Yeah, it is about a Russian detective

who must solve the murder of the Premier's granddaughter. I know you will like it. The book has more intrigue than you can imagine: sex, slavery, political intrigue, dirty cops and politicians, and a lot of suspense." Snapping back to reality he laughed, "You know me too well babe." Abbey smiled and pulled on her business suit, perfect, pinstriped, professional that clung to her every curve, despite its conservative nature. "You'd better get moving Stark, no husband of mine is going to sit around the house all day!" He snorted, but she was right. He had to make the attempt at work even if he did nothing but read all day. He rose from bed, running his hands over his tousled dark hair. Standing behind Abbey he glanced into the mirror and marveled again that she would have any desire to get involved with him. Her pale blue eyes met his in the reflection. She smiled playfully at him making her entire face light up. Her nose was thin and straight meeting with those lips that held a perpetual smile, even when she frowned. He stood six foot two, with a better than average muscular build, he really couldn't complain about his body. Firm abdomen, and just a sprinkling of hair on his well formed chest. For 37, he was content he still maintained a full head of hair, but couldn't deny the lines on his brow and the crows feet next to his dark eyes. He had an average face, not deceptively handsome, not ugly. Nothing really

stood out about him as far as he could tell, except maybe the swelling of his nose, evidence of one nasty tackle in high school football and later broken twice during amateur boxing matches. God had given him one redeeming quality: fists of steel. He leaned over and kissed her cheek, just before swatting her firm butt and heading off to the shower. "Bye baby," yelled Abbey heading out the door. "Oh, don't forget to give the twins some spending money before they leave for school." Why did Abbey have to be a cop, he thought. After all, half her family were cops - they didn't really need another one. She had a IQ of almost 200, had finished law school in the top of her class and had a bright future in law ahead of her when she decided to peruse her family's business - police work. In the ten years that followed, she had made lieutenant and was the youngest woman to become a Homicide department chief. He was proud of her, but there was no denying the envy he felt, nor the despise for the station in general. He had loved being a cop, seeing Abbey head off everyday, was just a reminder to him, of all that had happened.

When Shawn and Ashley came down for breakfast, Stark was just finishing his bacon, toast and started his second cup of Jamaican coffee. The twins were 17 years old, and the spitting image of their mother. Lanky, both of them, with long thin limbs though Shawn was beginning to fill out.

Both children have his ex-wife's eyes color, hazel green with flecks of gold. Ashley wore her reddish hair long, but was the typical tomboy intermixed with bookworm. Shawn sported the head of a typical punk, in Stark's old-fashioned eyes. Long on top, but shaved underneath. He had the long top, pulled back into a pony-tail, showing off the long forehead, and accentuating a nose, that was just a touch too big for his face. At times, Stark felt Shawn had unlimited untapped potential. He was the kind of child that consistently finished first with his class work and scored highest on his achievement test only to get barely passing grades. School was just a social arena, a daily playground for Shawn, nothing more in Stark's view.

When their mother called four years ago, she said she needed him to keep them for a few days, Stark happily agreed. After all, Stark had missed most of their lives. They had lived with their mother and grandmother since birth. Stark had gotten their mother, Gwen, pregnant when Gwen was 17 and she refused to marry Stark. A wise decision Stark now realized. Back then, Stark was unfaithful and unpredictable. When their grandmother died almost five years ago, Gwen fell completely apart. Stress completely overwhelmed her and she lost control of the twins. She decided it was safer for the twins to live with their dad, and his new wife Abbey, in the suburbs.

Abbey proved to be a good friend for the twins and got them into her martial arts karate class. They both soon learned to love the class and many of their former behavioral problems began to disappear. Stark was a questionable dad at best. He had always been selfish and a little wild himself, but he was learning fast. Amazing what kids will teach you about being a parent!

"Dad," said Ashley, as she came bounding into the kitchen, kissing his cheek as she walked past him, making her way to the fridge. "We need some spending money for today." Shawn was right behind Ashley, "Will you go to the karate tournament tonight?" "Yeah, dad, you will enjoy yourself if you do," advised Ashley. "You always do." "Yes, I plan to come tonight," assured Stark. "I don't have a case right now. Unless some major case comes up, I will definitely be there," Stark continued. "How's the car running, Shawn?" "Fine dad," said Shawn. "Don't you remember I told you two days ago that I had it tuned up in auto shop?" "Oh, yeah - now I remember, old timers disease, don't you know." Stark muttered a little embarrassed. "Dad, don't forget about picking up the new paint for my room," Ashley reminded. "Get the exact colors in the note I gave you." "I will baby," Bracing himself, Stark took out his wallet. "How much spending money do you need?" "Well, \$40 bucks apiece should do just fine, dad," smiled Shawn. "That's \$80 dollars and I

am not made of money," Stark quipped, "Why do you need that much money?" "Dad, you promised to help us," reminded Ashley. "We are not working because you wouldn't let us. I need to get some supplies for school in the student store, and, I want to get a couple of books."

"When I was a kid, we got books at the library," Stark said, but gave the kids the money anyway. "Shawn, I want you to get a haircut too! Stop by Harry's on your way home from school and get that done." "Ah give me a break pops. I like my hair just like it is! Besides, I saw your high school pictures and your hair was longer than mine!" whined Shawn. "Yeah, I know, but I'm your dad, so do as I say, not as I did when I was a dumb teenager" Stark laughed. "Okay day, Give me another \$12.00 for the haircut," demanded Shawn. "We won't spend it all in one place," laughed Ashley. "Funny," Stark grinned. "Now get out of here."

Stark could afford the \$80 dollars. Three years earlier he had helped a Houston millionaire find his 17 year old runaway daughter and stopped a nasty blackmail attempt by her cocaine dealing druggie friends. The millionaire was so thankful he rewarded Stark with a \$250,000 bonus. Abbey promptly confiscated the money from Stark and invested it for him and his children. Stark and the twins were allowed to use the profits from the investments for their personal use. In the last three years alone, investments yielded a

healthy \$70,000 in dividends. Stark used the profits to buy the twins and himself new cars. They used the remainder of the profits to buy various other questionable luxury items. Stark didn't mind giving the twins money, but he wanted to be careful not to give them too much either. Drugs were too easy to get these days. After the kids were off to school, Stark cleaned up the kitchen before heading off for the day. Doris, the housekeeper, was off for the day, and he didn't want to leave the kitchen a mess. Abbey would give him a ration of shit if he did, and he knew it.

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Stark drove the short 15 miles from Edge Rock to Houston. Edge Rock was a small town of 95,000 people and was usually quiet except for the local whorehouse, Candyland which, technically, stood just inside Houston's city limits though most people assumed it was in Edge Rock. The well planned location, made the brothel untouchable by the concerned and conservative citizens of Edge Rock, while the citizens of Houston were unaffected enough not to care. It was largely rumored that many of Edge Rock's influential politicians and top business executives were responsible for keeping Candyland open, but no one dared talk about it in open circles. Stark pulled up to the two story building that

housed his office. It was owned by his father, John Strauss, was a very successful businessman who had worked for years in the trailer home manufacturing industry. He had risen to director of operations at one of Simco's Manufacturing & Mobile Home's many factories and had hope his son would follow in his footsteps and become a junior executive at Simco Corporate Headquarters just outside Houston. Stark never wanted to work in industry and defied his father virtually from the time he was in junior high school. When Stark decided to become a police officer, John had written him off as son. Later, with the support of his mother, Stark and his father, agreed to bury their differences. His father promised him this property as was his mother's last wishes. Stark wondered when his father would sign the property over to him - one day. Stark had not seen his father for the three years since his mother's cancerous death. Alexandria Strauss had always been the glue that kept the family together. When Stark was accused of taking a bribe, his father never forgave him despite the repeated assurances that he was set up, but John Strauss was unwilling to accept that the police department would be involved in such scrupulous acts. Stark's mother never doubted her son's innocence. She always said, "One day John you'll have to apologize to Tommy for thinking he would do such a thing."

His office was on the first floor tucked among a small coffee and a wedding boutique with apartments located on the floors above. He passed his sign: Strauss Private Investigations and entered. "Good Morning Stark," said his secretary. "You look very relaxed today!"

"Good morning Melba, how are you and the kids today?" Stark asked. "Did Jonathan get that school thing cleared up?" "Oh yes," said Melba Jones smiling. "It was just a mistake in identity. One teacher saw the boy who threw the apple through the principal's window." Melba looked like a Black Bobbie doll. A very attractive 32 year old mother of Kevon and Jonathan, 15 and 13 years old respectively. Melba's past led her to become associated with Stark. When she was 21, she had become a stripper to support her sons. The lifestyle led her to become involved in some rather dirty business, with sinister people, and soon desperation had led her into the dark world of prostitution. The owner of the club, had introduced her to the back rooms early on. When she came asking for a loan, she showed him an eviction notice from the dive of an apartment where she lived. He "showed her how to pad her pockets" then he introduced her to cocaine, which as used to ease her conscience as she did private dances and other acts for the well paying patrons of DeLight's. It was ten years ago that Kevin Jones, Melba's father and a fellow police officer, asked Stark to get his

daughter away from Houston's very dangerous nightclub scene, Stark gladly helped. His job as a vice cop placed in an unique position to help. Stark still remembered that humid Houston Saturday night when he found Melba Jones badly beaten in an alley. The thought still sent chills down his spine. Melba had tried to turn a trick, when one of her rougher customers decided he didn't want to pay. He decided he wanted to punish all women and that Melba would be his punching bag. He beat her so cruelly she spent two months in the county hospital. Two of her fragile ribs were broken, two swollen eyes almost disappeared, a busted lip hung limp, and bruises told a hard story all over her body. To this day, Stark is puzzled at how Melba managed to survive. He was amazed by her strength of will and uncanny ability to defy the odds unwise doctors had set for her survival. That was the last trick she ever turned. When Stark found the guy that beat Melba, he did the sensible thing: he called Melba's dad. Stark watched as the retired Houston street cop beat the man senseless. Once Stark felt satisfied, he pulled Kevin Jones off the man, and just in time to stop him from beating him to death. A strange thing happened the next night, the nightclub where Melba had worked burned to the ground. Stark always suspected that Kevin Jones had something to do with the fire - but he decided he wouldn't go there. After that, Stark helped

Melba in getting on her feet. He felt he was responsible for her after he saved her life. First he had to get her into a cocaine addiction program. Kevin Jones gladly paid for his daughter's drug treatment with some of the money he saved for his retirement. Kevin kept her boys for the 1st nine months of her treatment. After the treatment, Stark talked Melba into staying with her parents. He worked with everyone, as a negotiator of sorts, to ensure all went well. Melba's mother was so thankful to Stark that she cooked for him for a month. Stark gained six pounds that month and decided he had to get away from Simone Jones. He eventually persuaded her that she had paid her debt. After some time, Melba even started attending church again. The choir of her church was glad to have her too. She had an angelic singing voice. She attended night school to become a secretary. While she was still living with her parents, she worked various odd "safer" jobs while she studied. She never wavered in her determination to correct her life. After a few years of being a secretary groped by various executives, Melba came to work for Stark. She soon became a good friend to Stark as well as a good advisor. "Stark, I'm a little worried about Kevon," said Melba concerned. "He's been hanging around with some of the rough street kids and he's going with a fast little girl named LaKeisha Moore. Pretty thing, but her brothers are trouble. Gang members! I am

worried about Kevon, he's started staying out late and I am afraid he may be around drugs. Can you talk to him for me?"

"Sure Melba and I'll look into his friends too. You all are like family to me. I want to make sure he doesn't get into any trouble." "Thank You Stark, I knew I could count on you. When will you talk to him?"

"Today after school," Stark said. He was always glad to help Melba. She had been very loyal to him and always looked after his best interest. Melba and Abbey often spent time together, both henpecking him relentlessly, but Stark knew they wanted the best for him. Besides, it would give him something constructive to do. Kevon's father was never around so Stark filled in as best he could. He had known Kevon since he was five years old and had watched him grow into a considerate young man.

"What do you have planned for today Stark?" asked Melba curiously. Stark pulled out his paperback book and turned to go to his office, "I am just going to do some reading for this book Abbey gave me." "Murder in Moscow?" asked Melba smiling. "Sounds very interesting." "We'll see," Stark said. "By the way, I want you to call our contact in records at the police station and see what you can find out about LaKeisha Moore's brothers. They all probably have a police record. It may be to our advantage to find out all we can about them." "Gladly, Stark," said Melba very happy

he was taking her seriously about Kevon. He turned on the television and began to read the book. About one hour later, Melba came into Stark's office anxious, "What did you find out about the Moore boys?" "Well, LaKeisha had her four older brothers, and one younger brother," said Melba trembling. "She is the only girl. Her oldest brother was killed in prison in a gang related fight. The second oldest brother was arrested for selling cocaine and is now spending 10 to 15 years in prison. The third brother is in college on a basketball scholarship and is doing very well. Get this Stark, he is majoring in criminal justice and wants to be a cop. My friend downtown says he is trying hard to save LaKeisha and Darrell, the youngest kids, from the streets. Their mother is a hard working woman whose husband died in a grocery store shooting. He was an innocent bystander who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's so sad Stark. The father dies and two of the boys go bad. I am so glad I have my father still." "Yes, Melba you are very blessed," Kevin is a good man. "I know he can be hard at times, but being a cop here can do that to a man." "Stark," asked Melba, "do you think I should talk to Carolyn Moore, LaKeisha's mother?" "Sounds good to me," Stark answered. "If she is a good Christian woman, then she will be very concerned for her daughter. Sounds to me, that is the case here." Melba

happily returned to her office and Stark decided to continue his reading. Truth be told, he was beginning to enjoy his paperback novel.

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When Abbey got to her office, the Chief of Police and her police Captain were waiting in her office. After ten years of police work, she had never seen them so worried. In fact, the whole department felt spooky today. As Abbey neared her office, everyone turned and stared at her - not saying a word. When she said good morning, they politely returned the salutation and continued staring as if she was going to be fed to the lions. Suddenly, she knew why! Two men were in her office and she thought to herself as she noticed them standing there, "Old no! Something's very wrong - something big is about to happen!" There was no turning back now, they had seen her approaching.

"Chief, Captain, good morning!" said Abbey.

"Good morning Abbey," said her boss Ken Wills.

Ken Wills was a handsome man who looked more like a business executive than a police Captain. He was 6' 3" tall with graying temples on his black head. Most of the detectives really liked Wills although Abbey never really cared for

him. There was just something strange about him. For one thing, he was a bachelor and was seldom seen in the company of a female. He had a very distinguished record and had been Stark's Lieutenant when he ran the vice department. Most of the female detectives had mentioned to Abbey that they too felt "strange" around Wills. They had reported that he never once gave them a second look, but that they were sure he was not gay. Abbey knew there was something afoul here, but she could never determine what. When Abbey asked Stark about Wills, Stark had reported that he thought Wills liked young women, in their early twenties.

"Abbey, always good to see you," said Chief Morgan looking very concerned.

"Last night, Abbey, a body was found in the alley at Candyland," continued Captain Wills. "The body was Bonita Chavez. I am sure you know who she is and a little about her background already."

Suddenly, Abbey felt the air collapse from her lungs. Bonita had been one of Stark's favorite girls at Candyland. After he was kicked off the police force seven years earlier, Stark began visiting Candyland. The first girl he visited was Bonita. She was very special to him and had helped him during a very bad first year of suffering.

Abbey's little voices started warning her: "Setup Abbey,

Setup!"

"Let us get directly to the point," said Chief Morgan.

"Please do," requested Abbey confused.

"As you know Candyland is technically in Houston," said Captain Wills. "We cannot officially investigate what happened so we thought we would ask you if you could persuade Stark to look into it. We would want this situation to be totally unofficial, and you must handle this case with great discretion. Stark's salary would be paid by a secret group of concerned and anonymous Edge Rock businessmen."

"Do you understand?" asked Chief Morgan. "This department would officially have no contact with the investigation."

"Would you be willing to persuade him to look into it?" asked

Wills. "The Mayor and several city council persons would be very thankful.

"I dunno," murmured Abbey stunned. "You are aware of Stark's relationship with Bonita. He may not want to work for the people who had him kicked off the force."

"Please, talk to him about it," suggested Wills. "It is extremely important to this city. If this matter can be resolved as quietly as possible, we would take care of you and Stark for life. The Houston PD and the press will blow it completely out of proportion if we are not careful.

Chances are the killer is a Edge Rock resident."

Abbey's little voices began screaming,
"Setup Abbey, setup but you may be able to clear Stark's
name and find out who set him up!"

The day was difficult for Abbey as her emotions tore her to shreds. She wanted to get in her car and drive directly to Stark's office and talk, but she couldn't. Today was a busy day for her and she had to stay until 2 PM to direct her staff for other less prominent murder cases. Her heart fell for the woman murdered by her drug addicted boyfriend. He was out there, somewhere hiding. Abbey was sure he was being helped by his friends and family. She had learned he was normally a very responsible young man, well liked, intelligent who had bounced from job to job. He had made many friends during these wasted years. He had just one serious problem that Abbey could ascertain: crack cocaine - his God. Once he got crack into his system, or needed some, he became dangerous, wild even.

Abbey's mind couldn't focus, she just thought about Shawn and Ashley, - and also, her boys Kevon and Jonathan. Crack cocaine could get anyone, the rich and the poor alike, but Kevon and Jonathan lived in an old and established Black neighborhood that in recent years seemed to grow drug dealers and drug addicts. Yes, she thought, they are at the

greatest risk.

Abbey also had the case of the murder of Rick Wilder. Wilder's body had been found dumped in a ditch on a lonely country road just inside Edge Rock's city limits. Abbey suspected the body had been dumped from some other location - possibly even from the city of Houston. But, why did they have to dump it in her jurisdiction? She was forced to investigate.

When Chief Morgan asked the Houston police to investigate, they agreed to help, but they said they would not take the lead because the body was found in Edge Rock. That meant Abbey would have to do most of the deep investigation. Yes, Edge Rock had murders, but nothing compared to what her Houston counterparts had to deal with on a daily basis. She decided she would place two teams on this case. She wanted this case solved fast, very fast!

Jerry Cline and David Craft on one team, and Molly McBride and Julian Menendez on the second team. Menendez was the senior detective and would lead the team. He had acquired ten years experience in Homicide and could easily lead the team. Abbey hated the cases where the jurisdiction was not clear. It always meant possible conflicts with Houston PD

and that was something her department seldom won. Houston PD and city government was just too powerful.

After all, Wilder was an upper income businessman with a wife and two grown children and five grandchildren. He was shot at close range, and his car was still missing after 36 hours. Was it a car-jacking or something else? The Wilders wanted answers and Wilder's son Bobby had already contacted the press and offered a \$10,000 reward for any information leading to the arrest of his father's killer. To Abbey that meant trouble. Would there be crazies coming out of the woodwork to try to claim the reward? Already she had received two calls from people claiming to know something and she would probably receive many more. All these calls had to be investigated and her detectives would be busy sorting out the real clues and facts.

At one PM, Abbey had to testify in court on a routine case involving a murder of a transient homeless man. One Friday night, four very drunk young men had stumbled across the 55 year old Vietnam veteran lying in an alley. The poor man had mouthed off to the men who proceeded to teach him a lesson that got totally out of hand. The man died of his injuries a week later, but not before he told Abbey's investigators where he had seen one of the young criminals. From there it was no problems for Abbey's detectives to

track down the other four young men. Abbey felt little sorry for the four men who faced manslaughter charges with Judge Jeter. Of all the judges that they could have drawn, they got the hardest. Judge Jeter was a very conservative and staunch man. He was known, infamously, for giving criminals very harsh sentences. Abbey knew he would throw the book at these four young men and their lives would be forever ruined: one hour of "rampaging" and a lifetime of misery.

After the court appearance, Abbey decided she would leave work much earlier than was her custom. She had to talk to Stark.

For once in her life, she did not know what to say to Stark. She had been through so much with Stark including deep depression and alcoholism. For that, she knew what to do. For Bonita's murder, what would she say to him? Could she ask him to help the city and police department that ruined his life? Could she ask him to help a city of wealthy businessmen, some of whom, had probably set him up to get him out of the way? How would he react? Would this send him back to the bottle - a war he had won many years ago with Abbey's help and love? Abbey just couldn't focus - too many negative thoughts running through her head; too many

doubts lingering; too many fears of losing her husband to something that almost destroyed him and his spirit. Abbey knew Stark was tough, but there is only so much one man can endure.

She wanted to tell Stark, "No way are you going anywhere near this case," but she knew he would want to find out what happened to Bonita. She wouldn't be able to stop him from investigating especially since he didn't have an ongoing case. She decided she would get involved in one of his cases - something Stark had told her was taboo in the past. No way was she going to let Stark go this one alone. There was simply too much at stake.

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Stark had read three chapters and had become completely absorbed in "Murder in Moscow" when the noon news broadcast began with Bonita's picture plastered on the screen. "Last night a local prostitute was found strangled in the alley behind Edge Rock's infamous prostitution house: Candyland. Bonita Chavez, a 28 year old woman was found murdered. Houston police Captain Henry Drake informed the Houston press that his department would keep the press informed of any new developments that did not impede the investigation.

Stark thought to himself, "She's still beautiful."

Just as Stark dropped his paperback, the phone buzzed and Melba's voice filtered in,

"Stark, Abbey is on line one; she says its urgent."

Abbey started talking as soon as he opened the line, "Babe, I'm taking the afternoon off, meet me at home at 4 PM."

Abbey did not wait for Stark's reply, and hung up. Stark could sense the fear in her voice. He had never known her to panic over anything. Once she even captured three heavily armed bank robbers without blinking an eye. This time something was different.

"Melba, why don't you go on, upstairs to your apartment and relax. I have a feeling we are about to get very busy.

Bonita Chavez was just found murdered."

"Okay then," answered Melba, more than a little concerned.

"I'll forward the phone calls up there."

Stark started driving home when he remembered the paint. He was in luck as he saw the sign for Handley Paint Supply and swung into the parking lot. He handed the pimply faced paint department clerk Ashley's note without saying a word,

"Sir, you realize this is a very expensive paint, don't you?"

Stark shook his head in acknowledgment.

"all right, well go have a coffee or something, and I'll be back. It'll take the mixer 30 minutes to blend the colors. You made a good choice, it may be expensive but this is one of the best selling paints on the market."

"Thanks," Stark said distracted.

While he waited at the sales counter for the paint, Stark browsed the isles aimlessly. His mind was on the Chavez case and Bonita. (might be a good time for him to have some Bonita Chavez memory, and maybe insert the section in question above.)

When he arrived home, he took all six gallons of paint and placed them in a corner of the garage. Abbey had not come home yet and that gave him several minutes to relax and make a light lunch for himself and his Abbey. When she walked into the kitchen, Stark could see she was badly shaken.

"Here you go babe sit down, relax. I made your favorite lunch: A Club Sandwich and coffee."

She sat, but didn't even look at the coffee or sandwich,

"Bonita is dead," advised Abbey.

"Yeah, I heard," Stark said visibly dispirited. "The Houston Police Department is already investigating."

"Chief Morgan and Ken Wills were waiting in my office when I arrived at work."

"Why? What did those bastards want?"

"Stark, they want you to investigate quietly Bonita's murder

and quickly find the murderer before the press and Houston PD blow the situation way out of proportion."

"Why would I protect them?"

"Well, they have made it clear, they will make the investigation rewarding for 'us' if you do, and miserable for 'us' if you don't."

He sat silently and thought about this for a moment before he spoke, "I see. I know you believed me when I said I was setup seven years ago, and it is possible one or both men had something to do with it or, at least, know something important about the setup."

"Yes, I do believe you, and this private investigation tactic only confirms that they probably were involved."

"Do you really want me to investigate a murder at Candyland? You know my past there."

"Stark, my inner voices are saying this is a setup and they are also telling me it is an opportunity to clear your name."

"I'll investigate then, your little voices have never been wrong."

"We'll have to be very careful on this one. There is something else I need to tell you. My brother, Gary, was at Candyland last night and he found the body when he went outside for a smoke. He's been one of April's regulars since his divorce."

"What if I find out something unsettling about your brother?"

"You won't. I know my brother didn't do it, just like I know you would never take a bribe."

"Okay Abbey. Gary will be my first stop if you are sure you want me involved. I will also see your father for advise. Everyone knows him in this city and he may be able to guide me away from the pitfalls."

"I have been ordered to stay clear of the investigation, but there is no law against me talking to my little brother. I would like to go with you."

"Abbey, I think it is best if I go alone. Gary may be intimidated by your presence considering you are a lead Homicide detective. He will probably talk more freely without you there."

Begrudgingly, she agreed to stay away.

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Stark arrived at Gary Abraham's apartment, at 6:00 p.m. Stark sat in his car for several minutes recalling his apartment days before going to Gary's door. Stark despondently remembered his lost, out of control days. He remembered how sad and alone he was even when he had a girl in the apartment. Gary's wife got the house, one of the two

cars, both kids, as well as most of his possessions. Stark lived for years in a small apartment at a singles only apartment complex. Stark's second floor apartment faced the swimming pool area and Stark would sit and drink Jack Daniel for hours in his living room while watching the people enter and leave the swimming pool area. Many of the attractive young women at the complex had tried to get to know Stark, but Stark seldom opened himself to their advances. The longest relationship he had with a "normal" woman before Abbey was seven difficult and drunken months. Stark was simply impossible to live with during those burdensome days. Teresa, the thoughtful and sexy girl Stark lived with during those months, tried and tried to get Stark into alcoholic's anonymous and therapy, but Stark flatly refused. Stark felt badly for Teresa, a beautiful and normally lively bundle of joy. But, Stark had changed all that for such a sweet woman. After seven months of drinking and cheating, Stark finally wore Teresa's patience down. He had her screaming at him every day until finally she refused to accept his excuses. She finally gave up and left Stark. Once several years later, Stark saw Teresa in a Houston mall. When Teresa saw Stark, she turned and promptly headed in the opposite direction. Stark felt so badly about how he had mistreated her.

Through the window, he could see Gary, apprehensively,

pacing in his living room. It was a little disconcerting, Gary had always been the calm, collected type. But, this was a new stress, after all, and men don't go around preparing to be a suspect in a murder investigation. When he rang the door bell, his brother-in-law was very happy to see him, "Stark, come in," said Gary, taking his hand in a friendly, brother-in-law shake as he began to ramble, "You've got to help me man. I am their number one suspect and I am completely innocent. Those Houston homicide detectives, Reynolds and Jerrico, are both crazy and they seem pretty convinced that I did it," screeched Gary.

"Calm down Gary, I'm going to investigate this! Just tell me exactly what happened," Stark demanded. "Don't leave a single detail out."

As Gary gingerly sat down at the small kitchen table, Gary told Stark he had worked quietly in his office that day trying to catch up on some outstanding paperwork. After all, he had no plans for the rest of the day. About 6 PM he headed for home and threw a TV dinner in the microwave, drank a beer or two to relax. At 9 PM he headed to Crow's Nest Bar so that he would not be alone and bored. He had drank two more beers and decided he wanted some feminine company for the night. By the time he arrived at Candyland, it was 9:30 p.m. and April was busy with a customer. He talked to a few of the other girls and then went outside to

have his first cigarette. He reported that he saw two young men go into Candyland while he was waiting, but that he did not see anything really unusual. The smoking area was near a seldom used entrance to Candyland and most customers were not aware of its existence. Since Dawn did not allow smoking in Candyland, not even in the girls rooms, the girls that smoked would go out there. It was dimly lit, completely enclosed by high shrubbery except for the entrance to the parking lot and door to Candyland. Stark knew the area well. Gary reported that he saw Bonita enter the smoking area while he was leaving the first time he smoked. No other girls entered the area that he noticed. He'd gone inside again and April was walking her customer downstairs as she always did. When she saw Gary, she smiled and continued to escort her customer outside. Gary leaned back in his chair as he recalled his conversation with April and the events that followed. When April walked to Gary, she seemed especially happy to see him,

"Hello Baby," teased April. "I didn't expect to see you here tonight, but I am glad you came."

As April was finishing, Dawn walked mysteriously by and gave April a solemn get to work look. April told Gary to wait 15 minutes so that she could get cleaned up before he came to her room. She was very uneasy after she saw Dawn and Gary

reported she was even trembling a little bit. He just assumed Dawn was exerting her usual authority over April. After a few more anxious minutes of waiting, he decided to have another smoke. No one was in the smoking area. That's when he discovered Bonita laying limp at the edge of the shrubs.

After Gary nervously told Stark his story a few more times, he advised Gary not to talk to anyone except his lawyer, including family members.

Stark drove slowly to his father-in-law's house. His head was spinning like an unpredictable top - thoughts going in this direction and that direction. Stark was certain Gary did not do kill Bonita but, who did? Was it a customer? Was it someone who didn't like prostitutes? Or more likely, was it someone who was afraid of Bonita for something she found out? Yes, thought Stark, this was the most likely scenario. When Gary went into Candyland after his smoke, someone must have been watching for Bonita to take a smoke. When she did, the killer must have approached her and strangled her. What did this mean then? Did it mean Bonita knew her killer. Possibly? And likely.

Stark told Mike Abraham, Abbey's father, about his conversation with Gary. Mike was a retired, 30 year veteran and former sergeant of the Edge Rock PD.

Mike Abraham was very concerned for his son.

"Stark, I want Gary cleared. He didn't do anything, so let me help, just tell me what you need," urged Mike.

"A few simple introductions will do for a start."

"Say who, and I'll make the calls,"

"I would like to speak to Dawn Starr and to the mayor in complete privacy," instructed Stark.

"No problem Stark," smiled Mike. "Consider it done. What else?"

"I need complete phone records for Candyland, Gary, Bonita, Chief Morgan, and Captain Wills," continued Stark.

"Morgan and Wills?" asked Mike curious.

"Just a bizarre feeling dad, just a strange feeling I have about her," Stark answered.

"All right Stark, is that it?" asked Mike.

"No" continued Stark. "Do you think you can quietly get me complete background information on Dawn Starr and Bonita from birth? And maybe while you are researching, throw April Law's name on the list."

"Why April?" asked Mike. "What has she got to do with this disgusting business?"

"Just being thorough dad, that's all," continued Stark lying.

Gary had told Stark April seemed nervous that night. Stark knew April was a new girl who had only been working at

Candyland for three months. In fact, she demanded more money for her services than any other girl. Strange. She seldom saw anyone besides her three regular customers. Gary had assured Stark, April was somehow different - a class act who "really" didn't seem to fit at Candyland. She didn't perform any dangerous "specialty services" for the money she made. Just straight wild sex. This was extremely strange for a Candyland girl, even bizarre. Frankly, Stark was surprised Dawn Starr, a very seasoned Madame, would allow such outrageous privileges for a new girl and he was determined to find out why.

"Stark, I'll call my contacts and get this information to you as soon as possible!" insisted Mike. "Tell my baby girl not to worry too much. I am going to watch your back on this one."

"I will dad," Stark assured. "Oh yeah, do you want to go to the kids karate tournament with us tonight?" Stark quizzed. "Possibly," answered Mike. "Let's see how my contact in the police department responds first!"

"Stark, handle Dawn Starr with great care," insisted Mike. "There are rumors she has every major politician and prominent businessman in town in her little black book. She has many influential and dangerous friends in high places protecting her and she is known to be a very clever manipulator."

"Yes, I know her already," reminded Stark. "I'll use my boyish charm on her."

"Just don't underestimate her Stark," warned Mike again.

"She may make grave trouble for you and Abbey."

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When Stark arrived home, his two pretty women were anxiously waiting for him as he stepped in the front door. Abbey was still very concerned and Ashley was very pleased with Stark.

"Dad, you've gotta see this!" announced Ashley beaming.

"it's amazing!" Ashley grabbed Stark by the hand and pulled him to the basement. Abbey followed.

"Look!" said Ashley she pointed to one wall.

Sure enough, Ashley had painted one wall. Stark loved the color! It was a wonderful bright, but not outrageous off white rosy color that screamed good taste. He was very pleased with his daughter's sensible selection.

"Absolutely wonderful," announced Stark. "But, I can see now you will only need 1 ½ gallons, maybe two for your room. That will leave four extra gallons."

"Dad, the four extra gallons are for your room and Shawn's room!" explained Ashley.

"Shawn also?" Stark questioned.

"Yeah dad!" continued Ashley. "I simply explained to him

that some researchers had done a study among teen girls to determine what colors they like best, and "Rosy White" won. I assured him, no teenage babe over 15 with good taste could resist relaxing in a room with this color."

"Clever, very clever" Stark said, amused. "Ashley, it is a wonderful color," said Abbey. "We are both proud of you. Now go relax in your room for tonight's tournament."

"Stark, tell me everything right now!" demanded Abbey nervously.

"Tell you everything about what?" asked Ashley as she was leaving the room. "Dad, what have you gotten yourself into this time?"

"We are both in something very nasty this time baby," Stark said. "We'll let you know when the time is right. Now, please sweetie, go rest."

Ashley had that look she got when she wanted something. Stark had seen it for the first time when she and Shawn were babies and Shawn had a toy doll she wanted. Clearly, Ashley took the doll by force and made her "younger by seconds" brother cry.

Stark started thinking out loud, "She's never gonna let this go now! She's got that look again, and that means trouble."

"Stark, wake up!" Abbey demanded.

"Tell me everything right now!"

Stark sat on an old sofa in the sub-basement and began to

relay the facts to Abbey. Abbey devoured every detail. Unknown to Stark and Abbey, Ashley was listening, covertly, from the downstairs basement closet. After it was clear Stark had told everything, Ashley told her brother, Shawn. "Shawn, keep your eyes and ears open on this one," ordered Ashley. "The folks could get in too deep. I am totally surprised dad knew that girl at Candyland, aren't you?" "Naw," said Shawn casually. "You forget dad used to work vice for six years. He knows, or knew every whore in town. You'd be surprised. He knows the teenage whores from high school!"

"What?" said Ashley totally blown away by her brother's statement. "There are some fast girls in high school, but none of them are whores."

Shawn did not respond. But, Ashley could tell he knew something. She was already scheming to determine the best way to find out what he knew. Soon she had him telling her all about the girls who made a little money on the side for various reasons. Seven girls were even topless dancers in sleazy Houston clubs. Ashley was totally surprised by the list of girls Shawn had mentioned. Most of the girls were excellent, if not, outstanding students. Shawn said, "just think of it as making money for college. Some of the girls do it for the excitements and drugs. Not everyone is born with a silver spoon in their mouth."

"There's something you are not telling me, isn't there?"

demanded Ashley. "You better tell me now!"

"Well, dad took me to a strip club for my 16th birthday," casually mentioned Shawn.

"I thought you didn't want to make a big deal about "our" birthday," said Ashley.

"I didn't," said Shawn.

"I remember the giant party the folks threw for "me" while you and dad went to a movie," said Ashley thinking hard.

"You were so cool, and now I know why!" continued Ashley.

"Who was it?" asked Ashley. "Who was it?"

"Who was who?" said Shawn casually trying to avoid the subject.

"Who was the girl dad bought for you on your birthday?" demanded Ashley.

"Shelly Dryers," said Shawn casually. "Dad set me up with Shelly."

"Shelly Dryers! Shelly Dryers!" screamed Ashley. "That 30 something leggy divorcee with three kids! Naw, can't be."

"Yeah, can be!" said Shawn smiling slyly.

"Why her? " asked Ashley. "Why?"

"It was dad's idea," revealed Shawn. "She is not a whore. She's 29 years old and she is just one of Stark's old lonely friends."

"Old lonely friend, I'll bet!" remarked Ashley. "Does dad

have any old men friends, and does Abbey know?"

"Yeah, Abbey suggested it!" admitted Shawn. "She told dad I was way too tense and suggested dad get me laid!"

"What?" questioned Ashley. "I knew Abbey was tough, but this?"

"Yeah, she is really tough in ways you cannot see," suggested Shawn. "She said an older woman would be good for me. Before I met my girlfriend, Tina, I saw her for three months as a friend."

"Saw her?" asked Ashley.

"Yeah, Abbey said it was all right if I went over occasionally and helped her fix stuff," smiled Shawn. "Can you see why Abbey loves dad?"

"Well, apparently, she's just crazy," suggested Ashley.

"Before, I always thought she was just crazy about Stark."

"Naw, Stark is a very experienced lover and Abbey needs a strong man," said Shawn. "I know you thought Abbey was the secure one, but its Stark who's strong, and Abbey knows it. She was very lonely before she met Stark."

The karate tournament went well for the Strauss family. The area was filled to its capacity with almost 7,000 screaming people. Some of the best karate champions in the Houston

area sponsored the tournament and served as judges. Abbey sat between Stark and her father and couldn't concentrate or relax at first.

As the opening ceremonies ended, Abbey was praying Shawn would not draw Tommy Hong or Steve Taylor. Tommy was the undisputed State champion and was largely considered to be one of the best amateur martial in the country. He was a humble young man trained by his Chinese grandfather from birth. Steve Taylor, on the other hand was a big mean bruiser. Most people in the area thought he was the only person who stood a chance against Tommy. Shawn was rated in the top ten in the Houston area and the best in Edge Rock, but no one thought he stood a chance to win a prize, no one, except Abbey who had coached him and told him how good he was for almost two years.

Once the first round began, Shawn's name was drawn to compete against Bobby Wells. Bobby was very good and was from Houston. Only Abbey knew for certain Shawn would easily take Bobby in full contact karate. Everyone else would just have to be surprised. Abbey's mind was now relaxing a bit. Ashley was to fight seventh against Debbie Nelson, an unknown girl. When Abbey asked about Debbie, she discovered that was ranked number six in Houston. Abbey prayed that Ashley would not get embarrassed by this girl.

Shawn was amazing in his fight. He scored all three points and easily defeated Bobby. His skill could easily be seen. Both Stark and Mike were amazed Shawn had become so good. They knew he had a special talent, but never imagined he could fight with such skill and determination.

When Ashley walked onto the competition mat, Abbey looked at Stark and smiled slyly. She knew and so did Stark. Ashley had that fierce piercing look in her eyes. Something had happened to focus her. Debbie's skills were awesome, but Ashley was very physical and unrelenting. Debbie scored the first two points, but Ashley had delivered two traumatizing non-scoring blows. Mike said, "She going to be disappointed isn't she?" "No she isn't!" insisted Abbey confidently, she's going to win." "She sure is!" insisted Stark amusingly. "You are both totally crazy!" insisted Mike. Ashley is strong, but she can't match this girl's skills. "The blows had stunned and weakened Debbie somewhat and Ashley moved in for the kill without any mercy. Ashley delivered a round house kick that struck Debbie forcefully on the left side of her face gear. Debbie went flying backwards. Ashley had struck her with such force, Debbie could not rise past her knees. The judges quickly moved in and stopped the match. Ashley had done it. Mike said, "I don't believe it. She won." "Yes she did," insisted Abbey.

When Tommy came to the mat, the stadium went wild. Mike had not been to one of these matches for two years and didn't realize how much Shawn and Ashley had improved.

"That guy is totally amazing," Mike insisted in awe.

"Yes," responded Abbey quietly. "He is the best I've ever seen." Someday when he is older he will definitely be a national champion, perhaps even a world champion. In the last two years, he hasn't lost a single point in amateur competition."

As Steve walked up to the mat, Stark said, "This guy is a monster." He looks like a body builder that could rip a phone book in half. I'd hate to meet him in a dark alley. Abbey, are you sure he is only 17 years old?" "Yes, he's 17 all right," answered Abbey concerned. "And he is very mean and exceptionally strong. He uses brute force to demolish all competition." "Can Shawn take him?" asked Stark worried. "Yes, he can beat him if he focuses and strictly follows the advise I gave him. Steve is not just physical, he had wonderful skills also." "Shawn has equal skills if not better," insisted Abbey. "But, he can't get into a brawl with this guy. If he does, he will certainly lose. He has to fight smart." Soon, Stark and Mike knew what Abbey meant. Steve kicked his first competitor so hard, he flew completely over to the other side of the mat. The boy

he was fighting had exceptional skills, but it was clear to everyone, he was just too small to overcome a skilled locomotive like Steve. Steve totally manhandled him. Shawn had a definite advantage here. He was taller than Stark and was beginning to fill out very well in the chest and arms areas. He was blessed with Stark's muscularity and tremendous ability to absorb physical pain.

Both Ashley and Shawn drew relatively easy competition for the next two rounds. They both won three consecutive points and moved into the next round. Mike was growing prouder of his grandchildren by the minute. Competition was thinning out as the kids approached the next round. It was also getting fiercer. Stark was praying both kids would make the quarter finals, but he had his doubts.

Luck continued to bless the kids. They both drew good competitors, but at least they had a chance. It seems that Ashley was growing better as they watched. "Why is Ashley doing so well?" asked Mike cautiously. "She my daughter," Stark said proudly. "Ashley has the same training as Shawn, but until today I thought she didn't really care about competitions," admitted Abbey a little confused. "Something unusual must be driving her to fight with a controlled furor." "I wonder what that could be?" asked Mike. "Naw,

she's just my daughter," Stark insisted smiling like a proud father.

Ashley fought first. It wasn't just that she won. She was using some of the training Abbey thought she slept through during those many months of unfocused training. She won three to two but looked good doing it. Stark was so proud. He had no idea Ashley was this good. Nobody did. It was a wild competition that kept everyone on the edge of their seats. Ashley had made the quarter finals. Things were getting interesting, and Abbey feared that Shawn would not make the quarter finals. What would happen if Ashley made the finals and Shawn did not. That would surely mean trouble. Shawn would be devastated. Shawn took the first point and everyone relaxed somewhat. When his competitor won the next point, the tension returned. When Shawn took the second point, everyone knew he would win - and he did, three to one. "That's a relief," Stark said relaxing a little. "Worried?" laughed Abbey hiding her fear. "You were both scared shit-less!" ripped Mike angrily. "And you both know it!" "Well, maybe a little," admitted Abbey amused. "Just a little," Stark laughed.

In the quarter finals, luck remained with the Strauss family. Both kids drew competitors they had a chance against. They both won three to two in heart attack fashion. Ashley was still dominating physically and Shawn

was using his best moves to win. "So who is Shawn going to fight in the next round?" asked Mike very concerned. "I hope it's not that Tommy guy!" "No Shawn is in the same half of competition with Steve," informed Abbey. "That means he has a chance to make the finals." "Are you sure Shawn can take the monster?" asked Mike enthused. "Yes, dad, I'm sure!" said Abbey confidently. "I don't know," Stark replied with serious doubts. "He can win," insisted Abbey. "I trained him and I assumed he would get a chance to battle Steve."

When Steve walked onto the mat, Abbey grabbed Stark's right hand and began squeezing hard. "He'll win, he'll win!" said Abbey about to explode. "Possibly," said Mike doubting. As the first semi-final began, Shawn and Steve battle for two minutes countering each others moves. Abbey had train Shawn well. He knew all Steve's tricks. Finally Steve scored against Shawn. As he did, Stark could feel pain in his own hand as Abbey squeezed so hard Stark fainted back in his seat. Amazing, considering Stark had what were considered to be huge hands. But, Shawn came battling back. He scored the next point in an outrageous manner with a seldom used move and the crowd went wild. "Wow," Stark said. "Where did he learn that move?" asked Stark astonished. "A special karate friend of mine taught us," announced Abbey proudly.

Their excitement was soon diminished. Steve won the next point using sheer brute force. Stark and Mike exchanged glances, both were certain that disaster was near. Abbey on the other hand, knew the fight was just getting interesting. She still faithfully believed Shawn could win. The entire stadium was going insane. When Shawn scored the next point, it exploded. All the spectators stood up and cheered wildly and started waving their hands. Stark decided to give his son some inspiration and began chanting loudly, "Shawn! Shawn! Shawn!" with reckless abandon. The crowd soon join in to help with the chant. Most of the hard core karate fans knew Steve and hated his brutal, and sometimes, illegal tactics. He would do whatever was necessary to win. Abbey had shown Shawn all the films from Steve's competitions. She warned Shawn about all the tricks he would use to get an advantage over his enemy. Shawn was well coached and ready. When Steve tried an illegal elbow to the head, he opened himself up to Shawn just as Abbey had predicted. "Now Shawn! Now!" screamed Abbey. At that moment, Shawn performed a duck and roll and sprung swiftly to his feet. Before he knew what was happening, Shawn performed a swift jumping round house kick to Steve's headgear and won the match. Abbey and Stark jumped out of their seats screaming as did everyone in the stadium, except Mike, and the chant began again. Ashley was watching with complete pride.

"Shawn won!" Mike was sitting quietly in his seat trying desperately to hide his tears of joy. In her 32 years Abbey had never seen her father with anything close to tears in his eyes. But, before Mike could completely wipe them away, she discretely observed his joy for an immensely joyful moment. When it was obvious, Mike was composed again, Abbey sat down and asked tactfully, "Dad, aren't you so happy for your grandson?" "Yes, I am," replied Mike now completely composed. "I am very proud and happy." As the women's competition began, The Strauss luck finally ran out. Ashley drew the girls Texas state amateur karate champion. Although Ashley fought like a raging wolverine, and used all her skills, She could not manage to score against this lady warrior. She lost three to nothing. The good news was that if the state champion repeated as champion, she would win a third prize trophy. She had an excellent chance to go home with a prize no one expected her to win. When Tommy walked onto the mat, he was very respectful to Shawn. Tommy had expected to fight Steve again, and for him it was a wonderful surprise to face this unknown and unpredictable competitor. It would give him a chance to test really his skills. Shawn and Tommy's contest was an acrobatic wonder. Shawn soon realized that this small oriental man was stronger than Steve and much faster than he was. Shawn fought with all his skills and training, but to no avail.

Tommy was just too good. He scored the second point with an unusual spinning move Abbey's friend had taught him just for this competition. But, it wasn't enough. Tommy was like super cat, never off balance and strong as Superman. Tommy took the next two points and won the competition. Shawn won the second prize trophy. More importantly, he must go man to man with the national champion and actually scored a point against him. Tina Johnson, Ashley's final competitor and state champion also repeated and this meant Ashley would take a third place trophy home. Mike and his family was dancing on cloud nine.

It was the best competition by far the they had ever attended. It was also a chance for everyone to get their mind off their problems and have some fun. Mike was very pleased with his talented grandchildren and took them to the mall to celebrate at Ashley's timely suggestion. Stark and Abbey insisted on attending and came along. After they celebrated for about a hour, Ashley asked Stark and Abbey if they'd mind if Mike took Shawn and her for a celebration ride, insisting that they were too wired to go home right now. During their pleasure ride, Ashley probed her grandfather,

"Mike, what can you tell us about the case Stark is working on?" quizzed Ashley.

"What have you learned about Stark's case?" demanded Mike angrily. "That's why you insisted on me driving you around, isn't it?"

"I heard dad tell Abbey everything," admitted Ashley a little ashamed for spying.

Mike told the kids everything. He asked them to let him know if anything strange happened and to call him immediately, if Abbey or Stark need some help. He reminded them how dangerous the situation could be and told them he would be watching out for Abbey and Stark.

"Please, make things as relaxed as possible at home for them," continued Mike. "Abbey's career may be on the line as well as Stark's life."

"Papa Abraham," said Shawn, "Please keep us informed about what is going on."

"You kids just keep your minds on school," ordered Mike. "My boys and I will watch out for your parents and make sure they don't get into any serious trouble. I promise."

That night, Abbey danced for Stark in a new negligee. The next morning, Stark woke to his wife's hard bite on his nipple. Stark was beginning to wonder if he could keep up the pace.

"Abbey, I am tired!" Stark insisted honestly.

"Yes, I know Starkie Bear, but not as tired as you're gonna be!" laughed Abbey enjoying her new found game. "Do you really think I would let you go to Candyland with excess energy?"

"Abbey, you know I have not cheated on you in the four blissful years we've been married," Stark reminded serious.

"Yeah, I know baby, and you are not going to start now," insisted Abbey. There's no way I'm gonna let you go near Ebony and Candyland like that! I'm gonna drain the life out of that thing!"

"I think you've already done that," Stark grimaced.

"Just making absolutely sure," Abbey determinedly continued. Stark began thinking about how Mike Abraham maneuvered him into a blind date with his daughter:

Mike Abraham had encouraged his lonely daughter to date Stark after he was discredited. He gave Abbey and Stark his complete blessings when they got engaged. Mike made it clear to the entire Abraham family, Stark would be accepted completely and without question. Nobody in the family would go against this big-fisted, strong, rouged man. Mike had a reputation for being very dangerous physically when he was angry. Stark liked and respected his courageous father-in-law without reservation and was glad he had set him up with

Abbey.

Stark had been drinking a lot during this dark period of his life. To his surprise, Abbey did not let that stop her from making him feel very special. She listened and they talked a lot during long walks in the park. After a few weeks with Abbey, Stark realized she was a special woman who made him feel he could do something with his life besides drink, chase women, and feel sorry for himself. She loved him unconditionally despite his jaded past. This meant a lot to Stark although at times he felt he was not worthy of Abbey. How could it be that she loved him, she had a future and he had none. Or so he thought until he began seeing Abbey. Abbey was tough and never faulted the girls at Candyland for helping her lost Starkie, who told her everything before they married. If anything, she was very thankful for their help in keeping Stark from going insane or drinking himself to death. Stark was special to Abbey in a way most people would never understand. Abbey's fears about Candyland were not justified. Stark considered this a buried part of his past. Gone forever.

As Stark drove to Candyland, he felt completely relaxed. Mike Abraham had made a noon appointment with Dawn and Stark

were glad he would be visiting during the day when most of the girls were sleeping.

Candyland was on the corner of Walker Drive and Hill Road. On the other side of the road was Edge Rock city limits. The old mansion was technically in the industrial district of Houston's business areas on one side, and on the other side, was in Edge Rock's upper income residential area much too close for comfort.

The front of the huge old converted mansion was beautifully manicured per Dawn's directions. To the east, was Hill Road which leads to a huge alley. From the alley, customers could discreetly enter Candyland's private parking area relatively unobserved. The dimly lit lot was shielded by trees and a large security fence. On the other side of the fence, stood well manicured, but inexpensive, apartment buildings belong to a local community college.

When Stark rolled his car into the parking lot, old memories flooded back to a time seven years ago when he wanted to die. He remembered a beautiful sensitive Hispanic woman who didn't play him like a typical john. She was sincerely kind and sympathetic to Stark and made his troubles disappear for at least the hours they spent together. In fact, Stark was hooked on her like a drug at one time.

When Bonita, suggested Stark begin seeing Ebony after a

year, Stark briefly felt betrayed. But, after seeing Ebony for a while, and occasionally, Bonita, Stark realized Bonita was right. They had no future together and they both were getting too close. Bonita admitted she was getting too close to Stark and was envious, but she and Ebony were good friends. Ebony was Bonita's protégé somewhat.

"Hello, Stark," said Dawn meeting him at the door, "It's been a long time since you've visited."

"Dawn," said Stark flatly. "You're still looking fine."

Stark was one of the few, normal guys, who had been 'sampled' by Dawn personally."

"Stark, you've gained a few pounds," laughed Dawn. "Married life must be agreeing with you."

Dawn led Stark to her private office.

"Dawn, let me get right to the point," Stark said.

"Please do Stark," requested Dawn.

"I need information about some of the customers," Stark said. "Some of Edge Rock's important people want this solved before the press makes it a national scandal. I give you my word, everything you tell me will be kept secret among you, me and my wife. My wife's career is on the line with this thing and we both want it solved as soon as possible. She is in a very good position to help me keep a lid on this investigation."

"All right Stark, but I want your word this information will

not get out," demanded Dawn. "I'm not comfortable with your wife knowing this, but some of my girls say she is a good person. Her self-defense course has kept some of my girls out of harms way."

"Yes, I definitely need her contacts and backup on this one," assured Stark.

"Fine," continued Dawn. "Bonita had many customers. She was one of the best liked girls I have. The only special customer she had was Chief Morgan. She would see him once a month in a Houston motel. It was kept very hush-hush. She reported that he had repeated one freaky habit of playing submissive with her dominating as the mistress. Nothing really strange. Just a little control and humiliation. He never hit her or anything like that. Just the opposite. She could do almost anything to him. If anything, he wanted her to be more aggressive."

"Dawn, what can you tell me about April Law?" requested Stark.

"April, what does she have to do with this?" asked Dawn a little irritated.

"Well, Gary Abraham told me she seemed very nervous that night," Stark insisted. "Besides, I have heard rumors that make me wonder about her past."

"All right Stark, but this is not for your wife or anyone else's knowledge," warned Dawn.

"Whatever, you say," Stark assured.

"April is my youngest girl," continued Dawn. "When she turned 21 three months ago, she came to me and told me she was a specialist for men who wanted something young. She is from a home where she was sexually abused by her mother's boyfriends. She is a very intelligent girl and attends a major Houston college. She makes her money for school by appeasing "special" clients who pretend they are getting a teenager. Of course, her clients all know she is 21, but they don't care. You will understand when you see her. She now has found six major clients. They all pay a special fee. April is somewhat of a part-time employee. She made money as a teen, beginning at age 14, getting money from older men."

"I see," said Stark. "How many customers are in Edge Rock?"

"Two," answered Dawn. "Captain Wills and James Penny, Deputy Mayor and son of the city's richest man, Wayne Penny. Both men meet April in a house we set up in the country for VIP guess who can't afford to be seen here. Crusher Smith, my bouncers, always drives April and the other girls to the special appointments. Her other customers, including your brother-in-law, always come here to see April."

"Is there anything else you can tell me?" Stark probed.

"Anything strange happen that night?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary," answered Dawn. "Not to my knowledge."

"Thank you, Dawn," Stark said quietly. "I promise I will keep you informed and please keep this visit confidential. Oh and one more thing, I need a list of customers for Monday" Dawn handed him the list.

"Dawn," Stark quizzed, "how did Mike Abraham persuade you to give me this list? What does he have on you."

"Whatever do you mean?" asked Dawn gleaming some fierce eyes at Stark. "You gave this list over too easy," continued Stark, "That can mean only one thing. Mike Abraham has something on you." "You'll have to ask him about that," insisted Dawn starting to show her teeth. Stark decided it was in his best interest to drop the matter completely for the time being. "Stark, before you go do you want me to get you two girls for old times sake, on the house?" asked Dawn changing the subject.

At that moment, the door opened "Hello, Stark," said Ebony Knights. After five years, Ebony looked even better than Stark remembered. She was wearing a black leather pants suit that clung very tightly.

"Ebony, you are looking very good," commented Stark being civil. "No thank you Dawn. I'm fine."

"You sure Stark?" polled Dawn grinning. "Both Ebony and myself are available. We know you have a wonderful wife, but she is not better than the two of us together."

"How about it for old times sake?" asked Ebony.

"Ladies, you both look great, but really, I'm fine!"

insisted Stark. "Dawn, I will be in contact."

"Stark, I'll walk you to the door," insisted Ebony.

"Dawn, please tell April I want to interview her," Stark requested, "and ask the other girls if they saw anything."

"April," inquired Ebony. "Why do you want to talk to April?"

On the way out Ebony told Stark she had something very important to tell him. She invited Stark to her room to discuss it. Stark hesitantly agreed to go. The room had been completely furnished with expensive furniture. Ebony went to the bed and lay across it in a suggestive way.

"Stark, I have missed you a lot," said Ebony.

"I missed you too Ebony," Stark said being cautious and considerate. "What can you tell me about that night?"

"One of the girls said they saw a new model Mercedes at the edge of the alley and street just before the murder," said Ebony moving her hand across her thigh. "She said she could not see who was driving, but she was sure it was a man."

"Can you tell me anything else?" asked Stark.

"Just that Gary Abraham was waiting for April to finish with a client," continued Ebony who opened her blouse to reveal a familiar hint of her full firm familiar breast. "He had smoked one cigarette and came in then went back out after ten minutes to have another. Bonita must have used the employee exit to enter the smoking area or may have arrived

late for work that day at Candyland. She has her own home now and always drives in from Houston.

"How long has she had her own home?" Stark asked.

"Two years now," answered Ebony. "She had planned to retire this year."

"Retire?" Stark asked.

"Yes, she had invested well over the last seven years and had invested in a dry cleaning franchise that was doing extremely well. She only worked to supplement her retirement."

"Can you find out if she was at Candyland or just arriving?" Stark asked as Ebony took her leather blouse completely off.

"Sure thing Stark," said Ebony as Stark rose to leave.

"Stark," said Ebony. "Man you have been completely domesticated, you chicken."

"Yeah, I know," Stark said embarrassed. "Abbey has made sure I don't have enough energy to be tempted if you know what I meant."

Ebony began to laugh hard making Stark feel a little silly even mentioning it.

"Yeah, Stark, I know what you mean," said Ebony as she continued to laugh. "Your wife is something special. Both Bonita and I attended two of her self-defense courses. She is truly a special lady and all the girls like her."

As Stark drove home, he decided he would not tell Abbey about his meeting with Ebony. He would definitely avoid mentioning being in her room.

-9-

Stark arrived late at his office, 10 a.m., Melba handed him a file folder, "Stark, Mike Abraham dropped this by and told me not to let it out of my hands until I gave it to you."

Stark took the file folder and went into his office.

"Stark here's a cup of coffee," said Melba.

"Thank you," Stark said. "How's the family?"

"Enough of the niceties Stark," said Melba peeved. "What have you found out?"

"Melba, it's best if you don't ask any questions on this case," Stark said bluntly. "These people are awfully powerful and I don't want you on their shit list!"

"You always tell me what's happening with your cases and get my advice as an objective observer, Stark," answered Melba feeling left out, and like an outsider.

"Not this time," Stark said firmly. "There's no reason for you to be on the firing line. I will tell you what I can when things are under control. There's too many nasty secrets coming out."

Melba returned to her office almost crying. Stark had never

shut her out. But, she trusted Stark completely. Whatever this was about, Stark had her best interest in mind.

Stark's eyes opened in disbelief as he read the financial folders on Dawn, Bonita, and Wills. They were all very wealthy - rich even. Too rich for a police officer and two whores, he thought. Stark found out Bonita, Dawn, and April were all from Houston, Texas. Stark decided he had to find out where these three women really came from and what secrets they were hiding. Wills had been born in Edge Rock and attended a Rice University college before returning to Edge Rock and applying to the police department. He was the only child from an upper income family, but his parents had not left him enough money to account for his wealth. He would have to do some more serious probing here.

"Stark, it's time for your appointment with Mayor Manners," announced Melba quietly.

"Great, where did you schedule the meeting?" Stark asked feeling badly for Melba.

"She will meet you at Papino's restaurant on Melbourne Street in Houston at 1:30 this afternoon," replied Melba professionally. Papino's was the best Italian restaurant in Houston. It was expensive too. All Houston's well-to-do citizens ate there. Most ordinary people had to wait for weeks to get an invitation. The restaurant was in a two

story building designed to make its customers feel special. Old country decor gave the restaurant a feeling of actually being in the old country. Inside, the best furniture was carefully placed to give privacy to its customers and at the same time the important people could be seen by their peers. Upstairs is where the very distinguished customers ate. Each table was attended by two waiters, and a live band played mellow Italian melodies to put the restaurant's customers in their best moods. As Stark approached the entrance he could smell the aroma of pasta-like foods emanating from the restaurant. It smelled very good. Stark had arrived first and decided to wait at the entrance for Mayor Manners. While waiting he observed several well known Houston socialites entering the restaurant. Stark had dressed conservatively in a relatively cheap suit compared to the expensive suits and dresses these people were wearing. He felt a little out of place. After ten minutes of waiting, Mayor Manners arrived. She was a pretty looking, even attractive, well-toned woman of 50 years and was very charismatic. To Stark, it was clear Mayor Manners knew she had acquired tremendous power, but would never blatantly flaunt it in any way. She was a formidable enemy and an essential friend. "Hello Stark," said Mayor Manners warmly. "Let's go inside. I've reserved a private table upstairs at a quiet VIP area. No one will be able to hear our

conversation."

When Stark and Mayor Manners sat down, Mayor Manners suggested, "Stark, if you want the best variety and most succulent Italian foods, I suggest you try the Italian Platter. It's absolutely fantastic." "Fine," Stark said amused. Stark thought to himself, "Damn that was smooth. She just made me feel like I was suggesting the platter." Mayor Manners turned to the waiters and suggested two Italian platters and told both waiters to give them some privacy for a meeting. "Stark now we have about 45 minutes before our food is here," informed Mayor Manners. What can you tell me about me about this situation?" It took about 20 minutes for Stark to tell her what he had found out. While he was talking, Mayor manner hardly said a word, but she never took her eyes off him. At times, Stark felt like a child telling a parent about something bad. When he finally finished, Mayor manors began, "Stark it concerns me greatly that Deputy Mayor Penny, Ken Wills, and possibly and Chief Morgan and so many other prominent people are involved in this matter. The press was scrounging for details right now. You can be sure they are investigating every facet of this case. Whatever you found out, they will eventually find out. I need you to find the killer as quickly as possible before all the city's dirty laundry is exposed." "That was my plan all along, Mayor," assured

Stark. "I don't want Abbey's career getting ruined over this." "I assure you Stark," said Mayor Manners confidently, "if you investigate of this, I will take care of Abbey's career and advancement. You have my word on that." "Your word is good enough for me Mayor," Stark assured. Just as he was finishing, the brunette waitress waved to Mayor Manners and she signaled her that they were ready for their lunch? . Stark ate without regard to his VIP guess, Mayor Manners was absolutely right about the platter. Mayor Manners also dug in. They both laughed and talked about everything in Edge Rock except the case from that point on. Stark thought, "Abbey is like this lady. When business is being discussed, everything minor is put aside. When business is over, it's like a totally different person. "Yes," Stark thought, "This is an older version of Abbey." Stark was certain Mayor Manners felt at ease talking to him, as he did.

Stark was pleased with his meeting with Mayor Manners. She agreed to open the doors for whatever he needed, including search warrants and Police Department cooperation. She was a very charming and charismatic lady who didn't play. A former marine officer, she was as serious and straight shooting as a bullet. No one would go against her.

"Just one thing Stark," continued Mayor Manners, "I want to be kept up to date on this case and when you find out who

did it, I want to be 1st person briefed. Give me your word on this."

"Done! Mayor Manners," Stark promised.

Stark decided he couldn't wait any longer to see Bonita's house. As he entered the exclusive fenced, patrolled, upper income, Houston residential neighborhood, his gut began churning. Was it possible Bonita had invested that well with the profits from her profession? Yeah! Possible, but unlikely. The house was in the \$500,000, don't come here unless you live here, neighborhood. Its lawns were carefully manicured and from the outside it looked more like the home of a very wealthy businessman or woman than a prostitute. It had a car port that you could drive right up to the front door and each tree and shrub complemented the look. This was the kind of place, you couldn't hear your neighbors making love, or even screaming. As Stark walked up to the huge oak front double doors, he could see the quality of the stained glass subtly signaling good taste. Stark thought to himself, "Did Bonita tell this guy about me? Why didn't I know Bonita was married before yesterday? Did I avoid that part of my life so completely since marrying Abbey, that I completely ignored anyone, or anything to do with it? Why didn't I know Bonita was doing so well? Did she have rich sponsors all along while I saw

her?" These were all questions churning in Stark's gut. He had to find out as much as possible.

Rusty McGill was waiting at the door for Stark, "Hello, Mr. Strauss, please come in to my study," requested McGill a wealthy Houston businessman, average looking, very serious, and the reserved type. Stark could see this house was as elegantly furnished inside as it was manicured on the outside. The walls were made of the most expensive woods and the staircase was magnificent. All the furnishings were of the finest quality. Even the drapes appeared to be more expensive than Stark's car. Stark thought, "This guy must be really rich!"

Stark could readily see, this was definitely a man who did not play.

"Mr. McGill, I am investigating the death of your wife Bonita," Stark informed calmly.

"Yes, I gathered as much," said McGill unblinking. "Bonita told me about you and her past well before we married. The police had already interviewed me. Detectives Reynolds and Jerrico, I believe. She wanted to contact you about something important, but she refused to tell me what. If you are wondering, I met Bonita at Candyland three years ago and persuaded her to marry me. She was an independent woman and

didn't want any man to control her, so I agreed to stay out of her professional business since she came home to me. I bought this house for her and her son, Hector." "Weren't you upset about her profession?" asked Stark cautiously. "If you mean, was I so upset with her I would kill her, the answer is no," snapped McGill sharply. I loved her. I did ask her to get out of the business, and she said no. I couldn't live without her so I finally decided that it was more important to live with her than without. I know I am one of the police's primary suspects, so it is vital that I cooperate with you to resolve this as soon as possible. I have customers who may not want to do business with a suspected wife killer. Bonita told me you were smart and discreet. She never lied to me. That's the only reason you are standing there." Stark believe this guy. In this business, you develop a nose for the truth. "I see," Stark relied sympathetically. "What can you tell me about her investments and business partners."

"She owns 25% of the Sunshine Cleaners franchise of Houston," continued McGill. "Bonita was an outstanding businesswoman, who could almost predict the trends of the stock market. When she got to Candyland, she invested every penny in some very high risk stocks that paid off big time for her. "What stocks did she invest in?" Stark quizzed. I think it was some kind of extremely risky commodities,"

replied McGill. She never told me for certain."

"What else can you tell me?" Stark probed absorbing every detail.

"I know you are wondering where she got her money from," continued McGill, "But I can assure you she 'earned' every Penny of that money through astute investments and whoring. Bonita's partners are Richard and Mary Sprinter, two very friendly people. They own 50% of the cleaning business and manage the 23 stores. The other partner is silent and Bonita refused to tell me who it is."

"Is this her son?" Stark inquired noticing the photograph on the mantel.

"Yes, that Hector Chavez, he's 13 years old," continued McGill. "Bonita refused to tell me who the father is, but when she was 15, a much older man got her pregnant. She was very wild as a teen and soon discovered she loved sex. Older men loved her, and one I think, introduced her to drugs and her profession."

Stark could see Hector's father must be a white male. There was something hauntingly familiar about the boy's features that Stark just could not place. Stark knew Rusty McGill did not kill his wife. It was clear from the way he conducted himself. Besides, he had an air tight alibi. Stark's instincts told him this guy didn't kill Bonita. But, he would investigate his alibi and bank records further to make

sure he did not pay someone to kill Bonita. Stark decided he wanted to find out more about Bonita's partners in the dry cleaning business.

"Mr. McGill will you call the Sprinter's, Bonita's partners, and get them to see me," Stark requested. "I want to find out who the other partner is as soon as possible. There are other ways, but I thought I would just ask."

"Sure, no problem," replied McGill picking up the phone. After he made the call, Stark felt he had established a little thrust with this man. But, he had to always be careful when dealing with suspects. "I want to thank you for your time and assistance Mr. McGill," Stark informed politely. As Stark stood, McGill followed to walk him to the door. "When you understand of this, if you find that some prominent people are insulated from being exposed, let me know," insisted McGill. "I will open some doors for you." That's a very generous offer Mr. McGill and I do appreciate it," Stark said firmly. "I'll let you know. There is one thing else you could do for me. Please do not tell the police I have talked to you. Most of them hate private investigators looking into one of their ongoing cases." "No problem, Mr. Strauss. Good-bye."

As Stark drove to the Sprinter's office, he felt relieved that Bonita had earned her money the hard way, "earnestly" - through hard work and investing, so to speak. The Sprinters were very outgoing every day folks. They now worked out of the same small, humble office they opened when they were just starting their dry cleaning business. Richard was 18 years older than Mary. He had been married twice before, and already had raised five children. He had almost given up on marriage, when he found the love of his life, Mary. Everyone told him he was an old fool to marry such a wild and undisciplined young woman. But, he saw something in Mary, and wisely paid them no attention and married her two years before he retired from the military. At age 50, Mary was still attractive and vibrant. They both dressed very conservatively and by looking at them, no one would ever guess they were millionaires. Twenty-seven years in the dry cleaning business had kept them working hard to build a future for their four children. They had done well, very well, but it was not always like that. Once Richard Sprinter worked 16 hours a day for many long hard years to get his business off the ground and support his growing children. His military retirement wasn't nearly enough to support his children from his first two wives and a new family, besides, he wanted to work for himself after his

career ended. He started the business as a second career when he retired from the Army at age 41. Mary worked just as hard. She would take care of the children and get them off to school, and then work all day and part of the night to do the bookkeeping for the business. After the first seven years, things improved and they had made enough money to open a second dry cleaners. Four years after that, they opened a third business. Two years later Richard and Mary got a small business loan and opened three more stores. By this time, Richard's children from his first two marriages had aged enough to help with the business. At the time, his oldest daughter was 25 years old and had graduated from Rice University with honors and a business degree. Richard had talked her into joining them in the business. She was tenacious like her father and after two years, Richard and Mary felt completely secure leaving the daily operation to her. This freed them to enjoy the fruits of their many years of hard work. Richard took Mary all over the world during what they called month long, semi-annual exploring expeditions.

When Stark told them who he was, Mary would cry every time she began talking about Bonita. She loved Bonita like a daughter, and Stark could see Richard was a kindly 68 year old self-made man.

"Mr. Sprinter, I must find out who your other silent partner is so that I may find Bonita's killer," Stark firmly demanded. "I know it is supposed to be a secret, but I assure you I will only expose him, if he killed Bonita."

"Richard," cried Mary, "Please tell Mr. Strauss who it is."

"Our other partner is Kenneth Wills from Edge Rock," announced Sprinter. "He introduced Bonita to us. Do you know him?"

"Yes," Stark said obviously shaken. "I know who he is. Thank you Mr. and Mrs. Sprinter."

Stark had to make one more stop to make in Houston. He entered the blue collar neighborhood and observed happy children blissfully playing kickball in the park - unconcerned with a lurking thunderstorm. Debra Mason was April Law's mother. When Mrs. Mason opened the door, alarm bells immediately started thundering in Stark's head. She was an older version of Dawn Starr. Same face just two or three years older.

"Mr. Strauss, please come in," said Debra Mason in a friendly manner.

It was clear to Stark, Mrs. Mason had endured a rough life. She had a dynamite body and doll-like face that said "foxy woman and man trap." She was definitely a woman who had been treated as a possession.

"Mrs. Mason," Stark carefully approached the subject, "Are

you aware of what your daughter does for a living?"

"Sure, she works for her aunt, in that Candyland whorehouse," said Debra Mason casually.

"Her aunt?" Stark asked for confirmation. "Yes, Dawn Starr as she now calls herself is my baby sister, Dawn Mason" Debra roughly announced.

Suddenly, Dawn's special treatment of April Law made sense and so did his report on Dawn Starr aka Dawn Mason. Why hadn't he made the connection? He just assumed it was a coincidence that April's last name and Dawn's old last name was the same. After all, there are a many whorish Masons in the world.

"Yes, Dawn is a crafty business whore," continued Debra.

"Our parents where terrific parents, but they were no match for Dawn. She was a bad seed from the very beginning.

"How so, Mrs. Mason?" Stark asked.

"Call me Debra, I never married," she continued. "Dawn loves one thing, money. She always has, and always will. She will do anything to get as much of it as she can. When she was 12 years old, she began chasing after teen age boys and by the time she was 13, she would trade sexual favors for money for trendy clothes and other luxuries. Our mother and father were hard working day laborers, good people really, but they couldn't afford Dawn's extravagant tastes for the finer things in life. Dawn always brought home the best grades,

and our parents were very proud of her. They had no clue how smart and devious she could be. She was so clever she could have anyone eating out of her greedy hands after just one meeting. When she was 15, she began selling herself to her teachers and various other pedophiles around Houston for as much money as she could grab. I wasn't smart at all and Dawn used various methods to control me. She was very popular cheerleader, and would set me up with any boy I liked and would buy me great things to keep me quiet. At the time, she had me totally under her control. She was so intelligent and clever she could have been a doctor or anything she wanted. Her motto has always been 'take what you want or get left behind in life' - and she did."

"I see," Stark said aware this woman had been abused by Dawn.

"What else can you tell me, Debra," Stark continued his probe.

"She got my baby involved in that business when she was just 14 years old," cried Debra angrily.

"How?" Stark asked.

"She told April, she could make a lot of money satisfying older men," continued Debra. "She promised fancy clothes and plenty of money and used cocaine to get April hooked and interested. It's my fault, I should have been more careful and stronger."

"I'm sure you did what you could," Stark comforted Debra.

"Just one more question. Who is April's father?"

"I don't really know," admitted Debra ashamed. "I was wild too and running with Dawn back then. It could be one of several guys. I told her it was John Willingham a Houston lawyer I saw back then. Maybe he is the father, maybe not."

As Stark drove home he felt sorry for Debra Mason. Her own sister had introduced her to a life of drugs and sex. When she found the strength to get out of the business and begin a normal life, her sister made her daughter a whore too. Terrible, Stark thought.

It had been an interesting day for Stark, as he drove down the congested Houston highway. He decided to visit Sergeants Kim Jerrico and her partner, Sherrie Reynolds at the last minute. Stark knew Sergeant Kim Jerrico very well, in a Biblical sense, that is. When he and Sergeant Kim Jerrico were both street cops some 15 years ago, Stark had spent six months dating her. They met one night when a Houston car jacker entered Edge Rock in a high speed chase. They had a wild and passionate romance and really enjoyed each other's company. That is until one day when Stark visited her apartment and found her in bed with another woman. She was not a lesbian, but had wanted to experiment a little. Stark

was no prude, and joined them. It was one of many times Stark completely enjoyed himself, but soon grew envious and so did Kim. This jealousy signaled the end of their once blissful relationship. They were so different and both like different things. Kim was no prude either, but she felt they had only one thing in common - sex. That wasn't enough for her. She had decided she had experimented enough with bisexuality and that she wanted to find a man she could settle down with and begin a family. At that time, Stark just wasn't that man and they both knew it.

When the two detectives approached Stark's car, he could see Reynolds was also a female. This took him completely by surprise because he expected Kim to have a male partner. He thought, - what a hypocrite I am. After all, my Abbey is a great detective and she is definitely all woman. Why shouldn't Kim have a woman partner. Stark thought, "I've got a chance to talk Kim into helping me for old times sake."

"Hello Kim," Stark said unsure about his old girl friend. "Look what the devil scrapped out of the bottom of the barrel," responded Kim amusingly. "How have you been Tommy?" "I'm fine," Stark answered happy with the playful reply. "I can see that," said Kim laughing now. "Looks

like you put on several since the last time I saw you," Kim continued with the blatant insults. "Yes, my wife Abbey always manages to put something good on the dinner table and I'm a little older now," Stark informed. "I believe you know my wife.

"Yes, I do," Kim continued, "I thought she was very intelligent until she married you." Reynolds was laughing the whole time and didn't saying a word. "Stark, this is my partner," Sherrie Reynolds. "Hello Sherrie," Stark said politely. "How do you stand this nut?" Stark was looking for a way to bring up the subject of Candyland. Kim saved him the trouble. "Stark, I thought I'd be hearing from you. I heard you knew Bonita Chavez very well," Kim relied cuttingly driving the knife deeper into Stark. "Yes, I knew her very well a long time ago," Stark answered quietly.

"You know those days are gone forever." "Do we have to put you on our list of suspects?" Kim laughed still making fun of Stark. "No, I was home in bed with Abbey at the time of the murder," Stark said seeing his opening. "That's why I am here," Stark continued, "I need a favor for old times sake Kim." Woman had always responded well to Stark, but he had no idea why. Perhaps it was because women sensed he was a man who was strong, but needed a woman to help "tame and reform" his bad habits.

"Do you work for someone on this case" asked Reynolds

serious now. "Let's just say I'm working to ensure the city of Edge Rock doesn't get humiliated," Stark answered flatly. "Kim, will you hep me for old times sake?" Stark asked. "What do you want?" asked Kim now completely serious. I want to know what you know and I want you to keep our conversations private," Stark answered straight faced. "Why should we do that?" asked Reynolds irritated. "If we work to together," Stark replied, "we can make better progress. I know the people in edge Rock very well and together we can solve this case faster. I will make sure you are informed every step of the way and you will get credit for the arrest." "Okay," answered Kim confidently. "What?" asked Sherrie Reynolds angrily and rising from her chair. "We can't do that!" "Listen Sherrie," answered Kim, "I owe Stark and I trust him completely. He has never lie to me about anything. We are going to help him and that's the way it gonna be." Sherrie sat quietly back down in her chair. They talked for 90 minutes comparing notes. Stark liked the two women, but he could easily see that Reynolds was extremely butch. She had a great sense of humor. She had made Stark laugh uncontrollably. Stark guessed that Kim volunteered to be her partner when her old partner was murdered in a shoot out. He figured many of the male police officers shunned Reynolds because of her sexual preferences and that Kim understood because of her couple of months of

experimenting. Not for one second, did Stark think that Kim was involved sexually with Sherrie Reynolds. Jerrico was beginning to relax now. They were a wonderful combination for a Homicide detective team.

"Just one thing before you go, Stark," warned Kim. "We believe the Mercedes you mentioned, belongs to Edge Rock's Deputy Mayor, James Penny. Our investigation revealed he likes the 'young stuff' - if you know what I mean."

"Yes, I believe I do," admitted Stark. "I believe he was involved with a young whore named April Law aka April Mason. I'll make some discreet inquiries about it if you don't mind."

"We insist," approved Reynolds, who had suddenly turned bitingly serious again.

Reynolds and Jerrico knew Stark knew the citizens of Edge Rock and could get answers they couldn't. They were both very seasoned detectives and knew they would get the credits even if Stark solved the case. They agreed Stark should take most of the risk, and they should get all the credit. Stark was tired and hungry and began driving toward home.

Stark was starving as his empty stomach began growling uncontrollably. He quickly decided he needed to relax at

home for a couple of hours so that he could do some serious thinking. Certainly the evidence was beginning to accumulate, but what did it mean? Abbey was still at work and the twins were in their rooms - thank God! Ashley had cooked a wonderful dinner. Stark was very thankful Abbey had done such a wonderful job teaching her how to cook. Stark gulped the chicken casserole and French leafy salad down so fast he hardly had time to savor its flavor. He went to his bed room and laid down to relax for several more minutes and fell asleep. Two hour later, "Stark, wake up baby," coaxed Abbey.

"What time is it?" Stark asked.

"You won't sleep all night if you don't get up now," insisted Abbey. "It's time to have some baked Alaska dad brought for dessert."

When Stark went down stairs, the kids were already devouring Mike's peach cobbler. Stark loved this dessert very much and wanted to dig in with wild abandon, but dad was here. Stark sat down and waited for Abbey to bring his dessert to him as was the normal custom for the man of the house, but everyone just looked at him like he was the dessert.

"Okay, let me have some cobbler first," Stark insisted, "And then I will brief you on everything!"

Everyone lit up with smiles. Stark had eaten two servings of dessert and washed it down with a Cherry Coke as his

family watched him eat every bite.

"Stark," growled Mike Abraham, "If you don't start talking right now, I am gonna invite every cop in the family to come over and kick the shit out of you!"

Stark knew his father-in-law was just kidding - or so he thought. But, he decided not to find out the hard way. The family sat attentively, as Stark told them every detail of his day's activities. Not once did anyone interrupt him.

"Wow, this is a real mystery," suggest Shawn. "Shut up and let me think, bean brain," mouthed Ashley.

"Enough," ordered Mike.

"Abbey, what do you think, baby girl?" asked Mike.

"I think Stark should interview April Law as soon as possible," said Abbey sternly.

"What?" asked Ashley visibly questioning Abbey's judgment.

"Why her? Wouldn't Ken Wills or James Penny be better interviews?"

Well, before you confront two of the most powerful men in town, you need to know the facts," advised Abbey. What do both men definitely have in common?"

"They both like young stuff," smiled Shawn. "Both men were involved with April and Bonita may have found out something they wanted to keep secret."

"Bravo! Shawn, Bravo! Very good!" applauded Mike. "I really

do think you are on the right track."

"Yes, I agree!" insisted Abbey.

"Okay, bean brain - anyone can get lucky once," retaliated Ashley mad her brother had outdone her.

"When are you going to Candyland?" asked Shawn curious.

"Now!" demanded Mike.

"Naw, not now - no way!" screamed Abbey. "It's 10:45 p.m. and the girls are working and Stark isn't going near that place tonight."

"I'll go in the morning," Stark said. "Still kinda tired."

"You are going right now," insisted Mike. "Don't be a wimp! What if something happens to April tonight? You may never find the answers you need. You know any good investigator never sits on a clue!"

"Dad, is right," yielded Abbey. "You can go tonight."

"Can I go with you?" asked Shawn.

"What?" screamed Ashley. "You are not going to let him go, are you Abbey?"

"Mike should go with you," insisted Abbey.

"I will go," said Mike laughing. "Stark may need some help."

"Abbey? You are not seriously considering letting Shawn go to a whore house, are you?" demanded Ashley.

"Ah, well, I ... dunno," admitted Abbey disoriented.

"Let the boy go," ordered Mike. "I don't want any wimps

raised in my family and he can make sure Stark stays out of trouble."

"Great!" beamed Shawn. "Tanks grandpa! Let's go Stark."

"We'll have some fun," laughed Mike. "Just kidding angel, just kidding - ease up!"

"Just a minute!" demanded Abbey. "We need to set some ground rules first! "

What do you mean, ground rules?" inquired Mike. "We are not kids you know."

"I don't care!" retorted Abbey. "If there's no ground rules, then there's no way you are going to Candyland! It's a take it or leave it deal. Do you, guys understand?"

"Wow! Bitching! Way to go Abbey ... kewl!" grinned Ashley triumphantly. "That's the way to lay the law down."

"What kind of rules are you talking about?" Stark asked stunned. "Well, first," continued Abbey, "none of you are allowed to go into the girls rooms! This is non-negotiable! Stark when you interview April, make sure you do it in Dawn's office. I am very familiar with the mansion. Mike and Shawn can wait in the customer lounge. Shawn, look but don't touch."

"Is there anything else, boss woman?" asked Mike kidding.

"Yeah, there is grandpa!" insisted Ashley serious. "Be home in 1 ½ hours. It takes 30 minutes to drive to Candyland, 30 minutes for Stark to interview April, and 30 minutes to

drive back here!"

"What?" screamed Shawn. "You must be kidding! There is no way we are doing that. We need a lot more time!"

"Okay," conceded Abbey. "Two hours then." "Don't you trust us?" Stark complained smiling. "Yes, Starkie Bear I trust you completely," Abbey answered smiling now. "But, you will have a horny teenage boy and a dirty old man with you.

"What?" said Mike smiling shyly. "Dad, since mom died, you know you have chased every widow in your neighborhood," informed Abbey. "I don't want you to get tempted around those young girls." "I am insulted," growled Mike. "I have never paid for a piece of ass in my 60 years of living ... and I'm not about to begin now!" "There's a first time for everything," grinned Abbey. "Just making sure you know how I feel about this fishing trip." "Fine," Stark said still smiling shyly. "Let's go guys."

It was 11 PM when Stark, Mike and Shawn walked out of the door. As soon as they walked out of the door Abbey said, "I am going to bed now after a hot bath." "Are you going to wait for the guys to return?" asked Ashley shocked. "No way," said Abbey smiling. "I trust my Starkie bear completely, besides I have to work tomorrow." "You trust him in Candyland with those wild whores?" Ashley responded doubting Abbey's sincerity. "Yes, I do," answered Abbey confidently. "Wow, how can you be so trusting?" asked

Ashley. "I know your dad," lied Abbey. "I am confident he gave that life up when we married. Besides, he knows I would do a Lorraine Bobbett on him if he ever cheated." Ashley smiled at her mother-in-law as she turned and ascended the stairs. Ashley went to her room and watched MAD TV and was determined to stay awake to see what time Stark and Shawn came home.

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Mike arrived first and waited in the parking lot. When Stark, Mike, and Shawn entered Candyland, Stark thought Shawn would burst. Perhaps his lower lip would get stepped on if he couldn't get it off the floor. Stark thought to himself, Dawn does run a very classy place. The girls are all well prepared and trained by Dawn in satisfying male and occasionally female customers alike. Only two girls were 21 years old and only April had that unique schoolgirl look.

"Hello, Stark," said Ebony seductively. "You look like you are here for more than just business. And you brought a new customer along with you."

"He's my son and he's just 17 years old," Stark insisted.

"He's just very tall for his age."

"Young stud," smiled Ebony. "Stark, you want me to treat him to a free one on the house?"

Shawn sat there stunned! Hoping!

"Stark, say its okay," insisted Shawn. "I'll be 18 years old next year!"

"Stark," reminded Ebony, "You were once 17 years old too weren't you? Have you forgotten?"

"Sorry Shawn!" Stark insisted. "Grandpa, tell Stark it's okay," insisted Shawn still hoping. "I can't do that," laughed Mike. "Remember Abbey's ground rules, besides, I don't think you are old enough yet anyway."

Stark's mind began swirling a million miles and hour as he started thinking out loud:

"Did I just make a terrible mistake bringing Shawn?"

"Will Shawn get accustomed to these types of places?"

"What will Shawn and Mike do while I am talking to April?"

If Shawn got involved with one of these girls, Abbey would have be furious.

"Mr. Strauss," said an angelic voice.

As Stark turned he saw a sweet child, an angel faced girl, that looked no older than 15 years old at most - maybe younger. He could see why the "pedophiles" loved April. She looked like a baby - petite and smoothie silky high school little girl's voice.

"April Law?" Stark asked still stunned.

"Yes, I'm April Law, please follow me!" April ordered.

"Ebony, will you make sure Shawn and Mike stay in the lobby

until I get back?" Stark insisted sternly. "I'll be glad to keep them company," Ebony smiled slyly. When Stark got to April's room - which was decorated in typical high school girl style, with posters and everything a teenage girl would have, Stark knew April was more than just a child. "May I call you April?" Stark asked.

"Sure, Mr. Strauss," responded April putting on a good performance. Stark knew what to look for in a seasoned whore and April seemed very polished. He decided he had to shake her up. "April, your mother says come to see her soon," Stark lied. April's complete demeanor change.

"Okay buddy," said April meanly. "What the hell did you want?"

It had worked. Stark saw the real April now. That's what he wanted. "Tell me about your customers," Stark demanded.

"Start with Gary Abraham." "Why the hell would I want to tell you anything?" shrieked April getting even more irritated. Stark knew how to handle whore from his many years as a vice cop. "Look, let me tell you how things work around here," Stark growled trying to shake April up. "You won't be working here long if I put the word out on you. My contacts and I will spread so many rumors, you'll be lucky if you can pay anyone to see you. We'll tell everyone you are HIV positive and that you are blackmailing your customers. When you are driving, the local police will stop

you and who knows what they'll find in your car. Are you beginning to get the idea? Now tell me what you know."

"You are a real bastard," said April ready to cooperate. She could see she was not dealing with a buffoon. She decided it would be in her best interest not to get on this man's bad side. "Gary is the typical repressed man," April laughed. "You know - didn't get any in high school. Nothing special about him. He just wants to get some of what he missed."

"Did you see him the night Bonita was murdered?" Stark asked.

"Yeah, that little weasel was waiting downstairs when my 9 PM appointment arrived," laughed April. "I made him wait."

"Gary said your 9 PM appointment, stayed just 15 minutes and that you were nervous, what was that about?" Stark demanded.

"It was just a friend dropping off a note for an appointment," answered April immediately while lighting a cigarette. "Was the appointment with James Penny?" Stark probed. "How did you know that?" asked April.

"Someone saw Penny's Mercedes," Stark said, never taking his eyes off April. Stark thought April was either a great liar or she was telling the truth. Penny's Mercedes, perhaps.

"Now tell me about Wills and Penny," demanded Stark.

"Wills is a classic child molester," announced April.

"Nothing really strange, he just loves that sweet 16 thing.

As far as I know, Bonita is the only girl he ever saw over 21."

"Bonita?" Stark asked very interested.

"Yeah! She would meet him to talk every so often," answered April. "I think they must have known each other for a long time. I don't think they have sex thing going, though, recently!" "What did they talk about?" Stark asked a little less forcefully now. "They always talked in private," answered April. "It was as if they were old friends or something. I asked Bonita about it and all she said was that he was an old customer when she was younger. Nothing more." "Okay, what about Penny?" Stark inquired.

"He's was a big puppy dog, Mr. Strauss," answered April. "We get together all the time and I play school teacher for him. Lately though, he's been getting very possessive. You know, like he owns me or something. I wanted to stop seeing him, but Dawn insisted that I continue." "I see," Stark said.

"Do you always meet at the farm?" "Yes, Wills, Penny, and other VIP customers see me there," answered April.

"Others? Who?" Stark probed.

"Yeah, sometimes Dawn has me see businessmen visiting the Houston area," admitted April. "I don't know there names. That's the way Dawn set it up. I think one of them may have been a politician because he looked really familiar. I think I've seen him on TV. "How well did you know Bonita

Chavez?" Stark asked.

"As well as I knew any of the girls," continued April. "If you want to find out about Bonita, you should ask my aunt, Dawn. I'm sure my mother told you she corrupted me."

"Yes, she mentioned it," Stark admitted. "Why do you say to ask her?"

"Well, since I got here, I have noticed them whispering about something. I got the feeling it was very important. Bonita seemed nervous whenever I mentioned my aunt these last couple of weeks. Honestly, I thought they were great friends."

"Do you have any idea what they were talking about? Have you heard any rumors floating around? "No nothing," answered April. "Thank you April," Stark said handing her his business card. "You have been very helpful. Please don't discuss this with anyone - not even your aunt. Call any time day or night if you remember or hear anything related to this case. It could be dangerous for you."

"Mr. Strauss, you sure you don't want to go back to school?" asked April getting back into her act.

"Nay, but I have a 17 year old daughter who could teach you a thing or two," Stark replied smartly. "Besides, I think you were trying to cut Dawn out of the profits with Penny, probably others too."

April's mouth opened in shock to confirm that Stark was on

the right track. He had hit a nerve with the "skimming" money from clients statement. Stark had learned a lot. But, now he had put everything on hold to see how Shawn and Mike were doing. Frankly, Stark didn't want to leave him with Ebony too long.

Sure enough, Ebony had started Shawn laughing like crazy when Stark returned. Mike was laughing quietly with two girls on another sofa. She had made a big impression on Shawn. Too big thought Stark. "Let's go guys," Stark demanded firmly. "Can't we stay a few more minutes?" insisted Shawn. "I don't think so," Stark said flatly. "The interview is over." "Don't be a party spoiler," demanded Ebony. "Sit down and stay awhile. "Don't you girls have to get back to work?" Stark asked hinting to the girls. "We have a few minutes," one girl said playfully. "Thank you," Stark said in his firmest voice, "but we really must go."

Seeing Stark was growing increasingly angry, Shawn rose and headed towards the door. Mike also got the hint. "Stark, I think I will stay and talk to these girls a few more minutes," laughed Mike. "Remember Abbey," Stark reminded. "It may be better for all concerned if you talk to them another day. Besides, I don't want to lie to Abbey for you." "Yes, I see where you are going with this," conceded Mike. He arose and followed Stark to the door. When they

all got outside Shawn asked, "Grandpa, where you planning to go upstairs with those two girls?" "No, of course not," insisted Mike. "We were just going to talk a few more minutes. They are both very good talkers." "Yeah, I could see that," Stark said sarcastically. "I am going home," said Mike. "Stark, I'll contact you tomorrow."

On the drive home, the only thing Shawn said was, "I can see why you like Ebony dad, she's very honest and knows what she is doing! She is very funny too."

"Yes, Shawn, but never forget she is a professional whore. She is a prostitute. Never forget that."

"Dad! Watch out!" screamed Shawn.

"What the ...!" yelled Stark.

Just as Stark was entering the lonely access road which was a short cut leading to Edge Rock, a big black van rammed Stark's car. It was trying to push him over the steep slope just below the road. Shawn looked over to Stark shocked to see him smiling,

"Hold on son," Stark screamed through the grin that was plastered on his face. "We are going to teach this fool a lesson he'll never forget. Put your seat belt on."

Stark sped up to 65 mph and continued down the road with the truck following. Just as they reached a sharp curve in the road, Stark let the vehicle catch up to him.

"Watch this!" Stark screamed as Shawn held on for his life. Suddenly, Stark hit his breaks hard as he was heading for the curve. He maneuvered his vehicle around the sharp turn and looked into the review mirror to see his pursuers had gone straight through the curve.

"Wow!" exclaimed Shawn, impressed. "Look!"

"Damn, now I wont get to question the guy!" Stark complained.

The van hit a huge tree at 65 mph and began leaking gas. It exploded into a giant ball of fire. Stark was disappointed because he could not question his attacker.

Two hours later, the Edge Rock police had cleaned up the mess. Abbey had been called to investigate the death of the driver.

"It may be very difficult to determine his identity," suggested Abbey. "Well," Stark replied, "He was burned to a crisp and had no identification on him and the van was stolen." "Don't you people use dental records for that?" asked Shawn. "Yes, that's true," advised Abbey, "but to do that he either has to have a record on file such as military or local or federal record. If he is not in the computer, it may be difficult to trace him. Perhaps we will get lucky." He was probably muscle hired by someone who had a grudge against Stark. You know, an enforcer or hit man. This is great!" Stark insisted still wired. "Great, Stark

are you crazy?" yelled Shawn. "That guy just tried to kill us."

"What your father means is that someone is getting nervous," Abbey responded. "That means they think he's getting close to something. Question is, who tipped who off?"

"Let's go home," Stark said coolly. "I have to get up early to put my car in the shop, again."

Shawn had never seen his father liked this. It was as if Stark was totally enjoying the action. He was happy Stark could handle himself, but seeing his father liked this, frightened him. Stark had a crazy streak in him that Shawn had not seen before.

At home. Stark told Abbey and Ashley what he found out at Candyland. He admitted he interviewed April in her room and knew Abbey would not care because of his brush with death.

"So what's this April really like?" quizzed Abbey curious.

"She's everything special people say she is and more," Stark said sarcastically. "She's a real pro who loves to manipulate people. She looks like she is 15, until she gets mad and then she looks like a demon. The eyes completely change and so does the voice. It's like she is Megan in the Exorcist." I had to use the vice cop's whore breaker method to get her to talk. She's cool, but not as seasoned as Dawn." "What did she offer you?" asked Abbey smiling.

"Come on Stark, you can tell me. I know whores under pressure always think they can control any man with sex." Stark knew he was no match for Abbey in the brains department, so he carefully gave his answer with no emotion at all, "She offered the full school girl treatment, but by this time, she already hated me. Did I do well or what?" Stark was having fun now playing with Abbey, by turning the tables. It was an opportunity that seldom arose. "I see, Starkie Bear," laughed Abbey. Let's go to bed. You must be tired. The good thing was everyone was too excited to care what Shawn did while Stark was questioning April. Abbey never asked and Stark never volunteered. Stark admitted he was more confused than ever, but that he had a feeling everything was about to come together.

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The next morning was peacefully mild for Stark. Abbey hadn't found out anything new about the assassin from last night. Rusty McGill's alibi had tentatively panned out, but Stark was still investigating Wills. "Gary probably didn't do it - no reason." Stark decided to call Gary to put his mind at ease, "Melba will you please get Gary Abraham on the phone for me?" "Stark, pick up line one," said Melba. "Gary this is

Stark, I just wanted to let you know that everything is going fine with the case. It looks like you are in the clear, but please don't talk to anyone until I tell you. Remember, talk to no one." "Sure Stark, and thank you so much for calling," said Gary very nervously. "I was going crazy wondering if I would be arrested any minute now. I was dreaming of being raped in prison last night." "That's enough ... Gary, ah ... please don't tell me anymore," Stark said halfway disgusted. "I really don't think you have to worry about that. I will get to the bottom of this soon." "Great, Stark, my life is in shambles," cried Gary full of self-pity. It's like I am being shunned everywhere I go, at work, in the supermarket, even my friends want nothing to do with me." "Think of it this way," Stark said sympathetically, "they will all feel like shit soon and every time they see you from now on for the way they treated you. You'll have them by the proverbial nuts, so to speak, my friend." "You really have a way with words Stark," said Gary with half-laugh, half-trembling words. "Good-bye Gary," Stark said amused. "Get some rest. It will all be over soon."

Stark moved on to a more likely suspect: James Penny. Penny definitely had the money to hire someone to kill him. Penny was a suspect, but he was just dropping a note off to April for a secret meeting, unless of course April lied and it was

someone else's Mercedes. Perhaps April was covering for Penny or maybe she was just growing more afraid of him as she suggested. Perhaps Penny had tried to use his money and power to control April. Yes, this was a distinct possibility. Had Bonita also been one of Penny's girls too when she was younger? "All the customers at Candyland were with girls at the time of the murder, except Gary." Stark had a terrible thought. What if another girls had a grudge against Bonita? Maybe this girl got some guy to kill Bonita. Were all the girls with a customer at the time of Bonita's death? Stark was giving himself a migraine headache, but he thought it was unlikely another girls were involved. "Someone must have followed Bonita and planned the murder but who? Ken Wills? And why? Blackmail?" "Stark," interrupted Melba. "Ebony Knights is one line one." "Stark, I overheard Dawn talking to Captain Wills about Bonita," reported Ebony. "What did they say?" Stark demanded. "All I heard was "Blackmail scheme" or something," informed Ebony. "I couldn't make out the rest of the conversation." "Stark, I think Dawn suspects I heard her talking," reported Ebony nervously. "She saw me, but I think she knows I didn't hear much." "Thank you Ebony," Stark said. "Please be careful. And stay clear of Dawn for now. Be natural and don't change your behavior towards her so that she will not

suspect you heard anything." "Stark," replied Ebony teasingly, "your son is a chip off the same block." As Stark heard the phone click off he noticed himself smiling with pride at Ebony's comment. His mind began spinning with details of the conversation. Blackmail scheme? Was Bonita blackmailing Wills after all. Stark didn't want to believe it. What did Dawn have to do with it? Was Bonita blackmailing Dawn as well? Stark was determined to find out.

"Stark," said Melba happily. "Here are the phone records you requested. Our friend at the telephone company wants twice the usual amount." Stark finally notice Melba was wearing a pair of clingy blue jeans with a very tight and low cut sleeveless T-shirt and her hair was in a pony tail. It was a very revealing and casual look. The only thing that bothered Stark was that most of Melba's breast was showing. Normally Stark would not say anything to Melba who usually dressed very well for work, but curiosity got the best of him. Besides, Stark felt like a father, big brother, or something to Melba. "Melba, that's a cool look you got going," Stark said smiling. "Got a lunch date or maybe something hot going on?" "Yes, in fact I do," answered Melba smartly. "I thought I'd get a hobby since you decided to exclude me from your cases. "What?" Stark growled angrily. "You are not serious, are you?" "Just messing

with you Starkie Bear," laughed Melba. "Starkie Bear ... you mean Abbey told you she called me that sometimes, didn't she?" Stark demanded feeling betrayed by Abbey. "Yeah, you know we are girlfriends," Melba answered. "We talk about a lot of things." "What else did she tell you about me?" Stark asked. "Everything, you are an open book!" Melba teased. "That's just great," Stark retaliated, "and the next time you come to work wear something that will keep your breast from falling out." "Later, Stark if you are going to be like that," laughed Melba walking away. "Melba," Stark screeched, "get me those phone records right now." Melba was still laughing uncontrollably. Stark rolled his eyes and took the telephone records. He spent the next hour carefully examining them concentrating on the Dawn to Wills calls as well as Dawn's individual calls. Stark decided there was too much there. Dawn had talked to half the politicians and businessmen of Edge Rock. The day after the murder, Ken Wills had made three calls to Candyland. Was Wills warning Dawn about something to do with the murder - or was it something else? Stark decided Wills was definitely involved. Stark also decided he would need to make a call to his dad Mike Abraham.

"This is Stark," he said to Mike. "I need a big favor. I want you to follow Captain Ken Wills of the Edge Rock police department for 48 hours to see where he goes and who he

talks too. If I get caught following a police captain, I could lose my investigator's license. But, what can they do to you? Nothing!"

"No problem, Stark," laughed Mike excited to be doing something constructive during his retirement. Besides, he and Abbey were one of several cops who never liked Ken Wills and Stark knew it. Mike always said Wills was unethical and would do anything to get ahead. "Do you think he did it?"

"I don't know Mike, but I think he is definitely involved in something questionable."

"He'll never know I'm there!," informed Mike. "Wills is was very ambitious butt kisser, but it's hard for me to believe he is a murderer?"

"Yes, but if his future is threatened, he may become dangerous and unpredictable, dad!" Stark informed. "If he is the killer, he will be very dangerous. Not to mention he's a cop, and if needs to hide his involvement, he'll probably do just about anything to keep this secret.

Oh yeah, and one more thing, how can we find out who Hector Chavez's father is," Stark requested. "I have my suspicions, and I think it is important to the case." "That's a tough one Stark," admitted Mike. "We'll need a blood sample. Who do you think it is?" "Wills?" growled Mike eager. "I'll get that blood sample for you, but it will get extremely

ugly!" "How are you going to get it?" Stark asked. "You don't want to know, just leave it to me! Good-bye Stark." When Stark hung up he started thinking out loud again, "What have I missed? Something is definitely out of place here, but what?"

Stark decided to call it a day at 3:30 a.m. He knew from many years of investigative work, that sometimes you have to take your mind off a case to find something overlooked.

"Melba," Stark called, "Get my father-in-law, Mike Abraham, and tell him to meet me at my house at 7 PM."

"You leaving now?" asked Melba surprised.

"Yeah, forward all the calls to your apartment and put a sign on the door with my cell phone number if we get some customers."

"Done!" said Melba. "Stark, I forgot to tell you, we got a guy in here yesterday wanting to talk to you. Here's his number. I think he is probably just a husband who thinks his wife's cheating. He had that look."

"Thank you, I'll be at home for a while," Stark informed as he walked out the door. "Wait Stark," said melba nervously. "I know you are very busy and have a lot ..."

"Melba, I need a permission slip to talk to Kevon at school," Stark said sympathetically as he remembered his promise. "Thank you," said Melba quietly. "I hate to bother you right now, but you know the code of these mean

streets: here today and gone today. Drugs, bullets, violence and death are the only things some of these kids know." "Yes, I know," Stark admitted knowing Melba was absolutely right. Besides, he would feel terrible if anything happened to Kevon because he hadn't tried. He didn't want to wait another minute.

As Stark entered Palmer High School, he decided he would be calm and collected with Kevon. He thought, "After all, kids these days have enough pressures to consider on a daily basis." He entered the principal's office and handed the permission slip to the secretary.

"I would like to talk to Kevon Jones," Stark requested.

"Yes sir," said the polite young woman. Stark sat on the sofa and began to notice some of the young ladies playfully teasing the boys. This made him think of April Law. How many of these sweet young girls would turn out to be another April? How many would or already were abused as April was? Stark's thoughts moved to Ashley. Naw! Ashley would never get into drugs or have to sell herself to anyone. No one would abuse her, not while he was alive anyway! Stark to wait 15 minutes before Kevon Jones entered the office.

"Stark, why have you come here?" asked Kevon relieved he didn't have to see the principal. "Kevon, let's take a walk ... I want to talk to you for just a few minutes," Stark requested politely. "Okay, but this is strange," said

Kevon. When Stark and Kevon finally reached the auditorium, Stark sat down and motioned for Kevon to sit too. "Kevon, your mother tells me you see LaKeisha Moore and that her bothers are gang banners," Stark said genteelly. "You are not involved with gangs are you?" "My mother," Kevon snarled. "I should have known." "Yes, she is very concerned about you," Stark advised. "She wants you to know you have all the support you need in your family and in me, should something serious arise," Stark said. "I can take care of myself just fine," said Kevon proudly. "I know you can," Stark continued, "but, if the gangs or drug dealers approach you or your brother, please come to me instead of your grandfather. We both know what he will do. I think I can handle the situation a lot quieter than your grandfather, that's all." Kevon was warming up to the idea of trusting Stark. Besides, if his grandfather became involved, someone would get hurt eventually. "Stark, I will call you if anything comes up," said Kevon. "Both the gangs and drug dealers have already approached me and Jonathan and I told them we were the grandsons of a police officer," said Kevon. "I think they got the message. Don't worry about the drugs. We both know what they did to mama." "What about LaKeisha's brothers?" Stark asked. "They don't really talk to me," revealed Kevon. "One of her brother's, Derrick, is kinda crazy, but I avoid him as much as

possible. He is a very scary guy and once he offered me some drugs. He called me a little punk, but luckily his mother walked into the room when he started to get aggressive. I am very afraid of him. His mother kept him under control while he was in the house. LaKeisha's mother is really hardworking." "That's good to know," Stark said relieved. "I am glad you feel you can talk to me. You'd better get back to class now. You know my number, right. Here's my card with all my numbers. Call me day or night." "I will," said Kevon respectfully. "Just one more question," Stark said. "What gang does Derrick run with?" "He is a member of the Baker Street Duces," answered Kevon. "they control the whole neighborhood." "Thank you Kevon ... now you need to return to class," Stark said preoccupied. Stark was glad he had talked to Kevon. He felt much better knowing he had offered Kevon help if he needed it. Besides, if his grandfather found out ...?

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As the warm ripping northern wind whipped against Stark's face, he realized the renegade feeling he was experiencing was a familiar one. Many times in the past he had tried unsuccessfully to deny this feeling. It was a cold hard feeling of responsibility driving him to go see Derrick

Moore right away. But, why should he? After all, it would be risky entering Derrick's mean turf and even riskier approaching a gang member in their territory. If he was not careful, it could even be deadly. But, Stark knew he always regretted not following his primitive, but incredibly accurate instincts.

Stark drove his car away from Baker's Street for ten minutes before he pulled his car to the curb uncertain. Why couldn't he ignore this urge to find Derrick Moore? For another ten minutes, Stark just watched the neighborhood citizens go about their normal routines. He watched as the mostly Black neighborhood families conducted their business and thought how peaceful these people seemed. Just three miles down the street, lived the sometimes violent and dangerous Duces.

Stark turned his car around, not sure of why he was doing such a foolish thing, and headed slowly toward Baker's street. There was a mystically peculiar feeling in the breezy Houston morning air as Stark was propelled further into probable danger. As he got closer and closer to Baker's street, he could see and sense a subtle to abrupt change in the class and behavior of the people.

Was he imagining it, or were the people actually tougher looking - more street-wise. There were actually women on the street corners before noon. Men from many walks of life and communities were driving by picking them up for some quick gratification. Stark was no snob, but he couldn't understand why so many women fell into this soul-bending life. He assumed it was more than drugs and child abuse.

It was a way of life that most people of extreme poverty fell into as easily as rich kids fell into college. It was the same poverty that made young boys sell drugs on the street corners to their own people - risking their life and freedom on an everyday basis. One boy looked like Kevon Jones, but Stark knew it wasn't Kevon. It could have been anyone's son or daughter - anyone who got knocked off the right and legal track. "Hell," Stark thought, "It could have been me!"

It wasn't that he was afraid, after all, he had been in rougher tougher neighborhoods many times as a vice cop. But, then he had a good reason to enter this type of situation. Today, he was just hanging himself out to dry and he could not shake his feelings of what was needed. He felt he had no choice.

Was it the thrill of facing danger pacing him, stimulating his senses, tantalizing his darker, wilder side - the side that demanded he occasionally get that kind of blood-chilling rush which only comes from craziness? Stark told himself he did have a good reason to be here: Kevon. He had to set limits for Derrick Moore: clear and certain limits Derrick would understand and appreciate.

Stark stopped at the corner of LaSalle and Miller Streets and walk up to two of the 20 something ladies working the morning shift. Immediately, one lady started her routine,

"Hello baby - I'm Crystal, do you want a date?"

"Thank you, maybe later," Stark said. "What I need is some information."

"I thought so," said the second woman. "He's a stinking cop."

"I am a private investigator," Stark reassured. "I need to talk some business with Derrick Moore. Do you ladies know where I might find him."

"Naw! We don't know anything about that," volunteered one of the now frightened women. "Let's go girl - this poor fool is looking for trouble."

"Wait," Stark demanded. "I am definitely not looking for any trouble - I just need to find Derrick."

"Naw, you don't want to find Derrick," advised Crystal. "He's a very dangerous red-light district fool. He might shoot you just because he doesn't like the way you look!"

"I'll be fine," Stark insisted. "And so will he. I am not looking for trouble. I just want to have a quick, friendly conversation with him."

"You'll find him in a crack house at 109 Amos Street," said Crystal warming up to Stark. "It four blocks down and make a right a Aster Street. If anyone asks, you never saw us. Be very careful baby."

"Thank you Crystal," Stark said. "Maybe I can return the favor someday."

"Maybe," said Crystal. "Maybe you can."

When Stark returned to his car, he realized his heart was beating much faster. He hated to admit it, but the rush was making him crazy. As Stark's car edged closer and closer to the curb outside Amos Street, he could see all kinds of

people walking down the sidewalks. How terrible he thought that some of the hardworking mothers and fathers had to raise their families on this drug-infested block. But, the good, honest, hard working families couldn't afford to leave. This meant their sons, and daughters too were easy prey for these gangsters. Some of the kids would be strong enough to resist, but many others would not.

Stark just sat in his car for several confusing minutes to think. Soon he noticed many people walking by him heading for the back yard at 109 Amos. What was going on? Was the gang having a party? Yes! Stark decide he would follow a group of young men and women entering the back yard. As he got closer the music was blasting and so was his heart.

Already he sensed the eyes on him. Many of the young men where whispering to one another and some of them where laughing and pointing to him. He heard one young man say, "This fool is totally crazy!"

When he got to the back yard, the disc jockey stopped the music and every eye was on him. Two muscular young men approached Stark. "Fool - you are in the wrong place," said one of the angry young Black men. "I am looking for Derrick Moore," insisted Stark. "We need to talk some business."

"You need to leave here while you can," insisted the second man. Stark braced himself as one young man charged him. It took only one punch for Stark to deck him. Out cold. All those years of amateur boxing paid off. Two punches and the second man was down. Neither was getting up.

Immediately several other young men pulled their weapons and Stark just looked at them unafraid. "You really are crazy said a talk muscular man. I am Derrick Moore. What do you want with me?" "I want to make you a business proposition," Stark said confidently. He knew he had gotten his attention and respect. "A proposition?" asked Derrick. Derrick was a big man, 6' 4", intimidatingly stout, and he had a face most men would fear. But, Stark was no princess. He had seen many hard days himself and lived through them.

"Walk with me for a minute," Stark said. Derrick was impressed with Stark's fist and his courage. He signaled his people to back off and motioned for the DJ to restart the music. As Derrick and Stark walked, Stark said, "Maybe I can do you a favor in the future for a favor now!"

"What's the favor?" Derrick asked.

"My secretary's son, Kevon, is dating your sister," Stark continued. "He is a respectable kid and has a bright future

ahead of him. I want you to look out for him and his brother and keep them away from drugs and the gangs." "And why should I do that?" asked Derrick. "Maybe some day in the future, I can do you a favor. I am a private investigator and very well connected. My wife is a lieutenant on the Edge Rock Police Department and she will probably make Captain soon. You could use those types of contacts if you ever got into a jam." Derrick stopped in his tracks. "What exactly are you saying?"

"I am saying we won't be able to get you out of a felony, but maybe we can make things easier for you. If anyone in the department is hassling you, we can back them off. You can never tell. Someday you may need some help and we are in a position to get that help for you." Derrick stared at Stark for what seemed like forever.

Finally, he said, "Okay, I'll put the word out for everyone to leave that little punk and his brother alone." "You won't regret it," insisted Stark. "There's just one thing," Derrick warned. "If that little punk hurts my little sister or knocks her up, he's mine! I will bury him." "I understand completely," Stark said. "I'll have a talk with him. Also, if your sister does get pregnant, I have friends who can take care of the baby in a safe and

clean manner. She will be completely safe." "I think this agreement will work for everyone, its good business," Derrick grinned. "Let me walk you to your car."

As Stark drove towards his office, he felt he had made significant progress for Melba. He believed Derrick would keep his word. He had seemed very sincere and he knew it was good business.

The Texas sun was hidden behind a thick bank of blue-gray stagnant clouds and the haze that hung in the humid sky signaled a coming storm - which was typical for this time of year. The day was young and Stark considered picking up some fast food for himself and Melba. But, he figured Melba would go up to her apartment and eat lunch. Stark wondered how Mike and Abbey were doing. He would go to his office and relax for a few hours.

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As Stark drove, he called the telephone number Melba had handed him.

"Hello," Stark said. "I'm Tommy Strauss - you dropped by my office yesterday."

"Yes, Mr. Strauss my name is Derrick Mann and I would like

to meet with you to discuss a private matter."

"When would you like to meet?" asked Stark.

"As soon as possible," said Mann obviously nervous about something. "It's very important to me."

"How about now? Can I meet you at your office?"

"No," said Mann nervously. "I'll meet you at Stillman Bowling Lanes in a hour. Do you know where it is?"

"Sure," Stark said. "See you there."

Stark glanced down at his watch, it was 4 a.m. Stark drove to bowling alley in 15 minutes. He was already headed in that direction. As he waited for Mann, he observed the people entering and exiting the bowling alley. He tried to clear his mind of all the debris that had him confused - really overwhelmed. He found it hard to believe that Wills would murder Bonita for any reason. He was a sneak and ass kisser, but a murderer? It didn't fit, his gut said no.

At 4:55 p.m. Stark left his vehicle and entered the building. He was sure he had correctly identified Derrick Mann when he entered the restaurant. He had "that look."

"Mr. Mann," Stark said as he approached a middle aged businessman. "I'm Tommy Strauss, but people call me Stark. Let's find a quiet corner to talk." Stark and Mann walked to the counter and Stark ordered a cup of black coffee and a piece of pecan pie. Mann ordered coffee only, but Stark was certain he would not drink it. There were only about eight

other people on the lanes and they chose a lane at the far end of the building to talk. As they sat Mann asked,

"Mr.... Strauss, may I get directly to the point?"

"Please do," Stark said sympathetically.

"I would like you to find out if my young wife is cheating on me," requested Mann with tears in his eyes.

Stark knew that when a man or woman suspected their spouse of cheating, they usually were cheating. He hated these types of cases, but they kept him in business.

"Why do you think she is cheating Mr. Mann?" Stark asked.

"Just a feeling," Mann said. "She is 15 years younger than I am and I work all the time. She says I never have time for her and that I neglect her. When she turned 37, six months ago, she broke down and said her life was over. Our son went off to attend an out-of-state college and she began to see spend a lot of time away from home. When we were first married 19 years ago, she clung to me and wanted me to do everything for her. She was very dependent on me and I worked hard to make her independent so she could stand on her own if something ever happened to me."

"I see," Stark commented. "So you just want me to follow her for a couple of days?"

"Yes. I think her girlfriend, who is really a cheating slut, probably set her up with someone," Mann suggested. "I want you to tap my telephone and find out who she sees. I hope I

am wrong."

"Mr. Mann, telephone taps are highly illegal, but I may be able to help you there," Stark informed. "I'll give you some equipment that you can install. There's no law against that says you can't monitor your own telephone calls. You can install the equipment for me. It is very simple to do and perfectly legal."

"When can you begin?" asked Mann.

"Now!" Stark replied. "Where is your wife now?" Stark asked.

"Well, she's teaching at Miller Joiner High School right now," replied Mann. "What time will she be home?" Stark interrogated. "She has a meeting after classes," Mann answered confused. "well, that should give us just enough time to install some equipment in your house. We'll take my car to get the equipment and I will show you how and where to install it. All phone conversations will be relayed to a recording device I have set up. Can you take the rest of the day off? What will you do if you determine your wife is cheating?"

"I don't know," Mann confessed.

Mann, a big burly guy, 6' 4" and massive, broke down and began crying. After Mann collected himself, they drove in Stark's car to Stark's office and as they entered Stark said, "Mr. Mann, this is my secretary Melba. Wait here while I get the equipment." "Mr. Mann, would you like some

coffee?" asked Melba. "No thank you," said Mann disoriented. "Don't worry, Mr. Mann," said Melba compassionately. "Stark has a lot of experience! He will investigate your dilemma. He is also very discreet." Mann was obviously torn and tormented. When Stark returned, he abruptly handed him a box of electronic equipment to give him something to do. Stark thought this may take his mind off the situation. Stark returned to his storage locker for one more piece of equipment. When he returned he said, "Melba, Mr. Mann and I are going to install this equipment. Call me if anything happens with that other case. "Sure Stark," said Melba. "Thanks for what?" Stark asked. "Thanks for talking to Kevon. He told me about that." "Oh ... I forgot about that," Stark replied hurriedly. "Anytime, and I will be checking a little more, just to make sure. "You can never be too careful when children are concerned. I'll call you in 30 minutes!" It was legal, but Stark knew he was pushing it. When Stark and Mann arrived, Stark quickly found the telephone junction box. Normally Stark didn't have an audience when he installed this equipment, but this time he made an exception. Mann watched as Stark took a small cabled wire out of his kit and attached it to one of the many incoming wires. "How do you know that is the right wire?" asked Mann amazed. I have done this a few times," Stark answered unemotionally. Stark

then took a small device for his kit and attached it to the line. "What is that?" asked Mann. "This is a call forwarding device," answered Stark. "It will send every call coming into your line to my telephone recording equipment. It is call "forwarding and recording" by tapping into the signal. "I can see why it is illegal," responded Mann. "Yes, but don't kid yourself," Stark advised. "Many big company and government agencies monitor all their employee phone calls." This gave Mann something to think about. "I feel very strange doing this," admitted Mann. "That's normal, but please think of it as the price for peace of mind," Stark answered. Suddenly Stark pulled out his cellar phone and called Melba. "Melba, are you ready for the test?" Stark asked. "Sure Stark," answered Melba. "I am ready." Stark hung up and told Mann to call someone from his home phone. Mann called his office and asked if any thing was happening. As he hung up, Stark said, "Now we will see if the equipment is working." He called Melba and asked her to play back the conversation. Stark handed Mann the phone to listen. "This is totally scary," said Mann a little ashamed. "If you think this is scary, you should see what the government can do," Stark muttered half-kidding. "they have some awesome equipment." "Thank you Mr. Strauss," said Mann. "I hate to ask you to go, but my wife may be home anytime now." "I'll drive you back to your

car," Stark said ready to move on. After dropping Mann at his car, Stark headed home.

When he got home it was 7:15 PM, "Stark, where have you been?" asked Ashley. "Ashley!" warned Abbey.

"Hey dad," Stark greeted his father-in-law with the customary hand shake. "Sorry I'm late. I took another cheating wife case today."

"Do you think that's wise?" questioned Mike.

"Yeah, I know what you're thinking but I just couldn't say no to this pitiful guy."

During dinner, Stark didn't say very much. Everyone knew he was deep in thought and knew he would say something when he was ready. They just continued talking as if he wasn't even there. Finally, he started telling them what he had found out. No one said a word until Mike asked, "Do you really believe Wills did it?"

"It's hard for me to believe he did," Stark confessed.

"I don't think he did it," said Abbey sharply.

"What?" said Ashley. "It's, like, so obvious Wills did it."

"Naw," said Shawn. "He didn't do it!"

"What, bean brain?" demanded Ashley. "How did your peanut-sized brain determine that?"

"Well," continued Shawn, "It's obvious Bonita used to be

Wills' main squeeze when she was younger. Sure, he may have had reason to kill her if she was blackmailing him, but dad says Bonita would never blackmail anyone. That means Wills didn't have a reason to kill her."

Stark was amazed at his son's keen intuition.

"Shawn, continue," Stark encouraged.

"Well, lets assume Bonita found out something important about Wills, what would Wills do? Kill her? Naw! It would be too easy for Wills to control her, he's police captain. He wouldn't have to kill her, maybe just threaten her. Remember she was rich and could have just walked away. She earned her money and wasn't concerned with blackmailing anyone. She was too smart for that."

Everyone was totally silent as Shawn went on, still shoveling food into his mouth. Ashley's mouth was open in amazement. Abbey's head was down deep in thought. Mike looked at Shawn with respect.

"Shawn," Stark asked. "What would you do next?"

"Find out if Wills did it, or confirm that he didn't," Shawn answered immediately, "and possibly eliminate him as a suspect."

"How would you do that?" asked Ashley with a new found respect.

Just then the phone rang. It was Mike. When Mike informed the family that Wills was Hector Chavez's father, Abbey

asked, "Is he? How did you determined that? "Don't ask," growled Mike. "Dad, you didn't break the law, did you?" asked Abbey aggressively. "Well ... ? No!" laughed Mike. I just used a little genius to get some sperm from Wills!" "Sperm!" Stark snapped. Everyone was looking at Mike with wolf-like eyes determined to get him to reveal how he did it. Finally, Abbey had enough and angrily demanded, "Dad, if you don't tell me right this minute, I'll ugh ... I'll ...". "Keep your shirt on Abbey, I'll tell," laughed Mike proudly. "Well?" asked Ashley. "I set Wills up with a young prostitute from Houston who insisted Wills wear a condom!" laughed Mike. "Then it was just a matter of having a friend call a friend who could get the seaman tested." "I got Hector's step-father to give a blood sample," continued Mike. "Since he was still under great scrutiny, he was all too happy to let the boy give a little blood. Brilliant, was I." "Yeah, dad," complimented Abbey, "you sure were!" "I'll have to watch out what I do with my condoms from now on," said Shawn. The whole room burst out laughing. Abbey had been quiet for a good while and finally Mike asked,

"What's on your mind, Angel?"

"Well, I think Shawn is right," said Abbey flatly. "I think we need to just ask Wills if he did it."

"Are you crazy?" stormed Mike. "Are you just going to walk

up to your boss and just asked him if he murdered a woman?"

"Of course not, dad!" laughed Abbey. "Stark is going to just walk up and ask him if he did it!"

"What?" Stark said bemusedly. "You have lost it baby!"

"No, listen to me Stark, if we do it right, maybe we can get a confession out of Wills."

"What do you mean, do it right?" asked Mike. "You are talking about setting Wills up?"

"Exactly dad, exactly," answered Abbey.

Just then the phone rang again. It was Jerrico again,

"Guess what Stark?" teased Jerrico.

"What?" Stark asked irritated.

"Your boy Wills just met Dawn Starr at an isolated farm house in Edge Rock. When he left, he was carrying a black leather bag."

"Very interesting," Stark replied. "Be ready to move fast! I'll get back to you soon."

Stark told the family what he had just found out. A complex plan began to form in his mind.

Suddenly Stark began pacing back and forth on the dining room carpet. Finally, he stopped and announced:

"I have a plan to expose Wills!"

"Here's what I want you to do, Mike," Stark instructed.

"Done," said Mike getting up to leave.

"Abbey, tomorrow at work play it cool," Stark ordered.

"Don't let Wills know we are on to him. Abbey call Mayor Manners Mayor Manners and have her issue two search warrants." After a brief explanation, Abbey called Mayor Manners, "Mayor, I need you to issue two search warrants, and I need Judge Fletcher to sign it without anyone knowing," Abbey demanded. "I will be helped by with Detectives Reynolds and Jerrico from Houston to serve the warrants. I will explain in more detail later. This must be kept totally secret."

"You've got it Abbey, but remember Stark promised to keep me informed," insisted Mayor Manners. "We will Mayor," Abbey promised. Abbey picked the warrants up three hours later. Stark called Jerrico at home that night and explained the plan. The next day, at precisely 5:30 p.m. they were to search the farm house.

In the morning Stark went to the office, excited about his plan. Would it work? He had asked Melba to open the basement door so he could check his recording equipment for the Mann case. Sure enough, Mrs. Mann was talking to a lover and planning a meeting at 1:30 p.m. Stark would follow her. His plan was in action and he needed something to keep his mind

off things. Mike would make sure everything was set up correctly to expose Wills. At noon Stark slurped his last cup of coffee down and grabbed his camera. As he waited outside the Mann house for Amanda Mann to leave, he wished it wasn't true. He watched as Mrs. Mann got into her Lexus and headed for Houston. When she pulled up to a small house in a questionable Houston neighborhood, Stark's heart fell completely. She was going to meet some low life lover. As she walked up the unkempt sidewalk a young handicapped boy ran out to meet her. It was immediately obvious that he had down syndrome. Stark began taking pictures with his zoom lens and recorded their conversation. He listened with his cheap listening device as Mrs. Mann called the 14 year old boy Josh. That was the name on the phone recorder. Stark knew immediately Mrs. Mann was helping the family for some reason. The boy's mother walked out and hugged Mrs. Mann before escorting her into the house. Stark waited for Mrs. Mann to leave and 90 minutes later, she departed. Stark followed Mrs. Mann for four more hours. Except for sitting alone for a while on a park bench, she primarily did daily chores of getting her hair fixed, visiting a girl friend, and just driving around, her day was exceedingly boring. While in the park, a young man sat next to her and began a conversation. He was a handsome looking man, about Mrs. Mann's age and they seemed to enjoy each other's company.

Soon, the young man offered to have some coffee with Mrs. Mann and she flatly refused. He gave up after a few more charming tries and left Mrs. Mann on the park bench. Stark decided if Mrs. Mann was having an affair or cheating, she must be doing it in casual one day stands. He called Mr. Mann and told him to meet him in the parking lot.

"Mr. Mann," Stark said pleased. "I believe your wife is not cheating. She seems to be helping a young handicapped boy in Houston. I just wanted to let you know so you would have some hope. I will follow her for a week to make sure, but I am relatively sure right now you have a wonderful wife. I suggest you take her on a trip before she finds someone besides a handicapped boy to keep her company."

Mann just began crying and Stark was happy for the guy. He seemed to be a decent hard working family man who just got lost in the daily grind of his career.

"Let me give you some very good advise," Stark requested.

"If you love your wife, and she tells you that she still loves you, I suggest you forgive her immediately. Many times men work hard to provide for their families and forget about how their spouse feels. Wives, and husbands too, get lonely and sometimes people just grow apart. I don't think that is the case here, but your wife probably doesn't share in your success at work and probably feels left out and

lonely."

"Yes," admitted Mann, "She has told me that several times."

"When your son left for college," Stark continued, "That probably magnified her loneliness and feelings of isolations. I suggest you take her on a long vacation to somewhere exotic and leave your work behind. I have worked theses cases for a long time and if you want to keep your wife, you had better forget her infidelity quick and make atonement for neglecting her."

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It was 3 PM when Stark called Jerrico and Reynolds.

"Did Abraham deliver the warrants yet?" Stark asked very concerned. "Yeah got them," replied Jerrico grinning. "Don't worry, we'll call you immediately!"

Stark headed home. When he got home, Abbey was waiting.

"Stark, everything is set!" informed Abbey concerned. "All we need to do is wait for Mike, Jerrico, and Reynolds to do their parts. They won't let us down."

Stark tried to relax. His plan would require him to confront Wills. This could be dangerous if Wills felt cornered.

Abbey was just as nervous as Stark. Finally, Reynolds called and informed Stark what they were waiting at the farm house.

"It is time to call Wills," Stark told his wife. "Reynolds,

Jerrico and your dad is standing by."

Stark called Wills and asked him to meet somewhere. Stark told Wills it concerned the murder of Bonita. Stark told Wills he found out he was Hector's father and wanted to discuss the case with him.

Wills was smart and Stark knew he would suggest some place where they would not be observed.

"Stark, lets meet in that old bar where we used to go for drinks after work," suggest Wills. "I own the building now and am fixing it up. We can talk there in private."

"Fine," Stark said. "See yawl at 5:30."

Stark called Mike and informed him of the location. It was almost 4:30 p.m. Mike told Stark he had allocated plenty of time to set up his equipment. He told Stark to keep Wills near the bar area.

At 4 PM Stark and Abbey headed to the bar. Abbey would not go in with Stark. Stark waited for Wills to approach the door then jumped out of his car. Abbey had already taken her position. Once Wills was in the bar, Stark entered.

"Hello, Stark, right on time," said Wills smiling.

"Good to see you again, Captain," Stark said dryly. "I have to talk to you about a very serious matter."

"You said you knew something," Wills prompted.

"Yes, I found out Hector was your son," Stark reminded.

"That would have given you a good motive to kill Bonita."

"I assure you Stark, I would never kill Bonita, she is the mother of my only child, besides I'm already eligible for retirement and it would be stupid to jeopardize that," insisted Wills.

"I also discovered you got her pregnant when she was just 15 years old," Stark continued. "That fact would ruin your name."

"I see," laughed Wills. "You think I care about that at this point? I have earned a fair living and I could simply move away. Besides, Bonita was very special to me. I would never hurt her. Think about it Stark, that was years ago, you honestly believe that a little scandal would ruin me? I took care of Hector, paid for his everything. Let one bit of information go to the public, and it all goes. I'm still a fine upstanding man, and better father than most of the deadbeats out there."

Stark was carefully studying his prey as he continued. He believed Wills. Stark's phone rang. He excused himself and took the call never taking his eyes off Wills as he listened to Detective Reynolds. Got it he said and hung up.

"I found out about the blackmail scheme you and Dawn Starr were running," Stark threatened.

"Blackmail scheme?" questioned Wills now a little allusive.

"Yeah, I discovered the hidden cameras in the farmhouse," Stark said coolly. "I don't think I'll have any problem

exposing you and Dawn."

"Why are you telling this to me Stark?" asked Wills suspicious.

"I just wanted to warn you before it comes out, as a former friend and police officer," Stark lied. "Tomorrow Reynolds and Jerrico will know. It is just a matter of time before they get you, Ken"

Suddenly Wills pulled his service revolver.

"What's this Ken?" Stark asked.

"Sorry Stark, I can't allow you to do that," said Wills crudely.

"I came here to warn you Ken," Stark said. "Now you pull a weapon on me?"

"Like I said, Stark, I can't allow this to come out," insisted Wills.

"So you did it?" Stark probe. "You killed Bonita."

"No, I didn't kill her," Wills said angrily. "I told you, I would rather die than kill Bonita."

"If you didn't, then who did?" Stark asked confused.

"I have no idea," Wills confessed. "I had hoped you would find out quickly without implicating me. I was in Houston at the time with a young lady I met several weeks ago."

"I see," Stark said. "There has always been something bothering me."

"What?" asked Wills.

"How did the money get in my locker?" Stark asked very serious.

"I put it there, I'm sorry," replied Wills. "I had too. It was you are me!"

"Why Ken, why?" Stark probed. "We were good friends!"

"I had to Stark," Wills replied. "I didn't want to, but you were too good at your job. You were getting very close to exposing some prominent Edge Rock businessmen who liked under age girls. They paid me good money to set you up."

"Who?" Stark continued his probe. "No let me guess, James Penny?"

"Very good Stark," informed Wills. "You are good! He is one of many others."

"Ken, did Dawn Starr put you up to the blackmail scheme?"

Stark asked genuinely curious.

"Naw, Stark," answered Wills. "It was my idea! I found out some good stuff about Dawn's past and persuaded her she needed some extra protection. I convinced her she could supplement her retirement at the same time. She had earned plenty of money, but the protection is what interested her most."

"Ken, I am not here alone," Stark said.

"It's too late for that Stark, excellent try." Wills said sadly.

"You know I can't let you live!" "Ken, that phone call was

from Detective Reynolds," Stark continued. "She and her partner had just executed a search warrant at the farm house. They have been following you for two days. I figured you would have moved the tapes from the farm house when they saw you there yesterday, so I had them execute another search warrant at your house. They are there right now, Ken."

"You always were very smart, Stark," Wills laughed hysterically. "But, there is no way you are taking me in. You know what they will do to me in prison."

"Ken, you are just 45 years old, and you have a very handsome son," Stark reminded. "You haven't killed anyone and you will be out in less than ten years. Probably just four or five in this state."

Suddenly Mike Abraham entered with Abbey. Mike had a shotgun pointed at Wills and Abbey had her weapon in her hand.

"Ken, give it up," said Abraham. "Don't be stupid."

"Captain Wills!" yelled Abbey. "Listen to me. All you have to do is drop your gun and we can walk out of here. You must realize by now Stark is wired and we have also video taped the whole conversation. With your knowledge of Houston's and Edge Rock's most powerful citizens, you can make a great deal. Give it up."

"Hello Ken," said a familiar voice.

It was Mayor Manners.

"Abbey is right," insisted Mayor Manners. "We want the people behind this plot. Three years in and out of state minimum security prison for your testimony. What do you say?"

"Is that a guarantee," asked Wills wild-eyed.

"I guarantee it," pledged Mayor Manners. "I'll spread a rumor that we never found a set of video tapes.

That lie will protect you for the rest of your life. All you have to do when you get out of prison is walk away."

Wills dropped his weapon and Abbey handcuffed him. Stark was sitting at a bar stool thinking out loud:

"If he didn't kill Bonita, who did?

When Abbey came back from turning Wills over to Jerrico's men, she said, "Stark, I have an idea about that. Mayor Manners can you get two warrants for arrest immediately?"

"Who are you arresting?" asked Mayor Manners.

"I think if we arrest Crusher Smith he will admit to killing Bonita for Dawn Starr," said Abbey unsure for her instincts.

"Brilliant," Stark said catching up to his wife's deduction.

"Why Dawn?" asked Mike still confused.

"I must admit I don't understand either," confessed Mayor Manners.

"Well," Stark continued, "Abbey told me Bonita's neck was broken with such force that whoever killed her probably had tremendous strength and a motive. The only one I can think

of with that kind of strength is Crusher."

"Got it," replied Mike. "Do you think Crusher may admit killing Bonita?"

"Yeah, he'll talk," answered Abbey. "He's not that smart. He won't want to face execution for Dawn. Offer him 20 years, he'll take it. We need to arrest him before he goes to work and Dawn has a chance to talk to him."

"We need to ask Reynolds and Jerrico to arrest Dawn and hold her while we interrogate Crusher," insisted Stark, "She has a secret bank account in the Cayman Islands and may flee. She won't be able to use her influence to get out of jail in Houston."

"I want to be there when she is arrested," insisted Abbey.

"Why," Stark complained, "Not wanting his wife to go to Candyland."

"Stark, I've been to Candyland before," laughed Abbey.

"You have," Stark asked. "When and what for?"

"You don't need to know everything," taunted Abbey.

"If you two are finished playing," prompted Mayor Manner,

"Go pick up the Dawn."

Stark suspected Dawn would not spend life in prison. She simply knew too many people. She'd find a way to make a deal for a reduced sentence.

At 9:30 PM, Detective Reynolds and Jerrico sent in two highly trained martial arts police officers to help with the arrest of Crusher Smith. Crusher was solidly built like a redwood tree trunk, and stood about 6' 7" in his bear feet. No sensible human being would dare underestimate Crusher. The officers posed as customers so they could get close to Crusher. Reynolds and Jerrico didn't want to risk shooting him if he resisted. They need him to get Dawn.

At 9:40 PM, Abbey, Jerrico, and Reynolds entered Candyland. Stark decided he should not go for the arrest. Dawn did not resist and within two hours Crusher Smith agreed to testify against Dawn in exchange for a reduced sentence. As Stark, Abbey, and Mayor Manners watched, Crusher told how Dawn ordered him to kill Bonita. He did not know why she wanted Bonita dead. Crusher said he liked Bonita and had known her for years, but that Dawn offered him \$50,000 to knock Bonita off.

Dawn refused to say why she ordered the murder. The only thing she said was that she would never go to trial. She said she owned too many Houston and Edge Rock politicians and powerful businessmen.

When Stark and Abbey arrived home at midnight, Shawn, Ashley, and Mike were waiting. Mike had told the kids what had happened.

"Stark are you going back to the police force," asked Ashley.

"Naw you dork," answered Shawn. "Why would Stark do a stupid thing like that!"

"Why is that stupid?" asked Ashley.

"You are not to smart," continued Shawn. "Stark won't want to go back after all these years. He has gotten used to the freedom he has as a small business owner!"

"Shawn's right," Stark confirmed.

"You could go back," teased Abbey half serious. "The department would welcome you with open arms and you could work for me!"

"Funny," Stark smiled. "You forget that some of Edge Rock's most influential citizens had me setup to push me off the force. Besides, I have lost too many years of retirement to go back."

Just then the door bell rang. When Abbey opened the door, her father-in law was standing there. He looked withdrawn and Abbey could tell he had been drinking. "Mr. Strauss, please come inside," urged Abbey warmly. As soon as John Strauss stepped inside, Stark could see that his father was besides himself. "Hello dad," Stark said sensing his dad's pain. "I am so glad you came. Please sit down."

"Grandpa, you never came here before," said Shawn surprised.

"Grandpa, I am so glad you came," smiled Ashley as she quickly walked over and gave her grandfather a tight hug.

"Tommy, I came to apologize for doubting your innocents," admitted John Strauss ashamed of practically disowning his son. "Dad, you have done nothing to apologize for," Stark tried to ease his dad's suffering. "I am just want us to enjoy the time we have left." John rose and went over to his son and gave him a long overdue hug. As he did the tears rolled down his red eyes and soon he was crying.

"Son, I don't ever want anything to???? keep us apart in the future," mumbled John Strauss. "We both owe that to your mother." Both Ashley, Abbey, and Stark could no longer contain the tears. Shawn was smiling ear to ear as if he had just won a karate tournament. Stark and his family talked for several hours before he drove his dad home.

The next morning Stark came down to breakfast and his family was glued to the television set,

"Last night, former Candyland owner and Madame Dawn Starr was found dead in her jail cell in Houston. The Candyland Madame died of an apparent heroin overdose. A formal investigation is under way to determine how the Madame Starr got the drugs in her cell."

"Dad?" asked Shawn. "There are some things bothering me."

"Yeah?" Stark asked. "Why did Dawn kill Bonita?"

"Shawn, think about it," said Abbey. "Bonita probably found

the cameras in the farm house. Dawn could not risk her telling anyone. The sad part is that Bonita probably would have never told anyway. She had too much to lose."

"That makes sense," Shawn said satisfied. "But, who tried to kill you, dad?"

"Good question," Stark said as he sipped his coffee.

~ The End ~

perhaps a sequel

"Stark in Houston"

"Stark in Japan"