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It was a hot, dusty 100 degree day in El Paso when his plane landed from O'Hare Airport. He found himself in good humor, actually looking forward to the plant visit later in the day, across the border. Working for a large American manufacturing conglomerate, his company had established several factories along the US - Mexican border taking advantage of the low labor costs. He enjoyed his visits into Mexico.

The girls there were so young, so fiery...so ripe.

They were naive, as well. Just the way he liked them.

Many came to the big city from the small, southern towns seeking jobs, money and husbands. They were naive to the ills of the world, and smooth-talking men had no trouble taking advantage of them. Most times, their dreams went unfulfilled, usually forcing them to leave town disgraced and pregnant.

He especially enjoyed visiting Juarez. The girls were quick to submit to an American who fancied them, especially when that American fed on their dreams. It didn't hurt that he was fluid in Spanish.

He enjoyed walking the shop floor, eyeing the tight pants and skimpy tops the young girls wore in the steamy-hot plant. He watched for new batches of recruits on each visit and mentally selected which lucky lady would be his next conquest. It was getting to be so easy that he knew the shine would wear off soon.

But until it did, he was going to enjoy it.

Grabbing his bags from the overhead, careful not to jar or mishandle the camcorder inside, he exited the plane into the blinding Texas sun.

It was a good day for someone to die.

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Late afternoon soon turned to dusk as he slowly pulled out of the plant parking lot in his rented van. Turning onto the main boulevard, he saw the young girl that held his fascination all day. She was a radiant seniorita, with long, flowing, jet-black hair, full lips and a smoking body barely concealed in a tight mini skirt and tube top. He watched her breasts bounce in perfect

unison with each of her steps. The moment he set eyes on her, he knew she had to be his.

Watching her saunter confidently down the street toward the bus stop he felt a hot longing in his loins. His breath quickened as he fantasized his hands and mouth furiously working over her sweltering body.

Pulling up beside her, his vehicle stayed parallel to her. At first, she pretended not to notice him, throwing small glances at him from behind her shoulder. A girlish giggle escaped her lips as she suddenly stopped and sassily put her hands on her hips.

“Is there something you want?” she asked him audaciously in Spanish, her mouth curling up in a mischievous grin.

“Actually, beautiful lady,” he answered perfectly in her native tongue, “I was hoping to be able to give you a ride and save you a trip on that old, stuffy bus.”

“Is that all you had in mind?” she answered seductively, approaching the car. It was apparent that the good-natured banter between the two all day long had helped ease any tension or concerns in her mind.

She was attracted to him, and why shouldn't she be? He was young, blond, clean cut and good-looking with the physique of an athlete. Working out to fine tune his chiseled body was as much for them - his conquests - as it was for himself.

Now, flashing his warmest smile, exposing perfect white teeth, he leaned over and opened the passenger door to allow her in. Without hesitation, she jumped in, her tight miniskirt rising up even further, exposing her beautiful, smooth thighs.

Her skirt wasn't the only thing rising, as he visualized what goodness those tan thighs led to.

He had the perfect plan for tonight. His designation was one of Mexico's infamous auto-motels, where he would pull his car into a small garage unseen, and an attendant would draw the door down behind him. From there, it was a simple matter of a few steps to the adjoining room where a small bed awaited the two.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“Of course I am,” she teased.

“So am I,” he replied.

As the beautiful Mexican girl closed the car door, he drove off.

She would never be seen again.

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Crossing the United States - Canadian border was never a problem for the tall, voluptuous, especially here at the Port Huron - Sarnia check point. The border guards were thorough, but with the right attitude and answers, they never quite questioned her deep enough. To minimize suspicions regarding her frequent visits into Canada, she used stolen license plates from Detroit, knowing full well the border patrol kept tabs on all cars crossing the border.

Though by average, she was taller than most of the female population, her vibrant blonde hair and natural good looks always caused men to take another glance in her direction. She utilized her tantalizing beauty in her nightly trolls in area bars looking for men that intrigued her.

As her car pulled up to the guard shack, the border official leaned out the window.

“Nationality?”

“United States,” she answered.

“Where ya headed?”

“I’m going to Toronto to attend a conference. I’m returning tomorrow.”

“Staying only one night?”

*Yeah, right Sherlock isn’t that what I already said?*, she thought, but didn’t verbalize.

“That’s all I’ll need,” she smiled deeply as he waved her through.

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Stopping midway between Sarnia and Toronto in the outskirts of a small town, she signed into a dive-motel under an assumed name, paid in Canadian cash and walked to her room. Once there, she stripped the bed, substituting a rubber mattress cover and silk sheets for the conventional, cotton, motel coverings.

Moving quickly, she pulled a tripod from her luggage and set up a tiny camcorder at the foot of the bed. Giving the room a final once over, confident everything was in order; she quickly showered and changed into a shape-hugging sweater dress. Donning ruby-red lipstick and reapplying her makeup, she was now ready to troll.

She liked that spur of the moment.

She didn't pre-select her companions preferring instead to leave any meeting up to chance. Depending upon what she was in the mood for determined where she decided to hang out. In the mood for a cowboy - she'd frequent a country-western bar. Looking for a red neck? She'd march down to the corner, neighborhood beer garden. More upscale, sophisticated types? She'd find a more pretentious hangout, complete with three-piece suits, lawyers and enough men with big egos just itching to test their masculinity on a 'tall drink of water.'

She eyed all these men with nothing but contempt. The married ones were the worst - so cynical and pompous, first striking up conversations with her centering around their family and the importance of a solid foundation before degrading the discussion with words and moves earmarked to get her in the sack.

Many of these self-centered idiots, their rooster feathers boldly displayed, their chests extended in a macho huff, were so easily led by the tip of their dicks. She stroked their mighty egos first, getting them all hot and bothered, and then played to their manhood in order to trap them within her sinister web.

By the time the men were in her room, all they concentrated on was the hot, animal sex they were about to indulge in. She found that when men were in this state of mind, there wasn't anything they wouldn't do, including bondage and discipline. Introducing them to her video camera had always been a non-event.

Of course, this made it extremely simple for her.

Pulling various gadgets like handcuffs, leather straps and mouth gags from her baggage seemed to excite the men even more. Deep down, she reasoned that all men just wanted to be dominated. It wasn't until she started the recorder and pulled out other paraphernalia from her bags, did her slave boys react differently. It was truly amazing to watch the anxiety-ridden recoils she received with the simple snapping of her thick, leather whip.

The rubber mattress cover always came in handy for those times that these, strong, macho men lost the ability to hold their water. This usually happened after a couple quick strikes across their bodies.

The obscure motel setting gave her the luxury to take her time, to have her way with them, to punish them for all the things that mankind had done

to her. The video would serve as her reminder, of her ability - her power - to command respect and authority.

Hours later, after fully satisfying herself, she would finish it. Based on the circumstance, it would either be quick or slow - depending on how well he served and satisfied her.

But always, for the camera.

It was her way of immortalizing her lovers, giving them one last shot at stardom - at least within her household.

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Tonight would be no different. She was in a tempest mood. The urge, the itch within her needed to be desperately scratched. It'd been a long time and she needed her fix.

Walking confidently towards the front door, knowingly allowing the form-fitting dress to slowly climb up her thighs, she could feel all eyes upon her as she seductively walked to the bar and sat down on a bar stool.

Looking up into the blue eyes of a handsome, unshaven man to her right, she pulled out a cigarette from its case and held it lovingly up to her lips. His quick reaction to offer a light and completely ignore his two companions in the process ensured he was the one.

"Hi, my name is Terrence. My friends call me Terry," he said confidently.

"Ohhh!," she cooed, "Hi Terry. My name is Lynn Ann."

She gave him her sincerest smile and he quickly reciprocated.

There was no denying it, she was in lust.

She couldn't help but think how beautiful he'd look on camera.

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Julia Sorenson was also traveling today. She was on the last leg of a three city tour, touting her book. Although there had been an extensive marketing and publicity campaign when her book originally came out in hardcover, her agent and editor both thought it was prudent for her to hit the campaign trail one last time when the paperback edition was published. She reluctantly agreed and after getting approval for some unpaid, personal time from the newspaper, off she went.

Of course, she didn't choose the cities she visited. Her editor suggested she hit the major markets, particularly those whose chief newspapers gave substantial headline space to not only the story but the

aftermath, as well. After spending two days each in Los Angeles, New York and Chicago, she was ready to come home.

Now, Julia was merely a plane ride - and an hour - away from home. Though her agent deemed the trip successful, Julia reflected on why she disliked book signings and the long, boring hours between book store visits. There was little doubt how she reveled in all the publicity, but there were certain things she could do without.

Sitting alone and waiting for planes were high on her dislike list. True, airports gave her a great opportunity to people watch, but that grew old quickly. She longed to return to her home...her roots and be comfortable again.

Her father was waiting at the other end for her. He had insisted when she flew out at the beginning of the week that he drop her off at the airport. That way, he reasoned that he would be able to pick her up. Of course, he had ulterior motives. Today was her twenty first birthday. Ever since her mother died, she and her Dad had a pact about spending their special days together. Julia knew that one day, when she finally found Mister Right that tradition could come to a squelching halt. But until that day, she was going to continue to enjoy her father's presence.

Julia flicked her cell phone open and pressed a single digit on her speed dial. Her father answered on the third ring.

"Hello?"

Julia smiled deeply at the low, gravel voice. God, how she loved this man. He'd been the Rock of Gibraltar throughout her life. Julia seriously doubted whether she'd ever be able to make it all up to him.

"Daddy?," she replied, "It's me. I'm in Chi-town. The plane is on time, and we board in thirty minutes. I just wanted to let you know."

"Thanks sweetheart. I'm just wrapping up a few things here and then I'll be heading for the airport. Did you have a good trip?"

"Pretty good. You know how it goes. It'll be good to get home, though. Where are we going to dinner?"

"My surprise," he said cheerfully. He liked to surprise his daughter. "But...I'm bringing a guest with me."

Before she could lodge a complaint, he quickly went on.

"I know...I know, you're thinking it's our special night - "

"But Dad..."

" - except...this gentleman has been pretty persistent. Calling...coming over...I think he deserves a break..."

*Jared!*

It was obvious he was talking about Jared Barnes. Local FBI agent and current on again - off again - beau. Jared had been a strong supporter for her in the FBI's Detroit branch during the Rochester child killing spree last year and both of them quickly developed a close bond that blossomed into romance.

He was a tall, athletic man in his late twenties. With his rugged looks and jet-black hair, Julia was sure that if Jared wasn't so introverted with women, he'd have his pick of eligible beauties. It was her good fortune not only to have met him during the investigation, but to have been bold enough to approach and initiate their relationship.

Lately though, the relationship had cooled somewhat.

*Not that it hadn't had its rocky moments before.*

At the end of the Rochester story, she had felt set up and discarded by Jared when he allowed the then, Section Chief Levins to badger her into changing certain facts of the story. True, everything eventually turned out well and she recognized stardom and a booming career in journalism as a result, but it didn't take away the entire sting from that abandonment.

With the intervention of friends, she and Jared finally reconciled. This time it wasn't based on a story or a case, but rather, two people who were desperately looking for someone to share their life with.

For the last couple of months, things had gone smoothly. Jared was there with her father and friends when she marched onto stage to accept her Degree in Journalism in late fall, and was a frequent guest during the holidays. They even took a winter vacation together out west for a week to get away from everything.

But suddenly Jared's job took precedence. And when it happened, Julia didn't like it. She understood how committed he was to the Bureau, but what she couldn't comprehend was his reluctance to talk about it.

"It's not like I'm going to compromise you and write about it," she remembered saying to him early one morning a couple weeks ago. Even now, she found it somewhat amusing that the conversation took place while they both lay naked in her bed.

They'd just had outstanding sex and were discussing their schedules for the upcoming week. That was when Jared informed her of his plans to travel to Texas to follow up on a similar murder to the one he was currently investigating. She was amazed - and a little hurt - when he changed the subject after she started hurling questions.

"That's not the point," he argued. "Part of your job is to report news, you know that!"

"But, I wouldn't jeopardize you or your case, Jared. Never!"

“I know, Julia. That’s not what I’m saying - ”

“Then what are you saying? That you can’t trust me? Huh? That if you tell me, I’m going to print a story about it? Huh? That I’d trade on our bedroom talk?”

“No,” Jared replied sheepishly, “that’s not what I mean - ”

“Then explain it to me!”

“Shit!” Jared swung the sheet off him and jumped out of bed. He was obviously agitated. “That’s what I’ve been trying to do!” His voice rose in anger. “You keep interrupting me!”

Suddenly, Julia started laughing at the sight of her irate boyfriend standing there naked, his manhood jingling and jumping the more his anger rose.

“What? Now what?” He was amazed at her abrupt change.

“T-That...,” she laughed pointing toward his groin. “I-I’m...s-sorry...”

She couldn’t stop, her laugh grew more hysterical. For a fraction of a second, he was tempted to join in with her. Instead, he grew even more infuriated and lost his temper.

“That’s what’s wrong with you,” he barked, catching her by surprise as he swiftly dressed. “You never listen to me...you think everything is funny!”

Julia was stunned. She didn’t understand why he was so upset. What did she do?

“Whatcha mean? Where are you going?” She knelt up in bed, startled that Jared was about to storm out of the condo.

“I got things to do,” he sternly replied, never meeting her eyes. “I’ll call you later...”

She thought about jumping up to change his mind, to convince him not to leave, then thought otherwise. As she heard him storm out, slamming the front door in protest, she sank back into bed and folded her arms over her bare chest.

He’d be back, she thought. She’d let him throw off steam and then he’d be back.

Only, he didn’t come back.

Jared picked one of his worse moments to become stubborn. Between his work schedules and her book signings, they hadn’t seen or talked to each other in over two weeks. Apparently, he’d been talking to her dad, though.

“Julia...,” her father’s voice snapped her back to attention, “are you there? Have you heard me?”

“Yes, Dad, I heard you. And I know you mean well, but Jared owes me an apology...and he’s not going to do it in front of you during dinner. I’m sorry.”

“Julia - ”

“I’m sorry Dad. If you persist, then the two of you can enjoy dinner and I’ll catch a cab home. I mean it! Please call him and let him know or don’t bother showing up at the airport.”

“Come on sweetheart. He feels bad enough - ”

“Good! He should! He’s the one who walked out on me! Tonight’s our night! I’m not ruining it...or chance ruining it. I mean it Dad!”

She could hear the deep sigh on the other side of the phone. She didn’t like displaying her anger toward her father, but felt it was necessary. He needed to understand how she felt and that she was no longer the little girl requiring his constant assistance. In a way, she was a little pissed off that he would invite Jared without consulting her. If he persisted, she was liable to just call tonight off.

Which was the last thing she wanted to do.

She had been looking forward to tonight all week.

Julia held her breath waiting for her father’s response.

“Okay, sweetheart. I’m sorry that I invited him without your knowledge. If you feel so strongly...I’ll call Jared to cancel...”

He waited for her to change her mind...but, after a couple moments passed in silence, he realized that wasn’t about to happen. God, his daughter could be a stubborn SOB, but didn’t she get that from him?

“Will your plane still arrive at the same gate?,” he asked, making conversation.

“Yeah...we’re boarding soon,” she replied, now a little pissed and a hurt that tonight’s activities had the shine rubbed off it a little. She silently cursed herself for the way she acted, and although a small part of her wanted to apologize, she didn’t.

“Well then...,” he said, knowing this conversation was going nowhere and wondering if later in the evening would be any different. “I’ll let you go. I’ll see you at the gate, honey. I love you.”

“Thanks Dad, I love you too. See ya.”

With a single flick, her phone was off as she slumped deeper into the imitation leather chair. Maybe the weight of the current road trip had expended her patience to the limit, causing her to go off the deep end with her father. But, didn’t she have the right? Who was he to play matchmaker with her when he hadn’t had a date himself in years? She thought she’d bring that point up to him later tonight.

“...rough getting parents to listen...”

“Huh?” Julia was lost in thoughts as she turned toward the voice.  
“Pardon me?”

“Oh! I’m sorry!” the young man sitting two chairs from her said. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop...I just commented that sometimes it’s hard to get parents to listen.”

“Ah ah...,” Julia flashed him an insincere smile. She wasn’t exactly in the mood to give this guy any more encouragement. The last thing she wanted was to engage him in additional conversation.

It wasn’t that he was bad looking, either. In fact, if truth be told, he was rather good looking. Blond, athletic, very stylish. She immediately noticed the stainless Rolex watch, the nice Italian pants and the freshly polished shoes. Her father always told her you could tell a lot about a man the way he takes care of his shoes.

“I’m sorry if I offended you,” he said, “it’s just that I have elderly parents at home, and man-oh-man, they think that living eighty years gives them the ultimate right to always be correct. You know what I mean?”

She giggled slightly.

“Actually, I don’t, sorry. My Dad’s not that old and there is that rare moment when he actually admits to being wrong.”

She smiled again, this time more soundly. Looking at his left hand, she noticed no ring or indentation.

“Yeah, well...you’ll get there,” he reassured her, “I never believed it, either.”

“Your parents stay with you?”

Now it was the stranger’s turn to smile.

“Yes. It’s better that way. I travel, so I don’t get overwhelmed by them, but this way I’m assured they’re taken care of. You know?”

“Wow...that’s sweet,” Julia answered. “The relationship my father and I have, I can envision us doing that. He means the world to me...”

“Just don’t make decisions for you, right?” he smiled, motioning toward her cell phone and she quickly caught his reference.

“Ah...,” she laughed, “...right. He was trying to set me up on a date tonight. I let him know it wasn’t appreciated.”

She didn’t know why she was explaining this to a stranger, but felt compelled, nonetheless.

“Well, to me, a pretty girl like you should have no problem finding her own dates. Am I right?”

“I...don’t know about that.” She smiled again and felt her face go flush. Against her better nature, she was finding the conversation and him very enjoyable. Julia was quickly warming up to him.

“By the way, my name’s Julia.” She extended her hand.

“Mine’s Paul. Nice to meet you. By the way...,” his index finger came up as if he suddenly recognized her, “...aren’t you Julia Sorenson? The reporter on that awful Rochester child killing case a while back? I read your book!”

She blushed, embarrassed that he recognized her and further self-conscious that he bought her book.

“Yeah...I’m that Julia. Hopefully, you enjoyed the book. You must be from Michigan, then.”

“Why, yes I am, as a matter of fact,” Paul suddenly blurted. He was obviously quite excited to be sharing an airport waiting area with a celebrity. “I live in Birmingham...you know where that is...yeah, stupid question. But, I followed that whole case in the papers. How you reported...and scooped the experienced reporters.

“But it wasn’t until I read the book that I really understood all you went through. It must have been terrifying!”

He leaned into her, invading her space. For some reason, she didn’t mind.

“Does that experience still bother you? I mean...I don’t mean to offend, but, what was it like when you came face to face with the clown?”

*The clown.*

*Did the experience bother her?*

There wasn’t a day...or a night...that she didn’t think or have nightmares about that clown.

How could she not? After all, she’d been through with him, finding the two drugged girls on the floor and the terror she experienced when the killer burst on the scene. Julia had never been that close to death before in her life.

The clown killed a Sheriff Deputy in cold blood before her and then turned on her. Julia could still envision the sight, could still smell the coppery scent of blood that flowed from the deputy’s head onto the hardwood floor. Her scalp still ached where the sadist killer yanked and held her in his grasp, terrorizing her with the knowledge that he could take her life away at a moment’s whim.

But that never happened. Her friend, Jack Saunders and his Special Forces unit from the FBI had interceded before any more blood could be shed. The hardest part of the whole ordeal was the fact that all the

stories...the book...everything, was a lie. The forces within the Bureau made sure of that.

The official report held that the deputy was the killer. He was a brash, wife-beating, prick who became a quick patsy for the Government's ultimate goal. By protecting the real killer, and feigning that he died in the aftermath of those evening's activities, permitted the Bureau to take him into custody for their own, personal agenda.

This was all done, the cover-up all concocted, because the real killer turned out to be Brett Meirs. Meirs was a former FBI profiler and known within the Bureau for his uncanny ability to channel the dead, which aided him in solving their murders. Somehow, the years of channeling had altered him, killing off parts of his brain, causing another personality to erupt from within him.

Only, this personality was different.

It was evil.

And it represented everything that Brett Meirs had set out throughout his career to destroy.

In the end, the cruel irony wasn't lost on those closest to him, like Saunders. The unique power that had once done so much good had now literally destroyed Meirs, taking away everything that he loved, everything he cherished. Today, held securely in some deep, dark Government vault, Meirs was left with nothing but a shallow existence.

Julia did not know where Brett Meirs was.

Aside from a couple key individuals, no one - not even his family - knew the truth. To the world, Meirs died a hero, stopping the Rochester Child Killer before meeting his own, untimely death.

But Julia was one of those who knew the truth. So she waited. Waited for the day that Brett Meirs would return.

And when he did, Julia knew that the nightmares she experienced were only precursors for the terror that would be bestowed upon her. Deep down, she rationalized that was the reason she couldn't rid herself of those vile memories. Somehow, she recognized there hadn't been adequate closure for her.

"Am I still bothered?," she chuckled sarcastically, "how about a state-of-the-art alarm system, one large dog, never taking the same route home from work, never leaving the house on weekends and staying in close contact with a few FBI buddies...does that sound like I'm still having anxiety?"

Paul tried to give her a comforting laugh, but it sounded phony, though she didn't seem to notice. As soon as he asked the question, he

cursed himself because it was very apparent the subject was unsettling to her. All the points he'd accumulated with her up to this moment had all been washed away. He needed to recover quickly.

"I'm sorry...I shouldn't have brought it up."

"No, no...that's okay..."

"Really, I'm sorry! How about a better subject...how do you enjoy reporting? Now, that's got to be an exciting field."

"Well," Julia began, and her low tone immediately told Paul this wasn't the uplifting area he envisioned it to be, either. Oh well, looked like it was strike two.

"A lot of people think it's glamorous," she continued, "but actually, you see the seedier side of society, if you really think about it. I mean, how often do you see news reports or stories touting the good nature of man?"

"I don't mean to sound like I'm bitching...I'm sorry. It's just that all we seem to report on is human tragedy. Murders...house fires...rape. When was the last, good, human interest story you've read, or seen on TV?"

"Well, I - "

"I mean," Julia went on, "if it's not the President doing something wrong, then it's some drunken Senator. Society today dictates that we dig up dirt, that's all. That's why those rag magazines at the grocery store check out lines are so popular. We all indulge in reading about the latest gossip...the latest human suffering to hit."

"I-I never looked at it quite in that light," Paul said. There was more to this young reporter than just great looks. "You make a very valid point. The news agency does feed on bad news. Then, why continue? I mean, why not get into a different line of work?"

Her face turned up as she thought the question through. Her eyes danced when she looked back toward him.

"I don't know this has been my life-long dream. To make a difference...to be a part of the bigger picture. With the Rochester case, I think I was instrumental in helping solve it, and undauntedly, I believe that could happen again. In that small way, I'm contributing. You know?"

Now Paul smiled broadly. He'd broken through.

"Yeah...I understand. That's neat. Maybe the next story you break will be even bigger than the child killer one. Maybe you'll be instrumental to the next, giant, breaking case!"

"Maybe...," she said, but didn't believe it. Many stayed in this business for years and never had the good fortune to report on a story of the magnitude she had, never mind be lucky enough to report on another major case. What were the odds on that?

“Hey, enough about me,” Julia finally said. “What about you? What do you do?”

Just then the airline attendant came on the intercom announcing the boarding of their flight to Detroit.

“Boarding time,” he announced as he stood. “How about we get together after the plane trip? I’m in first class...you?”

“Story of my life, back of the plane with all the crying kids. Why don’t you wait for me when we land? I’ll introduce you to my ole man.”

He smiled warmly.

“Gotcha. See you in Detroit.”

Then he disappeared into the tunnel.

An hour later when the plane landed, Julia searched the area for the mystery man to no avail. Maybe he’d forgotten...or maybe he just decided he wasn’t interested...it really didn’t matter. The irony that she originally didn’t even want to engage in any conversation with him in the first place, wasn’t lost on her.

This Paul was just like any other, typical man. Just couldn’t depend on them.

At least, her father was dependable.

There he was, all handsome, all smiles, just like he promised.

She rushed up into his waiting arms.

“Oh Dad, thanks,” she said, giving him a strong hug.

“Wow!,” he was surprised, “You should go away more often,” he kidded.

Across from the gate, hidden by the crowd of people rushing to meet their connections, stood Paul. He silently watched the warm embrace and allowed his glance to follow Julia and her father down the long, crowded corridor, until they both disappeared in a sea of bodies.

He found the girl very interesting.

He was sure he’d be seeing more of her.

Jack Saunders was completing some badly over-due paperwork for the Washington office when his phone rang. Since it was a double ring, he knew it was an external call. Dreading what kinds of problems could arise so late in the afternoon, he waited for it to go the traditional three rings and transfer to his assistant, Dorothy.

If the call was important enough, she'd ring in and let him know. If not, then there were few individuals who could extricate unwanted callers with the thoroughness and speed of his sharp-tongued secretary.

Confident she was taking care of the problem, Jack again turned toward his paperwork, stopping only to take out and light a new cigarette. Since he became Field Director for the Detroit office of the FBI, he'd been slow to make drastic changes in protocol and policy. But one procedure he addressed immediately - and he didn't care that people knew it was for his own benefit - *he was in charge, after all* - was the office smoking policy. Smoking was now allowed in his office and, if he was working a case, in the main conference room as well. Of course, any time someone from the main office visited, the previous protocol always went back into effect.

No use pissing off any of the big boys back in Washington.

Although, it seemed he made a career out of it.

Jack certainly didn't hear much grumbling with his new policy. In the eyes of many of the agents and office personnel, he was a hero. He did solve the Rochester Child Killings, and covered the Detroit branch against the main office's onslaught and scrutiny. In the process, a few of them got either promoted or out of hot water. His personal pets were Dorothy and Jared, and by knowing this, the rest of the office always went out of their way to accommodate them.

Jack opted for this field assignment to get away from all the political infighting within the Bureau. Being stationed in Washington just allowed for too much inquiry toward his character and his investigative methods. His maverick approach in solving cases always seemed to put him in more trouble than not.

Besides, during his work on the Rochester case, he'd grown attached to the team. Working with them reminded him of when he first joined the Bureau and the raw passions that were sorely missed today.

Though many saw his desire, and this assignment, as a career death wish, Jack felt otherwise. He saw it as an opportunity for renewal, a chance to rekindle those lost passions and to start over again.

Of course, it didn't hurt that Julia Sorenson decided to stay locally working for the Sentinel News, either. No...he didn't have any romantic designs upon her, but rather, looked at Julia in a more parental way. After all they'd been through together - certainly the sharing in the discovery of who was the Rochester killer - had created a certain bond that Jack hadn't had for years. Not since...he lost Brett Meirs as his partner, the first time.

With irritation after glancing at his calendar, he suddenly remembered what day it was. Without thinking, he swiftly lifted the phone from its cradle.

“Dorothy?,” he said when she answered.

“You should know...you called me.”

He suppressed a laugh at her biting tongue. He didn't want to provoke her. It was late in the afternoon.

“Of course...my mistake. Dorothy, I need a favor. It's Julia's birthday today and I completely forgot. I need you to send some flowers and a card for me.”

There was silence on the other end of the line. Jack realized what she was doing. She wanted to send the directive that she wasn't a typical secretary, but that message was going to be lost on him today.

“And when you're done with that,” he continued, envisioning the older, black woman seething behind her desk, “you can cut out of here for the rest of the afternoon. It's late enough, no one will notice.”

She was about to give Jack a few choice expletives, but quickly snapped her mouth shut. He was always doing this to her, bringing her to the brink of frustration only to throttle back, always with a laugh and a twinkle in his eye.

Dorothy had taken to Jack Saunders right away. Even though he had come to Detroit with much pomp and vigor, she saw through it. There were some that would say she liked him because they shared the same race and because he was more her age than anyone else in the office, but it just wasn't true.

She appreciated his sharp wit and willingness to do whatever was needed to get the job done. Jack brought a certain amount of professionalism to the many snot-nosed junior agents who felt their college degrees gave them passage into maturity.

There was no kidding around that she wasn't just a little bit attracted to him. He was good looking and his graying temples gave him a wise look. Jack had certainly been good for morale and development within this unit, especially for her.

It was for this reason that Dorothy enjoyed the good natured banter between the two comrades. Giving Jack a hard time was part of her basic make-up and that wasn't going to change. And in the end, she made damn sure he received all the support he needed behind the scenes.

Which was why she nearly lost her job a year ago.

She was diligently covering for Jack against the relentless Section Chief - now turned Assistant Director - Levins. Though it was easy being a

bitch to a prick like that, her actions certainly weren't lost on Saunders. After her infamous confrontation with Levins – the office still buzzed about it - she was accepted into Jack's inner circle and reveled as a life long friend.

“O-Okay...,” she finally answered, but Saunders had already hung up, a confident smile of victory firmly planted on his lips.

His brief moment of solitude was abruptly interrupted by a knock on his door. He knew it couldn't be Dorothy - she was too far away to have made it here that fast.

“Yeah?,” he yelled, “come in.”

Jared Barnes sheepishly entered. He knew it was late in the afternoon and it was Jack's wind down time, but what he had couldn't wait.

“Sorry, chief,” he began, inching his way into the room but waiting for full confirmation from Saunders to enter. With an irritated wave of his hand, Jack motioned his field agent closer.

“I suppose you're going to ask me for the afternoon off, so you can do something special for Julia's birthday, ay?”

The look on Jared's face confirmed to Jack that he had completely missed the mark.

“Ah...no, not exactly. I was supposed to meet her and her father for dinner tonight. That is, until she canceled that arrangement. But, that's not what I came here for.”

“This better be good, Barnes,” Jack sternly said, never taking his eyes off the blank computer screen. “I've got a lot of work to do.”

He liked Jared...liked him a lot...but it didn't mean he got cut any more slack than the next agent. In fact, he probably was on a tighter rope, considering everyone else knew how fond Jack was of him.

“It...is, Jack,” he said. He wondered whether he'd ever feel completely comfortable with this grizzled veteran.

“Well, come on! Unless you're planning on buying me dinner tonight, what's the poop?”

Finally sitting in the chair opposite the chief, Jared rubbed his hands together. Saunders momentarily thought of asking him who gave him permission to sit - just to fuck with him - but decided not to. It was apparent Jared had something nagging him. And if it nagged Jared, Jack knew it would nag him, as well.

“Jack, I think we may have an international serial killer on the screen.”

“Whatcha mean?”

“Well, you know the local case I've been following...young prostitute found hung upside down?”

When Jack's face contorted questionably, Jared went into more detail.  
"You know...decapitated, hands missing, strung up and bled?"

Jack's face flashed acknowledgment.

"We think we found another one.

"Where?"

"Juarez, Mexico. I got a call from an agent in El Paso, who happened to be working with the local DEA on something south of the border. Apparently, he saw my bulletin on the VCIP board and immediately called."

"Was he involved in the Mexico case?" Saunders' interest was heightened and he leaned over the desk toward the younger agent.

"Actually, no. Believe it or not, they were shaking down a guy who crossed over the border on suspicion of transporting. This guy held up in one of those, cheap, hourly motels in Juarez for a while. The Government guys were waiting him out.

"Then, there was a big commotion in a room down the corridor. It seems like an occupant and her john came into a startling discovery."

"Was the MO the same? Was our second victim in a similar condition?"

"Similar?," Jared answered. "I'd say. In fact, mirror image. My new-found friend managed to get me some pictures of the crime scene."

Jared pushed two large envelopes across the desk toward Jack. It was then he noticed the blank computer screen and smiled. Jack pretended not to notice.

Opening the contents of the two packages, the Field Director quickly laid the photos out before him. Mentally scanning the pictures, he leaned back and closed his eyes.

"Did you make contact with the Mexican officials?"

"Yes sir."

"And - ?"

"Not much help. They're claiming it's a drug hit. Somebody's sending a message."

"Can you get any information? Age of the victim? Witnesses...was she a working girl...anything?"

Jared shook his head slowly.

"I'm trying, but..." he arched his shoulders.

"What about this, 'new-found friend' of yours? Surely he has contacts."

"That's what I'm shooting for," Jared replied. "But so far, it's a dead end."

Saunders whirled his chair around and faced the windows. He was deep in thought and Jared didn't know whether he should leave or just remain. He decided to wait.

"Who's working this with you?," Jack's voice startled him to attention.

"Ah...Smith..."

"Call Washington. Remember that one forensic expert who helped us out last year...the woman?"

"Arnet?"

"Yeah. The woman with brass balls. I liked her. She knew her stuff and didn't take shit from anyone. Give her a call. Ask her if she's got some free time. Ask her to keep it quiet for now. This way, it'll cover our asses later if we find that there really is an international killer."

Saunders turned his chair so that his full focus was once again on Jared.

"And when you're done, do me a favor will ya? Call Julia and make amends."

Then Saunders returned his attention back onto the blank computer screen signaling an end to the conversation.