

Frank dropped the *Greenville News* onto the kitchen counter in Mick's condo. "I got your paper."

"Thanks." Mick didn't lift his eyes from the laptop on his dining room table. Normally he worked in the small bedroom he'd converted to an office, but the case files had outgrown the space. He typed in his password and waited for the computer to finish loading.

"Man, does your neighbor always dress like that to get her paper?"

*Oh, jeez, Mrs. Wilcox strikes again*, he silently groaned. The good mood that sleeping in his own bed and an hour at the gym had produced evaporated. He stared at the computer, urging it to start faster.

"It wasn't so much what she was wearing, as what she wasn't."

He sighed. Frank wasn't going to leave it alone until he responded. "What was she wearing this time?"

His partner rocked on his toes. Enthusiasm lit his voice. "She had on this little-bitty robe over a baby-doll gown. It was that kinda sheer material, you know, where you can see, but not really."

"Hmm." He focused on the laptop and launched the database program.

"That's the best you can do? 'Hmm'? What is *wrong* with you, O'Shaughnessy? She's hot. I mean, she has these tits..."

He rolled his eyes. Frank was pantomiming cantaloupes or maybe watermelons. "Go for it. She's not my type."

"Your type?" Frank asked, incredulous.

"Yeah. As in Barbie has no brain."

"Who cares?" The man's hands rose and fell in exasperation.

Mick ignored him and opened the car file.

"Christ. Sexy woman throws herself at him and he bitches 'cause she isn't a nuclear scientist." He opened a cabinet, grabbed a mug, and poured coffee. "You're out of sugar again."

"There's Sweet'N Low."

Frank made a face, but emptied several packets into his mug. He moved to the refrigerator and stood in front of the open door.

Mick shot a concerned glance into the kitchen. Frank had been making too many comments like that lately. But what was he supposed to ask? Was everything okay between Marilyn and him? Was he thinking about having an affair? Their relationship didn't work that way. Frank meddled in his life, not the other way around. His partner was supposed to be the solid, married man.

Frank pulled out the milk carton, sniffed and grimaced. "This is pathetic." He examined and replaced a carton of orange juice. "What's this?" He lifted a white container as if it might contain anthrax.

He leaned back so he could see what the guy held. "Probably leftover Thai. You might not want to eat it."

"Do you have anything in here that didn't die last week?"

“I haven’t been here. The apples and those little carrots in the bottom drawer are okay.” He’d had a handful for breakfast, along with a bagel he found in the freezer. “I need to go to the grocery store this afternoon.”

Frank grimaced and closed the refrigerator. He opened cabinets and finally found a box of Triscuits. “You want more coffee?”

He shook his head, his eyes never leaving the DMV records scrolling down the screen. “There are over two hundred thousand lines in this file. I had no idea there were so many old cars around here.”

“Half of them are in my neighbor’s yard,” Frank replied around a mouthful of crackers. He leaned against the counter, scanning the front page while he crunched noisily. “You see this?”

“You just brought the paper in.”

Frank held it up and Mick glanced at the headline.

“The Professor, huh?”

“Yeah, he’s made the big time. Bastard has a name now. I’m sure he’s rejoicing, wherever the asshole is.”

“Damn. If the TV people use it on the news tonight, we’ll be stuck with it. Anything interesting in the article?”

“Let’s see...rehash of the press conference. Wasn’t *that* fun? Here we go, unnamed sources...believe he’s a professor at one of the local colleges. Is that official now?” Frank looked up, an amused expression on his face. “Where do they get this stuff?”

“Did Terri Blankenship write the article?”

Frank glanced at the paper. “How’d you know?”

“Rumor has it Andersen’s sleeping with her.”

“Ouch. Talk about sleeping with the enemy.”

“No kidding. I wonder what else he’s leaking to her. And don’t even say what you’re thinking.”

“Yeah, yeah. I guess we’ll find out tomorrow.” Frank dropped the newspaper on the counter. “How do you want to tackle the car?”

“All we have are reports of a coupe or sports car and a big engine. No one actually got a real description.” Mick’s fingers tried to smooth the tension from his forehead. He’d had a headache for days. He propped his elbows on the table, thumbs at the hinge of his jaw, fingers cradling his head. Their one clue was turning into a grain of sand on a wide Carolina beach.

Frank wandered into the dining room and peered over Mick’s shoulder.

He angled the screen so Frank could see the information. “Let’s see how many we can get rid of. If we ignore the generic Chevy and Ford four-door sedans, that cuts it nearly in half.”

“Get rid of all the trucks too,” the other agent suggested.

Mick further narrowed the list by excluding the foreign cars. He paged through the remaining records. “Corvettes didn’t have big enough trunks to conceal a body.”

“Thunderbirds were clubby boats by then,” Frank said. “They had big engines, but they weren’t cool enough for our guy to be driving one now.”

“The clerk did say it was a coupe.”

“You were what in the eighties? Two? Three? I was in college. I can’t believe that was thirty years ago.” Frowning, Frank drummed his fingers on the table. “What were the tough guys driving?”

“British cars were hot when I was in high school.” Mick stretched, remembering a time that seemed so simple in retrospect. “Old Triumphs and MGs. Jeeps and Blazers were big. Lots of 4x4s As far as domestics went, we’re talking Mustangs, Camaros or Trans Ams.”

“They’ve been around a long time. Seems like they were big when I was in high school too.”

There were thousands of them. He cursed the mild South Carolina climate that didn’t turn cars into rusting hulks, eaten away by salt like the cars of the Northeast and Midwest. They’d have to find and investigate the owners of each car.

Frank hung over his shoulder. “It would help if they’d included the exterior color.”

Mick’s attention caught on the Vehicle Identification Number. “The manufacturer would have everything—including the original body color and interior package. Clark said the fibers were old. They could be the original carpets.”

“Good idea,” his partner nodded. “It’s possible he repainted the car, but we can at least start with the shorter list.”

Mick’s fingers danced over the keys, sorting the remaining cars by maker, then model, and sent each manufacturer the relevant VIN list, requesting specifications. As much publicity as this case had generated, he knew he’d have no trouble getting the information.

The message list refreshed with the outgoing requests, and the incoming message tone sounded.

“That was quick.”

“‘File received’ confirmations,” Mick said. He pointed at the screen. “Who’s Kevin Rynd?” The message subject line read, “Investigation.”

“Agnes Scott address. Did we talk to him when we interviewed people at the college after Baldwin’s murder?”

“I don’t think so.” Mick opened the message.

*Miss Geiger—Emily, since I have been intimate with her—is not young and beautiful any longer. Such is the cost of war. Soldiers die, women break. She is not the first, nor will she be the last.*

What the hell was this?

*Emily foolishly believed in her own abilities. Women have neither the strength of mind nor body to compete with men. Soon they will recognize this and return to their subservient position—the one they have held throughout history as man’s property and indulgence.*

“My God,” he murmured. “Read this.”

He turned the laptop so Frank could see the screen. “The asshole’s sending *me* e-mail now.”

*At the end, Emily’s struggles were pathetic, but her fear, her terror, was very real.*

Anger clamped Mick’s jaw like a vise. The contemptuous bastard.

*You understand the exhilaration of wielding authority over others.*

What? Was this scumbag trying to draw a comparison with what the police did?

*But you can’t imagine the bliss, the rapture, of holding the scales of life itself. Will Emily die today? Or tomorrow? Or should I show mercy to the vanquished? Why should I? Emily signed her own fate when she haughtily assumed random, genetically provided features afforded her special compensations.*

*What about the next one? Shall she die, as well? It is not her decision. It is up to you. It will be on your conscience, not mine.*

Don’t lay that on me, you asshole. Even as he rejected it, Mick felt the taunt hit home.

*How confident are you of your abilities? You stand at the fringes of my battles, my successes, looking manly and proud, but we know it is a charade. You follow my lead, waiting for any bread crumbs I deign to throw your way. I have the upper hand—and I’m laughing at you.*

“Jesus,” Frank said.

“Amen,” Mick answered.