

The background of the cover is a photograph of a city skyline at night, seen through a window covered in raindrops. The skyline is dark, with some lights visible. There are three paw prints scattered across the image: one near the top right, one near the middle right, and one near the bottom center. The text is overlaid on this background.

nine
black
lives

Resa McConaghy

NINE BLACK LIVES

By

Resa McConaghy

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Dedication

To Leo Orenstein

1919 – 2009

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Nicky Faime was an actor who played a cop to perfection. His dark eyes pierced. His measured words convinced. He was a drag net. He couldn't help it. He was born that way.

Nicky had forty-four years of life under his belt, twenty-six as an actor. For all his pretending, as Nicky called it, he now pulled in an easy ten anytime he signed. His lifestyle was costly, but Nicky wasn't worried. His box office showed no signs of slumping; so he knew the industry would just keep on pumping out any Nicky Faime project it could get its hands on.

Expectedly, Nicky's career was a jaded reality, and his aspiration to play meaningful roles remained out of focus. Sure, Nicky thought he could act; but his looks and charisma that were once his ticket onto the big screen and made him a star, were now in his way of discovering any substantial talent he might possess. Nicky had made thirty different movies, but exposing his full range of ability never stood a chance, because as Nicky knew better than anyone, those thirty different movies were really only one movie. They were one movie made thirty different ways.

Sunken deep into his leather couch, Nicky read the last line of a script. Without contemplation, he tossed it toward a messy heap of previously rejected scripts. It fell short, landing on the front page of a newspaper whose scattered pages swept through the spacious living room to join a haphazard installment of empty wine bottles, dishes and ashtrays.

Are all the great writers dead? Nicky wondered, as he rose from the couch. He dragged his feet over to the ditched script

then kicked it onto the reject heap. Nicky had read each script in that pile, and during the course of it all had managed to acquire the impressive disarray he now wallowed in.

There were times Nicky felt at peace in this room, his living room. There was oneness about the way the Neo Deco interior design worked with the Art Deco architecture. Oneness was Zen, and Zen was in. Yet, there was nothing Zen about the unceremonious dispersion around him. Nicky had fallen into an un-Zen bohemian existence, more befitting of a tortured searching artist than a jaded frustrated actor.

Fact is; it had taken Nicky three weeks to waste his living room. Three weeks and one day ago he'd given Ilena, his full-time personal assistant, time off with pay. Carlos, his major-domo, had been offered the same deal.

After that Nicky had sequestered himself, had done nothing but read any script his agent, Leo, had sent him. Nicky had wanted to work, but he had craved a role to shake off his stereotype. Nicky hadn't cared about the money. He'd cared about an award winning worthy part.

Christ, I'd do a student movie if I could break free, Nicky had sworn to Leo at that time.

Nicky had then asked Leo to send over all the latest script submissions, and not just the one's that had made Leo's real-money cut. Nicky had wanted to see the lower budgets and the arty independents. Nicky had wanted to read them all for himself. Leo could have missed something.

The first thing Nicky had done once the scripts had started arriving was to blur the line between days and nights. By closing

every curtain, blind or drape in the apartment, Nicky had staged a darkened seamless world for himself.

The second thing Nicky had done was to drag a reading lamp out from his den and position it behind a corner of the sofa. Then once the scripts had all been piled on the coffee table, he'd grabbed a coffee, lit a smoke and stretched out on the couch. Nicky had read and read, until all was read.

All was read because Leo wasn't sending over any more scripts, not until he got some feedback from Faime.

Leo had been Nicky's agent from day one, and had called him Faime from day one. To everyone else he was Nicky, Nicky Faime or Mr. Faime. Anyway, Nicky hadn't called Leo since he'd begun reading. Nicky also hadn't shown up at any scheduled event for the last three weeks.

Nicky didn't need to call Leo just to hear Leo tell Nicky to at least make the odd public appearance!"

"Appearances," Nicky scoffed out loud, rubbing his chin's near beard, as he shuffled over to a marble sculpture conscripted into a table for a pack of cigarettes and a remote.

Nicky pulled a smoke out of the pack, fired it up and took a couple of drags deep into his lungs. He stretched his arms out, feeling the cigarette's addictive refreshment.

As he exhaled, Nicky glanced around for an ashtray. They were all full. He spotted a ceramic dish on the coffee table, and retrieved it. As he moved the dish over to the pedestal, he moaned. Nicky was remembering that it was the last of Carlos'

homemade frozen microwave dinners, last night's dinner. "What the hell am I going to eat tonight?" he wondered out loud.

Nicky scooped up the remote. With the push of a button, floor to ceiling window treatments parted letting in a pearl gray day. Its falling snow mysteriously diffused Nicky's Upper West Side view over Manhattan. Soaking up his apartment's view was an inspiration to Nicky, an inspiration he'd deprived himself of for three weeks. Now, after such a lengthy deprivation, the inspiration was explosive. He'd counted on it.

What he hadn't counted on was the sleazy chill he now felt surrounding him. Nicky rubbed his arms in an effort to warm it away. The chill escaped his attempt to erase it, and slid across the back of his neck. He looked out on his shrouded view of the city. It seemed an omen, a warning.

Nicky instinctively understood that he had to go out there, but for what? He wasn't sure. What he was sure of was that; in three weeks he'd come to hungrily miss the world and all that its Status Quo had to offer. He was ready to rejoin himself with the external doings of life, to put his inner quest on a back burner. At least that's what he thought he was thinking.

Carlos is going to be pissed, Nicky groaned inside himself, as he returned his attention to the living room. He scanned the room for his Phone. He hadn't seen it for days. He knew it was out of juice. Nicky had tried calling it several times earlier in the day, but his apartment had remained silent.

Within the darkened den-like mood of the apartment, Nicky had taken a comfort in the chaos. At that time, it had seemed to be an outer expression of his inner turmoil. Now in the light of

day, gray as it was, there was no comfort. There was only confusion.

I've got to get out of here, Nicky concluded, as he butt his smoke. He grabbed the pack and the dish. He took off to Ilena's office, where it was tidy, where it was organized and where he could think.

Nicky sat in Ilena's chair, behind Ilena's desk. He drank in Ilena's large uncluttered office.

Eight paintings, all contemporary, all American and all in faux Deco frames lined the three walls that were without windows. The window, its view of the park languishing between dark panne velvet drapes, was the backdrop for Ilena's conference area. Brocade upholstered chairs with armrests were readied around a fabulous Deco dining table, where they graciously awaited some future scheduled meeting or important spur of the moment happening.

Nicky's decision to isolate himself had been an important spur of the moment happening. It had totally taken everyone, everyone except Ilena, by surprise. Ilena was never usurped by anything Nicky did. She expected the unexpected. She was always ready to simply unplug her power book, and head off in whatever direction necessary.

Nicky scanned the polished surface of Ilena's desk. He stopped to admire the clean and perfect rectangle reserved for her laptop. He threw his pack of smokes onto it. He placed the dish beside it. Her land phone was in perfect ergonomic position to his right. Nicky hit the speaker button, and thumbed in the numbers that would take him to Lara St. James.

Nicky could hear ringing, as he was connected to Lara's phone. Lara, Nicky's latest, was a gorgeous piece of work. She was twenty-four years old, had long blonde hair to go with her big blue eyes and a brimming C-cup. The mere scent of her approaching intoxicated Nicky.

Originally from California, Lara had been raised on the settlement plan. Meaning: her first serious relationship should include marriage to someone of property, no pre-nup and at least one child. Love could come in some later affair, once a generous settlement had been reached.

Six months ago, Nicky and Lara had met on the set of his latest movie. She'd secured a position in the Beauty Department. Nicky found it appealing that Lara worked behind the scenes. It made her seem real, unpretentious. Lara found it appealing that not only was Nicky rich and famous, but attractive enough to want to have sex with. Lara's on the spot decision that Nicky would be the father of her first child was a natural.

The ringing ceased and the luscious voice of Lara St. James wafted through the speaker. "Oh Nicky! I've missed you so much!"

"I missed you, too," Nicky's tone was static. "Dinner at Bella's?" He suggested.

"Sounds delicious!" Lara's voice encouraged.

"Eight?"

"Great! Um, Nicky, I don't know. I mean I've had a lot of time to think about things while you've been on your quest for a

meaningful role. I mean you're so deep and everything. I love you!"

"I know." Nicky responded, still static." See you at eight."

Lara continued purring goodbye as Nicky hit disconnect then speed dial. Ilena was up. Her mere hello was full of efficiency.

"Ilena, holiday's over. You're back tomorrow. See if Carlos can come in today. The place is a mess."

"He'll be there in an hour." she responded, no hesitation. Ilena had known all along Nicky's retreat would end at any time, just the way it had started. Ready! Set! Go! For three weeks, she had waited in the gate.

Nicky stared at the frayed Designer jeans he was wearing, scratched the scruffy patches of hair on his face and ran a finger through his oily hair. The least he could do was to clean up before the over-worried Carlos arrived. "Make it two hours," Nicky instructed.

"Understood," Ilena replied. She didn't bother to say goodbye. She knew she wouldn't get one in anyway.

Nicky hit speed dial. He took a cigarette and lighter out of the pack then stuck the cigarette in the corner of his mouth. As he was about to light it, the voice of Leo's secretary interrupted.

"Good Morning, Leo Mann Agency! How may I help you?"

"Sylvie, it's Nicky Faime. I want to talk to Leo!"

“Right away Mr. Faime!” Sylvie hid her crush on Nicky, Leo Mann’s number one client, with over officiousness.

Leo Mann sat behind his desk, backlit in a window with a power view of Manhattan’s business district. His desk, a large piece of taupe tinted glass set on a stainless steel structure, had no drawers. It was powerful, elusive and neutral, just like Leo. That’s not to say he was without emotions, but Leo didn’t take sides with his or anyone else’s feelings. It was a pragmatic stance. It got things to happen. Of course all that neutrality was covered up warmly with Leo’s own brand of bad jokes.

Leo was working his way through a pile of headshots and wondering when the hell Faime would call when Sylvie put Nicky through. “Faime, you back or just out for air?” Leo started with his humor.

“I’m back,” Nicky stated.

“This is great news Faime, great news. So, did you like the arty independent piece I sent you?”

“**The Fish Fry?**” Nicky’s voice sighed. “It reads like a recipe, not a movie.”

“Well then, what about the gay detective musical thing.” Leo asked.

“I don’t sing. I don’t dance,” Nicky reminded.

“Exactly!” Leo agreed then pointed out, “There’s the stretch.” Nicky’s silence was Leo’s answer. “What about the low budget vampire story? It’s got a good twist at the end.”

“What? So I could play a dead blood sucking cop in a cape, again.”

Leo could hear the dissatisfaction in Nicky’s voice, and understood there wasn’t anything in any of the scripts that would change Nicky’s life. Leo had always known that. He also knew Nicky had to ascertain that for himself.

“There’s nothing of import in any of the scripts you sent me. It’s the same old crap.”

“I’m in complete agreement, Faime. What do you want me to do?”

“Art can wait! I’ve decided to go for the money. At least cash gets everything else I need, and maybe in the end even that elusive role. Hell, I could hire a writer to do up one of my own stories.”

Leo had heard all this before. He knew things sounded good to go, at least for now. There was, however, the dangling leftover about Nicky hiring a writer. Leo would keep his eyes on that, look for diversions. He would push harder for a script that would break the type casting. After all, Leo didn’t want a repeat of five years ago.

Back then Nicky had become inspired to pen his own script. As a result he had taken a writer, Ilena and Carlos to the Bahamas. For six paradisiacal months they’d lived, worked and played in a private villa beside the ocean. Unfortunately, the only book that had come out of the deal was a ledger book of debits totaling a cool half mil.

“So it’s back to work with a big studio.” Leo led in optimistically. “Should I toss the arty, low budget scripts?”

“Yeah,” Nicky confirmed. ”Big Studio, big money; what else matters for now?”

“Nothing! You’ve made a smart choice Faime. All right, that leaves four scripts in the running. There’s the two cop movies, you’d play a detective in both. Then there’s the spy thing with special effects. You’d play a double agent. Last one’s a western. You’d play the sheriff. Any thoughts?” The input thing was a huge key to working with Nicky, therefore, Leo was constantly checking in at any point of the process.

“Yeah, I think we should pick the one with the highest dollar offer. Oh, and if the winner’s the script where Detective Black gets shot, you know the one?”

“Nine Black Lives?”

“That’s it! The scene when Black comes out of his coma, it’s all wrong. Where’s his wife? See that scene gets rewritten. Make sure they write Black’s wife in. Make sure I get some input before they do it!”

“I know the scene. It should have hills but it’s flat. Faime, if anyone can make it happen, you can. I’ll be all over it.” Leo assured.

“I know.” Nicky’s steady voice defaulted to a tone only Leo knew.

Leo never could come up with a fast one when Nicky hit him with the tone. It was straight from the heart, and nothing could

cut through. Leo went directly to sincerity. "It's great to have you back! This is good news, very good news," Nicky interrupted before Leo could finish.

"Hold on Leo! One last thing, some bad news." As he spoke, Nicky lazed back in Ilena's chair putting his feet up next to the smokes.

"What's that Faime?" Leo asked not sounding bothered. All the while Leo was thinking, it's Faime's health. I knew it! Something's wrong. There was nothing Leo needed less in this world than for Nicky to be seriously ill.

Nicky finally lit the cigarette and took a huge drag. "I started smoking again." As he exhaled, a defiant wad of smoke pummeled the speaker. Nicky hit disconnect.

Nicky took another drag and his mind drifted into Bella's restaurant, into Bella's menu. Nicky was privately amused with how Bella always tried to get Nicky to order another appetizer, but he always got the Caprese Salad.

You'll love this, Bella would say, as she'd point to an option on the menu. However, before she could say the name of the dish, Nicky would always interrupt. He'd insist to Bella that he would never sacrifice one moment of eating Bella's Caprese for any other appetizer. That's how delicious it is, he would tell her as his eyes dove into hers. What could Bella ever say?

An intensifying nuisance from between two of Nicky's fingers convinced Nicky to stop daydreaming of tonight's dinner. Nicky saw that the source of the irritation was the cigarette searing flesh between two digits, as it burned perfectly even toward its filter.

The minor pain made Nicky angry. He defied it by crushing the butt with the fingers it was burning, and then calmly placing the extinguished coal in the ashtray. A tad of skin peeled painfully away with the ash. Nicky winced, his vision blurred and all he could see were smears of red and green. As Nicky blinked several time to refocus, the sleazy chill he'd felt earlier found the back of his neck again. Nicky began to wonder if he was catching a virus.

Maybe a hot shower will take care of the chill, Nicky thought, as he arose from Ilena's chair, I have to wash and shave anyway.

Lucille Brookers flared her nostrils and inhaled the nutty aroma from a cup of hot black coffee. There was nothing she enjoyed more on these cold winter days than an almost scalding lash of java. She poised the cup eagerly to her lips. Her awaiting tongue sensed too much heat so Lucille pursed her lips and blew gently, dissipating the rising steam. Errant strands of her straight brown hair fell toward the cup. As she tucked the hairs back behind her ears, an open link in the Medic Alert bracelet that she was wearing snagged them.

“Ah rats!” Lucille sighed loudly.

Loreen, Lucille’s thirty-seven year old kid sister stood across the kitchen counter from Lucille. Loreen had a coffee of her own that she was working on cooling with a spooning technique. She looked up to see Lucille wrestling the bracelet into her hair.

“Hold still!” ordered Loreen. “You’re just making it worse.” She leaned across, and took charge of the untangling. “Looks like there’s a link that’s spread open, and some hair’s worked its way in.”

“I can fix that later. Hey, I know, let’s hang in the kitchen while we have our coffees.” suggested Lucille.

“No way!” Loreen was adamant. “I want to head right back to the Shrine.” She drew Lucille’s hairs out from the bracelet. “There,” Loreen triumphed. “You’re free. Let’s go!”

The sisters talked, laughed and sipped coffee as they strolled through the hallway of the renovated hundred year old home. They passed the archway that framed the eclectically furnished living room, before arriving at the foot of the stairs.

Again, Lucille's bracelet got tangled in her hair, so the sisters paused to de-snarl. Once rescued from her hair, Lucille decided to remove the bracelet until she would actually fix it.

"My coffee is finished," Loreen reported, as Lucille spun the bracelet on a finger.

Lucille drank the last of her coffee. "Mine too," She reported back. "We need to hit the kitchen for refills, and I should leave the bracelet in the middle of the kitchen table. I absolutely can't forget to repair it, and I can't take it upstairs. I might loose it in one of those eBay boxes.

"Absolutely!" Loreen agreed.

The girls returned to the kitchen. Loreen poured their refills, while Lucille placed her Medic Alert bracelet on a stark white linen serviette in the centre of the kitchen table. With cups and laughter temporarily sated, Lucille and Loreen returned the bottom of the stairs. They carefully climbed the narrow steep staircase to the top, opened the only door and walked into the Shrine.

Large enough to be someone's apartment, it was impossible to know what color the room was without looking up over the racks and shelving to catch a patch of pale peach wall meeting an off white ceiling.

Peering through the sliding glass doors that opened out to the deck only offered more of the same. It was a large deck that should

be being used for pleasure, not the tarp covered extension of the Shrine that it had become. Lucille secretly longed for thieves to find their way up and take all the stuff hidden under the waterproofed canvas, but no such luck.

Originally, when Lucille and her husband, Philip, had moved into their Park Slope row house, the top floor had been unnecessary to their living needs. So with Philip's blessing and much to his relief, Lucille had arranged the overflow of her career in it. At that time, after a ten-year accumulation from working in the movies, it had felt great to get all that stuff out of the way.

Fifteen years had slid by, and Lucille's career had remained hectic and rewarding.

As a result, the flotsam had mushroomed. It had become a living breathing entity of the past, and had sneakily attached itself to the present and future. It was a yoke-museum dedicated to absolutely nothing important. After all, Lucille wasn't a name on the public's lips. She never had been. She was a Costume Designer, a behind-the-scener who had constantly pack-ratted wardrobe stock. Lucille had intended to be ready for the clothing request from hell.

One of her reoccurring ordeals had been the bedtime phone call from the First AD informing her that: the Director had changed his mind about the look of the first scene up in the morning, Set Dec would work all night repainting and refurnishing the set and Lucille should bring in some previously not discussed clothing options to show the Director. He'd like to see them at six a.m., before any rooms were set.

To Lucille, there was nothing as desperate as the six am wardrobe-sell. So, she had focused on collecting an alphabet of garments, from argyle sweaters to Zoot suits. As it had been

quicker and easier to sell any piece of clothing if had had a Designer label attached, she had collected Armani to Zegna.

As accessories could make or break an outfit, Lucille had made sure she had kept plenty of those on hand as well.

There were racks and stacks of chachka in the Shrine. Six decades of men's ties took up two racks alone. They were all neatly hung on cloth-covered hangers, fifteen ties to a cloth and thirty cloths to a rack. Two-dozen cloths on another rack kept track of belts, scarves, suspenders and gloves. Three-dozen plastic tackle boxes organized adornments from earrings, bracelets and brooches to cufflinks, glasses and watches. There was, however, only one tiara.

What was the cost of all this? Well, thanks to wardrobe sales and charity giveaways at the ends of shows, not much, not much at all; so little it was hard to remember.

Continuing on, there were Lucille's special souvenir clothing pieces. Some outfits were period and some were contemporary. Nonetheless, famous actors had worn all of them. Lucille had made sure she had bought at least one outfit from every movie she had ever worked on. Sometimes she'd buy more if they seemed worthy, or if she had been able to get her hands on them, cheaply. Now she wondered what the big deal had been.

Then there were the crew gifts that had accumulated: t-shirts, baseball caps, coffee mugs, gym bags, deck chairs and other wares, and all with the title of the movie emblazoned on them.

Not to be forgotten, there were Lucille's gifts from some of the stars, directors and producers. Items here ran the gambit from

unopened champagne and inexpensive Tiffany's trinkets to signed photos, letters and books with inscriptions.

It was a list that out-last-ed, yet there was more. An entire wall in the Shrine was bookshelves filled with reference. Books of art reproductions, portraying historical figures, captured clothes of yore. Books with photographs of contemporary clothing designs captured days of now. Where images didn't exist, historical writings provided reams of print reference to whet the imagination.

Piles upon pile of old magazines were stacked beside towers of new magazines; they took up an entire corner, and all for the purpose of looking at clothes. Lucille picked up a book. Who needs books when you've got the Internet, Lucille wondered. She turned the book over in her hands. It felt good. She brought the binding to her nose. It smelled right. She put the book back on the shelf.

Finally, there was the shelf dedicated to Lucille's personal portfolios. Here, her life's work was captured in the form of sketches, photos and DVD's. It was a catalogue of clothes.

Clothes, the more she said it the more Lucille was sure it wasn't even a word. She hated clothes. Their fabrics suffocated her. She loathed washing them. She resented getting in and out of them. She considered joining a nudist colony, but managed to settle on something a little more impractical.

Lucille had decided to create a new career for herself. She'd be the curator of a Total Experience Art Showroom. The acronym would read: TEAS. Lucille had laughed herself sick with the double entendre.

Anyway, Lucille would invest her savings to make the gallery happen. In her mind this was totally doable. Way she figured; she

was only fifty-two, and even though work had relentlessly leeched her energy over the years, she still had more fire in her guts than most.

Loreen broke the silence. “I can’t believe you’re just going to give this all up. And aren’t you going to miss the excitement of working in film?” Loreen asked for the ninth time since Lucille’s passionate, not totally thought through and somewhat crazy decision had been made. At least that’s the way Loreen saw it.

Lucille thought about getting up for five am calls, worse, the nauseating six pm calls. She flashed on the indigestible catering and repetitive craft service. She could feel the endless hours in a day, and the six or seven-day weeks that could run for months on end. She felt burnout. She felt burnout on burnout.

“No.” Lucille answered for the ninth time. She placed her cup on the top of a taped up box, went to Loreen and gave her a big sister hug. “You’re not supposed to worry, remember? I’m in complete control of everything. My future awaits me.” Lucille snatched up a nearby sharpie and began writing on the box she’d placed her cup on. The box wobbled and the cup rocked. “Well, I think that’s it for the crew gifts,” she remarked.

Loreen moved Lucille’s cup to a windowsill. “I swear you’re an accident waiting to happen.”

“But if any strays turn up we can throw them in another box.” Lucille continued, ignoring Loreen’s last comment. “Really Loreen, I don’t think any of this stuff is worth much money.”

“Oh don’t worry! I’ll get enough for some of it, and just the sheer volume will make it add up.” Loreen was busy thumbing

through a rack as she spoke. “These designer pieces will bring in the cash that’s for sure. And don’t forget, you get half.”

“Loreen, you’re a riot. You’re going to be living on eBay for months.”

“And it couldn’t have happened at a better time, sis, you know that. Know what else? This is going to be the most wicked job I’ve ever had.”

Once Lucille had made up her mind to move on, she couldn’t wait to tear down the Shrine. Every little piece, bit and scrap in the room had a minute, an hour or a day’s worth of memories attached to it. What a load, Lucille had thought, and had been electric to the quick to set herself free from the past and its emotional baggage.

When Lucille had originally told Loreen she was changing careers, razing the Shrine and getting the Goodwill to haul it all away, Loreen had stared at Lucille with eyes that didn’t get it.

Who needs all this junk anyway, Lucille had asked in response to Loreen’s extended gaze? Apparently, Loreen did.

The Goodwill is going haul it all away? Loreen had repeated the phrase at least twice in a voice that had been hurt and angry. At that point, Loreen had felt it necessary to remind Lucille that charity began at home, and had insisted that all of Lucille’s so called junk was worth something. Loreen had also pointed out that she had been unemployed for months.

Look, Loreen had told Lucille, I really need the money. Loreen had also told Lucille, even if you think you don’t need the money, I have a strong feeling that it will come in very handy in your near future.

Lucille had stood dumbfounded, as Loreen had presented her passionate argument.

Here I am, stuck at home with no job when I could be systematically selling your so-called junk off on-line, Loreen had whined, her voice having risen to a pitch heard only by dogs. There're auctions, there's vintage and designer resale sites I can consign with, Loreen had rationalized. She had carefully taken a deep breath before she'd calmly made her final pitch. We could have our own site. It's the job and income I need right now. I'll warehouse everything in my basement, and I'll do all the work. Loreen had finished up with; we'll split the profits fifty-fifty. What do you say?

Lucille had wondered why she hadn't thought of that, and then had answered her own question to herself. Lucille had been so consumed by her own changed needs that she'd fallen blind to her sister's needs. There'd be no more talking about it. Of course Loreen would be in charge of the liquidation sale. So, the sisters started packing and logging inventory lists.

Lucille was, in truth, enjoying this project. It required spending time together with Loreen. It was more time than life had allowed since they were kids. Time, Lucille reminded herself, exactly what she would gain by changing the road she was on. There would be time to do something else with life, before it was too, late.

"I've still got a couple of hours before I have to head home. We could tape up some wardrobe boxes and start packing the men's wear." Loreen was more than eager, "Might as well have as much as possible ready for the first pick up on Saturday. I only wish Dan and the boys could do it sooner."

Lucille slid a tape gun from its precarious placement at the edge of a crowded shelf. She aimed it at a stack of cardboard. She squeezed a pretend trigger. Nothing happened.

“That never works!” laughed Loreen. “We’re going to have to go at this the old fashioned way.”

Ten minutes later, the sisters had built three boxes, the metal hanging bars secured into place and everything. They began filling one with the ties.

Loreen estimated out loud. “These ties could bring in, mm, maybe eight thousand dollars.”

“You really think you’re going to sell all those ties?” Lucille, skeptical to the end, was amused to no end by the way Loreen was making a professional business venture out of the Shrine.

“Eventually! We don’t need all the money right away, anyway.” was Loreen’s practical response.

Laughing out loud was Lucille’s.

“Really sis, don’t underestimate the selling power of the internet,” Loreen stated flatly. “Matter of fact, I’m going to surf around tonight, see if can get an idea on what your special pieces might be worth. I’m thinking about reserved bids for those.” Loreen was serious.

“You think?” Lucille pushed away the flattery that that thought brought her. “In the end they’re only used clothes.”

“Listen to me! I know what I’m talking about.” Loreen sounded confident, savvy. “For starters, the costumes from that cheesy

horror movie you did about eighteen years ago, **The Handmaiden's Hands**, I know there's more than one person out there who'll pay good money for those costumes."

"Maybe!"

"Maybe nothing! It's a huge cult classic now, and Nicky Faime was in it."

"But Nicky Faime wasn't a star back then," Lucille reminded.

"Well he is today, and didn't you once tell me it was his first leading role?"

"It was actually. He was almost twenty-four. I was already thirty-four. He played a cop."

"And if I'm not mistaken you once showed me a piece of his wardrobe?"

"I kept the jacket from his black suit, the pants were wrecked in a stunt," Lucille recalled. "Nice guy and a great actor, but he got stereotyped before he knew what happened."

"That's not the point. The point is we could get a thousand bucks for the Nicky Faime jacket from **The Handmaiden's Hands**. It's classified as movie memorabilia out there in collector's world, but it's classified as cash in mine."

3

A black Cadillac Escalade Hybrid moved more smoothly than its name through a frozen New York night. Seiji, the owner of the company that handled Nicky's security, was behind the wheel. An ex-sumo wrestler, he still packed half of his old weight and most of his old might. He was chauffeuring Nicky and Lara to La Dolce Donna.

Three years ago Seiji had started "Marshal Artists", an unlisted personal security agency. Seiji's company's first gig had been to provide red-carpet security at a tony off Broadway awards show. It had been the highest end Boho event of the year. Seiji had headed up the operation that he had assigned a dozen men to.

A crazed actor turned biker, stoned on E, had shown up to the event. He had driven his motorcycle at full speed, breaking through roadblocks and maneuvering by security checks. Nicky had watched the fiasco from inside his hired Limo, which had just pulled up into position at the top of the red carpet. As the maniac had made a run for the carpet, Seiji had calmly stepped in front of the oncoming motorcycle. The bike had been totaled. The Biker had suffered serious injuries. Seiji had been winded.

Three days later, Nicky had asked Seiji if "Marshal Artists" would be Nicky's exclusive security and livery. Nicky had made a generous offer. Seiji had gratefully accepted.

Of course Seiji could assign any of his men to Nicky; they were all honorable men. However, if he was indisposed, Seiji preferred to provide Nicky's security personally. Tonight was one of those

nights. Seiji stopped for a red light. Two more intersections, a left, a right and we're at Bella's, Seiji thought.

A five-star Italian Restaurant recently added to the TriBeCa landscape, La Dolce Donna featured the culinary passions of Chef Bella Donna Flores. Nicky had chosen it because he knew Bella, loved her work and was inspired by her immaculate kitchens.

Whenever anyone went out to dinner with Nicky, he always chose the place to eat, and it was usually Italian. He always knew the chef. If he didn't know the chef then he got to know the chef, if only for the one meal. That was because Nicky had a lot of issues around food such as: bacteria phobias, preferences for organic and free range, nausea on just glimpsing at raw flesh and one small allergy to peanuts that could kill him.

Nicky's food demanding went on and on, and all in all was too much for Lara to deal with. The only thing about food Lara liked was eating it. That was understandable. Anytime Lara had prepared a meal in the past, it had been inedible. It hadn't been worth the effort. She'd given up long ago.

When Lara was with Nicky the food was always to some degree better than great. She didn't care whether they ate out, or Carlos made them a meal to die for at Nicky's. What Lara cared about was her physical appearance. That also, was understandable. Lara was a natural beauty, and whenever Lara did her hair and make-up, she looked extra naturally beautiful. It was so worth the effort. She'd never give up.

Usually, Nicky's eyes would be soothing themselves on Lara's alabaster complexion. His fingers would be preoccupied with her hair all golden and tumbling around her shoulders and breasts.

However, tonight Lara's legs demanded Nicky's attention. The backs of his fingers soothed themselves on the sheer black nylons Lara was wearing with her little red dress. For Lara it was an e-zone event. For Nicky it was an intoxicant. Nicky had been turned-on by those stockings in the nineties. Yet, he'd never imagined that he could have had become as sexually stimulated by them, as he was now. Where the hell had Lara found them? Were they back in style? Whatever, Lara was wearing them, and that's what counted.

"We've arrived, Sir!" Seiji announced formally, as he pulled up to the front door of La Dolce Donna.

La Dolce Donna graced the main floor of an historic gabled brick building converted to condos. The restaurant itself featured a ceiling twenty feet high, and Bella had gone to great lengths to have it painted faux Sistine Chapel.

Tables were spaced well apart from each other, leaving ample room for dining privacy, a privacy that was enhanced by the strategic placement of small trees and shrubs. Fresh colorful floral arrangements picked up where the greenery left off. Each dining area felt lush. Each was VIP.

Less tables and longer dining experiences meant fewer meals during the course of an evening. That's why there were no prices on the menu; Bella couldn't afford patrons who needed to know.

Bella had become ecstatic when she'd found out she'd be cooking for Nicky on such a perfect winter's night.

It had been more than obvious, in the past, that Bella had adored Nicky. However, any ardor was truly as a friend, a friend who could help make her new restaurant a success by his mere patronage.

Well before Nicky and Lara had arrived, Bella had selected a bottle of one of her finest reds to impress Nicky with. Nicky only drank red wine. He had a penchant for the grape, and Bella knew it. She chose a vintage Brunello.

As Nicky and Lara were about to be seated, Bella approached their table with her arms wide open. Nicky embraced her warmly, after which Bella and Lara put on a beautiful show of cheek kisses.

When the Maitre'd finished seating Lara and Nicky, a waiter arrived with Bella's Brunello choice for Nicky.

The waiter presented the bottle. Nicky took it in, looked up at Bella and gave her an ice-melting smile. The waiter uncorked the bottle, poured a small amount into Nicky's wine glass and handed it to him. Nicky held the bouquet under his nose. His dark eyes misted ever so slightly. He took a sip. Bella watched. Lara waited. Nicky gave the nod. Bella snapped her fingers. Another waiter magically appeared, and the service began.

Seiji remained near by, waiting in the Escalade. He was in a non-parking spot just up the street from the restaurant. It hadn't escaped his notice that first one, then another autograph-seeking fan had arrived to take up a vigil outside of the closed shoe store, which was situated between his car and La Dolce Donna.

Over the next two hours, during Nicky and Lara's pheromone enhanced dining experience, several more fans had joined the first two and then a couple more had shown up.

They, the Fans, sheltered themselves in the shoe store's darkened doorway. They exchanged contact information. They warmed themselves with tales of Nicky.

All good things come to an end, as did the delicious and romantic evening that Nicky and Lara were luxuriating in. Sensationally presented desserts, each worth a weeks exercise, remained half eaten on their plates. Espressos had been downed, and Nicky's eyes were riveted to Lara's.

His voice, throaty from his carnal thoughts, revealed Nicky's urgency. "My place?" he suggested.

Lara found one of his hands under the table, took it in one of hers and abandoned it on a silky thigh. "Mm, Nicky, I'd love to go right back to your place, but we promised Mimi we'd show up at her party. Just for an hour. Please!"

The promise of the thigh was spoken loudly, and without words. In terms of their affair, Nicky liked to spoil Lara. In his mind, it was a tactic. "One hour," he agreed knowing dragging it out would only make the eventual sex better. He called Seiji for the pick-up.

Nicky and Lara emerged arm in arm from La Dolce Donna. Seiji and the Escalade were right out front.

As Lara slipped into the rear seat, the exuberant fans broke free of their protective doorway shadow. Nicky could have just slid in after Lara. Seiji would have preferred to have politely shut the Luxury SUV's door in Nicky's fan's faces, but Nicky stopped short. He'd decided to sign the few autographs that were being asked of

him in this particular situation. Its only a dozen, fifteen tops, Nicky rationalized. He made his mark on everyone's book, picture or scrap of paper.

The final autograph was for a woman who was beautifully bundled up in a turquoise mohair scarf, teal gloves and hat. She extended a red leatherette autograph book. "Could you please make it to Cynthia," she requested hopefully.

Nicky took the red autograph book from the teal hand. He flashed on the red and greenish colors he'd seen earlier in the day, when he'd burnt his fingers. "To Cynthia," Nicky repeated her name, as he signed the book.

Nicky handed the book back to Cynthia. The second her hand touched it, connecting her to the book to Nicky, a sleazy chill slid back and forth across the back of his neck. When he released the autograph book, the chill ceased.

As Nicky lowered his body into the Escalade, he noticed a new coffee joint across the street. A couple of people were sipping their coffees at the coffee bar in the window.

Nicky put an arm around Lara. Seiji shut the door.

Carlos must have called in a housekeeping SWAT team because Nicky's living room was immaculate when Nicky and Lara returned from their evening out.

Nicky poured red wine nightcaps, as Lara made herself comfortable on the couch. "Check out the floral arrangement on the baby grand!" She complimented. "Carlos totally outdid himself."

“Stunning!” Nicky replied as he approached with the wine, almost snapping the stems off the glasses when he saw Lara’s misty black legs reaching out beyond the hem of her dress.

Lara’s hand drew along the contours of her body. “Mm, you like?” she murmured.

“I like!” breathed Nicky as he tabled the wines, then slid in next to her. He pushed the skirt of Lara’s little red dress up to her waist.

Lara stretched her long legs across Nicky’s lap, poising her stilettos just right.

“And you’re killing me with the shoes,” he whispered into her ear as he stroked her calves.

Chills and fever attacked Lara simultaneously. She was whetting herself, and she needed a man. She smelled Nicky all around her, and she wanted him. She moaned and was all over him.

Nicky undid his pants. He was ready, exalted by Lara’s initiative. When it came to sex, Nicky desired a full lusty commitment, and Lara was committing. “Ah shit! The condoms are in the bedroom,” he groaned, the moment almost ruined.

Lara saved the moment. She undid his shirt, and began kissing Nicky in circles around his naval. She spoke in little gasps between her kisses. “Stay! Don’t go! We don’t need them. You know I’m on the pill, and I’ve been faithful, Nicky. There’s no one else. And if you’ve been true to me, then I want you for real Nicky, for real.”

The sound of for real was very enticing. When was the last time I had sex without plastic wrap, Nicky asked himself? Lara’s trail of

kisses hit the top of Nicky's slacks, whereupon she lowered them. Her trail of kisses found new territory. Nicky felt there was no logical reason to argue with such a sane moment. The condoms remained in the bedroom.

At the same time that Nicky Faime and Lara St. James were unleashing their passions, Lucille Brookers was containing hers. Philip was off on a European tour with the MSO. He had left a month ago.

Philip Stursberg, a known and respected violist in the classical music world, had been playing with the Manhattan Symphony Orchestra for a decade. The money wasn't all it should be, but he played other instruments and styles that netted him enough studio-work to top things up nicely.

Lucille missed Philip. She'd been missing him off and on, mostly on, for twenty-five years. It wasn't anyone's fault. It was simply a ravage of two intense careers on a relationship. Well, all that was going to change. Philip was returning from Europe in two weeks, and Lucille had a surprise for him.

Philip had been in Vienna when Lucille had told him about her gallery idea. He'd been supportive. He'd suggested that Lucille might wait until he returned before getting in, too, deep. To his relief, Lucille had agreed. What Philip didn't know was that Lucille was in the throes of liquidating part of her life. Lucille had purposefully held back the razing of the Shrine from him.

Lucille and Loreen's intentions were to have all the Shrine's loot hauled away before Philip got home. Lucille would tie a big gold bow around the door. She would give the space to Philip for the at home

recording studio he'd talked about for so long. Lucille had renovators lined up. She had paint chips to show him.

Her new career would cut Lucille's hours of work in half, and she would spend part of them working out of her new home office in Philip's old den. Philip would spend creative time in his studio, not across town at some pal's set-up. They would be together a lot more, and they wouldn't have to miss each other. It was a perfect plan.

Lucille sat up in bed while watching a movie on her laptop. She sipped on an herbal tea. She mentally struggled to not have a coffee. She knew she should wait until morning or she'd be up all night, but she still craved coffee.

The movie was a bore. Lucille ejected the DVD and placed it on her night table. She put her cup on it. "A coaster, that's what you're good for!" she snapped at the DVD. "Uch! Okay! I just took something out on a DVD," she continued talking to herself, "But why? I've got to relax!"

Lucille sank back into her pillows, and shut her eyes. Her thoughts drifted to Philip, how she loved him, how surprised and excited he'd be with her plan and how he might even want to become involved with the gallery.

The Gallery, Lucille began to dream about it, to plan it.

An enormous space would be essential. In New York City, that would cost a lot of green. However, as it was to be more than just a bunch of pictures on the wall, square footage would be required. Lucille wanted to bring together different media in specific themes. Fusions could include painting, music, theatre and electronic installations.

Of course once Lucille found this address, she'd have to invest a fair amount into creating a space that could re-invent itself with each new showing. Everything would have to be easily movable, like movie set walls, risers and overhead grid work.

Staff; Lucille knew she'd require staff to help her run the gallery, or it would become as enslaving as her last career. She added two full time and two part time staff to the expenses.

Wow! Lucille thought to herself, that's one wicked tab, but the art will sell, she rationalized. The art would sell if she picked the right pieces and drew the right crowds to the right events. That would require a publicist. The more Lucille thought about it, the higher the bill ran. Her stomach churned wildly. For the first time, Lucille understood that if her idea didn't work out, she would be left with very little in the bank.

Lucille could hear Loreen's words; even if you don't think you need the money, I have a strong feeling you might be able to use it in the near future.

Lucille bolted up off her pillows. Just how much money could Loreen make selling my junk, she questioned?

Be logical! Lucille mentally advised herself. She knew on-line merchandising was hot, but there was also a lot to choose from in cyber space. Certainly not everything offered could possibly get sold.

What items really brought in the big bucks, Lucille wondered? A smile crossed her lips. Lucille was thinking that Loreen might have a better shot at the brass ring if she had a moldy Madonna doughnut or a potato chip Jesus to offer up.

Lucille picked up her herbal tea. She took a less than satisfying sip. It was colder than stone. “Oh what the hell,” she said out loud, then head up to the kitchen to make a nice hot coffee.

By the time Lucille got back to bed with her coffee, her logic had advanced. She had calculated that based on one thousand dollars for the Nicky Faime jacket, her special collection could possibly be worth as much as seventy thousand dollars. That would be thirty-five each. And I was going to chuck it to the Goodwill she chastised herself. Listen to me, Lucille went on in her mind, I’m sounding like Loreen!

Getting back on the bed, Lucille reminded herself, of course this is all based on getting a grand for the jacket.

She pulled up her laptop from the foot of her bed, opened it and searched Nicky Faime. Topping the hits was the official Nicky Faime site, Nicky Faime.com. It was followed by: several popular unofficial Nicky Faime fan sites, Nicky Faime on the IMDB, Nicky Faime on eBay and approximately another three million possibilities. As this looked promising in terms of finding out the jacket’s true value, Lucille began exploring.

Lucille started with the obvious, eBay. There were no Nicky Faime clothing items on auction. After that, it didn’t take long for Lucille to realize that the main commercial sites were only offering DVD’s, posters and other licensed items. She’d have to dig deeper. She hit the official Nicky Faime site. Although sleekly designed, it was merely presentation, inert.

Lucille moved on to the unofficial offerings. Some were simple tributes, as inert as the official site. Others were active with message boards and other member contributions. The one thing

that was obvious to Lucille was that the fans on the active sites were very aggressive in expressing their passions for Nicky.

One site that interested Lucille in particular, because it was so hokey it felt safe, was called the Nicky Faime Cafe. Home page looked like a cafe menu, and offered up the spots you could travel to. Pictures, Trailers, Fan Photos, Bio, and a Message Board replaced Hamburgers, French Fries, Desserts and Coffee. Lucille entered the message board and began scrolling.

I can't believe how many topics there are, Lucille mused. She carefully browsed them: Is Lara a serious thing? I dream of Nicky every night. I'm marrying a man who looks like Nicky. What size shoes does he wear? My husband doesn't understand. I heard Nicky quit smoking.

"I've got to check some of these out," Lucille laughed quietly aloud. "Why?" She stopped herself. "Why should I be reading a bunch of personal stuff about Nicky Faime? What business is he of mine?"

"Because," Lucille answered herself, still talking to herself, "I'm trying to determine that Nicky Faime's jacket is worth a thousand bucks." So, with sanity on her side, Lucille crossed the invisible divide into gossip central. Nonetheless, her eyes were glued to the tempting topic; I'm marrying a man who looks like Nicky.

On this particular message board, many of the fans had posted their picture, or supposedly their picture, on avatars. Also, many had seemingly gotten to know each other on a personal level. Obviously, some fans were more dedicated than others, but it appeared to Lucille that many were making a part-time life out of hanging out in the Nicky Faime Cafe. They loomed as scopophiliacs

and dreamers. They seemed more in love with Nicky than was humanly possible.

In particular, a certain Nickynight was all over the boards. She posted topic after topic, answering her own topics whether or not anyone else did. She responded to anything anyone posted, and responded to her own responses whether or not anyone else did.

Nickynight's thumbnail size picture was always there beside her posts. Lucille thought Nickynight looked nice, and in as much as she could tell, benign. Unfortunately, Nickynight's posts were often very big winds, more like blogs that took too, much time for Lucille to bother reading all of, or even at all. However, the intensity of Nickynight's passion touched Lucille who was a smart girl, but as gullible as they come. She was so wrapped up in feeling Nickynight's love and sincerity that she completely missed out on the desperation.

Lucille continued filing through topics. Then there it was, a subject to justify her nosy endeavor: Nicky Collections by Nickynight. The original posting announced that Nickynight had just added a rare old movie magazine, with a small article on Nicky in it, to her collection. She had paid fifty dollars for it.

Fifty dollars for a scrap of Nicky paper, I like the sounds of that. Lucille thought. Her fancy was snagged. She read on.

Nickynight listed an inventory of her entire collection. She asked if anyone else collected? If so, what did they have? There were ten pages of replies. Fans listed their collections, announced new acquisitions, traded, envied each other's pieces and posted notices about new Nicky items up for sale or auction anywhere.

Still, how much could I get for his jacket? Lucille questioned. Maybe I should leave a message under the Nicky Collections topic? Maybe someone out there knows?

Lucille took a satisfying sip of coffee then she signed herself into the Nicky Faime Café. She signed in as PurpleFaime. Her posting under Nicky Collections read. "I have a Nicky Faime Jacket." That was all she wrote, no photo was posted.

Two hours later, Lucille tossed and turned in the clutches of caffeine. I've got to fall to sleep she coached herself.

Thinking about Philip calmed her down for a minute, until she pictured him jetting around the world, whereupon she developed plane crash anxiety. She tried counting sheep, but they wouldn't jump over the fence. She envisioned Loreen, then thought of the eBay sale, which lead to the Nicky Faime jacket. Lucille sat up, fluffed her pillows and shoved them behind her. She took her laptop off a side table. Before she could sit back into the pillows, Lucille had logged in to the Nicky Faime Cafe.

Lucille returned to the message boards. Anxiety enveloped her when she saw that there was a more recent post than hers under Nicky Collections. Don't get all worked up, she told herself, it might not even be in reply to my post. It could be something else all together. Lucille opened the topic. It was in response to Lucille's probe. It was from Nicky night and asked. "Where's the jacket from, and how did you get it?"

Lucille's stomach churned. Okay calm down! It's just a stupid message board, she reminded herself. Someone asked a question. I'll answer it, plain and simple!

Lucille hit reply. She typed. "It's from **A Handmaiden's Hands**. I got to go to the wardrobe sale and bought it for my boyfriend. I was wondering what it might be worth?" Lucille lied about the boyfriend part. She wanted to keep her personal life cloudy. She hit send.

Nickynight, in a robe, kerchief around her head and a thick green mudpack covering her face, sat at her dresser, which had been converted to a desk. The dresser was in a small bedroom with a queen size bed and tiny en-suite bathroom.

Nickynight urgently worked the computer's keyboard. She entered her favorite site, the Nicky Faime Cafe. She had a new important topic to post.

A diligent disciple, Nickynight frequented any Nicky message board she could find. Of course she had a different name everywhere she went, such as Faimed4life and NickyZgirl but it was the same person. In her mind she was, thanks to sheer prevalence, one of his most important fans.

Nickynight liked the picture she had set up in her avatar. She was sure she looked on the young side of her forty years. Not to mention, she'd made herself more attractive by setting off her wavy auburn hair and cat green eyes with the bold colors of a fake Mershe brand scarf that she had fashioned around her neck.

Surprised that the newbie, PurpleFaime, had responded so quickly, Nickynight became momentarily sidetracked from her new important posting.

It was an answer to the jacket question, and the answer was better, much better than Nickynight had anticipated. **The Handmaiden's Hands** was her favorite Nicky film. It was the movie that introduced Nicky to his legion of fans. It was the movie that defined him as a dark but sensitive upholder of justice in a black suit. It had never been released on VHS or DVD. However, it was a late night cult favorite. Nickynight began typing.

“OMG! He wasn't even famous back then. Is the jacket still in good shape or did your boyfriend wear it out?” Nickynight paused upon hearing a loud creak overhead. “I want to know more but I've got to go! I think my husband is coming.” Nickynight hastily submitted.

Ten weeks passed bringing spring into play, but it's colors seemed dingy through the opaqueness of continuing uncertain weather.

Nicky had signed with **Nine Black Lives**, the cop movie where he would play a Detective Black. He was, as time allowed, actively involved with the rewriting of the "coming out of coma" scene. Principal photography was set to start next Monday, a week from today, and would shoot entirely in and around New York City. As there was nowhere else on the planet Nicky would rather be, life had become temporarily perfect.

The time read nine on Leo's watch. His eyes moved up to reveal Nicky, sitting across Ilena's conference table from him. Nicky was reading the Times. Nicky liked the routine of a newspaper in the morning. It made him feel civilized. Nicky wanted to push his chair back so he could put his feet up on the table, but he knew better, so didn't. He had a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He wanted to light it, but knew better, so didn't.

Ilena was at her desk, working away on her laptop.

Leo looked at his watch again. He wanted the meeting to start, but interrupting Nicky's newspaper ritual could prove unproductive. Thankfully, Ilena did it for him.

Dark Cleopatra eyes, further complimented by a flawless dark brown complexion, looked up over the laptop. Ilena was thirty-five with a healthy figure, suit jackets over pullovers with skirts, and a full head of shoulder length, luscious black curls.

Ilena had worked for Nicky since she had been twenty-five. She knew Nicky better than anyone, including Leo. Ilena cherished her career with Nicky. There was stature, travel, never ending perks and the money was great. However, that's not why she had stayed in Nicky's employ for a decade of her life.

Ilena had chosen to fall in love with Nicky. The decision had been made years ago, when they'd met, when he'd interviewed her for the job. It was a secret she carried with her to this day. No one, not a soul knew or suspected. Women had come and gone in Nicky's life, but Ilena had remained. She knew how not to ruin a good thing.

"Okay, here it is! The new official Nicky Faime site," Ilena announced, hopefulness drenching her voice. "I think the designer out did himself." Getting the revamp to Nicky's liking had been a painful process.

Nicky finished the last few lines of the article he was reading. The newspaper was cast aside, as he rose. Nicky and Leo took up positions behind Ilena, and peered over her shoulder. All eyes were focused on the screen.

Nicky's voice was more carefully measured than usual, as he commented on the new Nicky Faime web page. "I like it. Ilena's right, it's a great design. It's got all the features." Nicky took a deep breath, but not as deep as the one Ilena took. "But it's too, blue."

"Blue?" Ilena echoed in question.

"Blue." Nicky confirmed, in response.

Ilena played it as a positive. “Well, that’s great! Everything’s a go, but the blue needs toning down.”

“Or changing.”

Leo spoke up, “Well, whatever you do about the color, just don’t take it off-line, at least not for long.” He looked at the time on Ilena’s screen. “It’s only been on-line for an hour, and there’s already thirty new log-in users.”

“They’re overindulgent on-line lovers.” Ilena commented.

“On-line lovers?” Leo wondered out loud. “Whatever happened to the nut that calls herself, Raggedyandoll, the one that wants to die with Nicky?”

“I checked that board a few days ago,” Ilena answered. “She, or claims to be a she, is still at large posting her heart out, but the death-wish message was deleted by the moderator.”

“Which is exactly why we’re here this morning. I’m, of course, referring to the over zealous fan problem, the stalkers that need to be taken care of before one of them takes care of Nicky. I’d like to get things started, unless,” Leo deferred to Nicky.

“Your call!” Nicky coalesced. “But you’re both over-reacting.”

“I hope you’re right,” Leo said as he returned to his place at the table. “Okay let’s do this!”

Nicky and Ilena assumed their seats at the table.

“Last meeting we listened to recordings of the crank phone calls.” For several years, all of Nicky and Ilena’s phone calls had

been recorded for security issues. “We all agreed that although there appeared to be a lot of different voices, there was a definite reoccurring speech pattern. Ilena was going to check the phone records.”

Ilena was quick, “They’re all different numbers, all pay phones and all in New York City.”

“That’s one stalker, maybe,” Nicky counted.

“What about the letters?” Ilena asked. “We’ve all read them. Their contents are un-nerving.”

”They’re pornographic at worst. There’s nothing threatening, nothing to go to the cops with,” Leo grumbled. “No sense dwelling on the letters, yet. What did surveillance turn up?”

Two months ago Leo had, with Nicky’s knowledge, hired Seiji’s service to keep Nicky’s surroundings under close watch. Everyone was sure that certain faces would repeat themselves as the days went by. Although Nicky had agreed, he hadn’t really seen the point. After all Nicky had a lot of loyal fans. Are they all to be considered stalkers, Nicky had asked?

Ilena extracted several files from her filing cabinet. “Seiji sent these over,” she informed, as she spread them across the table. They were labeled 101, 102 and 103. She opened each one, exposing three pictures.

Nicky’s right index finger came down on 101, a black haired woman with extra heavy make-up. “That’s Julie,” he said.

“You know her?” Leo was incredulous.

“From signing autographs.” Nicky was cool.

“That’s right,” Ilena confirmed. “I’ve seen Nicky sign an autograph for her on at least four occasions.” Ilena thought about it for a moment. “Maybe she sells them?”

“Maybe she sleeps with them,” Leo interjected.

Ilena knew Nicky thought this was a stupid meeting to begin with and was already tiring of it, but she didn’t break stride. She spread out the contents of Julie’s folder. There were six more pictures and some notes. Four of the shots featured Julie in a pool of fans.

“All of these photographs were taken at different events,” Ilena commented.

“What makes you say that?” Leo inquired.

“She’s wearing a different outfit in each,” Ilena qualified, as she picked up the notes. “These notes confirm it, as well as the fact that in two pics she’s using a cell phone to take snapshots.”

“Most of my fans take shots of me, when I’m out in public.

“Where’s this window?” Leo inquired, referring to the last two images.

All eyes focused on Leo’s reference. In the pictures, Julie sat in a window drinking coffee.

“It says,” Ilena read from the summary, “it’s a coffee house called Daddios, and it’s across the street from La Dolce Donna.” Ilena nervously twirled one of her curls as she continued. “Nicky,

can you believe that the last two times you ate at Bella's, Julie sat drinking coffee in the window at Daddios? It also says here that she didn't leave the coffee shop until you left La Dolce Donna."

Nicky knew that window, had seen it many times when he'd been at Bella's. "Sure," he reflected. "I've seen lots of people in that window."

"By the way, it's no secret that you frequent Bella's. It's a good idea if you don't eat there so often." Leo suggested.

Nicky's eyes flared. He didn't like Leo's suggestion.

Ilena intuitively changed the subject. "Have you seen these women?" she asked as she pointed to 102 and 103.

"I don't think so," Nicky replied.

Ilena continued with the notes. "Although 102 and 103 have only shown up at three public events, they appear to be a team."

"That's nice," Nicky said. "Anything else?"

"Yes," Ilena answered, as she added Julie's name to the 101 folder. "I think we should include the Faimed4life file in this collection. We could number it 100."

"Faimed4life, the internet fan that Seiji helped us sell a magazine to." Leo remarked. "We paid Marshal Artists a lot of money to loose her in the ladies department at Macy's," Leo reminded.

"But they got her picture," Ilena asserted then head to her file cabinet.

Faimed4life was a first class on-line Nicky nut. How dangerous was she? That's what Nicky, Ilena and Leo had been trying to uncover by meeting her in the flesh. Ilena had reeled her in with an old movie magazine that she had put up for sale on a site that Faimed4life frequented. Faimed4life had been thrilled to have had found a copy of the first magazine to ever publish an article about Nicky, and just had to have it.

Once the connection had been made and it was time to do the trade, Leo had called in Seiji. Seiji had sent in a female agent with whom Faimed4life had done the transaction.

They had met in a restaurant. It had taken only minutes for the sale to go down, but in those few minutes, several shots had been captured through the lens of the agent's jeweled brooch. Seiji's agent had waited until Faimed4life had cleared the restaurant then had followed her, but as Leo had so recently reminded, had lost her in Macy's Department Store.

Ilena placed the opened Faimed4life folder on the table where everyone could see a tight shot of a woman in a floppy felt hat, wooly turtleneck sweater and large sunglasses.

"All that effort and we still can't tell what she looks like." Leo pointed out.

"You can tell from her skin color that she's Caucasian," Ilena noted. "Her nose is incredibly non-descript, mid size, aquiline and she likes to wear an thick coat of lipstick. Also, the notes say she stood about five feet and ten inches, but wore draped slacks that obscured the height of her heels."

A polite tapping noise prompted everyone to look up and over to find Carlos, standing in the doorway.

“Excuse me, Sir!” Carlos spoke politely to the intense gazes he faced. He was professionally uniformed in gray slacks, white shirt and gray vest. His extremely pale gray tie was knotted in a double Windsor.

“Come in Carlos!” Nicky invited, pleased to be distracted from the meeting.

Carlos crossed to the table. He held up a thick ivory binder. “The menu for Saturday night’s soiree that you and Lara will be hosting,” he presented, unable to take his eyes off the cigarette dangling from Nicky’s mouth. “I desperately need approval. Our sommelier has decided to rush off to a vintages tasting event in California. He leaves tomorrow.”

For each film Nicky made, he threw two very special dinners. One was pre shoot, and one was post wrap.

The guest list for the fete prior to shooting focused on the money people. It was an arm’s length of producers and investors with their wives, husbands and girlfriends or boyfriends. Preferable though, to Nicky, was the wrap dinner whose invitations went out to the director and the lead actors, although there were always exceptions.

Carlos slipped a menu out of his binder, which also held: a running record of all menus from all Nicky’s parties, who’d attended, their food idiosyncrasies, what was served, what wines were sipped and how it was all received. Carlos presented the bill of fare to Nicky. The meeting remained on hold while Nicky perused it.

“Delicious!” Nicky commented. “It makes me hungry. Think I’ll grab a bite after this smoke.”

“May I ask if you’ll be retiring to the solarium before you light your cigarette?” inquired Carlos.

“Yes you may and yes I am,” Nicky answered, although recently, he’d been thinking about getting a different smoking room. The solarium wasn’t really doing it for him any more. Nicky felt bad for the plants.

“Thank you, sir.” As Carlos turned to leave, Lara arrived.

Still in her pajamas, she posed in the doorway. “Carlos can you please be a dear and make me a latte?” her voice was like treacle. “I need to wake up.” Lara was always sweet as sugar when she spoke to Carlos, or asked him for anything. She wanted him to like her. It was important.

“Certainly Miss Lara,” he replied respectfully.

As the weeks had passed, Lara had gone back to her apartment less and less. Actually, she hadn’t been there at all for almost a month. How could she go back to her cramped up rental after living with Nicky in the lap of luxury? That morning she intended to speak to Nicky about helping her buy a condo. However, Lara could see there was a meeting happening, and was smart enough to know she should take off. As Carlos passed her in the doorway, she finished her request. “I’ll have it in the living room.”

“Certainly.” Carlos nodded as he continued out into the hallway.

“Just want to say a cheery good morning to everyone,” she bubbled to the rest.

Ilena and Leo reciprocated the good morning. Seeing Lara always made Leo feel like getting out his checkbook. Ilena saw Lara as one dimensional, a scheming dimensional. Carlos thought Lara was the most beautiful, considerate and cultured woman he'd ever met. She was the perfect choice for Nicky.

Lara blew a honeyed kiss to Nicky.

Nicky smiled warmly. "Later babe!" He loved having Lara around.

"Alright!" Leo's voice brought the meeting back to the table. "Word's out that Nicky will be shooting **Nine Black Lives** right here in the city." He looked at Nicky. "I'd like to continue the surveillance while your filming."

Nicky's body language said no.

"Continuing surveillance would be most prudent," Ilena stated slowly.

Nicky would never argue with Ilena's pragmatisms. He got up to leave.

"What do you say Faime? Leo pushed.

"We go with most prudent! Nice meeting. I'm glad it's over," Nicky said as he walked through the door into the hallway.

"Alright!" Leo's voice pulled Ilena back to the table. His expression was sober. "Surveillance is extended. This meeting is over!"

Cynthia Johnson walked along Main Street in Briarwood, Queens. When she shuddered from the cool of the overcast spring afternoon, she almost dropped one of her bags of groceries. Cynthia was thirty-nine, stylishly dignified in a smart coat with slacks, an oversized shoulder bag and a jewel tone Mershe scarf knock-off. With the colors of the scarf augmenting her intriguing green eyes and chin length auburn waves, she looked an awful lot like Nicky night. In fact, she was Nicky night.

The garden style apartment building Cynthia was passing seemed to go on forever. At the end of the block she turned the corner, and walked along another side of the same building for another block. She crossed the street at the next corner then continued past medium sized single-family homes, each distinguished by its owners' choices of color and siding. She turned the next corner; the homes were smaller, and close to the sidewalk.

Cynthia dragged her bags up the six steps of a house with maroon siding and gray trim. She dropped the groceries at the front door. As she pawed around inside her purse looking for her key, an older Ford pulled up in front, and Mrs. Hall opened the door from the inside.

"Everyone's home at once?" remarked the elderly Mrs. Hall. She picked up the bags of groceries, and went back into the house.

"Thanks Mrs. Hall" Cynthia called out." She watched a handsome forty-five year old Jack Johnson emerge from the car, and slam shut the driver's door. Simultaneously, Bobby Johnson, fourteen with an attitude problem, kicked open the passenger's side.

“Jack, ”Cynthia shouted, “ You’re home early today? And with Bobby?”

Bobby almost wiped out a neighbor as he blindly and rapidly shuffled his ass across the sidewalk.

“Bobby!” Cynthia chided as he clumsily flew by, but he wouldn’t look at her.

Jack controlled his anger as he walked up the steps. “School called. He’s in big trouble this time.”

“Now what?” Cynthia sighed.

“A lunchtime graffiti spree with some other delinquents that’s what. This time the police are involved. It’s a big mess. I feel like, I don’t know what to do anymore.”

“We’ll figure it out!” encouraged Cynthia as she took one of his arms. “Let’s go in! It’s chilly out here.”

Jack took a deep breath, and nodded his head yes.

Several hours later, in her bedroom and at her computer, Cynthia was once again Nicky night visiting the Nicky Faime Cafe. She had, with time, become growingly intent on possessing Lucille’s jacket, the one from **The Handmaiden’s Hands**.

At first in her postings Nicky night had gone on about: How lucky PurpleFaime was to own the jacket, how it had to be worth at least five hundred, maybe as much as two grand and how envious she was of PurpleFaime. Later postings had progressed to: She’d

love to have the jacket, but that it was for sure worth more money than she could ever afford. That had progressed to; I don't know if I can live without the jacket. Please let me know first, if you ever decide to sell it. Maybe we can work out a payment plan.

Lucille, who'd grown weary of the whole jacket chat thing, replied that she would think about it. It had been Lucille's last post, and that had been over two weeks ago. Cynthia was aware that the postings had stopped, and now wondered if PurpleFaime was gone for good.

Disappointment greeted Nickynight when she checked the Collections topic. There were no new posts. However, disappointment was put on hold when she realized that a personal message awaited her viewing. Private messages were always a highlight for Nickynight. Her fingertips buzzed as she typed in her password. Her private mailbox opened. She gasped. It was from PurpleFaime and said:

“The jacket is yours if you want it. I don't want it any more, and I don't want any money for it.”

Nickynight's fingers ripped over the keyboard. “Yes! I want it! Just tell me where and when.” It was submitted before she could even finish reading her own sentence.

Thursday morning Lucille found herself in a rat infested building close to Canal Street. She had three take-out coffees in a flimsy cardboard holder. She waited in a dark wood hallway for someone to answer a door.

Eight weeks ago, when Philip had returned from the European tour with the MSO, he had been disinterested about what colors to paint his studio. It had thrown Lucille off a bit, but then again, she had rationalized, he must have been worn out. Back then Philip was supposed to take some time off, but lucrative LA session work came his way. Two days later Philip was gone.

Of course Lucille understood, but she couldn't put her life on hold. She knew Philip wanted her to wait until he got back before investing any money into her Gallery, so she decided to do some talent scouting. She'd been scouting for a month. Anyway, today was Wednesday, and he'd be back home Monday morning. He'd finally have time to get excited about his studio and Lucille's Art Gallery.

The door opened. A girl in her twenties, wearing heavily stressed urban clothing, hair uncombed for days and her male counterpart stood on the other side. They welcomed Lucille into their dark depressing workspace. They were a team. They painted oil on canvas, bed sheet sized canvas, with their bodies. Not a unique approach, Lucille thought. However, now that she was having a good look at the disturbing, moving images they had created, she was sure she had found something that could be a part of a larger art happening.

Cynthia Johnson walked down the six steps of her home in Queens. She looked at her watch. It was ten thirty a.m. She head off along the street, her destination and purpose: Manhattan and shopping.

Instead of having lunch, Lucille sat in an uncomfortable chair in a cold white room. She watched a dance group of four dressed in red try to impress her, and they did to a point. Their lithe bodies begged attention, but in Lucille's mind they had a lot of moves that were mime-like. Lucille hated mimes. As much as she wanted dance to be a part of her art happening, and well as the group could move, they were out. The mime thing was just, too, freaky.

It was two in the afternoon when Cynthia Johnson walked into Devign Foods. A hip, high-end supermarket, Devign Foods advertised itself as one of a kind, even though there were four more in the city. With prices double anywhere else; Devign Foods was a place for the truly fussy and well heeled.

Meanwhile, down aisle four in teas and coffees, Carlos had almost finished his mid week shopping routine. For errands outside the apartment, he always added a dark gray blazer to his standard grey pants, white shirt and vest. A deep burgundy tie replaced the pale gray one. It was the proper way to look in public.

Carlos bought all of the food he cooked for Nicky, personally. It was the proper thing to do. Mondays and Fridays he hit the organic

farmers market for the freshest of fresh. Wednesdays, between two and three in the afternoon at Devign Foods near the Village, Carlos would shop for anything else the pantry required.

A French roast coffee, the usual espresso beans and an Earl Grey Tea would be required to satisfy all of Saturday's guests. Carlos' preferred brands were all there, except for the Earl grey tea. The allotted shelf space was empty, sold out. Carlos would have to make an alternative selection. He zeroed in on the options. He zoned out of the din of Devign.

There were three food items that brought Cynthia Johnson to Devign Foods. She hated the prices, but it was the only place in the city she could get Quiller brand organic cold pressed safflower oil, a Devign Foods house brand of greens juice and their specific herbal tea blend for arthritis.

It was Cynthia's last stop before heading back to Queens. Her tote bags were full, and her purse kept slipping off her shoulder. As she was only grabbing three items, she passed on a basket. Cynthia cradled the juice and Quiller oil in the crook of an arm, as she hustled down aisle three. When she whipped around the corner into aisle four, she smacked right into Carlos' shopping cart. The juice and oil went flying, landing in his cart. Carlos, focused on the two-second best choices of Earl grey tea, snapped out of his concentration.

"I'm so sorry!" they apologized in unison.

"No, no it's completely my fault," said Cynthia as she regained her posture. She scooped her juice out of Carlos' cart, "At least nothing broke," she said scanning for cracks in the glass juice bottle.

“Don’t be silly, Carlos insisted, it’s my fault for pulling in so tight on the corner.”

Before Carlos could put the teas down, to perhaps be of some assistance, Cynthia had grabbed her oil from the cart. “At least the oil bottle’s plastic. Hey,” she noted, as she saw another bottle of the Quiller oil in Carlos’ cart, “You use the same oil as I do.”

“Well then, you have excellent taste,” Carlos complimented.

“Thank you,” Cynthia accepted. The tea she had come for was displayed within an arms reach. She plucked one from the shelving, smiled and was on her way.

Carlos returned to his two boxes of tea. He slowly rotated each box under his nose. He put one in his cart, the other neatly back on the shelf.

Lucille Brookers final Wednesday appointment was at three-thirty. She was to meet with Tulia, a Lyrical Stylist, at her Soho loft.

Tulia worked with a piano accompanist. He was there, sitting stiffly on his bench. Lucille listened raptly, or at least appeared to. She didn’t understand their music at all, had never heard anything like it before. There were so many frantic notes and so much high-pitched poetry that Lucille had no idea whether to like it or not. There was no instinctive connection.

In the end Lucille politely complimented the duo on their interesting work. She also requested a second audition, when she

could bring Philip with her. After all, she thought, he'll know if it's good or not.

6

Nine Black Lives was in pre-production.

Friday morning's prep schedule had Nicky in for a cast rehearsal. Coffee, Danish, fresh fruit, filtered water and real glasses were laid out on a rectangular table. However, no one would touch a thing, not until Nicky Faime arrived. No one would dare touch any of the food out of deference for Nicky.

The film's director, Haps Von Chapin, was of a different consideration. Haps had already finished with a banana, a Danish pastry and two cups of coffee.

Haps had rehearsed his four leads, cast numbers one through four, yesterday. It had proven to be a remarkably productive day. Haps was now expanding the rehearsal arena to include cast numbers five through eight.

Nicky was number one, Detective Black. Black was a break-the-rules-cop. Black could perform feats worthy of a puma, in order to snare his prey. However, there was a catch. He had an Achilles' heel, his wife, Carmen.

In the number two spot was a fifty-five year old African American character actor named Charlie Broadfoot. A tall heavysset guy with a very dark complexion and a nose slightly bent from his early days as an amateur boxer, Broadfoot would play Nicky's superior, Captain Jordan. This would be Nicky and Charlie's fifth film together. Charlie always played Nicky's cranky, loud authoritative

superior. Audiences couldn't get enough of Charlie taking strips off Nicky.

Number three was Claus Irons. Claus was a critically accepted European import who had the legitimate theatrical background that could really sell a villain. Claus would be portraying Del Vartnay, an architect and the murderer.

Rounding off the lead cast, in the four spot, was Sharlaya Shannon, a twenty-two year old American beauty with blonde hair to her waist. She would play the District Attorney.

Yes, the producers had been somewhat concerned about the audiences buying someone as young and beautiful as Sharlaya in the District Attorney role, so in a bid to heavy up her character, the writers had come up with a tough name to give Sharlaya some weight: D. A. Kowolski.

Haps Von Chapin, eighty years old and with sixty years of film making to his credit, sat at one end of the table trying to reassemble his archaic hearing aid. Credited with being one of the main pioneers of the quintessential cop film formula, he eternally adhered to his own rules. He especially held onto rule one and rule two. One; buy the rights, cheap. Two; hire yourself to direct.

On one side of the table cast numbers two, three and four were in a passionate debate with each other. The newcomers, numbers five through eight sat across the table from numbers two through four, and chatted quietly amongst themselves.

"Nicky!" Charlie roared as Nicky appeared in the doorway. Nicky and Charlie made their way to each other. There was a whole bunch of hand shaking and shoulder slapping between the two, as they made their way back to three and four.

Nicky was giving three and four his undivided attention when he caught sight of Verdad Morales out of the corner of an eye. She hinted of something pleasant. Nicky turned his head in Verdad's direction.

"Verdad!" Nicky called warmly. He moved around to five through eight's side of the table.

Verdad Moralis made a living playing fading beauties. Not many knew her name, but if they saw a picture of her they would say, oh yeah, her! I like her. A small, yet very tasty part, she would play Nicky's character's wife, Carmen Black, number five.

"Although our scene was cut to a sad forty-five seconds, I'll never forget our work together in **Die Until I Cry**," Verdad remembered fondly. She took one of Nicky's hands in both of hers.

"We were brilliant together!" Nicky raised her delicious hands and sampled them with a kiss.

Reluctantly, Nicky released Verdad's fingers. He turned to the rest of the cast and extended his hand. "Nicky Faime," he introduced himself.

Len Chan, cast number six, was the first to reciprocate. He barely stood to Nicky's armpits. He took Nicky's hand, and informed Nicky that he was playing **Nine Black Lives'** Medical Examiner, Dr. Ken Chang. He would also be a conscience for Nicky's character to work off of.

Number seven, Victoria Plumner, was in her mid thirties. She fussed with a pin in her auburn hair's usual up-do. She was torn between paying attention to Nicky, and keeping an eye on the only

cherry Danish in the assortment on the table. She would play the victim's wife, Miriam Grey, who although well intentioned, gets in the way of the investigation. As a result of her meddling, Black would get shot, and fall into a coma.

Also intent on the cherry Danish, actor Holdens Graff had positioned himself next to it. As cast number eight, a character named Heff Ventner, he would articulate the forty-ish playboy pal of the victim. He would find the body, and become a prime suspect.

Numbers four through eight had two things in common with each other. One, they were all hard working actors. Consistently in and out of money, they were thrilled to be earning triple scale on a Nicky Faime project. The second thing they had in common was that they had all previously been in a Nicky Faime movie. Other than for having had worked with Verdad, Nicky was unaware of that fact.

You see, number seven, Victoria, had been a crowd scene extra years ago. She had just started out on her career. She had never actually met Nicky on the day that she worked, but she was somewhere in the movie.

Len Chan hadn't had any lines with Nicky, but he had been included in a scene that Nicky had been in. Thing is, Len had been seventeen at the time, playing a short eleven year-old. Nicky had almost tripped over Len as Nicky had walked out onto the set.

Holdens had had one line with Nicky in a Zombie flick. The reality was that Holden's had been made-up to death, as a walking corpse. He'd been rendered unrecognizable. He never did get to meet Nicky, out of make-up, as a normal person.

Nicky turned his attention to the spread on the table, then to Verdad. “Think I’ll grab a water. What are you having?”

“Coffee,” Verdad replied, as she began to pour herself one, “and that cherry Danish.”

“Nice choice,” said Nicky as he slid a saucer under the Danish. He swooped it right out from under Holdens’ fallen chin.

“Oh, thank you, Nicky,” Verdad announced loudly as she accepted the pastry, making sure everyone understood that Nicky had been especially kind to her.

Victoria mused up her nose then grabbed a cinnamon twist.

Haps finally stuck his hearing aid back into his ear, and addressed the group. He had become cranky, as usual, from having to deal with his sound problem. “Everyone here?” he was shouting, making it obvious that the aid was still broken. “Good, let’s get started! I don’t want to be here all day.” His volume was unnerving. Haps singled out Holdens, “You’re the new guy playing the playboy?”

“Holdens Graff replacing Robin Gantt,” Holdens announced, as he arose full of dash from his chair. He extended his hand to Haps.

Haps ignored Holdens’ hand. “You’re a lot shorter than Robin. Nicky is over six feet tall. Robin was taller than Nicky. You’ve got to be taller than Nicky!” Hap’s disappointment was tangible. “How did this happen?”

Holdens sat down to a hushed room.

“He could stand on an apple box,” bravely offered Len Chan, remembering the many times he’d had to stand on one.

Verdad, now sitting between Haps and Nicky, took Hap’s arm gently. She spoke loudly into his ear, “Don’t worry darling, wardrobe can get him some elevator shoes.”

Haps turned to Verdad. He put his hand on hers, “You’re not only beautiful, you’re brilliant. Problem solved!” Haps declared, and returned to his cast at the table. To their relief, he opened his script. “Scene one - Exterior Police Station - Day,” he read.

Lucille’s Shrine had become a large empty shell.

It wasn’t the way Lucille had wanted things to go, but renovations had been completed in Philip’s absence. Loreen had helped Lucille pick out ideas for colors, light fixtures and flooring. They’d e-mailed the options to Philip, and he’d made choices surprisingly quickly. Lucille had figured that that was a good thing. It was expedient. It showed passion, didn’t it? Loreen had supported Lucille’s rational.

Lucille had retained a small personal souvenir collection from the Shrine. Portfolios, DVDs and personal gifts had been packed into three plastic baskets. They were currently on the floor in the living room. They waited in Limbo for the moment they would be moved move into Lucille’s new office.

Lucille entered the empty shell, Philip’s future studio. She flicked on the light. She walked over to observe her reflection in an antique mirror. The mirror was attached to a closet’s door. It was

original with the house, and was not up for sale in Loreen's eBay extravaganza.

Lucille was wearing a swing cut, cream coat over a black sheath dress. A black purse and adorable little black ankle boots completed the outfit nicely. Her hair was pushed loosely up, and sunglasses were flipped onto the crown of her head. Her make-up was done to professional standards because, other than for some lipstick touch-ups here and there her make-up would have to last all day.

Lucille checked inside her purse, and yes, the list of addresses of possible gallery sites, phone numbers, agents, and meeting times was there. She was more than just a tad excited. Lucille was ready to whirl through the roof, for today could be the day she'd find a space for her new gallery. She'd be completely ready to roll when Philip got back.

Lucille made sure her purse was properly closed, and arranged its strap on her shoulder until it felt just right. She pivoted left, pivoted right and pivoted in a complete circle, never taking her eyes off of her image in the mirror. Her medic alert bracelet was sitting below her cream coat's cuff. It ruined the outfit. Lucille tucked the bracelet securely up under her sleeve. She nodded her own final approval to herself.

Lucille opened the mirrored closet door, and extracted the only thing hanging in it. It was a navy blue garment bag. She arranged it over an arm, flicked off the light and head back downstairs. She walked down the hallway, and out of the front door into a morning whose clouds allowed the sun out, occasionally.

It was the other end of the day, late afternoon. Lucille sipped a large latte in a busy bistro near Bloomingdales. Her day of gallery hunting hadn't yielded what she'd envisioned. It didn't matter. She was undaunted, although somewhat fatigued. At this point, she just wanted to get rid of the garment bag she'd been dragging around all day. She figured, with Philip coming home, this was the last opportunity she'd have to get it to Nickynight.

Nickynight was still the only name Lucille had for Cynthia, but then again, PurpleFaime was the only name Cynthia had for Lucille. I look just like I do in the picture that I have posted in the Nicky Faime Café, Nickynight had told Lucille in a private message. I'll be wearing a green coat when we meet.

Lucille had told Nickynight she would wear her hair in a loose up-do, and had described the outfit that she was currently waiting in.

In truth, Lucille was a bit apprehensive about meeting someone from the Internet. She'd heard stories. However, the rendezvous was happening in a very public place. Lucille would quickly hand over the bag, then bye-bye Nickynight, plain and simple.

Twenty minutes passed. Nickynight was late, and Lucille's apprehension was turning into irritation. What if this person didn't show, Lucille wondered? I'll have to lump the garment bag all the way back to Brooklyn, Lucille realized. She didn't want to do that. It was the last of the Shrine, and there was no way it was going back home with her. Could I ditch it somewhere, Lucille asked herself? What an epic the whole thing had become.

Nickynight, aka Cynthia, arrived at the Bistro in a green coat carrying her usual purse and an umbrella. She was out of breath, having raced from Fifty-ninth Street where the six train had left

her. Cynthia hated being late, and was worried that PurpleFaime might have gone, if she'd even shown up to begin with. However, moments after Cynthia entered the Bistro, the two women's eyes made a connection.

Cynthia crossed to the table. Lucille stood up. They lightly shook hands. Lucille took the navy garment bag from the back of her chair, and handed it to Cynthia. Cynthia unzipped it eight or so inches, held it near her face and inhaled deeply. Overwhelmed, Cynthia fell into a chair at the table. She gushed her gratitude.

Lucille beamed. She was pleased to make someone so happy, so easily. As Lucille put on her coat, preparing to go, Cynthia said a few more words of thanks.

Lucille stopped dead in her tracks. She smiled extra wide at Cynthia then said something. Cynthia responded in a positive manner. Lucille sat down in her seat, abandoning the departure process. She had decided to stay, to have a coffee with Cynthia.

Two hours later Lucille and Cynthia had finished up an early dinner together. During dessert and coffee, they laughed, nodded agreements to each other and laughed some more. When it was over, they exited the bistro together, hugged good-byes and went off in opposite directions.

In Nicky's kitchen, which had been featured in a prominent New York Society magazine, Carlos was working late with a Sous Chef. They were preparing for the twenty guests they'd be feeding tomorrow night.

Things had been shaping up nicely. Carlos had been able to retain the services of the four waiters and one hostess he preferred. However, Carlos mistrusted bartenders and their concoctions. It may have been out of Carlos' control when Nicky dined out, but at home it was all up to him. Seiji would bartend.

Seiji was one of Carlos' favorite people, because Carlos knew Nicky was safe with Seiji. After all, who was going to mess with someone who looked like Seiji?

Carlos had been let in on the fact that Seiji had secreted a gun somewhere in the Escalade. Carlos knew, because Seiji had trusted Carlos with the information. However, Carlos had always thought that if someone ever did try anything, Seiji would easily crush his or her neck with his left hand, and Seiji was right handed.

Carlos and Seiji respected each other's loyalty to Nicky. Last year, when Carlos had confided to Seiji about his fear of bartenders, Seiji went right out and took a mixology course. From then on, Seiji would always bartend.

As far as a Sous Chef was concerned, there were only two people Carlos would consider, his older brother, and his younger brother. His younger brother was available.

They'd been prepping all day. Carlos and his brother had shopped, chopped and debated recipes for hours. Although it was late, ten p.m., they would start the oil for the salad dressing before calling it quits. Carlos wanted time for the herbs to scent the oil before adding the lemon and lime. His younger brother ripped up the fresh herbs that Carlos had selected while Carlos retrieved the Quiller safflower oil from the pantry. The tamper proof seal was unbroken. Carlos pulled the ring on the seal, allowing the fragrance free essence of safflower oil into the air.

Fresh obsessed, Carlos smelled everything in his path from Nicky's food to Nicky's laundry. The oil was next in line. Carlos inhaled over the opened bottle then sighed despairingly. The oil had an odor. It was like peanuts, probably stale, thought Carlos. Carlos' younger brother gave the oil a whiff. His face soured. Both agreed that this oil could not be served tomorrow, or on any other night. Carlos poured the oil down the drain, and trashed the bottle. He washed his hands with soap, rinsed and repeated.

Monday, **Nine Black Lives** shoot day one, was a dreary drizzle fest. Nicky's call time was eight-thirty a.m.

Up at the top of the day was scene twenty, a crime scene investigation. The slug on the call sheet read; Black interrogates Miriam Gray and Heff Ventner. Officers and forensics do their job.

The location was in Brooklyn, and Seiji was at the Escalade's wheel getting Nicky safely there on time. Nicky, seated in the back, was comfortable in track pants, sneakers and a denim jacket. He was reading the Times. Some other actors might be going over the days lines, but not Nicky. All that had been done the night before. Nicky would be fresh and spontaneous on the day, not having over read, over rehearsed or over analyzed.

Lara had secured the choice position of being Nicky Faime's personal make-up artist and hair stylist. Nicky had insisted. Leo had made it happen. Further, Nicky had thought it only natural that they should ride in together. After all, Lara had given up her apartment and had been staying at Nicky's place, until they found her a condo

Lara sat in the back seat with Nicky, doing some morning reading of her own. She had picked up Nicky's habit, but preferred the latest fashion and celebrity magazines to the newspaper. However, this morning she wasn't really reading. Lara just stared blankly at pages. In her mind she was lingering on in Saturday night's superfluities.

Nicky's pre-production dinner had been a monstrous success. Lara was busy remembering the rich and powerful men she had met, and the wealth encrusted women they'd had with them. The epicure atmosphere Carlos had created with his courses and service had inebriated everyone. This was the way to live Lara thought, smiled, looked up and saw Ilena. Lara's smile froze.

Lara was incomparably peeved about the fact that Ilena always rode with Nicky when he was working. The fact that Ilena had been demoted to the front seat hadn't done much to quell Lara's insecurities. She hated Nicky and Ilena's close relationship. First things first though, Lara thought as she gazed past Ilena. There'd be plenty of time to extricate Ilena from Nicky's life once a baby was born. In the meantime, Lara had decided to fake it.

Seiji turned off Flatbush. As Nicky turned his newspaper to the next page, Seiji formally announced, "Mr. Faime, we're almost at base camp."

Nicky looked up from his paper, "Thank you Seiji!" Nicky's eyes caught the beautifully restored renaissance revival homes passing his window. "The neighborhood's really come up." he said to anyone in the car who cared to listen.

The neighborhood reminded Nicky of his youth, when he'd lived nearby. It had been a time long ago, when his life had been one of insecurity and poverty. It was a time Nicky would conveniently forget as often as he'd remember, in order to get on with life.

Ilena, who had just finished tucking papers into her briefcase, looked out at the street. "Some friends of mine recently bought something like one of these, a brownstone row house not too far from here. They paid one point eight mil for it," she commented.

The Escalade turned a corner. “There’s the set!” Lara declared triumphantly, as though there was a prize attached to being the first to call it out.

Of course, everyone saw what Lara saw. One of the charming brownstones had been marked off with yellow police tape. In front of it cruisers, unmarked cars, an ambulance and coroner’s vehicle had created blockage.

“No ma'am,” offered Seiji, “Set’s a half mile away. That looks like a real crime scene.”

“There wouldn’t be exterior dressing at the location,” Ilena stated. “Today’s scenes are all interior,” she added, the logic of it missing Lara.

A uniformed Officer waved Seiji over. Seiji pulled up to the curb. He lowered his window as the Officer approached.

“Sorry about this, but you’ll have to turn around and detour.” advised the Officer.

“No problem. I’ll turn around. Thank you.” replied Seiji.

“Will this make us late?” Ilena asked, looking at her watch.

The Officer looked over to Ilena, but what he saw was Nicky Faimé sitting behind her. “Nicky Faimé!” he snapped to, as though in the presence of a superior officer. The Officer had a new tone. “Sorry sir,” he apologized. “You’ll be through right away!” It was as if Nicky was one of them, and had every right to be at a crime scene, or at least drive through it.

“Nicky Faime coming through! Make way for Nicky Faime!” The Officer directed a particular cruiser.

Something wasn't clear. Nicky silently questioned himself; is that Officer thinking of me as an actor, or as a cop?

The cruiser was repositioned with alacrity, and Seiji was able to navigate around the rest. Macho hand waves from several Officers, and a siren quickie sent the Escalade off in style.

Nicky peered through the rear window, reflecting on the crime scene as it grew smaller and smaller. He blinked, and it was gone.

Honeyland was situated in the parking lot of an old church, approximately three miles away from the actual location.

Three miles through Brooklyn streets and traffic means a ten to eighteen minute shuttle, thought Cheryl, a cute young TAD in a cheap yellow rain slicker. Cheryl was standing by. To be exact, she was umbrella laden, positioned where Nicky's Escalade would pull in.

The crew was ahead on set. Special Effects had completed the dressing of the corpse. All male actors were on set, and Haps was ready to block, now.

The pressure was on. Cheryl had to get Nicky and Victoria to set by eight-forty. It was currently eight-twenty. Cheryl would have to ask Nicky to turn around, and go directly to set.

Victoria Plumner, playing Miriam the dead victim's wife, had been in Hair and Make-up since seven a.m., and her processing had fallen far behind schedule. Cheryl had come close to begging, but

mercifully Victoria had reluctantly said she'd block in rollers. Although, she wouldn't travel until Nicky did.

The Escalade pulled into its assigned spot. Cheryl broke a grin, and announced into her walkie that Nicky Faime had arrived at base camp. In her nervous haste, Cheryl beat Seiji to Nicky's door. She popped open an umbrella and positioned it over where Nicky's head would be when he stepped out.

Nicky emerged. He had a cigarette in his hand. He looked at the umbrella, and waved it away. Lara stepped out after Nicky, and took the umbrella.

"I've got to get to the Make-up trailer." Lara said to Nicky, and kissed him on the cheek.

Nicky took Lara's hand, kissed her fingers. "Later babe!"

That was Cheryl's cue. "Good morning Mr. Faime!" Cheryl spoke in a friendly efficient voice. "You've been requested on set for a blocking."

"Thanks! I'm grabbing a smoke," Nicky said, his sights set on the Hair and Make-up trailer. As Lara had gone in, Victoria, in rollers and rainwear, had come out. Victoria waved a cigarette at Nicky. They walked towards each other.

"Cheryl, may I have an umbrella? Please!" Ilena's voice was curt.

Cheryl snapped out of the stupor Nicky's response had put her in. She spun around, and landed in Ilena's wet face. She fumbled with an umbrella.

“Mr. Faime isn’t on the clock for seven minutes.” Ilena was professionally correct. “I’ll be in Mr. Faime’s trailer,” Ilena informed Cheryl, as she took the umbrella that Cheryl had managed to open. “Now, if you’ll be kind enough to point the way.”

Nicky and Victoria intersected in the center of the parking lot.

“Nicky, good morning! I’d heard you’d arrived.” Victoria held up her smoke, “I thought you might want to join me. Look, the rain’s stopped just for us.”

Nicky lit Victoria’s smoke, then his own. Victoria chatted on about their upcoming scene together. Nicky couldn’t get a word in edgewise, but he didn’t mind. He was content to smile and listen half-heartedly, for Nicky’s mind was largely at the crime scene he had passed on the way to base camp.

As Victoria puffed and prated, Nicky’s forgotten cigarette was once again burning a path to his fingers. Nicky’s eyes weren’t on the travelling ember of his cigarette, because they were watching through the rear window of the Escalade. Nicky was visualizing the crime scene getting smaller and smaller.

The coal from Nicky’s smoke began to sear into his flesh. He ignored the pain, preferring to stay inside his mind and watch the reverse of his previous visualization. It was hypnotizing. The crime scene loomed larger and larger. Before he knew it, Nicky was just outside the front door of the home at the heart of the action. Nicky tried to enter, but he couldn’t cross the threshold.

“You’re on the clock, Mr. Faime,” Cheryl’s TAD’s voice brought Nicky around.

Nicky went to take a drag, but the cigarette had become smothered to death between two fingers.

“Time to block,” Victoria said, as she flicked her butt onto the cement.

“Time to block,” Nicky repeated. As he flicked his butt, a half-gram of Nicky’s flesh went with it. The rain started up again. A sleazy chill landed on Nicky’s nape. He glanced over at Cheryl. “Can you have some Cold FX and the First Aid Kit brought to my trailer before we travel?”

Cheryl looked like she was about to cry, scream or both.

Lucille Brookers lay lifeless on the floor in her shell of a Shrine.

Lieutenant Lightfoot, plain clothes, a huge man of better than six feet three inches with an intimidating edge about him, entered the Brookers’ living room. A subordinate trailed Lightfoot, notebook and pen in hand.

Philip, his good looks still holding out at fifty, was pulled together nicely in high-end sportswear. His hair was immaculately groomed, and his nails were professionally manicured. Normally a highly opinionated person who liked the sound of his own voice, Philip was now sickened into silence. He sat in despair on the couch.

Loreen wore a tracksuit over her pajamas. Every short hair on her head was out of place. She was curled up in Lucille’s favorite chair, trying to hold onto the pieces of her broken heart. Confused, angry and mucous ridden, she was working away on a box of facial tissues.

“Mr. Stursberg?” Lightfoot barked, forcing Philip out of his quiet. “I have a few questions.”

“Of course. Excuse me. It’s just that,” Philip paused for bravado, “I know she’s dead, but to think it could be murder. I mean she had no enemies. It doesn’t make sense.”

Loreen pulled a wad from the box. Her words were muffled through tears and tissue, “Everybody likes her!”

Lightfoot’s king-sized knuckles formed an understanding hand on Loreen’s shoulder. He addressed Philip. “Murder never makes sense Mr. Stursberg, and we’re not saying it was murder, just possibly.”

Lightfoot’s words were of no comfort to Philip. They weren’t meant to be.

Philip managed a feeble, “I see.”

Lightfoot eased up a notch. “I’m trying to get a time line going here, Mr. Stursberg. Dispatch has confirmed you called in at seven twenty-one this morning. “

“That’s right.”

“And you know it was seven twenty-one because?”

“Because it’s right here,” Philip pulled out his phone “It’s always here when I use my phone.”

“Makes sense,” Lightfoot went along. “That means you found the body at about seven nineteen, maybe seven twenty?”

Lightfoot calculated, “then called immediately using your cell. Is my assumption correct?”

Philip remained silent for several beats. “No!” He finally admitted. “I washed the blood off my hands first.”

“Lucille’s blood?” Lightfoot wanted some clarification.

“Yes,” Philip whispered then went silent.

“Did you change your clothes?” asked Lightfoot, mentally noting Philip’s attire.

“No.” Philip’s head swayed negatively. “There’s been no time. I just got home, and” he choked, his throat swollen with emotion. Philip had momentarily lost the ability to speak.

Loreen came to Philip’s aid. She stifled tears and tried to fill in. “Philip was in Los Angeles working.” The tears won. They began spilling down her cheeks, but she continued. “Lucille was so excited. She could hardly wait for Philip to come home. It’s all I heard about for days.”

Philip looked at Loreen, sighed and cast his eyes downward. “I got home at seven.”

Lightfoot pushed, “So your plane got in from LA at what, five thirty, six this morning?”

Philip’s eyes remained downward, as he answered, “No uh, well you see, I traveled back early with a friend. We got in last night.”

“But you didn’t come home until this morning?”

“That’s right.”

As interesting as this piece of information was, Lightfoot knew possible adultery wasn’t murder. “So you got home and used your key to get in?”

Loreen was staring at Philip in disbelief. She was outraged by what she was concluding.

“Yes!” Philip answered, eyes still down. “I called her name a few times. She didn’t answer.”

Loreen suddenly understood that Philip had been having an affair, while her sister had been being murdered. “How could she answer, you asshole? She was dead. If you’d come home last night, as any good husband would have done, she’d still be alive.”

Lightfoot’s hand that gently comforted Loreen, now firmly restrained her attempts to lunge at Philip.

“It’s your fault she’s dead,” Loreen cried. “I hate you! I hate you!” She broke down into a gagging cough She yanked wildly at the tissues.

Lightfoot and Loreen could barely hear Philip when he whispered, his face still glued to the floor. ”I went down to the bedroom.”

Loreen struggled to calm herself. She wanted to hear what the worm had to say.

“Maybe she’s sleeping, I thought. So I went downstairs and checked the bedroom.” Philip was shaking his head no. “I checked

the garden off the bedroom. It was awful, dark and raining.” He paused.

Lightfoot coaxed. “But Lucille wasn’t out there, so you came back inside.”

Philip’s head movement switched from a no to a yes. “I came back inside. I went upstairs, into the living room. That’s when I saw the baskets.”

Loreen looked over at the baskets. Their meaning overwhelmed her. She went for more tissue. The box was empty. She threw it at Philip. Loreen tore off her fleece jacket, and cried into that.

“Would you like to take a break?” Lightfoot’s merciful offer was directed to Loreen.

“No! I want to hear it all, now!” she spewed defiantly. “Tell us everything, Philip, and talk louder! I can’t hear you very well.”

Philip finally looked up. “The baskets contained the last of the Shrine. That was it. You see, the third floor was ready, and Lucille was up there. I was sure she was up there, hiding with a surprise party. It was so like her.” The memory hollowed Philip’s face as he continued. “So I went upstairs. I even practiced being surprised on my way up. There was a big gold bow on the door.” Philip stopped speaking. He was waiting for Loreen to accuse him again.

Loreen turned her head in disgust.

“It was so dark. It rained this morning,” Philip again reminded Loreen and Lightfoot. “I flipped the light switch, and the bulb burst. It just exploded, and I saw her in this, this flash. Lucille was lying on the floor. I walked over. I didn’t want to, but I had to. I knelt down,

and touched her head. It felt cold. Her cheeks were hard. My hands were sticky. There was blood, blood on my hands. At that moment, I knew what had happened.”

“What had happened, Mr. Stursberg?” Lightfoot inquired dryly.

“Lucille had had an accident, and had bled to death.”

“Because she has von Willebrand disease,” Loreen explained, sounding sicker than ill.

Lightfoot had seen Lucille’s corpse. He’d seen the medic alert bracelet. Lightfoot had understood the deeper meaning to Loreen’s very personal crimination of Philip all along. If Philip had come home last night, he could have stopped the bleeding, however it had started. Philip could have called an ambulance.

What Lightfoot needed now were the missing links, the pieces between the Lucille’s Medic Alert bracelet and that old gut feeling he was experiencing at that moment. Lightfoot also had a sense that Loreen was done for now. “Mrs. Brookers-Wright, you need to rest. Can I have one of my men drive you home?”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Loreen looked and sounded absolutely wiped out, “and please, call me Loreen.”

“I could use some rest myself,” Philip remarked. He arose to leave, only to find one of Lightfoot’s giant paws in his face.

“Not so fast, Stursberg.” Lightfoot insisted.

Shoot day two; the sky's sickening pallor was a continuation of Monday's foreboding atmosphere. Nicky's call was for seven a.m.

At six-thirty, Seiji was negotiating the Escalade through traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge. Beside him, Ilena was going over her endless papers. She sat twisted sideways, ready in case Nicky should need her.

In the rear, Lara was using a couple of her magazines as an under pad for a piece of paper. She was compiling a shopping list of clothes for herself.

Nicky was well into the morning's papers. Today, Nicky had eschewed his regular newspapers, opting for several editions that he considered to be more locally focused. He was scouring the local news for something specific. He wasn't sure what that specific would yield. He just wanted to find it. He caught a small headline reading; Body Found In Brooklyn Brownstone. Beneath, a short item reported:

Police are investigating the death of Lucille Brookers whose body was found yesterday morning in her Park Slope home on St. Marks Avenue.

Nicky looked up from his paper. "Seiji, yesterday we passed a crime scene. What street was that on?"

"St. Marks Avenue, sir."

"Right." Nicky returned to the article.

Philip Stursberg, Ms. Brookers husband of twenty-five years, made the sad discovery on his return home from a business trip.

There were no obvious signs of a break in or theft, but Police may suspect foul play. Lt. Lightfoot of the 27th precinct said it's too, early for the department to issue an official statement.

Ms. Brookers, who was a Costume Designer in the film industry, will forever be remembered for her work in the cult classic "The Handmaiden's Hands", starring the then unknown and now famous Nicky Faime. Mr. Stursberg, a violist in the Manhattan Symphony Orchestra was unavailable for comment.

"Ilena," Nicky lowered his newspaper, "you know how I get pissed off about the black suit sometimes?"

"Oh yeah!" Ilena knew exactly what Nicky was talking about. "And you always blame that poor designer whose name you can never remember, and I always say someone would have put you in a black suit, eventually. It was only a matter of time."

"Her name was Lucille Brookers."

"Was?" Ilena noted.

"Yes," answered Nicky.

Ilena nodded an understanding.

A shard of guilt pierced Nicky's conscience. It had taken death, something he'd rather forget, to help him to remember. Lucille Brookers, Nicky thought to himself, around mid thirties at that time, loads of energy, good to work with and talented. I could

always remember all of those things, but I could never remember her name.”

Ilena’s eyes bolted up from her documents, “Did you say something?”

“Not out loud,” Nicky answered, taking the pen from Ilena’s hand. He circled the item about Lucille Brookers, and returned the pen. “Make sure this article gets clipped and filed.”

Ilena glanced over at the story, “What should I file it under?”

“Lucille Brookers,” Nicky replied, and then went back to his reading.

Lara, who’d appeared not to be listening, cuddled up to Nicky. She didn’t care about disturbing his reading. “Is Lucille Brookers a good friend?” she inquired sweetly.

“No, she’s dead.” Nicky’s tone was as final as his words.

A clammy shudder gripped Lara. She didn't know this energy, and didn’t want to deal with it. She returned to her shopping list.

Set’s Rumor Mill was located in the Hair and Make-up trailer.

The Pretty Department, as many called it, was a place to make the actors look and feel beautiful. Fresh flowers, aromatherapy, soothing music and no walkies helped set a special vibe apart from the rest of the production’s insanities.

It was a big cast day. The Hair and Make-up assistants were in, setting up their stations.

Victoria and Sharlaya had been in their chairs since six a.m., and, as had been predicted, had fallen behind the clock.

Beneath her professional smile, Daphne, Key Hair, was close to tears. Victoria's hair hadn't gone well, and had to be reset on larger rollers.

Moira, Key Make-up, couldn't stand Sharlaya, but you'd never know it from all Moira's attentive fawning over Sharlaya. Unfortunately, Sharlaya had developed a last minute pimple on the tip of her nose, so had required a complete facial first thing in the morning.

Cheryl, the bottom of the AD department, knew they were in the doghouse. She was painfully aware that if they couldn't make up the time, it would be her fault. She tapped gently on the Hair and Make-up door then cracked it slightly open. "Are we ready for Len Chan?" she inquired pleasantly, carefully.

There were no negative responses, so Cheryl opened the door the rest of the way. She led Len to one of the Assistant's chairs. "Can I get you anything?"

"What's for breakfast?" he asked.

"Let's see, Craft is serving fried eggs, bacon, grilled cheese, the usual muffins and Danish. Of course there's a full range of breads, toasted or plain, jams, peanut butter and honey. The porridge is ready, and there's a full array of dry cereals. Oh yeah, coffee, tea, juices."

“Okay, I’ll have a scrambled egg white sandwich, with tomatoes and sprouts on lightly toasted spelt bread. Make sure it’s buttered with unsalted butter, not margarine, a fresh squeezed OJ and a regular coffee.

“Anything else?”

“Yes! I didn’t get any sides.”

Cheryl reached into her pouch, and pulled out the miniaturized call sheet and script pages for the day. “I’m so sorry!” she muttered, as she handed them to Len.

“That’s okay, but I’ll require them whenever I’m in.”

“Yes sir!” Cheryl turned to go. She rolled her eyes and thought, Craft is not going to like this. Cheryl knew Craft was behind. They were busy preparing Haps’ third breakfast, the first two having not been up to the Director’s standards. Craft just couldn’t get it right this morning. Now Len’s order was really going to jam the works, just as the bulk of the hungry cranky crew was arriving for call.

As Cheryl opened the door to exit the Beauty trailer, Victoria requested warm bottled water and some Advil. Sharlaya needed a Red Bull.

“Lara should be here soon,” remarked Moira, indignant to be doing everyone’s make-up but Nicky’s. It took a lot of the glory out of the job.

“I hear she’s older than she says she is,” mentioned Daphne.

“Never lie about your age,” said Victoria, staring intensely at the craftily disguised pimple on Sharlaya’s nose.

“I think she’s sick or something,” Sharlaya pointed out. “I heard her throwing up in the honey wagon toilet yesterday morning.”

“I’m sure she’s bulimic. Have you seen how skinny her legs are?” Victoria made it sound like it was a bad thing. “I’m sorry, but that’s just not normal.”

“Who’s Lara?” Len asked, sucked into the gossip.

“Nicky’s girlfriend,” informed Moira, “and his personal make-up artist. Does his hair, too.”

“Sounds like sour grapes,” Len was honest then wished he hadn’t been.

“Not at all,” defended Moira. “It’s just that some of us have worked exceptionally hard to get where we are.”

“Amen to that!” sighed Daphne.

Lara, who was totally suspicious of Daphne and Moira’s intentions in regards to Nicky, swished into the trailer. Moira and Daphne dropped what they were doing. They rushed over to Lara for morning hugs. What a disgusting two-faced display by the three. Yet, they needed each other, and in a symbiotic way their relationship worked quite well.

Lara went to her station, Nicky’s area. It was at the front end of the trailer, higher than everyone else’s stations. Daphne and Moira gave each other a hairy eyeball then resumed their work.

Outside the trailer, Cheryl adjusted her earpiece and the volume on her walkie. She performed her expected light tap on the door then cracked it open. She had Charlie Broadfoot in tow. She also had Victoria's water and Sharlaya's Red Bull. "Charlie's here!" she carefully chirped as she led him in.

Twenty minutes later, Cheryl escorted Holdens into Hair and Make-up. She was also carrying a tray with Len Chan's breakfast nicely arranged on it. Len had already left the department. His processing had been finished. Charlie had moved into the Hair chair that Len had vacated. Holdens sat down in Make-up.

"Is that my breakfast?" Charlie asked Cheryl, his hungry eyes glued to the tray of food.

Shit! Charlie's breakfast, remembered Cheryl to herself. Charlie had been so easy about it. All he'd wanted was whatever had been up and hot with a regular coffee. Len's breakfast had been such an ordeal that Cheryl had completely forgotten about Charlie's.

"What'd I get?" he asked eagerly, indicating to where Cheryl should place his breakfast tray on the counter.

"A scrambled egg white, tomato and sprout sandwich on lightly toasted spelt bread buttered with unsalted butter, fresh squeezed OJ and coffee," she said, putting the tray where he'd requested.

"Well, that's different," remarked Charlie, not impressed. He was sure he'd smelled bacon and real eggs as he'd passed the Craft truck. "No bacon?"

"Um yes! The fresh batch should be finished shortly," Cheryl covered for herself. "I'll rush some right over," she sighed then high tailed it out of the trailer to get some bacon, and to reorder Len's

breakfast. In her cluttered panic, Cheryl failed to pay attention to the real world around her, and smacked head on into Nicky at the bottom of the stairs to the Hair and Make-up trailer.

“I’m so sorry!” Cheryl gasped as she steadied herself. It was at that moment she noticed that Nicky had been through wardrobe. He was in his costume, a black suit, white shirt and loosened tie. She checked her watch as Nicky proceeded up the steps. “Oh no!” Cheryl cried, “I forgot to come get you. I’m so sorry!”

“It’s better not to have to be sorry,” Nicky responded evenly. He opened the door, and entered the trailer.

Charlie was smoothing his hair in the mirror when he saw Nicky enter. He got into character and spun around in his chair. “Your ass is mine today, Black!” He bellowed.

“It ain’t over 'til it’s over!” Nicky shot back, a la Black.

“You’re off the case Black!”

“Yeah, well I’m still on the scent, Captain Jordan,” Nicky’s Black taunted.

“So stop sniffin’ around,” Charlie demanded in a Jordan growl.

The whole place broke up. These guys were a riot. Nicky and Charlie did their handshakes and arm slaps. Nicky said a general good morning to everyone then head to his chair.

Twenty minutes later, Charlie, Len and Holdens were being traveled to set. Lara was almost finished Nicky. Moira and Daphne were still working on Victoria and Sharlaya.

The Beauty Assistants were packing up to go to set. Daphne's Assistant was quite upset. She'd had a bit of a run in with Holdens. He wouldn't let her touch his hair. He'd said he'd take care of it himself.

With an arm around her Assistant, Daphne consoled, "Look don't get all twisted up in a knot over it. He's a nobody, an aging day player who's managed a career on no talent, okay looks and great hair."

"He's wearing a wig," said Moira. "I'm sure of it. That's why he didn't want you touching his hair. He thinks we think it's real."

"That's pathetic," Daphne criticized. "A man should be able to be who he is."

"If people knew he was bald, I don't think he'd get any work," Moira commented with salt on her tongue.

"Oh I don't think he's completely bald," informed Moira's Assistant, "I had to be so, so careful with the make-up around his hair line. You know, so as not to disturb some wisps of his own hair he'd combed in with the wig, to make it look natural."

"He's bald with fringe," laughed the Hair assistant, feeling better.

The other girls, including Lara joined in the laughter.

Not Nicky. He didn't join the laughter. He didn't feel better. Holdens, that poor bastard Nicky thought, as he studied his own hairline in the mirror. Nicky thought he might have noticed it receding ever so slightly in recent months. Would they all be laughing at him one day?

The Assistants, all packed, head out to the location. Nicky and Lara were ready shortly thereafter, and took off to set. Victoria and Sharlaya remained in the works.

Cheryl tapped then popped her head in the door. “Set’s calling for an estimate. What do you think? Five minutes?”

“Try more like twenty,” Moira hissed.

“No problem!” Cheryl saluted, and left the trailer. Once well clear of hearing distance, she walkied a ten-minute estimate to the First on set, and crossed her fingers.

Saturday began **Nine Black Lives** first weekend, two days off.

It had been a hassle, class-A- bullshit, but Leo had come through with a DVD copy of **The Handmaiden's Hands**.

Nicky had requested it Wednesday, for Saturday. Leo had already known that the master reel hadn't existed for years. The director, for unknown but surmisable reasons, had destroyed the film. Luckily, by Thursday afternoon, Leo had tracked down the Cameraman, who'd retired to Florida. The Cameraman had retained a now ancient Beta copy, which had been couriered overnight to Leo's office in New York. Leo had had to cash in a favor to get the transfer made by Saturday noon. It was in Nicky's hands at two.

In the midnight hour, Nicky and Lara were curled up in bed with gourmet popcorn and red wine. They watched **The Handmaiden's Hands**. It looked terrible. The lighting sucked. Sets were pathetic. Performances were questionable. The special effects were more like special defects, and could the Zombies' make-up be any cheesier?

However, Nicky had thought that Lucille Brookers had done a good job with the costumes. Even Lara had commented how sharp Nicky had looked in that particular black suit.

The movie was about half way through. Lara, who had been barely hanging on because the movie had been such a drag, had fallen asleep. Nicky hung in to the end of the movie. When it was over, he read each and every credit.

Sunday afternoon, Nicky, Leo and Ilena were gathered in caucus around the table in Ilena's office. The stalker files were neatly piled beside Ilena.

"Alright!" Leo chimed as usual. "Let's see this letter!"

Ilena held up a large zip-lock. Inside was an unfolded letter and an envelope. Everyone could read the letter through its plastic protection.

Nicky smirked, couldn't resist a low laugh.

"I'm missing the punch line, Faime," Leo wanted to laugh with Nicky.

"It looks like Props made it."

As ridiculous as it was, someone had gone to the age-old trouble of cutting letters out of a magazine, and pasting them one by one onto a sheet of white paper.

"But I assure you it's very real," Ilena's words were as sober as the Prohibition era. She read the letter out loud. "You'll never hurt me again. It's your turn to suffer."

Nicky took the baggie. He turned it over in his hands. "There's a hair in here, dark brown, blackish."

Julie has black hair," Ilena said opening the 104 - Julie folder. She displayed the photo. Do you think it could be hers?"

"Maybe, but it could be yours." Nicky suggested.

“What do you mean by that?” demanded Ilena, thinking what a mean thing that was for Nicky to say to someone as loyal as she was.

“You put the letter in the baggie,” Nicky sought clarification?

“That’s right.” Ilena confirmed.

“The hair could have fallen out of your head and into the baggie just as you were putting the letter inside. It’s a short hair,” Nicky continued, “more like a broken end. Maybe it was already stuck to the letter. Maybe it wasn’t. It could be mine.”

Ilena, seeing the point Nicky made, chastised herself. She knew better than to jump to personal conclusions.

Leo pointed to the Julie picture. “Has she shown up on set?” And what are we going to do about that?” Leo was right to be concerned.

Everyone had seen it before. It started with a couple of fans one day, a few the next. A week in a location could produce a large crowd. One-day locations could be just as bad. Someone in the area would recognize Nicky. An hour later the entire neighborhood would show up. Some would show up once during a shoot. Some were repeat visitors, and those were the ones worth remembering.

“I don’t think so.” Ilena opened the rest of the files. “I haven’t seen any of these faces on set, yet.”

“I’d like Seiji to plant a couple of his men in the crew.” Leo thought out loud. “Nicky?”

Nicky said nothing.

“What if the person behind the letter is Julie, and she shows up with a gun? What are you going to do?” Ilena plead rationally. “If something does have to be done, better it’s done by trained professionals.” She held the baggie up. “Or we could take this to the police.”

Nicky sat silent. He couldn’t help from wondering why everyone thought he couldn’t take care of himself. After all, Nicky was an icon of strength and justice. He didn’t need babysitters. He also didn’t need an argument. He wasn’t in the mood. “Okay, but just a couple of guys,” Nicky conceded. “Let’s not make too big of a deal out of this.”

By shoot day 22, Nicky had added three more articles to his Lucille Brookers file.

Two of the items were by the only reporter in the entire city who had followed her story. It hadn’t turned into much. Lucille’s had appeared to be an accidental death. There had been alcohol and a sedative in Lucille’s blood. She’d lost her balance, had fallen forward, hit her head on a door and had broken her nose.

Lucille had had von Willebrand disease. Yes, she had been taking medication, but existing clotting agents in her blood hadn’t been enough to slow down the hemorrhage that her broken nose had caused. Lucille had needed to get to a hospital. In the end it was determined that landing on her back had been her true undoing. The official cause of death was affixation. Lucille had choked to death on her own blood.

The third item was an article on Lt. Lightfoot, lead detective on the Brookers case. It was a local human-interest story featuring one of New York's finest. Lightfoot was about to turn 55, and was also celebrating 35 years on the force. The article featured his accomplishments with the department, his charitable work in the community and the life of a child he'd recently saved. On a lighter note, the article listed his favorite things. Among them was Nicky Faime, his favorite actor.

Friday, shoot day 25, was Lt. Lightfoot's birthday.

Earlier that day, Nicky had gotten Ilena to call the twenty-seventh. He'd wanted to get Lightfoot on the phone so he could congratulate him on turning fifty-five and his thirty-five years on the force. After all, Nicky was Lightfoot's favorite actor. Lightfoot had been out on a call, and had only been able to be reached under dire circumstance. Ilena had been informed that the best time to grab Lightfoot would be at his shift's end.

At the end of his Friday shift, down at the twenty-seventh precinct, there'd be cake, champagne and toasts. You should catch Lightfoot before his party starts Ilena had informed Nicky. Nicky had liked the party idea. He had decided that in person congratulations were in order. Nicky would attend the event, arriving fashionably late and uninvited.

Nicky wore his costume from Nine Black Lives, his black suit, to Lightfoot's party. It had been much to Wardrobe's dismay, but what could they have said.

Nicky appeared to be a natural part of the action, as he walked into the Police Station. He fit right in with the suited-up detectives. He went unnoticed as he pulled up to the front desk.

“Is Lt. Lightfoot available?” he inquired flatly.

“Who wants to know?” asked the surly desk Sergeant, not looking up from his paperwork.

“Nicky Faime.”

Had he heard right? The Sergeant peered up. He’d heard right. “Mr. Faime,” he sat straight. “Sorry sir! The Lieutenant hadn’t mentioned anything about you showing up,”

“It’s a birthday surprise.” Nicky claimed.

“Of course,” the Sergeant said then punched in Homicide’s bullpen extension. “Nicky Faime’s here to see the Lieutenant.” He didn’t take his eyes off Nicky. “Sure I’m sure,” the Sergeant was speaking to the person on the other end of the phone. “I’m absolutely positive it’s him.” The Sergeant was loud and proud of the Lieutenant’s famous guest.

After hanging up, the Sergeant’s line of sight zeroed in on a rookie. “Perkins!” commanded the Sergeant. “Take Mr. Faime up to the Lieutenant.”

Perkins led Nicky, now with an official visitor’s card clipped to his breast pocket making him look more like a cop than ever, down a hallway. They arrived at imposing double doors. Behind the doors was the detectives’ bullpen, and Lightfoot’s party.

With plastic champagne flutes half drained, fifteen or so detectives, officers and support staff stood with bated breath. They were awaiting the possible appearance of Nicky Faime, their favorite cop actor. The doors parted, and Nicky stepped into the fray.

“Son of a bitch!” bellowed Lightfoot, extending his baseball mitt of a handshake.

“Nicky Faime,” Nicky said, going for the shake. He recognized Lightfoot from his picture in the newspaper.

Their eyes met, and their hands meshed. However, before either could address each other further, applause broke out. Champagne found itself in Nicky’s face. He took the glass. The applause began dying down. The timing was perfect. Nicky would toast Lightfoot, but as he raised his glass, a Detective beat Nicky to the punch.

“Toast! Toast!” shouted the Detective. Everyone raised his or her glass. “To Nicky Faime, the greatest cop on film!” cheered the Detective.

Nicky’s thunder had been stolen. Worse so had Lightfoot’s.

“Thank you!” Nicky said as the cheer faded, causing it to rebuild.

A voice in the crowd broke through the clamor. “Nicky! Would you sign this DVD for my wife?”

Lightfoot placed a paw on Nicky’s shoulder then set his focus on the crowd. “Look you goons,” he began in loud bearish humor,

“Nicky Faime didn’t come all the way here to sign autographs for your wives or husbands.”

Through the side of his eye, Lightfoot caught Nicky watching him through the side of his eye. Lightfoot sensed an ulterior motive. Lightfoot instinctively understood that there was something else that brought Nicky to the bullpen, another reason besides the occasion’s congratulations. Nicky could feel Lightfoot’s intuitions at work.

Lightfoot shook Nicky’s shoulder in a good old boy gesture, “And he sure as hell didn’t come to listen to your star struck rabble. There’s only one way to handle this.” Lightfoot barked an order at Nicky, “Into my office! You’ve got some explaining to do!” The place cracked up on Lightfoot treating Nicky as though he was one of them. Everyone knew Lightfoot was pulling Nicky’s chain.

Nicky ratcheted the gag up a notch, “Yes, sir!” Nicky snapped back. He brought the house down. Nicky and Lightfoot used the high note to escape to Lightfoot’s office.

Lightfoot downed the last of his champagne, as he entered his office. He tossed the empty flute onto his cluttered desk, and took his seat behind it.

Nicky downed the last of his champagne then placed his flute on the edge of a crowded shelf. Nicky took a step toward Lightfoot’s desk. The flute fell off the shelf, and Nicky accidentally stepped on it. It was humiliating, but Nicky was undaunted as walked the rest of the way to the desk under Lightfoot’s severe scrutiny. Nicky stood at attention, facing Lightfoot, facing the desk.

“Let me guess, you read the item in the paper about me, and thought you’d congratulate me in person?” Lightfoot summed up Nicky’s modus operandi.

”That’s right.”

“But there’s more.”

“I’ve been following one of your cases.”

Lightfoot’s facial expression demanded an answer without having to ask a question.

“Lucille Brookers,” Nicky responded.

“You a friend of hers?”

“No.”

“So what’s your angle?”

“We worked together, once, a long time ago.”

“You have no angle.”

“That’s right! I have no angle, but her death sounds shaky.” Nicky insisted.

“Faime! You wouldn’t know shaky if it shook you,” Lightfoot insulted, his gag-ish humor now faded. Lightfoot had become adamant. “The case is almost closed, accidental death.”

“You believe that?” questioned Nicky.

Lightfoot arose from his chair. He walked to his office door and planted himself there. It was an invitation for Nicky to leave.

Nicky realized that there were now two people in this world who would call him Faime, and that his visitor's pass had just expired.

Lightfoot's voice raised a decibel. "Look Faime, what's it to you? You might be my favorite actor, but you're not a cop. Lucille Brookers' death has nothing to do with you. Stay out of Police Business!"

Nicky's inner ire raged. He steeled his jaw. How many times had he acted this part out in a scene in a movie? Yet, Nicky didn't know what to say because this wasn't an act. It was real, and no lines had been written in advance.

With nothing to say in his defense, Nicky felt officially off the case, and he was pissed. He walked calmly out of Lightfoot's office into the bullpen. All eyes were on Nicky, as he made his way to the imposing double doors. Nicky pumped adrenaline all the way. Lightfoot entered the bullpen behind Nicky. He folded his arms and glared at Nicky's back.

Nicky turned on a dime. He faced Lightfoot and the party. "Happy Birthday, Lieutenant!" he saluted. A cheer went up.

I wrote the perfect line, Nicky thought as he walked through the double doors into the hallway. The writers couldn't have done better.

Monday, shoot day 26, was the day the morbid spring weather that had long overstayed its welcome had finally given way to sunny summer skies. Unfortunately, for those shooting **Nine Black Lives**, it was a moot point.

Nine Black Lives would begin three weeks of exterior night shooting. That night they were back in Brooklyn at shoot day one's location to finish the script day. Honeyland had returned to the same church's parking lot.

Nicky's call had been at six-thirty p.m.

Going from days to nights was a nasty transition at best. The entire cast and crew's ill mood had created a cantankerous atmosphere on set. More of a drag, Haps just wasn't getting what he wanted from his actors, especially Nicky. The scene they were currently shooting wouldn't be worth printing.

"Cut!" Haps called at the top of his lungs. He was at his wit's end. "Claus! Del Vartnay is incredibly intense, not annoyingly irritated," Haps pleaded, as he approached the actors on the set. "And Nicky, where's your edge? It's like you're not even here. For Christ sake! This is scene one twelve, the big scene leading into the next scene where Black gets shot. The murderer has returned to the goddamn scene of the crime, just like Black knew he would. The victim's wife, Miriam, insane with obtaining justice, has shown up with a gun. Victoria we need to believe you. Passion, passion, passion!"

The more Haps had pushed Nicky and the others, the worse they had gotten. There was no reason to think they would get any better at this point. He needed to think. He pulled at his hair that hadn't been there for years then called his First Assistant Director over.

Following a very brief meeting, Haps' First A.D. made the announcement that they would take a break from the current scene. They would move to an insert shot of Del Vartnay sneaking through the back yard with Jordan on his ass. There would be no wardrobe change for Claus or Charlie, but Victoria would change into her day four wardrobe. Day four was owed an insert shot of Miriam exiting the house, and getting into her car. After that, Victoria would change back to night twelve, and they'd all give the big scene, scene one twelve, another try.

The First A.D.'s thinking was that switching scenes around would give the actors, especially Nicky, a chance to get out of the uninspired rut they were in. With any luck, they'd be back into scene one twelve in an hour and a half. Production could still get several shots of one twelve off before lunch, which was set for one a.m., just into the next calendar day.

Haps and Nicky had a quick side bar before Nicky head back to base camp for his break. Haps commiserated with Nicky about what a pain it was switching over to nights. Haps emphasized that it was really unfair to have to do such a heavy scene on the very first day of night shooting. It was a complete drag, but Haps blamed the city.

All of the city's permit regulations had locked the production into locations, as per neighborhood's specifications. That had created the crappy schedule. Haps said he needed Nicky to focus, to really put himself into the murder scene. Nicky went along with

what Haps was saying, and said the down time was probably just what he needed. Yet all the while, Nicky understood clearly that the murder scene was exactly what he was focused on. The problem, as Nicky saw it, was that he was focusing on the wrong murder, the wrong scene.

All was quiet on the Honeyland front when Nicky arrived back at his Winnie. It didn't matter to Nicky that he had the deluxe extendible model of Winnebago motor home. He hated that stinky dressing room on wheels. Unfortunately he had to go in for his smokes.

Ilena was in the front, sitting at the table, doing her work. That's how they did it. Ilena's office was in the front. Nicky's change room was in the back. Only for meals would Ilena clear the table. Here, with the door wide open, Nicky, Ilena and Lara would eat some scrumptious lunch Carlos had provided, while the rest of the crew suffered through the catering.

Lara hated this arrangement. She couldn't understand why Ilena didn't get her own motor home. Why would a big star like Nicky put up with something like that? Lara had definitely envisioned herself as hanging out in Nicky's Winnie, being his girlfriend and all. Although in the end, it didn't really matter yet. Lara wasn't in any position for it to.

Also, other than for eating and changing, Nicky was never in there. Nicky pretty much lived on set. If he wasn't on set, he was in make-up, or off somewhere having a smoke. Smoking, another thing Lara hated about Nicky's life, another thing she would change in time.

Ilena watched, as Nicky grabbed his smokes and head back outside. She didn't like him to smoke either, but she would never try to change Nicky or things about him. It wasn't her job.

Nicky stepped into the night. The Escalade was parked behind his motor home. Seiji was behind the wheel, watching a security monitor. Cheryl was outside Make-up, dutifully standing by to whisk Victoria back to set. Neither witnessed, as Nicky silently slipped between the Honey Wagon and Wardrobe trucks and out of the parking lot. It's amazing how swiftly a black suit melts into a sable night.

Nicky was already a block away, turning the corner. He'd known for days where he'd be going. He had the route all figured out. Nicky walked a couple of blocks, turned a corner then picked up his pace for another couple of blocks. He turned another corner, and head up the street. Nicky pulled up under an Oak tree across from Lucille Brookers' home. There was no yellow tape, no cruisers, no ambulance and no coroner, but it was her brownstone.

While studying the front door, Nicky drew a cigarette out of its pack. He stuck it between his lips. His curiosity about Lucille Brookers' death burned to where he could have lit his cigarette with it. He took his lighter out from a pocket. Nicky was just about to fire up, when suddenly the door opened. Loreen emerged from an amber glow, dragging two bags of garbage. Nicky put his lighter back in his pocket.

Loreen was about to heave her bags onto the already healthy pile of trash growing from the curb across the sidewalk, but thought better. She'd already gotten one fine, so she took some time to place it properly.

“Excuse me!”

Loreen looked up from her task. There stood Nicky Faime, right in front of her. She almost fainted then thought better. Maybe it's just someone who looks like him, she rationalized.

Nicky held up his cigarette. "Got a light?" His voice was as smooth as silk satin.

"Nicky Faime?" Loreen asked optimistically.

"That's right. We're shooting near here. I'm on a smoke break with no light," his voice assured.

Loreen's thoughts raced. "Could this really be happening? I take out the trash, and meet Nicky Faime." She saw the cigarette. A panic grew.

"No I don't have a light, but I could get one," she blurted out immediately regretting it. Oh no, why did I say that? Say something better!" she told herself. "My sister worked with you once," came out of her mouth.

Nicky's dark eyes drew Loreen in. "Lucille Brookers?"

"Yes, how'd you know?" Loreen was sent aback.

"I read about her death. I know she lived here."

"So this isn't some kind of an accident. You came here on purpose," Loreen said regaining ground.

"I came on purpose, but I didn't know I'd meet you. You're the accident." He held out his hand. "Nicky," he said.

Loreen peeled off a pair of rubber gloves, and plunged her hands into Nicky's. "I'm Loreen," she gushed. "But why'd you come?"

"A chilling feeling about Lucille's death. I suppose it's my version of a gut feeling."

"Then you'll want to know everything?"

Nicky stared at Loreen's pretty face. Short sandy wisps of hair scattered out from under a kerchief wrapped head, framing eyes wide and moist with hope. "Yes," he answered.

"I'll show you where it happened," said Loreen, and she led Nicky inside.

"Unique place," Nicky commented as Loreen led him into the main floor. He noticed boxes were being packed. It looked like someone was moving out.

As though she could hear Nicky wondering, Loreen commented, "The house is going up for sale as soon as possible. Philip wants it empty and clean before strangers start milling through."

"Philip, Lucille's husband?"

"Yes, the merry widower." Loreen spoke sadly. "Look," she said, "I'd like to," she paused, "get myself a bit more together before I take you upstairs. Would you like a coffee?"

"Love some," Nicky said. He pulled Black's prop pen and notebook from his jacket's inside pocket.

While coffee brewed, Loreen filled Nicky in on everything Philip had told Lt. Lightfoot. How Philip had found the body. How he'd washed Lucille's blood from his hands. How he'd returned to New York from Los Angeles the night before, but didn't come home.

As they sipped their coffees at the kitchen table, Loreen ashamedly informed Nicky that Philip had been seeing someone else for quite awhile.

"Why are you ashamed for Philip's infidelity?" Nicky asked Loreen. "He's the sinner in this story. You should be angry at him, not yourself."

Nicky's words empowered Loreen, and her anger surfaced. She confessed to Nicky that she hated Philip's guts. She thought that he might have had something to do with Lucille's death.

Nicky looked up from the notes he'd been taking. "Yet, you've been helping him," he mentioned, as he glanced around at all the work Loreen was doing.

"How does it go? Hold your friends near, your enemies nearer. And I thought maybe I'd find something the police missed."

"Have you?"

"Not that I know of." Loreen poured second cups without asking.

"There was alcohol and sedative in Lucille's blood." Nicky was non-accusatory, simply stating reported fact.

"Yes, but only around two glasses of wine and a common prescription sleeping pill. And see, I just don't get that. Lucille was

a coffeeholic and a night owl. If she needed to sleep she'd skip her evening coffee, have an herbal tea, count sheep or even smoke pot, but never a pill. And where'd she get the pill? Her doctor hadn't prescribed any. There was no pill bottle, full or empty, anywhere in the house. Family and friends all deny having given her anything. And what about the wine?"

"What about the wine?"

"There was an empty bottle, but she hadn't drunk that much. Where did the rest of it go? Police said she could have had some the night before, and finished it that night. Maybe, but again she was more likely to have a coffee. Unless she had company, if she had company in the evening, she'd offer wine."

"But she didn't have any company that night?"

"I don't know. None of the neighbors had noticed anyone coming or going. But I know she was dressed for visitors."

"How do you know?" Nicky pushed.

"Lucille lived in yoga wear and jeans around the house. She died in a vintage angora sweater with a pair of black capris and ballet slip-ons. That would definitely be more like something she'd wear for company."

"Did you mention that to the police?"

"Yes, and I'd mentioned the clothes to Philip as well. Even he agrees with me. Of course Lt. Lightfoot has a theory about the clothes. He claims Lucille could have gotten dressed up because she'd found out Philip was returning early. But there were no phone records, no faxes, no e-mails to confirm that. Apparently, only Philip

and his girlfriend who had flown back with him had known about the schedule change.”

Loreen had developed an exceptionally strong attachment to Nicky in a very short period of time. It was understandable. He was the first person, since her original conversations with Lt. Lightfoot, who had taken her seriously. Even Loreen’s husband had tired of hearing about it. He was always telling her to let go, to get on with her life.

“There’s nowhere to go to get on with life,” Nicky said seemingly reading her mind, “until the mystery of your sister’s demise is solved. Is there? What else have you learned?”

“Well, I know Philip and his girlfriend were seen arriving at her place at dinner time. They had dinner delivered in, and in is where they remained all night. All entrances and exits have security cameras, and for sure Lt. Lightfoot reviewed all the footage. Neither of the two cheaters ever left the building. Still, Philip could have hired someone.”

“Remind me,” Nicky asked, “What was her time of death?”

“Around midnight,” Loreen sighed painfully. “Around midnight.”

Meanwhile back in the church’s parking lot, an hour and a half had elapsed since Nicky had left set. An hour and ten had gone by since he’d snuck out of Honeyland. Scene one twelve was back up. Cheryl knocked on Nicky’s Winnie’s door. Ilena opened it.

“It’s time for Mr. Faime’s touchups,” Cheryl informed Ilena politely.

“Nicky’s not in here,” remarked Ilena. She walked out into the parking lot, and looked around. “He went for a smoke,” Ilena told Cheryl then checked her phone, ”over an hour ago.”

“Maybe he went straight to Make-up?” Cheryl guessed hopefully. “Excuse me!” Cheryl begged Ilena, as she sped off to the Hair and Make-up trailer.

“Straight to Hair and Make-up? I doubt it,” Ilena spoke to herself.

At the brownstone, Nicky and Loreen were hanging on to their last sips of cup two.

“I think it might be time to go to the Shrine.” Loreen sighed.

“The scene of the murder?”

“Yes,” Loreen answered. She could see misunderstanding in Nicky’s eyes. “Oh! It’s not like a religious Shrine or something. You see, costume designers collect a lot of stuff, so fifteen years ago when Lucille and Philip moved in here,” Loreen began filling Nicky in.

Lara was at her station In the Hair and make-up trailer. Nicky’s chair was empty. Lara was quiet, annoyed.

Moira and Daphne worked like a tag team on Victoria. There was a familiar knock. The door opened, and Cheryl’s body stiffened within its frame. It was plain to see that there was no Nicky in the

Pretty Department. Cheryl shot an inquiring glance at Lara. Lara shrugged her shoulders in disbelief.

Nicky and Loreen pretended to sip coffee, neither needing nor wanting the current situation to end.

“So Lucille agreed I could sell off her burdensome collection.” Loreen raveled on.

In Honeyland, Cheryl stood hunched and alone in the parking lot. She was staring at the walkie on her belt. Cheryl swallowed her fears. She had to do what she had to do. She had to report that Nicky was AWOL.

Cheryl had searched Wardrobe, Craft Service and even the Grip truck, a notorious smoking denizen, but had found no Nicky. As a last resort she'd used channel two to ask if anyone had had a twenty on Nicky. There'd been no takers.

Cheryl switched to channel one. Her earpiece wouldn't quit. The chatter was relentless with vitally important stats. Cheryl took a deep breath, then pressed the transmit button. She spoke urgently and clearly into her mouthpiece. “Breaker, breaker! Cheryl Tad to Michael First. Breaker, breaker!”

Cold empty cups lingered on the kitchen table. Nicky and Loreen had finally given up pretending to drink coffee that had been long gone.

“And that’s the story of the Shrine and what happened to it and why,” Loreen wound up then added afterthoughts. “There’s still a lot of Lucille’s collection in my basement. Sales were going really great, but since,” Loreen paused to pull her words together. “My heart won’t let me sell anything else.” Loreen sounded miserable.

Nicky touched the back of Loreen’s hand, a gesture of understanding. His fingertips tingled on connecting with her skin. Nicky was sensing closeness, in his own way.

Loreen gained heart. She smiled up at him. “You know Lucille had in her collection your jacket from **The Handmaiden’s Hands.**”

“Sweet!” Nicky was complimented. “How much did it go for?” he inquired, his vanity seeping through his detective facade.

“Nothing, nada, zip,” Loreen shook her head. “Lucille gave it away, or at least she said she was going to. Anyway she must have, because now that I think about it, it hasn’t turfed up anywhere.” Loreen arose. “Shall we go upstairs?”

Production had come to a grinding halt. The crew stood, sat, chat, ate, napped, rapped, smoked and joked, all the while being paid. The cast was on hold in Honeyland.

Inside the Escalade, Seiji was concentrating on scouring the streets as he circled the block, slowly. Nicky was not to seen. Seiji couldn’t stray far, but had decided to expand into concentric circles around base camp.

Ilena stood in the church's parking lot calling Nicky's phone over and over. The First A.D. was frantically working between his walkie and his cell. There was only one thought in everyone's mind. Where the hell is Nicky?

"Here we are." Loreen announced quietly, throatily. She flipped on the light. "The Shrine."

Nicky walked to the center of the room then did a protracted three sixty on his heels. He absorbed the mirrored door upon which a web like fracture painted with brown imitated a Rorschach in crystal and dried blood. Nicky saw the outline of Lucille's body on the floor. Around the shape that was the representation of Lucille's head, there was brown staining.

Loreen observed Nicky taking in the room. She felt a need to explain. "Of course it's getting cleaned and repainted next week. Philip's arranged everything. The Police know."

Ilena was calling Nicky's cell for the tenth time, as she entered his Winnie. She found his phone in the rear. It was on the bed, ringing vainly. She sat on the edge of the bed, and began to think systematically.

Ilena started at the last time she'd seen Nicky. He'd come into the trailer, grabbed his smokes and gone back outside. Ilena had had no other course than to think Nicky had gone out for a smoke.

Ilena considered where Nicky might have gone to enjoy his vice. She remembered that last time they were at this location Nicky had taken his smoke breaks by a tree stump at the far end of the parking lot. However, Ilena had just come back from the parking lot and there had been no signs of Nicky, not even a smoldering butt.

What else can I remember, Ilena thought? She searched her memory's databank. Ilena recalled that the last time the production had been at this exact location, it had been shoot day one. Ilena distinctly recalled that en route to set on shoot day one, the Escalade had passed a crime scene in front of a brownstone row house. It had been the Lucille Brookers death site.

Ilena had been filing the Lucille Brookers news clippings for Nicky. Of course, Ilena thought, that's where he is. Ilena phoned Seiji.

Nicky pulled a pair of surgical gloves from his blazer's side pocket. He stretched them over his hands. He inspected the closet door and the mirror. He engaged Loreen in further conversation, as he worked.

"What's the rest of the story?" he inquired.

Loreen took a deep breath. "There wasn't a trace of blood downstairs, but there was lots of it upstairs. It was on the mirror, on Lucille's face and on the floor by her head."

Loreen walked back to the doorway at the top of the stairs. She proceeded to play out the scene for Nicky. "Okay, I'm thinking Lucille was already reacting to the wine and sleeping pill when she came up here."

Then, Loreen stumbled toward the mirror, as Lucille might have. As she neared the mirror, Loreen feigned tripping over her own feet, and falling toward the door. She stopped her performance to inform Nicky, “Lucille was normally very graceful. She was a good dancer and studied yoga, but every once in a while she would just trip over her own feet. It used to make me mad. Now I wish,” Loreen trailed off.

“Continue!” Nicky encouraged.

“She hit her head here,” Loreen placed her forehead on the mirror. Then she reacted by snapping it back. That made her lose balance, and fall backward, landing on her back. Loreen laid herself down on the floor, and fit her body into the outline of Lucille’s corpse.

Nicky swallowed hard as he watched Loreen get into her sister’s death pose. “Maybe that’s how it happened,” Nicky mused aloud. He turned his attention to the solid oak door with the mirror on it. The mirror was thick, had beveled edges and hard to shatter. He looked at the bloodied fracture, and understood that Lucille had impacted with critical force.

Loreen began to get up from Lucille’s imprint. “I don’t even understand why she was up here. There was nothing left to do.”

Nicky stared at the big gold ribbon and bow on the door.

“The big gold bow had been tied days before,” Lucille attested. She stood up and stared at Nicky. “You know the rest, von Willebrand Disease.” As she left the room, Loreen removed her kerchief. She needed something to wipe her tears with.

Nicky pored over the door one last time then removed the gloves. He fully intended to go over the death theory with Lightfoot. It sounded feasible, but Nicky saw a major flaw.

The victim had been stoned stupid, had lost balance and had smashed her head onto the mirrored door. However, Nicky didn't see that the victim would necessarily lurch backwards.

Instead, Lucille's face should have hit the mirror, frozen there for a brief par-second, and then have slowly begun sliding down, leaving a gory streak of deep red fluid down to the floor. Factually, that's not what the bloodstains bore out.

Therefore, to Nicky it seemed like Lucille must have been pushed backward. Had someone been inside the closet, Nicky theorized? Had someone opened the door at the exact moment that Lucille had impacted it with her head?

Downstairs, Nicky found Loreen in the living room, silently curled up in Lucille's favorite chair. She was exhausted, glad Nicky had to get back to work. She got up to see him out.

"Do you think it was an accident, or is there more to it? Or maybe my husband's right, I just can't let go."

"I'll let you know, as soon as I know," Nicky assured her. He pulled the notebook and pen out of the chest pocket. He took Loreen's number and a few last notes, as they walked to the door.

At the door, Loreen turned and locked eyes with Nicky. "Thank you! I don't know what's going to happen, but just talking to you has made me feel better." Loreen embraced Nicky. She was genuinely grateful. She kissed his cheek.

Nicky hugged Loreen, and kissed her cheek. It was an honestly touching moment, yet Nicky couldn't resist falling into the sensual softness of Loreen's breasts. What is it about a woman in distress that makes me want sex, Nicky wondered? Fortunately, because he was an ardent professional, Nicky was able to shake his sexual impulsiveness.

Nicky walked out onto the front steps. The Escalade was parked in front. Seiji was waiting at the passenger's door. Nicky proceeded to the street without looking back. Nicky glanced at Seiji, as he got into the black Cadillac SUV. "Ilena?" Nicky accused.

"Yes sir!" Seiji confessed. She called and told me to wait here."

"Damn her!" Nicky laughed.

Seiji closed the door.

Seiji bypassed Honeyland, and drove Nicky directly to set. Nicky was rushed to camera, where Lara did his touchups. Props replaced all the items that were missing from his pockets, the items Nicky had used for his private investigation at Lucille Brookers, when he'd been with Loreen.

Serious overtime loomed. You could chew the stress on set. Who wanted to put their lead actor on the production report as being the cause of a costly delay? No one, that's who. So now there was a new question. Whose fault would it be? Crazy thing is, everyone was worried for nothing.

Nicky was revved. He was inspired. He turned in a stellar performance that night. The other actors fed on and off of Nicky's

energy. He made them great. He made it fun. Everything was going down in a take and a safety. They wrapped early.

Nicky and Lara arrived back at the apartment around five twenty a.m. Lara went directly to bed. She'd wanted Nicky to come, but he'd insisted on going over tomorrow's lines, as per his routine. He'd used the truth as an excuse, even to himself. Nicky needed to be alone.

Although Nicky had been physically sharp, hitting all his marks on set, as soon as he'd been wrapped, his energy had fallen flat. He'd instantly retreated into his cerebral world. He'd swiftly returned to Lucille's murder.

Lightfoot had been right. Nicky didn't have an angle, not one he could put a finger on. Nicky's only connection to Lucille Brookers had been **The Handmaiden's Hands**. Nicky would have to start there. It was logical, but what about it? There was one thing; one tangible object that Nicky figured connected him to Lucille, the jacket. He needed to know where the jacket had gone, and it wasn't his vanity talking this time.

Loreen had said the Police had checked Lucille's e-mails. That meant she'd owned a computer. The Cops probably still had it. Nicky would have to check into that as well. Thoughts were mounting, cluttering his mind. Nicky poured a glass of Cabernet then went into Ilena's office to sit back, to think.

Lounging back in one of Ilena's brocade upholstered chairs with his feet up on the conference table, Nicky should have been comfortable, but he wasn't. He switched to the chair behind Ilena's desk, and put his feet up on Ilena's immaculate surface. It still

wasn't working. He couldn't concentrate. He felt restless, haunted. Nicky grabbed his wine, and head to the solarium, where he could have a smoke while he pondered.

Nicky stood outside of Ilena's office, peering down a long dimly lit hallway. The solarium was at the end, around the corner. He took a number of steps then stopped cold. Glancing around, Nicky realized he was beside the door to his office. He hadn't opened that door for months. The last time he'd gone in there had been for the reading lamp. That had been sometime in January. It was now mid-summer.

Nicky wondered what was wrong? Why wouldn't he go in there? Nicky considered some kind of irrational fear as a reason, but no, there had to be more to it. Was something from his past trying to surface? He was a man. He could and would face it, if he only knew what it was. A sleazy chill gripped the rear of his neck. It was the same chill that never turned into a cold. It was the sensation that Nicky had come to associate with the annoyance of burning his fingers with a cigarette.

Nicky pulled out his lighter. He adjusted it to high. He held it between his smoke pincers, the index and middle fingers on his left hand. He fired up the lighter.

Nicky let his flesh burn, just a bit, just until he became incredibly agitated. He thought it sounded like someone was inside his office. Nicky angrily threw the door open, and flicked on the light. There was no one. There was only his empty office.

The instant he saw it, Nicky knew why he hated going in his office. "Because it's a turn off!" he answered himself aloud.

It was true. Nicky had hated this room from day one. Everything about it was wrong. Ilena, Carlos and the decorator had picked it all out. Sure, he'd approved pieces, but when it had all been put together, it just hadn't added up. The only appealing feature was the view, and where was it? Nicky crossed the room and opened the thick, overly formal drapes. The light before dawn wandered in.

There were some Deco style chairs in the room. They were sort of okay, but the fact that there was no couch annoyed Nicky.

Nicky slid his glass of Cabernet onto his desk. It was a massive piece of wood boasting with importance. Who could live up to a desk like that, Nicky wondered?

The mega 4G computer that took up a lot of his desk's surface embarrassed him. He'd tried to use it, but he hadn't liked sitting behind the thing. He'd never bonded with it.

The backdrop for Nicky's desk was a book lined wall. As he stared at the walnut shelves filled with books, Nicky questioned himself. When was the last time I read a book? Have I ever actually read any of these books? What kind of a phony sits in front of a wall of books they've never read?

He scanned their spines. It was then Nicky realized he owned the complete works of Tennessee Williams. He'd only ever read *The Glass Menagerie* and *The Night Of The Iguana*, but he'd seen all of the movies. Nicky loved the stories of Tennessee. Maybe he would read more of them. Maybe he'd make the time.

There were some volumes of Shakespeare on the shelves. Nicky thought they were valid, but hard to understand. Nicky knew he'd

never get around to reading those. Nicky continued past Dickens, Emerson, Hemmingway, Capote and more.

An hour and a half had elapsed. Three quarters of the books were off the shelves, piled neatly here and there. The ones lucky enough to still be in the bookcase were lined up in the order Nicky thought he should read them in. Nicky glanced at his watch. He knew Carlos would be arriving in seven minutes. He placed a call.

“Ilena! Nicky. I need you to locate a jacket.”

At seven a.m. precisely, the door to Nicky’s apartment opened and Carlos entered the foyer. Instantly, Carlos sensed something was different. He could smell it. He followed his nose to Nicky’s closed office door. Now Carlos was sure. It was the stench of tobacco. He could hear Nicky’s muted voice. Only the odd word was intelligible, Lucille, eBay, hands. Carlos wondered if he should knock or wait.

Nicky raised his voice, “Carlos, get in here!”

Apprehensive is a good word to describe Carlos as he walked into Nicky’s office. Sometimes hearts skip a beat, but Carlos’ skipped two at the sight of Nicky’s demolition of his library. Ilena had spent over six years collecting those books. Many of the books were rare editions. It was beyond literature. It was a financial investment.

“That’s right, Loreen is probably the last person to have seen the jacket before Lucille gave it away. Her number is in the notepad I gave you to file when I got back to set tonight.

“May I get you some breakfast?” Carlos inquired, after Nicky hung up.

“No, thank you!” Nicky answered. He walked to the window, and stared out at the view. His fingers were still stinging from his experiment with the lighter. It could have been soothed with some ice, but Nicky wasn’t interested. “You said you were getting a new computer?”

“Yes, sir,” Carlos replied to the back of Nicky’s head.

”Did you?”

“Not yet, soon.”

“Take the one on the desk!”

“Yours, sir?”

“It’s not mine. It’s yours.”

“I don’t what to say.”

“Say thank you!”

Carlos reddened, “Thank you, very much! May I ask what you’ll be using, sir?”

“I’ll have Ilena get me one like hers.”

“Of course!” Carlos backed up to leave.

“By the way,”

Carlos froze.

“Lose the desk. I don’t care how. Just lose it. I’ll need a new one,” continued Nicky. “I need a desk that’s less imposing, easier to put my feet up on. Put it in a corner. The chairs can’t stay, and I need a couch, black leather, comfortable. Put it where the desk isn’t going to be any more. Make sure the new coffee table’s long and dark.”

“Very good, sir!” Carlos couldn’t contain himself anymore. “And about the books?”

“I kept the ones I want. Relocate the rest to Ilena’s office. Place a few around the apartment. I think there are a couple of volumes in there that belong in a museum. You could donate them.” Nicky remained fixed to the window. In its dim reflection Nicky could see Carlos staring at an ashtray with one cigarette butt in it.

“Change the drapes to something smoke doesn’t cling to. Weather-strip the door. Install air purifiers, whatever you want, but I won’t be smoking in the solarium anymore. I’ll just lock myself in here with my nasty habit.”

“Interesting turn of events,” thought Carlos. He felt an urgency to tell Ilena everything as soon as possible. “Yes sir, as you wish!” he responded appropriately.

It was Saturday afternoon at Jim's American Used Cars in Jersey City. Sales had been sluggish all month. Unfortunately used cars weren't on the cutting edge of green, and with the economy in rough shape it seemed more people were interested in selling their car than in buying one.

The Escalade, with Nicky in it, was headed south on Ninth Avenue. It reached the Lincoln Tunnel where it traveled from a bright sunlit world into an artificially lit slice of subterranean engineering. Nicky pushed his Sunglasses up onto his head. He needed to shake the crappy mood he was in.

Lara hadn't wanted to tell Nicky where she was going that afternoon. He hadn't had a problem with that. Yet, when he hadn't wanted to tell her where he was going, Lara had gotten quite upset. Nicky had become prick-ish, refusing to tell anyone where he was going. It was a treadmill endeavor. Seiji drove Nicky everywhere Nicky went. It was like telling everyone anyway. It seemed to Nicky the only way he could have any independence was to banish everyone. There had to be a better answer, and Nicky had figured one. The Escalade surfaced onto the I-495. Daylight raked Nicky's eyes. He pulled his Sunglasses back down.

Fifteen minutes later Seiji pulled up in front of oversized glittering signage announcing: "Jim's American Used Cars". Beneath the name was the slogan: "The Wright Car For You".

Nicky walked into the showroom. A polished black 2005 Impala was the featured vehicle. The driver's door was wide open. Someone was reaching into the front seat, their "derriere" poised

awkwardly over a sweet pair of heels. Nicky approached. "Loreen! You look great."

"Nicky!" Loreen's voice got sucked up in the car's interior. "What are you doing here?" She backed out and stood up too, fast. Her head hit the frame.

Nicky helped steady her. "Thought I might buy a car today," he answered. "Plus I thought it would be an opportunity to have a coffee with you"

"Shit! I already took my break. There's no way Jim will let me go for another one." She gingerly felt her head.

"You okay?" Nicky asked.

"Oh yeah, it's just a little bump. It's already itchy." She scratched her head. "But this job's not okay. I hate it."

"So quit!"

"I can't! It's the only job I could get. Jim, the guy who'll find the Wright car for you, that's my brother-in-law, Jim Wright, piece of work."

"Go back to selling off Lucille's stuff."

"I can't do that!" Loreen was aghast. "I'm not ready yet. It's just, too, heartless."

"Why?"

"Because she's dead."

“You’re wrong.”

“What?”

“Not to sell the stuff, that’s heartless.”

Loreen stared into Nicky’s eyes. He’d lost her somewhere.

Nicky explained. “You need cash. You hate your job. You’re unhappy. Lucille gave you a way out.”

“Oh, oh!” Loreen shuddered.

Nicky looked over to what had made Loreen react with disgust. Nicky could see a two-for-one suit with matching acetate tie and puff set coming his way. Nicky looked back at Loreen, “Jim?”

“Ah, yeah!” Loreen sighed.

“Loreen! How long does it take to write down the name of a console?” Jim called out jokingly. Well he thought he was joking, but loud was what it was. “Who’s your friend?” Jim pulled up to the car. “You look familiar pal. Jim Wright,” he stuck his hand out to Nicky.

“Nicky,” he said taking Jim’s hand.

Before Nicky could say another word, Jim was patting the Impala like an old friend. “Just got her in today.”

“Sticker price is high.” Nicky commented.

“Because it’s a cop car,” Loreen explained. Jim gave her an evil eye. She didn’t care. She just didn’t want Nicky to get sucked in.

“There’s this huge console with a siren, radio stuff and I don’t know. It takes up half the room in the front.”

“Well it’s coming out today,” Jim nodded to Nicky then looked back at Loreen. “Am I right?” He spoke sharply.

“You’re right!” Loreen admitted. “The dealer wanted the make of the console before he came down to remove it,” she said then took off to her post at reception to make the call.

Nicky opened the driver’s door. He checked out the console, and scanned the interior. “In-car video,” he noted.

“True, but it’s not a cop car. It was a cop’s car, his personal car.” Jim clarified. “Look, no one’s gonna mistake this baby for a cop car. Cops use the Standard and the LS, but,” he stroked the hood, “this here’s an SS. I mean just look at her. She’s definitely smaller and what with the front fascia extensions and taillight appliqué, who’s gonna think it’s a cop car?” He hung his head. “I’m just helping his widow out here, so the sticker might seem high, but,” he whipped open the hood, “she features a supercharged 3.8 V6 and dual exhaust.” He bent down and caressed a wheel, “Seventeen inch aluminum wheels.” Jim stood up and circled the car, never a space in his pitch. “Heated leather seats, auto-dimming rear view, six way power seats, she’s got it all. Want to hear more?”

“No, I’ll take it,” Nicky said.

“You will?” Jim’s jaw dropped three point five inches.

“That’s right.” I’m driving it off. I’m keeping the console.”

“But the console is useless to the average person,” Jim pointed out. He had been counting on the few extra bucks that would have fallen into his pocket from selling it off.

“I like the cup holder,” Nicky explained.

Loreen approached. “Okay! It’s all set up,” she announced. “Console’s history in two or three hours.”

Jim looked at Nicky. Nicky didn’t flinch. Jim looked back to Loreen, “Well just call back and cancel. The console’s staying.”

Loreen stopped in her tracks. “Uch, okay!” she sighed and returned to reception.

“Well, let’s just step into my office,” Jim rubbed his hands together. “What did you say your name was, pal?”

“Nicky, Nicky Faime”

Jim did a double take. That’s where he knew Nicky from, the movies! Jim opened the door to his office for Nicky. As Nicky passed by into the office, Jim was kicking himself upside and down. Damn sticker price should have been higher, was all he could think as he followed Nicky in. Somehow Jim controlled his rue, as he shut the door.

Purchasing the Impala today had been invigorating for Nicky. It was as though he’d bought himself some privacy, some independence. Tonight Nicky was in the best mood he’d been in for weeks.

When Nicky had returned to the apartment, Lara had already gotten back. Whatever she'd done had invigorated her as well. Neither had questioned the other. Instead, they had ravaged each other with make up sex. It had been incomparable. They'd decided to celebrate, and only La Dolce Donna would do.

One of Seiji's agents slowly sipped a Large Latte in the window bar at Daddios. Her no nonsense gaze was roaming the street beyond the pane of glass in front of her. She had fixed part of her sights on La Dolce Donna. Two stools over, Julie, also staring at La Dolce Donna, sipped a Large Latte of her own.

At first there had been speculation that Julie simply came every night, a stalking routine. She probably knew, as much of Nicky's public did, that La Dolce Donna was Nicky's favorite restaurant. This had turned out not to be the case.

Seiji had dedicated a set of eyes to watch the Coffee House and La Dolce Donna. Nicky hadn't eaten at Bella's for the last three weeks, and for the last three weeks Julie had been a no show. Yet, tonight she came.

It wasn't like Nicky arrived first, someone tipped her off and then she came down. Julie was already there, waiting. It had become obvious that Julie could get personal information on Nicky, information beyond an address or a phone number.

The Escalade pulled up in front of Bella's. Julie's breathing became audible to The Agent. The Agent listened to Julie's breathing intensify as Nicky and Lara stepped out of the car. Julie held her breath, as Nicky and Lara walked into the restaurant.

Lara was exceptionally radiant that night. Nicky hadn't seen her so dressed up in quite a while. Come to think of it, Nicky hadn't been so dressed up for quite a while, either. Sure, Black wore a suit, but that was Black. He was Nicky.

Working on a film has a way of making people resort to their laundry baskets. Hell, Nicky himself hadn't even had the perspicacity to do a pair of jeans all last week. He'd shown up at Honeyland in track pants every day. However, tonight was special. Nicky was wearing a new Designer suit, French navy, not quite black.

Lara's milky complexion was a white rose's petal against her midnight blue dress. The dress was a stunning silk mini with flowing georgette panels. It was very sixties in a now way. Simply accessorized with a fine choker of icy blue diamonds, matching bracelet and earrings, Lara sparkled like fine crystal. The small trinkets, worth a year's salary to many, were a gift from Nicky.

From the moment they made their appearance at the restaurant, it was red carpet all the way. Bella personally hovered over the entire night's service for the beautiful couple.

Yet, in spite of its sleek, exciting and promising start, the evening was fizzling out quickly for Nicky. He and Lara had barely spoken a word to each other since they'd been seated. Lara's attention was not on Nicky. It was on her food.

Nicky liked the few pounds Lara had put on recently. However, he'd never seen her finish any plate of food that had been placed in front of her. Watching her eat so much was a bit of a turn off for Nicky.

Nicky knew Lara enjoyed Bella's cuisine, but she hadn't touched her wine and her entree was almost history. Nicky was annoyed. He wanted romance. He was getting another course.

Lara managed a glance up from her plate. She saw the annoyed look on Nicky's face. "What's wrong?" she asked sweetly.

"I've never seen you eat so much." Nicky was honest.

"Well, I'm hungry," explained Lara. She laid her fork on the table, and placed her hands into Nicky's. "I'm hungry because I'm pregnant."

Nicky knew, from experience, it was better not to say anything at this exact moment, to wait for Lara's next sentence. He remained coolly concerned on the outside, suspending all thought on the inside. After all, another woman had spoken those exact words to him once before. Sadly they'd been followed by the words, and I'm getting an abortion. He steeled himself, readying for the inevitable.

"I'm keeping our baby. You have no say in the matter." Lara was finite. She picked up her fork, and resumed eating.

Our baby! The words reverberated, freeing Nicky's suspended thought process. Nicky saw himself holding a baby, all cute in pink, or blue or yellow. The baby began to cry. Nicky held it closer, to comfort, to nurture. It vomited on his favorite Armani shirt. He didn't care. "But you're on the pill. Isn't that dangerous?" Nicky was concerned.

Lara didn't answer his question, "It's a boy, Nicky. We're having a son," she informed him instead.

Nicky saw himself with a little Nicky, seven or eight years old. They were at a baseball game, hanging out in father-son Yankees' jackets. Someone hit a home run. Nicky caught the ball. He gave it to little Nicky.

Lara's next sentence brought him back to the table. "That's where I was this afternoon. I was having an ultrasound. Nicky, I'm over fourteen weeks. I wanted to tell you sooner, but," Lara paused dramatically.

Nicky flinched. Okay, first he's having a son. Now he's having a son with a "but". Carefully, evenly, he meted out his question, "Is there something wrong with the baby?"

"Nothings wrong with the baby," Lara assured, then lowered her eyes. "I have a confession. For the sake of our son and any future we might have together, I've got to come clean."

Lara raised her eyes, but Nicky's had slid sideways.

"As you know, I was on the pill. I was on the pill until I stopped taking them. Nicky, I did it on purpose. I wanted to get pregnant. I know you might think it looks like I tricked you or sort of lied, but I didn't, not really. I did it because I love you, and I want our baby. You can think what you want, but I love our unborn son more than anything and I'm going to be the best mother, ever!"

Nicky, who'd possibly had the worst mother ever, was having a son with a woman who'd dishonestly gotten pregnant to be the best mother ever. Nicky saw Lara in a new light. He wondered if it could ever be the same between them.

"What are you going to do, Nicky? I don't blame you for hating me, but don't hate your son."

“I don’t hate my son.” Nicky hadn’t planned on being a father, but he’d never planned on running away from it, either.

“Do you want me to move out? Lara near whispered, “I’d understand.”

Nicky understood, too. He understood that if Lara left, the baby left with her. “No! We’ll work something out.”

They fell silent as dishes were bussed away, and dessert menus presented. Nicky waved his away, “Just coffee. Thanks.”

Lara didn’t need a menu, either. “I already know what I want. I’ll have Crème Brulee and a bowl of olives.” She looked hopefully at Nicky. “Are you happy?”

That night after dinner at Bella’s, Nicky and Lara had a heart to heart that lasted into the wee hours of the morning. Lara had shed many tears. Nicky had raised his voice many times. However, in the end it was decided that they would put their son first. They would remain together as a couple. After all, there was still a lingering goodness between them. Perhaps that could be nurtured.

Lara had gone to bed exhausted and happy. Yes, Nicky had not proposed marriage, but he hadn’t kicked her out either. It had been made clear to Lara that Nicky would stand by his child to the ends of the earth. Somewhere between here and there, Lara knew she would get that wedding ring she wanted so much.

Nicky, exhausted and haunted, went to his office to smoke and think. His room was in mayhem with redecorating, but he was too tired to relocate. He pulled a chair into the window and stared out.

As crazy and intense as the evening had been, Nicky knew with every fiber in his being that he had made the right decision. Whatever the circumstances, he would not allow his child to suffer the loneliness and rejection that he had.

Nicky had never spoken of his father to anyone. How could he have? What would he have said? His father had never laid eyes on Nicky. Therefore, Nicky had never laid eyes on his father. He hadn't seen his mother for twenty-five years. That had been her choice, not Nicky's.

His mother and all that pain was the past. Nicky was having a son. That was the future, and the future excited him. Nicky wanted the world to know, and tomorrow it would.

It was late Sunday morning in Nicky's solarium.

Well, it wasn't really a solarium. Situated in a far corner of the apartment, it had originally been the over opulent master bedroom. The twelve hundred square foot space was complete with two cornering walls of windows and a Deco fireplace. Nicky's king size bed looked like an ottoman in the room. Nicky preferred to sleep in the six hundred square foot bedroom, with its one well-covered picture window.

A good use for the big room had never presented itself, so it had remained empty. It had remained empty, until Carlos had arrived.

In order to get Carlos, a non-smoker, to come work for Nicky, a smoker, Nicky had had to make one major concession. Nicky would have to relegate his smoking to a single room. Carlos had convinced

Nicky this large empty room at the end of the east hall would be the most ideal. Completely at the other end of the apartment from the kitchen and far from the dining and living rooms, the foul odors could be kept at bay.

We'll make a green room, Carlos had suggested. After all, he'd told Nicky, plants will love the light in here, and they would help to keep it smelling nice.

So, Carlos moved in a white wicker chair, two oleander trees and a large assortment of houseplants. He scattered them about, using groupings to hide several air purifiers

As time had passed, the few plants had mushroomed into an indoor jungle of green, falling from the ceiling and growing up from the floor. A full compliment of white wicker furniture had been added to the chair.

Carlos had even scored a hi-def television, thanks to Nicky who decided he wanted to lose it from the living room. Nicky had insisted the living room was for guests, and guests should relate to each other through conversation, not television. Carlos had stuffed the monitor inside the faux fireplace, and had tuned it to the hi-def fireplace fire channel. Carlos loved it with its smoke free crackling logs and licking flames.

Ilena, Leo, Carlos and Seiji sat in wicker chairs. They faced Lara who sat on the wicker couch. Nicky, who refused to sit but insisted everyone else did, stood behind Lara. His hands rested protectively on her shoulders.

"I want to thank you all for coming to this meeting on such short notice." Nicky's voice was more formal than usual, "but Lara and I have an important announcement."

“Nicky and I are pregnant!” Lara blurted out, beaming, glowing as only the expectant can.

Everyone jumped out of his or her chair.

Good thing you can't hear a heart break, Ilena's would have made quite a noise. Yet, she opened her arms to the couple, and went in with genuinely warm hugs. “Congratulations! What wonderful news.”

“Thank you!” Lara replied carefully, hugging back weakly.

“Thanks, Ilena!” Nicky's hug was substantial, sincere.

“Does he need an agent?” Leo joked, getting a few chuckles. “Faime, it couldn't happen to a better guy!” They shook hands, solidly. Leo then gave his hand to Lara, “Congratulations!”

Lara barely shook his hand. “Thank you!” she managed politely.

Carlos and Seiji bowed in unison, each offering sincere best wishes.

“Seiji!” Nicky's voice was deep, serious. Seiji stepped forward. “Lara is going shopping this afternoon. I know you'll take extra care.”

“Yes, sir!” Seiji understood his role had grown. He burst with pride. “I'd like to prepare the Escalade. What time shall I bring it to the front?”

“One would be perfect,” Lara's voice fluttered. “I can't tell you how safe I feel with you near by.”

Carlos felt pangs of envy as he watched Seiji leave to prep the Escalade. He wished there was something more important he could do for Nicky, for Lara, for the baby. Turns out, there was.

“Carlos, I don’t want the baby drinking store bought formula or eating that yucky canned baby food. What should I do? Can you help me?” plead Lara, a damsel in distress.

Carlos went to Lara. He took her hands. “Of course! I’ll always be here for you and the baby.” He turned to Nicky. “Sir, I’ll be requiring some new equipment, to be dedicated to the mother and baby’s nourishment.” Carlos turned back to Lara. “I’ll investigate formulas, and I won’t tolerate those horrid paper diapers. Only the best Sea Island cotton will do, and a diaper service, the best of course. I’ll look into it.”

“Oh Carlos, I don’t know what I’d do without you,” cuddled Lara.

Nicky watched as Lara wound Carlos round and round her finger. Nicky knew her well enough now. Just what was she up to?

“And maybe you could help me get the nursery together?”

“My pleasure!” Carlos was exploding with importance. “I’m assuming we’ll be converting the guest room.”

“I suppose,” sighed Lara. “I just wish there was something a bit larger, a room more central to everything. It’s a long way from the kitchen to the guest room. I’d like him somewhere close to all of us, all the time.”

“That would be Ilena’s office,” Carlos responded. It was a matter of fact.

“Oh, yes, it would be, wouldn’t it?” Lara despondently realized out loud.

Nicky cut his eyes at Lara. That was it. She was after Ilena’s room. They hadn’t discussed the nursery last night, but what could Nicky say? It was for his son. What could anyone say? What could Ilena say?

“Carlos is right,” Ilena said. “My office is the most central room, and Lara’s right to want the nursery in it. I’ll move my office to the guest room.”

That was more than enough of Lara’s bullshit for Leo. “Faime, you lucky man!” He exposed his watch, “If that’s everything?”

Later that afternoon, Nicky was back in the Solarium. He was having a private meeting with himself.

The Martial Artists Agent’s report on last night’s surveillance had arrived after anyone else interested had gone. Nicky wasn’t going to wait until they came back.

When Carlos had brought the brown Martial Artists envelope to him, Nicky had sent Carlos to Ilena’s office for files 100 through 103. Carlos hadn’t made it out the door, when Nicky had asked Carlos to grab the Lucille Brookers folder while he was at it.

Nicky sat at the wicker table. Julie’s picture was to his right. The first part of the report confirmed worst-case scenario

suspicious. Julie's appearances were purposeful, calculated. Nicky was uncomfortable thinking that Julie had an inside track on his info.

Nicky speculated on who the informant could possibly be. Someone who worked at La Dolce Donna was Nicky's first thought on where to find a rat. Perhaps the lousy vermin was Bella's grocer, or her linen service. Then again, maybe the leak was closer to home. Nicky disliked this idea, intensely.

The second document detailed how Julie had remained at Daddios until Nicky and Lara had departed in the Escalade. Once the Escalade had driven out of sight, Julie split the restaurant and took off on a bicycle.

The Agent had managed to follow Julie for three or four blocks, but hadn't stood a chance of staying on Julie's tail. The Agent had been in a car and had gotten stuck at a light when Julie cut across a park. By the time the light had changed, Julie had bicycled into an alley. The Agent was unable to pick her up from there. Nicky was already amused thinking of what Leo's reaction to a second failed tail might be like.

However, for a fifty-buck tip, the Agent had managed to secure Julie's cup from the Coffee Shop. A report on any prints would follow shortly. Nicky recalled that Seiji's connections had lifted a single print from that crazy note made out of magazine letters. Nicky wondered if they'd get a match.

Carlos arrived back with the files Nicky had requested, and placed them in front of Nicky. Nicky closed last night's report on Julie, and set it aside. He picked up Lucille Brookers' folder.

Before she'd left, Ilena had told Nicky she'd found something of interest about the jacket. Nicky, still in the ether about his son to be, instructed Ilena to file it with Lucille Brookers.

Nicky's call asking Ilena to help him find the jacket had been in line, a sane request. He would have done it himself, but the screen on his phone was too small for him to be able to focus for any length of time, and he didn't have his new laptop, yet. Besides, Nicky was on set working most of the time. Ilena had the time to do it.

Nicky had understood Loreen's reasons for choosing to sell Lucille's things on-line, fast and profit. He'd wondered if the recipient of the jacket hadn't had a similar fast and profit intention, an intention between free and a grand. It was possible someone was online at this moment offering the jacket to the highest bidder.

Ilena had set out searching for the jacket by calling Loreen and obtaining as much detail as possible.

After talking to Loreen, Ilena had opened her laptop and searched Nicky Faime. Much like Lucille, Ilena had been quickly uninspired by the standard sites. Much like Lucille, Ilena hadn't found any Nicky Faime jacket up for sale on eBay. Much like Lucille, Ilena had found her way to alternative sites with message boards.

Right off the top Ilena had known she'd never be able to read, or even scan her way through everything posted about Nicky. Ilena had decided to let a search tool do the work for her. Yes, she had to actually be in a dedicated area, nonetheless when warranted Ilena searched specifically for the words "jacket" or The Handmaiden's Hands. She hit pay dirt on the message boards in the Nicky Faime Café.

Nicky opened the file. Several pages that were stapled together were placed on top. Nicky didn't understand at first then realized they were Printouts from a message board, a board from a fan site called "Nicky Faime Café" Ilena had hi-lit in pink all the posts concerning the jacket.

The last sheet in the stapled together presentation was an enlargement of one of the thumbnails that lined the left border of the pages. It was a picture of Nickynight.

Nicky read the posts from someone called PurpleFaime who had Nicky Faime's jacket from *The Handmaiden's Hands*. He read the posts from someone named Nickynight who coveted it.

Nicky was sure PurpleFaime was Lucille Brookers. There was no picture beside her posts, but Nicky knew. For back up, Nicky checked the dates of the postings. They matched the time frame.

Nicky didn't stop himself from reading every word on the pages Ilena had given him. The hi-lit passages informed Nicky about the jacket. The rest of the text taught him about Nickynight. Nickynight claimed she was married, and it appeared that Nickynight's husband, Jack, did not know the extent of her Internet adoration of Nicky. She also mentioned a son, Bobby. Both Jack and Bobby were ardent Nicky Faime fans.

All that was informative, but what caught Nicky's eye was Nickynight talking of a vintage magazine that she had acquired for fifty dollars. This had to be the same, if not the exact magazine Seiji's Operative had sold to Faimed4life. Nicky detached Nickynight's picture from the report before sliding the report back into the folder.

“Shit,” Nicky said with a tinge of anger in his voice. Nicky had cut a finger on a sheet of paper in the report. Amazing how nasty paper can cut, he thought. He brought the cut finger to his mouth, but a globule of blood fell off before it got there. It landed on Faimed4lfe’s file folder. Nicky’s back neck felt cold. He turned his collar up to warm it.

Nicky removed Faimed4lfe’s picture from its folder, and held it next to Nickynight’s blow up. Nicky took a good look at the photos. “This is the same person,” Nicky concluded. “They both have green eyes, similar lips and that old movie magazine. This person must have the jacket, or had it.”

Carlos tapped on the open door then approached Nicky. “Sorry to interrupt! I wasn’t sure what to do.”

“Not a problem. What’s up?”

“Your wrap party is four weeks away. I need a guest list, sir. Invitations and RSVP’s take at least two weeks. I need to plan a menu, shop, arrange for staff, polish the silver,”

“Right here,” Nicky said before Carlos could finish his prep roster. Nicky slid a folded up piece of paper from his shirt’s pocket, and handed it over.

Carlos unfolded the paper then smoothed it between his fingers. He perused the names. “Lara, the director and main cast. No surprise guests, sir?”

“Not yet.”

“You’ll let me know as soon as any come up?” Carlos requested urgently, his nosy eyes coming to rest on Nickynight’s blow up. He did a double take. Nicky caught it.

“What is it Carlos?”

“Do I know her?”

“I’m the first who wants to know if you do,” Nicky urged. He held the printout closer to Carlos.

“I’m not sure, but there’s something about her”

“The green eyes?” Nicky offered.

“Well, yes, but no. Humph!” It wasn’t happening. It irked Carlos to no degree. “I’m sorry, sir!”

Nicky put the blow up on the table. “Did Ilena say when my laptop’s arriving?”

“Yes, tomorrow by noon.”

“And the den?”

“Finished by the end of the week, sir. That is providing you’re happy with the progress.”

“Everything is perfect.”

“Thank you!” Carlos was very relieved.

“Except the desk.”

“The desk?”

“Take it down another notch.”

“Very well,” Carlos said obediently. Yet he wondered if he would ever get the desk to Nicky’s liking. “Anything else?”

“No.”

Carlos nodded, and walked almost all the way to the door only to stop in his tracks, “That’s it!” he yelled, He hurried back to the photo of Nickynight, talking in incomplete sentences. “The Mershe scarf, the woman from Devign Foods. We use the same oil. Quiller safflower oil.”

“Calm down, Carlos,” Nicky’s voice beat steady. “What about Devign Foods?”

“We literally bumped into each other,” Carlos chuckled. “Her juice and oil went flying into my cart. That’s how I know we use the same oil. I wonder if her oil smelled rancid as well? I had to pour the entire bottle down the drain you know, a real waste.”

Nicky pulled a chair up to the table. He motioned for Carlos to sit down. “Start from the beginning.” Nicky coached.

It was a Tuesday, Nine Black Lives' shoot day 32. Two cameras were rolling on a night exterior. It was the master wide shot from two angles of the police station. Del Vartnay and Miriam hurled insults at each other on the precinct's steps.

DEL VARTNAY

You're nothing but scum, a cheap piece of trash!

MIRIAM

You bastard, Del Vartnay!

Miriam attacks Del Vartnay. Jordan, followed by Ken Chang, runs into the scene.

JORDAN

I'll see both your asses in jail if you don't break it up.

MIRIAM

God damn you Jordan! The only person who believes me is D.A. Kowolski.

Kowolski, in an exquisite little suit, little being the buzzword, bursts through the station doors. She races down the steps, her stilettos clicking rhythmically on the cement.

KOWOLSKI

Taxi!

Kowolski gets in a cab, as Black and Heff Ventner head up the steps.

CHANG

Look to the forensic evidence for the truth.

MIRIAM

Screw you Chang!

JORDAN

Black! What the hell are you doing here? You know you're off the case.

Black squares off with Jordan.

BLACK

I'm just a regular citizen, Jordan, John Q. Public. My friend here says you asked him in for questioning. I'm making sure he gets a fair shake.

JORDAN

You're running interference, Black.

HEFF

I'm fuckin' innocent Jordan, and Black knows it.

Chang sidles up to Black, and whispers into Black's ear.

CHANG

Black! You sure you're doing the right thing?

Black's wife, Carmen, screeches her car up to the curb. She dings a police car. All heads turn as she whips out of the car. Her eyes catch Black's eyes. She runs towards him, waving hysterically.

CARMEN

Darling, our wish came true. I'm pregnant!

"And Cut!" screamed Haps, elated. The shot was brilliant all around. It was a print.

"Checking the gates! If the gates are good, that's lunch, one hour," yelled the First. He got the nod from Camera. "Gates are clean! Everybody's back on the clock at two a.m."

Locations madly cleared the ends of the road so that the star cars and performers' shuttle could drive right up to the bottom of the precinct steps. Lara was already waiting where Seiji would pull up. Lara couldn't wait to get off set. She couldn't get over how irritable Nicky had become since yesterday, since he'd quit smoking.

The actors dropped their characters. They gathered around Nicky in a happy congratulatory whirlpool of backslaps, handshakes and kiss cheeks. Nicky and his son-to-be were the center of attention.

Verdad and Nicky's embrace was special. Victoria was jealous.

"Nicky," lured Victoria, "join me for a smoke?"

Nicky tensed up. He craved a smoke. He wanted to go with Victoria. "Can't. I quit. The baby, you know," he spoke strongly.

"Smart decision," Charlie supported.

"That's unfortunate. **The Handmaiden's Hands** was on cable this weekend, I was going to enjoy razzing you over a puff," teased Victoria.

“Aw! I wish I would have known. I love that movie,” raved Len.

“A cult classic,” Claus added.

“Never heard of it,” Sharlaya said, not to be left out.

“I had a part in it,” Holdens announced. He was amazed by Sharlaya’s daftness.

“Did we have lines together?” Nicky asked. He thought about how he could never remember Lucille’s name, but this was worse. He had no recollection of Holdens, whatsoever.

Holdens laughed, “Yeah, I had one line. I said argh, argh.”

Len was thrilled. “Wow I’m the presence of two cult legends.”

“I didn’t see you in it.” Victoria snapped, challenging what she thought was a one-upmanship move by Holdens, or an outright lie.

“That’s because I was a Zombie,” Holdens shot back. “I had all that make-up on.”

“You never mentioned it?” Nicky was taken aback.

“I was embarrassed. Obviously Nicky didn’t remember me. Victoria, you just watched the movie, and you didn’t recognize me. On top of everything, they credited me with the wrong name.”

“I have to say I know how Holdens feels,” defended Len, “I feel the same way. Nicky, you don’t remember me, either. I was in a scene with you in **Precinct Outer Space.**”

“You were?” Nicky sounded guilty.

“I was nineteen. I played eleven. I was so short you almost tripped over me, when you made your big entrance in the family scene on Mars.

Victoria fumed. She was two upped. Victoria couldn't take it anymore. “I was an extra in **The City Screamed.**”

Claus, feeling Victoria's indignation, took her arm in support.

The look on Nicky's face was incredulous. He sounded tired. “None of you ever said anything.”

“Well you're a big star. We're just local talent.” said Len humbly.

“Speak for yourself!” Claus was indignant. “I'll join you for a smoke,” he said to Victoria. “Let's go!”

Everyone went quiet as the smokers fumed off. The clicking of Sharlaya's stilettos pierced the silence as she fled to her star car, which had finally arrived with the other vehicles. Len, humiliated, bowed his head then started down the steps. Holdens offered Len a pat of understanding, and accompanied him to lunch.

“I'm up for some food,” Charlie yowled, waving to Nicky. “Verdad, you coming? Shuttle's leaving.”

Within moments, Nicky's Escalade was the only vehicle at the curb.

What just happened? Nicky asked himself. He and his son-to-be had gone from the center of attention to the center of nothing.

Thursday, late afternoon, Ilena found herself walking up the six steps to Cynthia Johnson's front door. She acknowledged a mailbox that had the name Johnson on its flap. Ilena rang the bell. Nicky waited in his car, behind his sunglasses. He was parked around the corner, two blocks away.

Seiji had not been amused when Nicky had told him he was driving himself to set that day. Lara had been pissed-off when she'd found out Ilena would be riding with Nicky, but Lara had maintained her fake understanding position.

Ilena knew she didn't have to ride with Nicky. She was happy to do it.

Nicky had been upfront with Ilena about his suspicions regarding Nickynight, aka Faimed4life, and now aka Cynthia Johnson.

It had been unethical, but Nicky had hired a hacker to break into the Nicky Fame Café. The hacker had come through with an e-mail address for Nickynight. Although defunct for the last seven weeks, the e-mail account revealed the name Cynthia Johnson, a canceled phone number and a billing address.

Nicky needed to check out the billing address. He wanted to knock on the door. He was sure someone would answer, and that an informative conversation would ensue. Nicky knew he was too famous either as an actor, a cop or a cop actor to risk doing what he was thinking. Getting recognized was a bad idea. Nicky would have to send somebody in for him, a soul he could count on, who was cool and smart on her feet. He asked Ilena.

Ilena rang the bell a second time. Mrs. Hall answered the door. The safety chain was in place. "Yes." she simply said.

"Good afternoon! I hope you can help me. My name is Shelly, and I'm an acquaintance of Cynthia's." Ilena lied.

"Cynthia?"

Ilena pulled a Mershe scarf knock-off out of her bag. "Yes, I wanted to return this. She left it at my place about four months ago."

Mrs. Hall really liked Cynthia, and surely that was one of Cynthia's scarves. She also liked Ilena's looks and demeanor, so she unchained the door.

"I'm Mrs. Hall, Jack's aunt. Cynthia moved out almost two months ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Ilena, and she was. Even though Nicky had already figured as much from the cancelled phone and e-mail accounts, Ilena still hoped to bring something back for him. "Well, that would explain why her phone's out of service." Ilena stared at the scarf, "What should I do with this?"

Mrs. Hall was also staring at the scarf. "Cynthia loved those scarves, must have had fifty of them. I wish I could help, but she hasn't called or written since she left."

It was then Bobby arrived home, lugging his usual attitude.

"Bobby!" chirped Mrs. Hall, "This is Shelly. She's a friend of Cynthia's."

“And that’s why you guys are blocking the door, so no-one gets in alive?”

“Watch your manners! We have a visitor.” Mrs. Hall was mortified.

“Please, don’t concern yourself. He must miss Cynthia terribly,” Ilena commiserated, as she moved out of Bobby’s way.

“Yes he does. We all do.”

“Like try again!” Bobby was disgusted that anyone would actually think he liked Cynthia. “ It’s not like she’s my mom or something. I hope she never comes back.” He shuffled into the house.

“Well if Cynthia was his mother, he wouldn’t have turned out this way.” Mrs. Hall shook her head.

“He’s young. He’ll grow out of it.” Ilena extended the scarf. “Why don’t you take this? I’m sure if she calls anyone, it’ll be you.”

Mrs. Hall took the scarf. She got misty-eyed looking at it. “Cynthia’s job kept her running in and out of town, kept her on the go. But when she was around, she was a great help, not just for me, but also for Jack and Bobby. Almost every Wednesday she would bring me a bottle of greens juice and a special box of herbal tea, you know, for my arthritis. It’s not the same since she’s been gone.”

“Just like Cynthia to be so thoughtful.” Ilena agreed. “And I’m so sorry to hear about your arthritis. I think I read somewhere recently that certain oils included in one’s diet, especially safflower and sunflower can really help.”

“I’ll have to look into that,” responded Mrs. Hall, glad for any company for her misery. “You know, after she left, Cynthia had her room repainted and re-carpeted. How’s that for the perfect tenant?”

After Ilena and Mrs. Hall hugged goodbye. Ilena crossed the street and head in Nicky’s car’s direction. Ilena noticed an elderly woman working on her pristine miniscule garden. The old woman feigned looking for deadheads with one eye, while scouring the street with her other.

How lucky, thought Ilena, as she approached, the true meaning of “Neighborhood Watch” Ilena smiled invitingly.

The elderly woman bit. “Nice day!” The woman was lonely, nosey and hoping Ilena would respond.

“Lovely!” exclaimed Ilena, stopping to admire what she knew were petunias. “Beautiful pansies!” she complimented.

“Thank you, but they’re petunia’s,” the elderly woman chuckled then got down to gossip. “You a friend of the Johnson’s?”

“Just Cynthia.”

“Oh, the mother, but she’s not there. Hasn’t been home for months.”

“Yes, it’s unfortunate.”

“And sad. She’s so lovely.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Ilena sighed deeply. “You must be a good friend.”

“Oh, I never met them, but I watched them from time to time. She was so affectionate. The husband is a decent man, but the son, well, if he were mine I’d turn him over my knee.”

Ilena’s heart raced as she hurried to the car, and it wasn’t because they’d be late getting to set. She had to tell Nicky that how things appeared to be on the surface wasn’t the truth. Things weren’t adding up. They weren’t adding up quite nicely.

It was Saturday afternoon. Nicky had the day off. He and Ilena were enjoying a Carlos breakfast in the kitchen, while they went over the Lucille Brookers case. They were invigorated. They were double edged. They had two new pieces of information.

While Nicky and Ilena had gone about investigating Cynthia’s last known address, Nicky’s hacker had broken into Nickynight’s private mailbox. PurpleFaime and Nickynight had made a date with each other. PurpleFaime would give the jacket to Nickynight at five p.m. on a Friday afternoon. It had gone down, apparently, at a Bistro near Bloomingdales.

Thanks to a hundred bucks that had jogged one particular waiter’s good memory, it had been confirmed that the meeting had in fact gone down.

For second c-note the waiter had recalled that Lucille and Cynthia had enjoyed a dinner together. Fifty more bucks helped him mention the navy garment bag, but there was no amount of money that could help him to divulge what had been inside it. As the

waiter had told the Agent, how could he remember something he'd never seen? That was good enough for Nicky. As far as he was concerned, the jacket from **The Handmaiden's Hands** had been inside of the navy garment bag.

Cynthia Johnson's trail forward had gone cold, so Nicky had sent Ilena backwards.

Using phone records, Ilena had traced Cynthia's previous address to an apartment in Middle Village. When Ilena had checked into the building's management, she had discovered that one of the units was up for sale. Nicky had had Ilena contact the real estate agent. A viewing was set for two o'clock on Sunday afternoon, tomorrow afternoon.

As Nicky and Ilena were finishing breakfast, a report on the fingerprints lifted from Julie's coffee cup that had been bought from Daddios for fifty dollars arrived.

One of the prints that had been lifted from Julie's coffee cup matched the only print that had been found on the note made out of magazine letters. It was the note that had promised Nicky would suffer. It was the note that Nicky still laughed at because it looked like a Props concoction.

Seiji had informed Nicky and Ilena that there were Penal Laws in New York for stalking offenses. Four statutes had created the separate crime of stalking in four degrees.

The note was definitely threatening. Now that the note could be tied to Julie due to the thorough surveillance work of Martial Artists' Agents there was enough to bring Julie up on charges. There were just a couple of snags as Nicky and everyone else saw

it. Who the hell was Julie, and where in New York could they find her?

Sunday afternoon, Nicky sat behind his sunglasses, behind the steering wheel of his Impala. He was parked just off Metropolitan, somewhere around the M train station. He'd been waiting twenty minutes. He was hot, edgy and trying not to smoke.

Nicky had agreed with Ilena that she would do the apartment viewing. After all, one always had to wonder if Nicky's celebrity would be a plus or minus in a given situation. He was checking out the street action when he caught Ilena heading towards him. She looked keyed.

Once in the car, Ilena began with the boring information. It was a small building, twelve units, all currently owner occupied. She explained to Nicky that the manager had only been there for six months and had never met Cynthia Johnson. It seems that the last manager had died suddenly last Christmas. Then Ilena got excited.

Ilena explained how she'd just left the building, and had been walking down the street when she'd heard the screech of brakes. She'd instinctively turned to look.

"It was a cab, and Len Chan flew out of it," Ilena spoke excitedly. "Len raced into the apartment building. I was right there, and I decided it was only expedient to go back and look to see if his name was the intercom system. There was no Len Chan, but there was a V. Morales listed."

Nicky opened his door. "Let's go!"

“Right!” Ilena opened hers. “We’ll perfect our story on the way?”

Verdad was beside herself as she led Nicky and Ilena into her living room. “I can’t believe you’re here. It’s unheard of.”

Nicky gave her a huge hug and a kiss, as he took in the room. Len was there, sitting on the couch between Victoria and Holdens.

“I just viewed the apartment up for sale!” Ilena informed.

“We might be neighbors?” Verdad squealed.

Ilena gestured maybe, maybe not. “I’ve got a lot of places to see.”

“Are you going to ask them to sit down?” Victoria questioned from the couch.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” apologized Verdad. “I’m so surprised by this visit I almost forgot.” She explained, “I’m having one of my afternoon rehearsal parties. Len, Holdens, Victoria and I have several small but very intense scenes coming up on Monday.” Verdad was nervous, as she seated her new guests.

Victoria addressed Nicky and Ilena, “So, how is it you’ve ended up here, at Verdad’s?”

“Lucky co-incidence,” Nicky threw off a nutshell explanation.

That was good enough for Verdad. “Holdens, would you be a doll, and throw on a fresh pot of coffee?”

“My pleasure,” Holdens replied, bee lining to the kitchen.

That was not enough information for Victoria. Nicky could sense it. “Unfortunately, we can’t stay long. We have an appointment,” he informed.

“In Queens?” Victoria pressed.

“In Astoria,” Ilena picked up the lie, “with a friend of mine. He builds these wonderful environments for children.”

“Not Lars Haarkinder!” raved Len. “Anyone who’s someone wants a Lars Haarkinder environment for their child.”

“He’s the man!” Nicky was smooth.

“Isn’t that beautiful,” Victoria droned, still on the scent, “and you ended up here, in Verdad’s apartment?”

“Right here in Verdad’s apartment at the Metropolitan Gardens!” Ilena exclaimed with an “I’m just as surprised as you are” smile. “Lars called last night to tell me tomorrow was a good day for him to meet Nicky. It was too late to get out of my viewing, but seeing as how Middle Village and Astoria are both in Queens, it worked out anyway.” Ilena attempted to sate Victoria. “I found Verdad’s name on the intercom when I checked for the name of someone I used to work with. She lived in one of these low-rises on Metropolitan.

“That is a lucky co-incidence,” Victoria muttered.

Nicky, pretending he hadn't heard that, commented on Verdad's apartment. "You have a real sweet place here, Verdad. Did you decorate it yourself?"

"She sure did," Len was swift to answer. "Verdad has the best taste in everything," Len added his own note of appreciation.

"Thank you Nicky, and thank you Len! I do so love it here. It's because I was born and raised in this neighborhood. I can walk to my mother's, or my sister's. I get to see my nieces and nephews and even a few people I grew up with. It means a lot to me." Verdad shifted her head to Ilena. "What's your friend's name? I've lived in this building for nine years. If she lived here since I've been here, I'll remember."

"Cynthia Johnson." Ilena answered with a hint of nostalgia.

"Cynthia Johnson!" Verdad shouted, like she'd won a contest, "that adorable young exchange student from the UK. But she must have gone back, oh, over a year ago."

Nicky didn't flinch a muscle or bat one of his super long eyelashes.

"Actually," corrected Ilena politely, "Cynthia's around forty."

Verdad deflated, "Oh, I'm sorry! But can you imagine, two people with the same name living so close together. I wish I could have helped."

Maybe you did, thought Nicky.

Holdens entered from the kitchen carrying an extra large tray. He carefully balanced a large pot of coffee, cups, cream, sugar,

napkins and cookies. He managed to place the whole nine yards on the coffee table without incident then wiped the sweat from his brow with a napkin. "There we go, nice fresh hot coffee and cookies," he announced.

Nicky and Ilena neared the Impala.

"What's wrong with you?" Ilena's voice was stressed. "You're supposed to be a cool, easy going guy, but you almost started an argument up there. Is it because you quit smoking?" Ilena got into the car. "You could have been more polite about the cookie."

"I didn't want a cookie." Nicky barked, getting into the driver's seat.

"I know," Ilena said, understanding why Nicky hadn't wanted one. "That's not the point. Verdad baked them herself. You rejected the cookie. You rejected her. Trust me! As a baker of cookies, I know."

"What should I have done?" Nicky demanded belligerently.

"You're the actor," Ilena reminded Nicky. "We were already lying a blue streak. You could have made up one more lie. You could have said you're on a heavily restricted diet. That wouldn't have been to far from the truth."

"Holdens kept insisting. He held the cookie right up in my face, and wouldn't take it away." Nicky calmed. "Remind me! What did I actually say?"

“You said, get that fucking cookie out of my face,” Ilena quoted.

Nicky hesitated. True, not smoking brought out the prick in him, but that wasn't the full story of what was eating him up inside. Nicky unbuttoned his shirtsleeve, exposing a Medic Alert bracelet.

Ilena was surprised. “I haven't seen that bracelet for years, since you threw it in the trash.”

“I'm having a son. I'd like to live long enough to raise him, so I bought a new one.”

Ilena nervously twirled curls between her fingers. She would never forget the night Nicky almost went into anaphylactic shock. The night he had almost died.

Eight years ago, Craft had made Nicky a tomato sandwich. They had used a knife that had been used to make a peanut butter toast. They'd claimed they'd cleaned it, but obviously not well enough. The whole incident had never made the papers. Leo had taken care of that. He had thought it would be better for Nicky's image to stay low key on the Achilles heel situation.

Nicky had understood Leo's concern at that time. Nicky still understood it. Nicky played physically hale characters, men who were for the most part, invincible. Nicky carried this sense of superiority with him at all times. It was one of the reasons he delivered his movie heroes so well.

The whole peanut allergy only served to undermine Nicky's unyielding manhood. There was no way his public could find out. It would make him fallible in his fans eyes. It was a guarded secret,

and outside of Leo and Ilena, only Carlos, Bella and a very few other people knew.

Ilena felt bad about having ridden Nicky so hard. She sighed then wound up over compensating. “It’s a drag, but hey, you’re not missing out on anything. Personally I find peanuts hard to digest. And peanut oil has a heavy taste. Not to mention there are much healthier oils on the market.”

Nicky was stone quiet.

“I like peanut butter, but have you ever smelled rancid peanut butter or peanut oil? When peanut goes, it goes.”

Nicky finally said something. “When it goes, it goes?”

“That’s right. All oils can go rancid, but nut oils are particularly vulnerable.”

“Rancid peanut oil,” mused Nicky. He pulled out his phone.

Ilena wondered why Nicky was mulling that one over so intensely, then caught his drift. “It wouldn’t have to be rancid though, just peanut,” she mused back.

“Exactly!” Nicky hit a preset. “Lieutenant Lightfoot, please. Sure, I’ll leave a message. Tell him Nicky Faime called.” Nicky adjusted his sunglasses. “Tell him I have an angle.”

The next Sunday, ten thirty a.m., Nicky awoke to an empty bed. He felt completely un-refreshed. Night shooting had taken its toll. Especially exhausting was how he and Lara always drifted back to day hours on the weekend, only to have to flip back to nights on Monday. It was tough, and Nicky was worried about any health effects on Lara and the baby.

Nicky got out of bed and hit the shower. After his shower, Nicky felt clean, but refreshed was still an elusive arm's length away. He stood in his walk-in closet, staring at plethora of black, white and grey with remote touches of blues.

Nicky chose a pair of faded black jeans, and pulled them on over his slim, beautifully striated legs. He chose a basic black short-sleeved Designer t-shirt made out of the finest Pima cotton that money could buy. He put it on and looked in the mirror.

Nicky didn't have the Medic Alert bracelet on. Why should he? He was at home, and there was no need for the bracelet here. However, going out was a different issue, and as he checked himself out in the mirror Nicky realized that he would not be able to go out in public in short sleeves.

Nicky hated that metal band. He also hated the necklace, the ring and the other styles of bracelets. If whatever Nicky wore had Medic Alert on it, Nicky hated it. It only served to be a constant reminder of his weakness. When he didn't wear it, there was no reminder. There was only strength. Nicky's attitude may have seemed cavalier, but his life didn't present many situations without one or a combination of Ilena, Carlos or Leo being around.

However Nicky handled his health predicament, he understood a couple of hard cold facts. One; his death was one slip up away. Anyone like himself, or say Lucille Brookers with her von Willebrand Disease, had had to learn to create a confidence based on prevention and treatment. Lucille had used Desmopressin and birth control pills to help control bleeding.

Nicky imagined how extra careful, extra aware she must have been to avoid accidents. He knew if something did happen there were techniques to control bleeding, procedures to follow. How many nosebleeds had Lucille had during her life? How many times had she pinched the end of her nose and leaned forward so the blood wouldn't flow into her throat?

For his part, Nicky had been treated with adrenaline and steroids to counter effects. Nicky made sure he only ate food that was prepared by someone whose kitchen was immaculate and was a stickler about cross contamination.

Two; It was up to him, as it had been up to Lucille, to rise above self pity, dread fear and inadequacies in order to embrace life with a positive passion, a life that could betray you the moment you weren't looking.

Nicky felt a certain special closeness to Lucille. He knew; much like he wouldn't accidentally or otherwise have eaten Verdad's cookie, or any other unqualified cookie, that Lucille wouldn't have accidentally fallen onto the mirrored closet door in her Shrine. She must have had some help.

Nicky's next thought was a cup of coffee. He threw on a shirt then head to the kitchen.

Nicky stuck his head into his office as he passed by. He noticed the decorating was still unfinished, but a new desk had arrived. It looked like a possible maybe.

He continued to the next room over, the nursery, but Lara wasn't in there. Now Nicky knew why his office was taking so long to finish. All the energy was going into the baby's room. It was fantastic! Lara was definitely showing her creative side. He looked around at all the nursery rhyme characters painted on the walls in soft happy colors. A suite of furniture in cream with gilt looked fit for a prince. There was some kind of baby thing in blue and cream. Nicky wasn't sure what it was, but it worked in nicely.

Nicky continued on into the living room, where Lara sat on the couch surrounded by an effusive array of gifts. Everyone wanted his or hers to be the first to arrive, for Lara's baby shower had become the "Social Must" for the second week of next month.

Lara was thrilled, holding up one gift after another for Nicky to see.

That's disconcerting, Nicky thought. The shower was still five weeks away. How many more presents would arrive by then? Did a baby really need all these things? What was Lara showing him now?

Lara proudly presented an immaculately preserved antique hand painted cradle. It was a gift from Lara's mother. The cradle had been handed down in the family for five generations

Nicky took in the cradle. He reached out and touched it. He noticed how tiny the mattress was. He placed his fist where the head would go. "Isn't there something about the head? You're supposed to be careful?" he asked Lara.

Lara answered authoritatively, “Yes, but I’m not sure what exactly. All these mysteries will be cleared up when I start post natal baby care classes.”

“There’s a school to learn to be a mom?”

“And for dad’s if you want to come.”

Nicky thought about it. What did he know? “Do they have a manual?”

“No!” Lara whined, then she saw the spark in Nicky’s eyes. “Oh you! I’m too tired for jokes.”

“Then why aren’t you in bed, sleeping?”

Lara threw her arms around his waist. “Oh Nicky, I’m too excited to sleep. The Baby’s Home Journal magazine is interviewing me at one for their celebrity pregnancies series. Nicky Faime’s son is already in demand, and he’s not even born.”

Nicky remembered about the interview, but was concerned about his son being in demand.

Lara could see the stress in his face, in lines she hadn’t seen before. She told Nicky not to worry, and promised she’d have a long juicy nap after the interview. She kissed him sweetly, and explained she had to get going. Seiji would be outside at twelve fifteen.”

“Seiji? I thought he was taking the day off?”

“That was before the interview came up. You know he’s not going to let just anybody drive me around.”

Nicky kissed her back, “He’s getting a raise.”

Carlos was putting finishing touches on petit fours as Nicky entered the kitchen.

“You deserve an award,” Nicky said sucking up the fresh aroma of a deep dark coffee.

“Thank you, sir, but I didn’t grow it, I only brewed it.”

“For coming in on your day off.” Nicky corrected as he poured himself a cup. “You’ve been in every Sunday since I started Nine Black Lives.”

“That will all settle back to normal when the shoot is over,” Carlos assured as he refrigerated his mini creations. “It’s still only the two guests this afternoon?”

“That’s right.” Nicky threw back several hot lashings then topped his cup off. He cut his eyes. “Did you get the stuff? He asked quietly.

“Yes, sir” Carlos replied. He walked toward the pantry at the back of the kitchen. “Let me get it.”

As Carlos disappeared into the pantry, a taut mouthed Ilena entered the kitchen.

“Ilena!” Nicky was surprised. “Doesn’t anybody take a day off anymore?”

“Good morning to you, too. I’m getting a coffee, if you don’t mind?”

Nicky smiled.

Ilena never could resist that wickedly charming and outrageously sexy smile of his. She melted, and grinned back. Ilena explained she'd love a day off, but had to pull her new office together. She couldn't wait until the shoot was over, there was, too, much to do. Ilena poured her coffee then walked back to the door to the hallway. She stopped short, and asked Nicky how he liked his new laptop.

Nicky confessed that it was still in the box, but insisted he'd be setting it up later. He'd let her know then. Ilena reminded him that it was the same as hers, and offered any assistance he might need. Nicky gave her a nod. Her dark luscious curls, swaying with her body as she walked away, imprisoned Nicky's gaze. The spell was broken by Carlos' voice.

"Once again, I assure you the bottles are tamper proof," Carlos reinforced as he emerged from the pantry with six bottles of Quiller safflower oil. "Where would you like them, sir?"

Nicky pointed to the counter, and pushed up his sleeves.

Nicky's guests, Loreen and her brother-in-law Philip Stursberg arrived at three. Carlos had the petit fours arranged here and there amidst scattered blooms on Nicky's generous coffee table in the living room. Nicky approached his guests as Carlos led them in.

"Loreen, thank you for coming!" Nicky's voice enveloped her. They enjoyed a short but meaningful embrace. He turned to Philip with his hand extended "Mr. Stursberg, please call me Nicky!!"

“Philip,” said Philip as he shook Nicky’s hand, wondering what Loreen had done to get close enough to Nicky to deserve a hug.

Nicky reciprocated, “Thank you for coming!”

“I wouldn’t have missed this for the world.” Philip’s words fell like dried leaves from a tree.

They seated themselves around the coffee table, midst the effusive array of gifts. Loreen was in awe of the display and could only think to ask if they were all for the baby. When Nicky told her they were, Philip showed his snide side. Philip couldn’t control himself from commenting on what a nice haul it was for a baby shower that was still five weeks away.

Loreen, disgusted by Philip’s shallow observation, asked him bare faced. “Is that how you see it?”

Mercifully at that moment, Carlos wheeled in the coffee service, sparing Philip from having to answer Loreen’s question. Instead he complimented Carlos on the delicious aroma.

Carlos poured first cups, then left as per Nicky’s earlier instructions. Philip took his time stirring his coffee, his spoon clinking, clinking. Nicky took his time turning his cup in its saucer, getting it positioned just right.

Philip broke, “Nicky, Loreen tells me you’ve been looking into my wife’s death. It seems you think Lucille was murdered, even though the police are about to close the case.”

“Yes, but it’s still open.” Nicky insisted.

“Not for long.” Philip restated.

“Yet,” Nicky pushed.

“Well then, what do you have that points otherwise?” Philip challenged as he selected a white oval with shredded orange peel from the petit fours.

Nicky grabbed a photo from a side table. He extended Nicky Night’s blow up to Philip.

Philip casually accepted the photo. He had a serious pore over it as he sipped his coffee. “No,” he finally answered, “I can’t recall this face at all.” He handed it to Loreen, who couldn’t wait to snatch it from Philip’s hands.

“I’m sure I don’t know her,” Loreen was confident, “but the scarf’s a Mershe. I can’t tell if it’s real or fake.”

Nicky’s voice was at its measured best, “As far as I know, her name’s Cynthia Johnson, she’s a Nicky Faime fan, possibly a stalker. Lucille gave her my jacket from **The Handmaiden’s Hands.**”

“So that’s where it went!” Loreen exclaimed, “but how did Lucille know this person? From work?”

“They met on-line.”

“Lucille would never have done something like that,” Philip defended. He chose a lilac square with a glazed cherry and chocolate dust.

“Well I guess never-time was up, because she did.” Nicky stated.

Philip cut to the chase. “Are you saying this woman killed Lucille?”

“Not yet,” Nicky said, feeling Philip out. “Just trying to locate her.”

Philip was amused. “You know what I think? I think you’ve played a detective so long that you’re starting to think that that’s what you are. I think you need professional help.”

“Please, Philip, you don’t need to be insulting. Nicky’s doing this for me, I’ve always believed Lucille was murdered.”

“Then you’re both mad. Next thing you’ll come up with some preposterous idea like I hired that woman to kill Lucille.”

Nicky and Loreen tossed petit fours into their mouths.

Philip flushed.

Loreen had a sip of coffee, washing down her mouthful. “Relax Philip! No one’s saying that.”

“I’ll relax all right!” Philip raised his voice, as he stood up. “But not here.” He calmed, regained his dignified posture. He nodded to Nicky. “Thank you for the brief hospitality!” He spun to depart, then spun back around. A crosscut chocolate roll with white chocolate scrapings disappeared into Philip’s mouth. He wiped his hands and departed in a subdued huff.

“Philip, wait!” Loreen called after him then turned to Nicky. “I’ve got to go. I can’t believe this is happening.”

Nicky took Loreen's hand, and walked her out. Loreen fretted all the way to the door. Her head was down as she apologized for Philip's behavior.

"Hey," Nicky soothed as he tilted her head up into his face, his lips almost touching her eyes, "He'll get over it."

Lara had returned from her interview at four thirty, and as promised, was now napping. Nicky sat in his unfinished office, trying out his new desk.

The desk was a disaster. To start with it had no drawers. Nicky wrestled his feet onto it. The angle was off. He tried different positions with his legs. There was no getting comfortable. Nicky's frustration neared anger. Nicky could hear Ilena in the hallway, approaching his office. He whipped his feet off the desk almost knocking over a bottle of Quiller filled with red liquid. He grabbed his laptop, still in the box, and began opening it.

Ilena appeared in his doorway, tapped then approached Nicky's desk. She was going home and wanted to know if he needed anything before she left.

Nicky pulled the laptop out of the box, and said he was fine.

Ilena observed as Nicky found the power cord, and plugged in the works. He flipped the screen up, and told her to have a great night! He scanned the keyboard for a power switch.

Ilena couldn't help herself. She leaned in, and hit the almost imperceptible start button. Nicky placed a hand on her shoulder as they watched his new desktop materialize. She looked up at him for

approval, her dark Cleopatra eyes asking yes? Nicky's eyes answered yes. Ilena's eyes cried yes. The phone rang. It was Lightfoot.

Lightfoot hadn't returned Nicky's message until late yesterday afternoon, the message that had said Nicky now had an angle. Nicky had told Lightfoot about Cynthia Johnson aka Nicky Night, and how she had tied in with Lucille Brookers via Nicky's jacket from **The Handmaiden's Hands**. Nicky had explained that most of this information was on Lucille's computer in the Nicky Faime Café.

After having had sworn Lightfoot to secrecy, Nicky had also confessed his peanut allergy to him. Lightfoot appreciated the information and the need to keep a lid on it. However, when Nicky had told Lightfoot that Cynthia had attempted to kill Nicky with peanut oil, Lightfoot had laughed so hard that he couldn't talk anymore.

Now, Nicky supposed that Lightfoot was getting back to him to finish yesterday's conversation. "Ilena, the Lieutenant's around the corner. Are you available to take notes?"

"You know I am."

"I'll need the files."

"Right!" Ilena's curls flew as she made tracks.

Nicky sat back in his chair, looking at the latest mistake of a desk. Okay, it was a piece of crap, but he was an actor. He could make himself look comfortable at it, even if he wasn't. Unlike his last encounter with Lightfoot, Nicky would have the upper hand. Sitting at his desk, in his office, entitled him to it.

Judging from how quickly Ilena returned with the files under one arm and Lt. Lightfoot on her other, Lightfoot must have been at the front door when he called. Ilena had the Lieutenant laughing, tears in the corners of his eyes. Nicky could tell that Lightfoot was smitten. Another thing working for me, thought Nicky.

After Ilena placed the files by Nicky's laptop, she sat on Nicky's new couch. Ilena readied her note pad and pen.

Lightfoot stood in front of Nicky's desk just the way Nicky had stood at the foot of Lightfoot's when he'd gone down to the Police Station to wish Lightfoot a Happy Birthday.

"Faime, you gonna offer a guy a drink?" Lightfoot bellowed.

"I assumed you're on duty," Nicky said.

"Amateur! Don't you know its death to assume? FYI, It's Sunday, my day off, and a nice cold beer would hit the spot. Ilena, what're you having?"

Ilena got up. "A glass of wine would be nice." She head off to get the drinks.

"Nah, nah," Lightfoot gently guided her back to the couch. "Faime can get the drinks."

Nicky had been thrown off his game by Lightfoot's "amateur" remark.

"And get yourself something," Lightfoot suggested to Nicky.

Nicky stood up and spun his chair like a roulette wheel. "I'll get the damn drinks," he said. As he exited his office, Nicky could sense Lightfoot sit down in the chair Nicky had just vacated.

When Nicky returned with the drinks, Lightfoot had not only commandeered Nicky's desk, but had pulled up a chair for Ilena. They were sharing a joke.

Lightfoot stopped laughing when Nicky entered. "I asked Ilena if she would mind taking notes. She said it would be her pleasure. You don't mind?"

Nicky stood, pissed, at the foot of his own desk, steadying two wine glasses and a bottle of beer. "Not as long as I get a copy," he replied evenly, as he passed Ilena's glass of wine to her. He put Lightfoot's beer on the desk.

Lightfoot took a swig of the beer then lay into Nicky. "So what the hell are you up to Faime?"

"What are you talking about, Lightfoot?" Nicky questioned, swirling his wine in his glass to hide his lingering soreness about Lightfoot's "amateur" comment.

"Stursberg called me about an hour ago. He's quite upset. He seems to think you and Loreen are having an affair. Said his wife might have been murdered after all. For some reason he thinks maybe Loreen hired this Cynthia Johnson to kill Lucille, and you're helping to hang it on Stursberg."

Nicky drank all of his wine and tabled his glass on the desk. "Thought out like a true rat," he commented.

“Why else would you care?” You knew his wife for ten minutes.”

“A cold chill.”

“What is that, some actor’s interpretation of a gut feeling? Gut feelings are for cops and psychics. You don’t get it, do you Faime? You’re an actor, not a cop. And I’ll tell you something else. The police didn’t need your little tip to find the Nicky Faime Café. Lucille had it bookmarked. If PurpleFaime gave the jacket to Nickynight, so what? Gift giving’s not a crime.” Lightfoot put his feet up on Nicky’s desk, blocking out the Quiller bottle. “Even if I concede that PurpleFaime is Lucille and Nickynight is Cynthia Johnson, where’s the gripe? Cynthia got what she wanted. You’re angles soft, Faime.”

Nicky repositioned the Quiller bottle so Lightfoot could see it. “My angle’s sharp,” Nicky differed. “Cynthia Johnson tried to kill me.”

Lightfoot had heard this all yesterday. Nicky had gone into some detail explaining his theory on how Cynthia had switched the safflower oil in the Quiller bottle to peanut oil then switched the contaminated bottle with one in Carlos’ shopping cart. Fortunately, the peanut oil had gone rancid. Carlos had known it did not smell like safflower oil should smell, and had tossed it.

Nicky picked up the Quiller bottle, and extended it to Lightfoot. “Care for some cranberry juice?”

Lightfoot took the bottle from Nicky. He gave it a once over. “Nice trick,” he said. “Tamper proof.” He gave the bottle a twice over. “But it’s nothing a clever twelve year old couldn’t have done,” he concluded. “What else you got?”

Nicky couldn't stand the way Lightfoot kept bringing him down, but he refused to quit. He pushed the files nearer to Lightfoot. "Check out the top one!"

As far as Lightfoot figured, Nicky had offered up the pile, the top folder being merely a suggestion of where to start. Lightfoot slid a file out from the bottom of the small heap. It was Julie - 101.

Lightfoot perused the surveillance photos of the black haired, heavily made up woman known as Julie. He read the threatening note. He skimmed the written data. Lightfoot didn't want to be, but he was concerned for Nicky. In harsh tones he advised Nicky to take this to the anti-Stalking Unit, that the woman was a kook and that Nicky was walking on thin ice.

Lightfoot could see Nicky was sick of being barked at, so gave him a break. He opened the top file; the one Nicky had wanted Lightfoot to open all long. It was the 100 - Faimed4Life package that now included Nicky night aka Cynthia Johnson.

"So this is the one you say tried to kill you, with peanut oil." Lightfoot started to chuckle, then changed his mind. "Look Faime, as far fetched and paranoid as your whole theory is, I'll buy it if you can answer one question. Why did someone who wants to kill you, also want to kill Lucille Brookers?"

Lightfoot had Nicky there, but he remained cool. "The case is still open," Nicky reminded.

"Not because of Cynthia Johnson, that's for sure. Look Faime, I got a lot of facts to figure in."

"Like what?"

“Like the fact that Stursberg has an alibi, but he also has an excellent motive? Then there’s Loreen who has no motive, but has no alibi?”

“What are you talking about?” Nicky demanded to know.

“Loreen had a fight with her husband on the night Lucille died. In a fit of rage she took off in the van and didn’t come back for over two hours, the exact two hours she would have needed to get to Lucille’s, commit the crime and return to her fight with her husband.”

Nicky couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Forgot to mention it to you, did she?” Lightfoot was brutal. “Maybe there is something going on with you two, only you don’t know it.”

“Fill me in on Stursberg’s motive.” Nicky spoke through his perfect teeth.

“Insurance policy,” Lightfoot admitted. “von Willebrand Disease disqualified Lucille from regular policies. She was too high risk. Other premiums were out of this world, low pay offs, but here’s the deal. Lucille bought herself a big pay off policy against certain accidental deaths, your chance in a million long shots, tidal wave, earthquake, plane crash, unlawful homicide, that kind of thing.”

Nicky processed this information. “And if it was unlawful homicide?”

“Stursberg gets ten mil, but not if he’s in on it.”

“And that’s why the case isn’t closed?” Nicky surmised

“Partly,” Lightfoot sighed from so deep within that Nicky could feel its wind. Lightfoot eased up a bit.

“So.” was all Nicky said.

“So things can be sitting right in front of us, and we don’t see them, like a tree in a forest.” Lightfoot said, looking at Ilena.

“How philosophical,” Nicky said, flashing on the fact that Verdad lived in the same building as Cynthia Johnson had.

The last of the beer went smoothly down Lightfoot’s throat. He removed his feet from Nicky’s desk. “That’s it then! Except, about the Stursberg thing. Let the cops do the interrogating from now on.”

“I had him over for coffee, not in for questioning,” Nicky asserted.

“Whatever you call it, just butt out!” Lightfoot stood to leave. He slapped his massive hands on Nicky’s new desk, and gave it a once over. “You should get yourself a decent desk. This one looks like it’s for an amateur.”

Shoot day 40 and Nine Black Lives was trying to catch up on its night precinct interiors. The Third AD had developed a cold and was told to stay home. No one wanted a Crew Flu epidemic. It was Cheryl's big chance. She had temporarily been promoted from TAD to Third, and would help direct the Extras on set. Cheryl was in career heaven as she herded around cops, detectives, lawyers, whores and perps.

The stage was set for the tenth time. The Camera would start on Miriam and Heff. They've been held all day on suspicion, and are at the front desk being released. Black and Jordan are warning them not to leave town.

Camera would pan over to Kowolski and Chang, catching them as they raced in from the back hallway. Camera would stop on Kowolski as she accidentally dropped her files. Camera would close in on Kowolski as she bent to the floor to retrieve the folders, catching her cleavage hanging over the points of her stilettos. Camera would rise back up with her décolletage, and move out to a medium shot.

Chang is trying to tell Kowolski she's making a mistake, but she tells him to "back off".

"Everyone, places!" The First AD stressed at the top of his lungs. He needed the shot to go down. He was trying to get out of the toilet because, if he didn't, it was going to his fault. Unfortunately, there was nothing specific to blame the delay on for the production report.

The First screamed. "Sharlaya, what's Kowolski's line?"

"Get back!" she responded.

"Continuity," shouted the 1st, "what's Kowolski's line?"

"Back off!" Continuity read from the script.

"Sharlaya?" the 1st checked.

"Back off!" She got it right this time.

"Again!"

"Back off!"

"Finals!" yelled the 1st.

Lara, Daphne and Moira raced in and did their usual swat mission touch ups. One by one they finished, and split the set.

"Good for hair!" Daphne called.

"Good for make-up!" Moira Called.

"Good for me!" Lara called.

Hap's directed. "We'll pick it up from Jordan's line, "And if either of you."

The 1st called the roll. "Camera!"

"Rolling!"

“Slate!”

The Clapper/Loader slid the slate in front of the Camera. “Slate in; scene eighty-four, take ten.”

“Sound?”

“Sound rolling, and speed,” confirmed Sound.

“And action!” roared Haps.

JORDAN

And if either of you even thinks of leaving town, I’ll hear about it.

CHANG

Wait! New forensic evidence has surfaced.

Camera panned to Kowolski and Chang. Kowolski hit her mark, and dropped her files on cue. She bent down and Camera made it in for the most perfect cleavage, stiletto shot you’ve ever seen.

“Cut!” someone shouted, the take ruined.

“Who called cut?” Haps was furious. “Only I can call cut.”

“I called cut,” confessed the Camera Operator. “Something shiny on the floor is ruining the shot.”

Sets and Props swooped in. They scoured the floor around Kowolski’s feet. Props found the problem. He held a hairpin out to Haps.”

“Whose hairpin is that?” Haps demanded a culprit.

“Don’t look at me, I’m blonde.” Sharlaya stated an obvious.

“Hair!” The 1st pushed his weight. “Whose hairpin is this?”

Daphne hastily retrieved the pin from Props, and examined it. She announced it was mid tone, for light to medium browns and auburns. It could have fallen out of Victoria’s hair.

Victoria indignantly felt her hair then announced forcefully that all her hairpins were in place. In a hissy fit she blamed it on the Extras.

The 1st ordered Cheryl to check the Extras.

There were five female Extras in that night, three prostitutes, one cop and a lawyer, none to whom the hairpin could be attributed.

Never mind the toilet, the 1st could see the sewer up ahead. He was desperate as he looked at Cheryl. “Cheryl, your hair’s auburn, could it be yours?”

Cheryl, whose hair was in fact dark brown, had never used a hairpin in her life. Yet, she wondered, how much time would be spent on the hairpin mystery before Haps would let go? What the hell, she was used to taking the blame. She smiled at her 1st, stuck a hand into her hair and felt around. “I’m so sorry! It seems like one of mine is missing,” she said.

Cheryl got a, “you’re on my next team” nod from the 1st. He ordered a memo to go out with that night’s call sheets. No one on crew would be allowed hairpins, bobby pins or any other small hair implements on set. Only actors would be permitted.”

Cheryl stoically copied her 1st, naively believing once she was a real full time 2nd AD she wouldn't have to endure the blame game anymore.

Wednesday, Shoot day 42, found Nicky with a decent stretch of down time. Although he'd been bringing his laptop with him since Monday, this was the first chance he'd had to use it. Nicky and Ilena sat outside his trailer at a table Locations had set up for them.

Ilena peered from the side as Nicky searched "viola concertos".

"Since when did you take up an interest in classical music?" she wondered out loud.

"Since I met Philip Stursberg." Nicky mumbled, browsing the results. It was immediately apparent that viola concertos were not all the rage. There was an English guy, Walton, getting the most hits. He'd written one viola concerto in 1929. A Russian named Schnittke wrote the next known concerto for viola in 1985. It was very interesting, but Nicky didn't want to read it all right now.

Ilena could see Nicky was off on his own, so moved on to her own. She flipped up her screen and got to work. Nicky took himself to a movie database, and typed Verdad Morales into its search engine. Her page came up with thirty-two credits on her resume.

Nicky felt lucky. He clicked randomly on a title, **The Sun Sets, Rises And Sets**. When the page came up he went right to the crew list, and there it was: Costume Designer - Lucille Brookers. He began to investigate all of Verdad's credits.

By the time the temporary TAD, who was replacing Cheryl while Cheryl continued to replace the 2nd on set, came to get Nicky for touch ups, Nicky knew that Verdad and Lucille had worked on four projects together over a twelve year span.

That Saturday, with one week of shooting left to go, Nicky was in a going out mood. La Dolce Donna was his choice.

The last time Nicky and Lara had dined at Bella's, Lara had sprung the baby on Nicky. Lara had felt she might need a buffer zone so she had suggested that Leo and his wife, Ronnie, should be their guests that evening. Nicky had been all for it.

Outside Bella's, Seiji's Agents hovered in crevices. Their eyes washed over everything. They were impeccably prepped. One was set to follow Julie by foot; another, agent had a bicycle and another a car. Seiji wired to it all, waited in the Escalade. Julie wouldn't be giving anyone the slip tonight.

Inside Bella's, Nicky, Lara, Leo and Ronnie relaxed under the faux dome in their green enclave. The wine had been poured, and the appetizers had been ordered. Nicky stood up and politely excused himself. He could have been going to the washroom or to some private spot to use his phone, but he head straight to Bella's kitchen.

Nicky was no stranger to Bella's kitchen so it was perfectly normal, as he cut through the culinary action, that he put his arm around Bella's waist and led her aside for some chitchat.

Nicky took Bella into his confidence, explaining that someone had been stalking him whenever he came to her restaurant. “She’s been using Daddios, like a home base,” Nicky informed Bella.

Bella threw her hands over her face, making a big ex. “I don’t want to believe it!”

Nicky showed her Julie’s picture, but Bella drew a blank. Nicky asked Bella to keep her eyes on anyone who had access to the reservation information, or who was privy to the inside gossip. Someone was tipping Julie off, and Nicky needed to know whom.

When Nicky arrived back at the table, Ronnie was in mid rave about Sidgwick’s Toddler College. The reservation list ran for three years. Some couples registered before conception to secure a spot. Lara was frantic. She had to get the baby in. Ronnie assured Lara she had connections, and could help. They could register Monday, but they would need a name for the child.

“We’ve got to pick a name this weekend!” Lara insisted to Nicky.

“What about Augustus?” Leo joked.

“An emperor’s name. Works for me.” Nicky assented poker faced. “I’ll call him August for short.”

“Listen, the two of you,” Ronnie usurped the recommendation. “A child’s name is a serious challenge. The wrong name and he’ll grow up with a complex.” Ronnie had a socially subscribed mode of seeing things.

Lara was completely with Ronnie. “I don’t like it.”

“I was joking,” Leo raised his hands in defense.

Nicky sat back, “I wasn’t.”

Obviously, joking or serious, Augustus wasn’t an option with the women. Also made clear at that moment was the reality that the women intended to talk about the baby’s life the entire night. The ceaseless topic traveled from names and preschool, to private school, to schools for the arts, to private tutelage. By the time dessert arrived, Harvard and Yale were toss-ups.

Bella proudly accompanied the dessert. She’d come in early that day to personally prepare a tray of chocolate truffles, each one a masterpiece, each one a family secret. They weren’t to be found on the menu, nor could one order them specially. Bella had to be inspired, and the promise of another Nicky on the planet did just that. As the diners admired Bella's works of art, she poured demitasses of a very late harvest unfortified black Muscat wine.

Bella raised her wine to Nicky, Lara and their shared joy, and toasted with an abounding sincerity before leaving her guests to their truffles.

During the courses, Nicky and Leo had become more and more detached from the ladies, defining a conversational world of their own. Dessert proved to be their most private space.

Nicky sipped the thick sweet wine over a bite of truffle resting on his tongue then asked Leo why he never came to the wrap dinners any more.

Leo explained how he hated those things. He said all those actors so close together in one place at one time was work for him, and ruined the meal. Leo maintained it was the pre-shoot dinner

parties that he enjoyed. Leo was at ease with all the producers and backers. Leo said the smell of power and money enhanced any meal. Nicky said he could understand why Leo felt that way.

Nicky wasted one beat then changed the subject. “Thanks for getting me that DVD copy of **The Handmaiden’s Hands!**”

“You’re welcome Faime, but you thanked me for that weeks ago.” Leo was suspicious. “What is it you’re really trying to thank me for?”

“For telling me everything that you’re going to remember about it.”

“Hold on, Faime, that was eighteen years ago.”

“Humor me!” Nicky lured Leo into memory land. “You were a hot shot agent with one client, me.” Nicky poked at Leo’s funny bone.

“I invented credits for your resume.” Leo regaled.

Nicky and Leo laughed off a lot of memories over their wine and truffles. Nicky reminded Leo how they had survived on brown rice, onions and carrots, and they hadn’t been vegetarians. Leo said he’d been grateful they’d gotten to eat at all, what with all the ants and cockroaches sharing their apartment.

The Handmaiden’s Hands was a step up, but who knew it at the time? Back then it was a paycheck. No one really thought anything would come of the stupid film. Leo had even worried that it could possibly hurt Nicky’s career.

“Who could have predicted a low budget loser like that would turn out to be a cult classic. Hell, the script was a joke,” Leo laughed. “The lead role paid peanuts. They couldn’t get anyone with any kind of a name to take it.”

“No one?” Nicky questioned.

“No one with a name, but a lot of unknown hopefuls were lined up, ready, willing and able. I’d pitched you for an audition early on, but the Producers were still all fired up about getting someone with marquee value. They couldn’t get me out of the office fast enough.”

“Did you tell me about that?”

“I’m sure I did.” Leo paused to reflect. “Remember, I told you I threw your demo on the desk as they were showing me out? I told them to do themselves a favor and watch it.”

“Right!” Nicky recalled. “I wasn’t sure if you were confident or pushy.”

“Three months later, I got a call. Someone, the director or a producer had finally watched it, and they’d loved you. Although, what had really sold you had been that embarrassing late night commercial you did for, was it a laxative?”

“Hemorrhoid product.” Nicky said dryly, recalling that miserable piece of shit he’d shot. Yet another thing he’d done solely for the money.

“Yeah, times were tough back then, but they’re not now. Point is, someone had loved the fact that you could keep such a straight

face pitching a hemorrhoid product. You got the job, and we've never looked back."

"True." Nicky concurred.

"So why are you looking back now, Faime?" Nicky and Leo's eyes locked, "You still on that costume designer's death?"

"Lucille Brookers," Nicky corrected, "unlawful homicide."

On Sunday, Nicky and Ilena were in his office, caucusing around Nicky's new coffee table. The coffee table was temporarily serving as Nicky's desk, and as a result was cluttered. Nicky tossed his sunglasses onto a stack of newspapers. Ilena cleared a square where she neatly placed the Julie - 101 file.

Nicky and Ilena were there to review the Julie stalking situation, but Nicky was suffering from tunnel vision. He was double distilled, intoxicated by the scent of murder, and he would only focus on Lucille Brookers' death.

"Cynthia Johnson, a twenty year old exchange student from England, lives in the same building as Verdad," Nicky vigorously pursued his train of thought. "The twenty-year-old student physically moves back to the UK, but her telephone and Internet account move to Briarwood?"

Ilena knew Nicky wouldn't get off the Brookers topic that easily. Ilena understood, because she thought as well as Nicky did that a third party had assumed the real Cynthia Johnson's name. That third party turned out to be a forty-year-old woman in a Mershe scarf knock-off.

What really bothered Nicky and Ilena was that there were no credit cards, no bank account, nothing else in Cynthia Johnson's name that suggested complete and purposeful identity theft.

"Then Lucille Brookers is murdered, and Cynthia Johnson vanishes." Nicky finished.

Ilena raised her brows, "Yes! Well, people disappearing are a concern." Ilena massaged her temples. "Seems like the current theme."

"Theme?" Nicky knew something was wrong. "What are you taking about?"

"Julie seems to have disappeared," Ilena informed Nicky. "She was a no show when you ate at Bella's last night."

Nicky was quiet.

"Which is the specific reason for this meeting," Ilena said. "According to Police data, stalkers stay on a subject for one point eight years on average. Maybe Julie's one point eight is over, and she gave up?" Ilena expressed her wishful logic out loud.

Nicky admitted to himself that it was an anomaly for Julie not to make an appearance, but had she truly given up. "Maybe her one point eight is over," Nicky groaned. "Maybe she's sick. Maybe her informant is failing her. Maybe it's because she's onto us. Maybe she's moving into the next part of some insane plan."

"Stalking you at La Dolce Donna was Julie's main routine," Ilena began then continued. "Nonetheless, Seiji has suggested maintaining surveillance on that situation. Also, Seiji says that the

three Agents that have gotten jobs in the Grip and Electric departments on **Nine Black Lives** have blended in seamlessly. He suggests we circulate Julie's picture through Security, Locations, the AD Department and every PDO that reports in.

Nicky felt a prison's walls closing in on him. If Leo and Seiji had their way Nicky wouldn't be able to go anywhere by himself. How could a person think in such a claustrophobic situation, Nicky wondered? Nicky desired freedom, a freedom no one was going to give, a freedom he'd have to find for himself. He craved a cigarette, a cigarette he couldn't smoke because he'd quit. Nicky stood up, grabbed his sunglasses and whipped them over his eyes.

"Where're you going, Nicky," Ilena asked?

"For a walk in the park," Nicky answered, putting on his jacket. "Alone!"

On Shoot day 46, Verdad was in for Carmen's big hospital scene with Black. It was the coming out of coma scene that Nicky had helped to rewrite.

Nicky's call had been for seven p.m. but he'd decided to arrive an hour early so Lara could trim his hair. When Nicky and Lara had taken their station in Hair and Make-up, Daphne was rolling Verdad's hair, and Moira was giving Charlie a relaxing facial.

Verdad, hungry for any attention from Nicky, started with some easy chitchat. "It's hard to believe the shoot is almost over."

Charlie piped up before Nicky could. “You gotta look on the bright side. You got an invitation to one of Nicky Faime’s famous wrap dinners.”

Verdad raved, “I’ve already bought a dress! It’s black, simple but sexy in a kind of Anna Magnani sort of way.”

“I feel like a Tenth Victim,” Nicky teased.

“You mean a Rose Tattoo,” Verdad sexily teased back.

Lara glanced at Verdad. She didn’t like how important Nicky made Verdad feel, especially in front of other people. She didn’t like Verdad.

“Wish I was buying a dress for one of Nicky’s dinners,” Moira was brazen enough to hint.

“Me, too!” Daphne was just as barefaced.

Lara saw her opportunity to show Verdad and everyone her importance, her power. Lara poured on the fake friendship she’d built up with Daphne and Moira.

“Daphne! Moira! You gave me the best idea. Wouldn’t it be so much fun if you came to the dinner?”

“We’d love to come!” They were shameless.

“Oh Nicky, please?” Lara begged artificially.

Nicky’s smile made it clear to see it was totally okay.
“Whatever you want, Lara!”

Lara, Daphne and Moira abandoned their tasks, coagulating into a group hug behind Charlie's chair, squealing mercilessly right above his ears.

"Girls!" shouted Charlie. "Save it for the dinner!"

Lara caught Verdad staring in the mirror at the three revelers. Now, thought Lara, now, Verdad and everyone realize who is the most important to Nicky.

An hour and a half later Nicky and Verdad were standing by on set. They were perched on their cast chairs. Verdad was running over her lines. Nicky was critiquing.

"Please wake up, please! For the sake of our unborn child, please!" Verdad spoke as Carmen.

"Not bad," Nicky wasn't totally sold.

Verdad was frustrated. Not bad was not good enough. She expressed to Nicky how she was feeling it, but needed to feel it more. It was a very deep tearful scene, but she was, too, happy from thinking about Nicky's wrap party.

"Think of something sad!" suggested Nicky.

"Is that what you're doing?"

"Yes."

"Will you share it with me?"

"Someone recently died before her time." Nicky hung his head.

“Oh, that is sad,” commiserated Verdad. “Family, close friend?”
Some of her glee drained.

“Professional colleague.”

“Someone from the business? Who is it? Maybe I know her?”
Verdad was completely off the party now.

“Lucille Brookers.” Nicky was brief.

Verdad threw her palms across her mouth to stifle her gasp.
“Lucille’s dead?”

“You knew her, too,” Nicky consoled.

“Just like you, professional colleagues. Oh dear, you’re right.
She was too young to die. That is sad.” Verdad placed her hands
across her heart. “How?”

Nicky watched Verdad very, very closely, “She might have been
murdered.”

Verdad was crushed, becoming depressed. Nicky could see
tears welling in Verdad’s eyes. Now she’s ready for the hospital
scene that I helped rewrite, Nicky thought suspiciously. He couldn’t
help but wonder if Verdad was upset because she’d honestly liked
Lucille, or if she’d maybe killed Lucille.

Shoot Day 50, **Nine Black Lives** last night of principal photography, would be dedicated to scene one twenty-four. Scheduled was a stunt, a “big leap” with four cameras on hand to capture the action. It was a spectacular way to wrap things up.

The setting, a society party debuting a new young artist, was scripted in an enormous loft style apartment. It featured a fabulous staircase leading to a rooftop garden terrace. Classy and artsy guests would mingle throughout the apartment, up the stairs and into the roof garden.

Black, in a cast and sling from his gunshot wound several scenes earlier, is an uninvited guest. Black would sneak through the party to the bar where he would confront Del Vartnay. After an intense verbal exchange Del Vartnay, realizing the jig is up, would throw his drink in Black’s face. Del Vartnay would use the moment to flee, racing through the party, up the stairs and across the garden to the parapet at the end of the roof.

Del Vartnay would climb the parapet, look behind and see Black closing in on him. Having no choice, Del Vartnay would leap across an alley to the roof of the building on the other side. Black, right on Del Vartnay’s ass, would take the leap as well. The subsequent parts of the chase had been in the can for a couple of weeks.

Haps had decided, on the day, that the stunt wasn’t exciting enough. What Haps decided he needed to make it really happen was a breakaway trellis on the parapet for Del Vartnay to crash through.

The 1st. A.D. and Special Effects departments were sent into a scramble. All shots were on hold until the Carps finished such a last minute construction, and the racket that went with it. The 1st was not amused. The last thing he needed on the final night of shooting was a costly delay.

However, a delay was exactly what Cheryl needed. Still replacing the 2nd on set, tonight she was in charge of a hundred and fifty extras. Even though she had a Daily A.D. to assist her, the Extras were only eighty-five percent. Cheryl needed to get to holding, locate the slow down and rattle the cage.

Haps and the 1st had decided that a good use for the down time would be to go over the stunt shots list with the actors and Stunt team. All were called to set.

Nicky arrived on set with Lara. A fake cast and sling was on his left arm. The jacket to his black suit was worn with his good arm through the sleeve, and the other side of the jacket hanging from his shoulder. To further accommodate the situation, an entire sleeve had been ripped out of his shirt. Lara, even though she wasn't really showing much yet, flaunted a Designer maternity top.

The Stunt Coordinator ran through the specs. The Black and Del Vartnay Stunt Performers would be wearing full armadillos along with hard elbow and kneepads under their wardrobe. This was routine precaution for a seven-foot jump from a three-story building to a two and a half story roof.

As well as the Black and Del Vartnay stunt doubles, there were half a dozen stunt performers in the party's guest pool. They were ready to fly out of the way or be knocked over as the racing characters zigzagged through the set. When you added to that the spotters by the parapet, spotters by all airbags and the

Coordinator, you had a nineteen-man stunt team. This was, of course, exclusive of the paramedics standing by with their ambulance.

Of the four cameras, two were on the roof. Another camera was in the lane on the ground looking up. Equipped with a long lens, it would capture a greater feeling of height. The P.D.O. team had cordoned off the lane, which was filled with air bags, just in case.

The fourth camera was located on the roof that the jump was being made to. The air bag here was the successful target.

Another on the day addition that Haps had decided he wanted was an insert shot of the real Black and real Del Vartnay hitting the parapet. It would be a tight shot, so as to capture their expressions the split second prior to jumping. All concerned were busy working out the details on what was safe and effective when the first of the break away trellises arrived with SFX and Set Dec.

Thrilled, the 1st announced that scene 124a, Black and Del Vartnay at the bar, was up in ten. The 1st walked Cheryl. He informed her that all Extras should be in position in five.

Cheryl copied from the shuttle she was in. Eight percent of the remaining fifteen percent of the ladders had just arrived on set with her. The remaining seven percent were in a shuttle less than five away. Cheryl was still alive!

In the end, it took another twenty minutes for everyone to arrive on set and the pandemonium to settle. The focus was on Black and Del Vartnay at the bar. Finals were history. Everyone was happy. The 1st cued the roll.

A half an hour later scene 124a was in the can, and a one-hour lunch was called.

It was one a.m. and the crew was back on set. They were all somewhat in an out-of-shoot mode, having been treated to the Caterer's finale meal featuring barbeque steaks, sushi and chocolate mousse cake.

Nicky was in Hair and Make-up languishing in the aftertastes of the gourmet midnight supper Carlos had personally delivered to set.

Video Village had been relocated from downstairs to the terrace. Although it had been squashed into a corner at the top of the staircase, Locations had managed to negotiate the four monitors, one for each camera, and eight VIP chairs into the space, yet, still have standing room in the back for the Beauty Department and Wardrobe.

Coverage of the party in the apartment and up the stairs had been completed. The Master of the chase scene, up to the big stunt, had been shot. They'd pick it up on the roof garden.

Nicky arrived on set ready to go with his cast, sling and wardrobe all set to continuity specifications. Claus, who'd arrived moments earlier, was talking to Haps and the 1st. Nicky joined them.

Haps was passionate with his explanation. Nicky and Claus listened raptly. "It's critical that both of you recapture your exact facial expressions from the moment of the cut. Nicky I need that determination in Black's face. Claus I want that desperation in Del Vartnay's face. You boys understand?"

“Got it!” Nicky nailed the point.

Claus expanded it. “There was an edge of grief mixed in with Del Vartnay’s desperation,” he expounded.

“Yes, yes that it!” Haps confirmed not wanting to get into semantics with a theatrically trained actor. He continued with his directions. “In this part of the sequence, you’re running through the party. Just do everything as choreographed by Stunts. When Del Vartnay reaches the parapet, we cut, and Stunts takes over.”

Nicky and Claus nodded affirmative.

Haps looked at his 1st. “Let’s roll!” Haps never got tired of saying that.

The established set was being tweaked to perfection. Cheryl was guiding Extras into their continuity positions and situations. Stunt performers were poised, and Camera teams were readying to roll.

The actors proceeded to their marks. On the way to his, Nicky passed Cheryl fussing with a group of Extras around a table.

Nicky found his mark. He assumed position. His performance adrenaline began to flow. His line of sight was right at the table that Cheryl was setting. There was an elderly woman, an elderly gentleman, a young artist, Cheryl’s back and the tails of a Mershe colored scarf.

Nicky could hear blood pulsing in his ears as he paced towards Cheryl. He put a hand on Cheryl’s shoulder. He guided Cheryl aside, revealing a woman in a fake Mershe scarf.

It wasn't Cynthia. However, the woman that Nicky had revealed was awed. Here she was a lowly Extra, and there he was right in front of her, Nicky Faime, a big star. She was speechless.

Nicky covered his unusual action by shooting her one of his special smiles, "Thank you for wearing such a beautiful scarf," he said formally, yet warmly. Such appreciation of the Extras by the stars was rare, but not unheard of.

She managed a few words, "Thank you! I knew you'd like it."

Extras who'd witnessed the scene, tittered with excitement about what a generous professional Nicky was. The elderly gentleman attempted to change his tie to one that he thought Nicky might like better, but Cheryl prevented him from doing it. Another Extra wanted to sit at the table with the woman who Nicky had complimented. Cheryl was losing control of the Extras. Their din built.

"Settle!" the 1st commanded. "I hear laughing," he shouted. The set went silent.

Nicky returned to his mark. He'd been shook up bad. How long had that scarf been on set until he'd noticed? He scanned in one direction then scoured another. He searched for any familiar face, hair or clothing. What else had he missed?

"Finals!" the 1st called.

Nicky's performance adrenaline increased. His guts rushed to his head, but he pushed them back down where they belonged. After all, he had a scene to deliver.

As touch ups were being executed, and to all appearances, Nicky was chill, but his eye continued its systematic evaluations.

Moira finished Del Vartnay's finals. "Good for make-up!" she called on her way to the monitors.

Lara was done with Nicky, "Good for me!" she called as she head off to Video Village.

"Lara!" someone called loudly to her.

Lara turned her head as a female Extra ran up the stairs towards her.

Without breaking gait, the Extra grabbed Lara's arm, and threw her down the stairs. Lara screamed out. As the Extra fled across the roof garden toward the trellis, Nicky recognized that it was Julie.

Half of the people at Video Village ran down the stairs after Lara. Nicky axed the urge to run with them, and took off after Julie.

"Catch her!" the 1st yelled. The Camera Operator heard "Action", and began to roll.

Nicky was in hot pursuit. Julie was approaching the end of the roof. Nicky was gaining ground. It was fantastic, better than the Coordinator had choreographed. Using the sets as a stairway, Julie athletically leapt onto a chair, from the chair to a table, from the table to the parapet. Without losing a beat she broke clean through the trellis. Nicky was only several strides behind as his feet found the chair, the table, the parapet and air.

No one by the air bags on the roof across from set understood what was happening. No call for the actual stunt had come through the walkies, but from the second they heard the crash of the trellis, the entire team went into action, hastily taking positions around the massive air bag.

Julie hit the pillow then rolled expertly to the edge of it. Nicky landed on the exact spot Julie had just rolled from. Julie sat up, and jumped off between Spotters. Taken aback by this change in choreography, and stunned to see a woman, the Spotters failed to notice as Nicky rolled off the bag landing on the casted arm.

As his body hit the roof, Nicky could see Julie escape into the building. He bounced up like he was made of rubber, and chased her through the roof door. Nicky was possessed, as he bounded down the stairs to the exit.

“Who was that?” One of the Spotters on the ground alerted loudly as the Stunt crew watched Julie disappear down the alley.

Nicky flew out of the door, and into the alley.

“That’s Nicky Faimel!” Several Spotters shouted then began to pursue Nicky.

It was an urban alley maze, yet Julie had no problems negotiating a route through it. She always managed to turn another corner, or find another cut through. She used objects as springboards. She rolled under a truck. She shook the Spotters, but she couldn’t shake Nicky.

A narrow slot between buildings, a stretch of alley, another corner and there it was at the end of a half block of back lane, a main street with pedestrians, cars and taxis. As Julie raced toward

her increasing chance of escape, she missed a springboard, but Nicky caught it. He won distance, and closed in.

Julie spotted a slice of uniform at the alley's edge. She screamed "rape".

Nicky grabbed her blouse. Julie lurched in a direction opposite from Nicky, and they went to the ground together.

Nicky and Julie rolled over and over. They gasped and gasped in the heat of the night. Nicky gained the advantage. He straddled her, pinning her arms under his knees. He pressed the cast onto her chest, and turned her face to his with his other hand. She assumed passiveness, and stared into his eyes. He stared into hers.

"Why" he asked.

"I love you," she coughed.

"Hold it! Right there!" commanded the voice of authority. Nicky didn't have to turn his head to see the barrel of a gun attached to one of New York's finest. Nicky knew the situation looked bad, so he held it right there.

"It's not," Nicky started to say.

"Hands over your head!" the officer was loud, harsh.

Julie was weeping, gagging.

Nicky rose, "You're making a mistake."

"Shut up! Face against the wall."

Nicky turned to the wall. The Officer moved in behind Nicky. Julie sat up at the officer's feet, massaging her chest and sobbing quietly.

"It's over!" the Officer assured her, He cuffed Nicky's unfettered arm to iron bars protecting a window.

Julie's sobbing had faded as the Officer pulled out his radio. He looked down at Julie, to ask her name. She was gone.

Nicky sat alone in an interrogation room, looking at his feet, which throbbed in a way he'd never experienced. Nicky's entire body was in trauma. His left arm was killing him, but Nicky was thankful it wasn't broken. Apparently the cast he'd been wearing spared him some unknown damage, but he'd wrenched his spine into an awkward twist as he'd rolled off the air bag.

Nicky was wondering what the hell was happening with Lara and the baby. He needed to get out of this place. Nicky hated playing this scene, even when it wasn't real. He wished someone would yell cut.

Instead, "Can't keep your nose clean, can you," a voice growled.

"Lightfoot!" Nicky stood up, and walked to a corner. He looked up into a camera. "Get me out of here!"

Some minutes later, an automatic door slid open. Lightfoot stood on the other side. "Seiji's here."

"And Lara, the baby?"

“They’re both okay, in the hospital.”

“Shit!” Nicky’s teeth clenched.

“Attempted homicide, we’ll catch the bitch!” Lightfoot sounded determined. He pointed his thumb at the door.

“Damn right I will!” Nicky sounded beyond determined. He stepped through the door then past Lightfoot.

The door closed behind them, but you could hear Lightfoot’s last words “ I said we, Faime. Cooperate!”

Nicky slept with one eye open in a chair at Lara’s bedside. Seiji stood guard outside the door.

Nicky could hear Lightfoot’s words, “attempted homicide”. They had taken on a heightened meaning now that Nicky could see how bruised Lara was, and now knew how close she’d come to losing the baby. It would be at least a couple of weeks before Lara could come home. Even then the doctor was prescribing a regimen with a lot of bed rest for the duration of her gestation period.

Lara began to waken. Nicky hit the call button. A nurse entered the room.

“You’re looking fine,” the nurse said cheerily as she sat Lara up, “and such a beautiful day!” She poured some water into a glass and placed it into Lara’s hands.

Lara sipped some water then returned the glass. The nurse took a few minutes to draw blood.” The doctor will be here shortly,” she informed as she left with the sample. “You missed breakfast, but we’ve got an early lunch coming for you.”

“Thank you,” said Nicky as the nurse left the room.

Lara was still groggy. She had been sedated to stop her from moving around, because of the baby. The baby needed to be still.

“Lara” Nicky took her hand.

Lara fell into sobbing.

“Don’t cry Lara, it’s not good for you or the baby.” Nicky caressed the hand he was holding. “Everything’s going to be fine!” He assured.

“Do you love me?”

“Yes, in a way.”

“When do I go home?”

“In a few days,” he white lied.

That’s all Lara needed to hear. Nicky’s word was good. She knew she’d be taken care of. She relaxed and stopped sobbing.

A summer sun slashed at Nicky’s eyes as he walked out of the hospital. He didn’t need his Sunglasses. There was enough darkness in his heart to create an eclipse.

It was as though the time from the hospital steps to the inviting double doors off the driveway of the Atokad, the condo apartment building Nicky lived in, was simply one long dingy thought. He couldn't even remember getting into the Escalade.

When they arrived at Nicky's, Seiji held Nicky's door open. As Nicky stepped out of the Escalade, he paused to look at a heavily crestfallen Seiji. Nicky understood that Seiji was blaming himself for what happened to Lara.

"It's not your fault." Nicky assured him.

"If I had only been there."

"Then you'd have abandoned your post. I'm the failure here. I was there," Nicky pointed out.

"But you captured the person," Seiji reminded.

"Yeah, but it didn't stick, Julie got away. Some things are out of our control when they happen, but later, when you're in control, you can do something about it."

"What are you going to do sir?" Seiji asked.

"Hunt Julie down."

"And then?"

"Justice, of course!"

"Of course," Seiji agreed. "Of course!"

Nicky vanished into The Atokad.

Nicky was exhausted when he reached his apartment's door, where Carlos awaited him. By buttoning up his jacket, Carlos had made an attempt at covering up his feelings of grief with propriety. Unfortunately, it was buttoned one off, and the truth of Carlos' pitiful frame of mind was exposed.

"When will Miss Lara be returning home?" he inquired gingerly.

"Soon," Nicky answered quietly.

As they entered the living room, Nicky was hit with the sight of baby shower gifts. His response was immediate.

"Might as well put the gifts in the nursery!" Nicky ordered. "And I suppose we should postpone the baby shower, for now. Lara will be on bed rest for quite a while.

"Yes sir." Carlos said sadly. He followed Nicky into the nursery.

Nicky gazed around at the nursery rhyme characters painted on the walls in soft happy colors, and the suite of furniture in cream with gilt.

"Lara's doing a nice job in here," Nicky complimented.

"Beautiful, sir," Carlos agreed.

Nicky pointed to the baby thing he didn't understand, but that worked in nicely. "What is that?"

"It's a baby bathinette sir." Carlos demonstrated as he explained. "See!" He flipped the top down. "You bathe the baby in

here then,” he flipped the lid back over the mini tub. “You dry the baby off, and diaper it on here.”

Nicky was stone quiet. Carlos stood awkward, unsure.

“Well, It’s still eighteen weeks away until Lara will be able to use it,” Nicky commented. “I’ll be in my den.”

“Yes, sir,” was all Carlos could say. He observed Nicky’s impeccable posture failing, as Nicky entered his office.

Nicky limped into his office.

The adrenaline had long been spent, and the physical damage that had been done during his unexpected stunt had become apparent. His only body part that wasn't sore was his eyes, that is, until they laid themselves on his new desk. It was so turgid it took whatever breath remained in Nicky away.

Nicky stumbled over to the hi-tech silver metal L-shaped workstation. He didn't care that it had a teak top and details. No one would ever take him seriously, if they observed him sitting behind it.

“What was Carlos thinking?” Nicky moaned, too exhausted to do anything about it. A spasm of pain gripped his entire body. I got to start working out more, he thought, and why is the back of my neck so cold? I haven't burnt my fingers, yet. He eyed the couch, but it was half a room away, so he dropped into his chair behind the desk.

Nicky pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket. Nicky had picked up a couple of packs on his way home. He had told Seiji it was a temporary set back, for pain control. He would quit again in a few days.

Nicky managed to lever his feet up onto the desk. He called Carlos for some coffee and a scarf. Nicky sat back, and lit a smoke. There was no ashtray, so he pulled out a drawer.

Nicky exhaled, as he tilted back. He turned his chair then stared out at the Upper East Side rising up over Central Park. The view, normally inspiring to Nicky, appeared dingy and cold despite a blazing sun. The skyline didn't soar to its usual exciting heights, but rather fell into ominous inky chasms.

Nicky adjusted his gaze to the soothing greens of the park. He reminded himself that if things went well, he would be walking in that green with his son one day. However, today Nicky was worried. He was worried, as the doctors were, that Lara could still lose their baby. She could suffer no stress, emotional or physical.

Sure, Lara had been deceitful in her attempt to get pregnant, but once it was a reality, it seemed to Nicky that her indiscretion could be forgiven, or at least overlooked for the sake of the child. Loving that child had brought Nicky and Lara together on a different plane.

Nicky knew Lara, their son and himself were all victims of the same twisted mind, Julie's mind. Nicky hated being a victim, and he felt an unhealthy anger. Nicky wanted to turn the tables. He wanted to stalk the stalker. He wanted to hunt, and succeed in capturing his prey.

Nicky could see Julie's face clearly. He was flashing back to last night in the alley. He could hear himself ask Julie, why? Nicky could hear Julie say, I love you. Yet, it wasn't the kind of I-love-you Nicky had ever heard from Lara or anyone else who had professed love. It was a different kind of love, a love that sounded like a hate.

The heater on Nicky's cigarette had burned long and seared into his fingers. "Fuckin bitch!" he snarled, as he crushed the smoke. He threw the extinguished butt into the drawer. Great, he

thought, now not only is my entire body wrapped in the physical definition of acrimony, my fingers are severely irritating me.

Sub-conscious Images of Nicky's mother surfaced in Nicky's fore thoughts. How the hell did she get into my thoughts, Nicky wondered. The cold running across the back of his neck intensified.

At that moment, Carlos tapped on the door. After a pause, he entered with coffee and a scarf. He placed the tray and the neatly folded scarf on Nicky's desk. He hung the robe on a coat tree near by. "Will there be anything else?" Carlos' eyes darted around; looking for the cigarette he could smell.

"Actually, yes," Nicky spoke quietly. "You could bring me another scarf. It feels like there's a bag of ice on the back of my neck." Nicky slowly retrieved the scarf from his desk, and draped it over his neck. "Oh, and thank you Carlos!"

"Certainly! I'll return shortly."

Nicky waited until Carlos closed the door before he rose from his chair. He removed his blazer and shirt then put on his robe. Nicky adjusted the scarf so it was comfy then hobbled to a picture hanging near the desk. One of Nicky's fingers found a secret catch, and the picture slid up into the wall. Nicky proceeded to open the safe behind it.

Nicky pulled out cash, sealed envelopes, documents, a couple of small boxes and a pocket protector. He stuffed everything but the protector back into the safe then made his way back to his chair.

Nicky gently slid two fingers into the plastic sheath. His heart rate increased, and his breathing deepened as drew out an old

photograph. One of the edges had been folded over so it would fit into its protection. It had been at least ten years since he'd looked at it.

Circa nineteen seventy-four, Central Park, Bethesda Fountain; an eight-year-old Nicky in bell-bottoms and psychedelic t-shirt stands beside an attractive blonde woman. She's very cool in her hip-huggers, crop t-shirt and Power To The People button.

"Amanda?" Nicky asked out loud. "What the hell happened?" He compared their facial features, finding as he had in the past only several similarities and a world of differences. If he only knew who his father was, what his father looked like, it might all make sense.

Nicky's memory drifted back to that day at the park. It had been a special day, so special Amanda had brought along a friend who had owned a Polaroid camera. Nicky remembered having had been impressed with the camera and having had asked Amanda's friend if it had cost a lot of money. The guy had said sure, but it's worth it. He'd placed Nicky and Amanda by the fountain and had taken this picture of the mother and son.

Now, it was thirty-five years later, and Nicky could still hear Amanda's thin voice against the cascading water of the fountain.

I'll always love you, no matter what, she'd said then had kissed him. That night Amanda had dropped Nicky off with some friends. A couple of weeks later the friends had taken Nicky to Child Services. One of the friends had given Nicky this picture, in the car on the way. He hadn't said anything, just given Nicky the picture. The silence had cut like a knife. Nicky had been abandoned. It had felt like shit. It still did.

Nicky hadn't seen Amanda again until he was in his mid-late teens. They had had a few strained visits over a few years, but she'd gone away somewhere, disappearing again.

As Nicky studied the old photograph, he suddenly understood why Amanda was in his thoughts. It was obvious that Julie shared the few physical similarities that Nicky bore to Amanda, and then some. What sort of a strange coincidence is this, Nicky wondered? He couldn't think about that at this moment. He put the picture into his robe's breast pocket.

Yes, abandonment was a theme from Nicky's past, but whatever life could throw his way, abandoning his son would never be an option for Nicky. Abandoning Lara wasn't an option, either. However, the whole love thing confused Nicky. How could he figure something out when it never added up?

Nicky closed the venetians to blacken the room. He knew Carlos had switched to the venetians because smoke didn't cling to them the way it stuck to fabric drapes, and they were more easily cleaned more often. Unfortunately, Nicky didn't like the way the sun bled through the tiny crevices between the slats. He decided he'd speak to Carlos about it later, and staggered to the couch.

Nicky was lying on the couch pressing the picture of Amanda onto his forehead with the heel of a hand. Whatever his thoughts, they were louder than Carlos who quietly wheeled in Nicky's dinner.

Carlos was standing at the foot of the couch when Nicky noticed him. Carlos wondered why Nicky was pressing a photograph onto his head. Nicky peeled the snapshot off his brow, and sat up. "Zen exercise" he explained.

“Glad to hear that sir.”

Nicky adjusted the two scarves around his neck.

“Still chilled?” Carlos inquired.

“Yes,” Nicky replied. “Maybe you could bring me another scarf.”

“Certainly,” Carlos said. He turned his attention to the meal he had just brought Nicky. “Duck a l’orange, wild rice, braised endive and chef’s salad,” Carlos announced as he lifted the serving lids.

Nicky glanced at the food and waved it away. “Thanks! I’m not hungry.”

“Sir, you need to eat, keep your strength up.”

“I’m cool!” Nicky insisted.

“At least the salad?” Carlos tried.

Nicky gave in, but was specific. “Leave the salad, only, on the table.”

Carlos placed the salad on the coffee table. “Perhaps some French fries would tempt you?” he offered.

That worked. “Sure,” Nicky said, “and some wine.”

Carlos brought Nicky French-fries, wine and another scarf. Nicky draped the third scarf over the first two. He didn’t eat the salad, but he ate three more orders of French-fries and drank all the wine.

Another bottle of wine later, the entire pack of smokes and like magic, Nicky slipped through into the next day.

It was the next morning. Nicky's hands pressed hard against each other, his skull between them. His head had split in two. He was attempting to press it back together.

Nicky had been awake for ten minutes, mindlessly staring at the empty wine bottles on the coffee table. He was on the couch. He had never left it.

Nicky wanted to sit up, but his back was frozen. A spasm gripped his back, and his left arm throbbed. He swore as he moved it, but reminded himself if he hadn't been wearing that stupid cast, his arm could have been broken. He tried to be thankful for a small mercy, even if it didn't feel like one. Nicky rolled himself to a hunch at the edge of the sofa. However, straightening his back was going to be another job, so he paused for a breather. He looked at his feet. He removed his shoes.

As Nicky tried to erect himself, he saw the photograph of Amanda and him shoved into a wine glass. He leaned forward, pulled it out of the glass and shook the last of the wine from it. He blotted it on his robe then placed it on the protector to dry.

As soon as he could stand, Nicky dragged himself to the bathroom. Relieving himself of two bottles of wine eliminated one of his pains. It was like a new lease on life, for about one minute. He removed the scarves, washed his face then replaced the scarves before he looked in the mirror. Nicky knew the look in his eyes. Life couldn't stay on hold forever, even if he did have a hangover.

As Nicky dried his hands, he noticed that the cigarette burns from last night were red and puffy. He doused them with hydrogen peroxide and slapped on a couple of adhesive bandages.

Getting back to the couch wasn't much easier than leaving it. After easing himself back onto the sofa, he called Carlos for some coffee. He lit a cigarette, had a short coughing fit then escaped into a satisfying drag. Still, as hard as it was, he had to take step one if he was ever going to take step two.

Carlos knocked. It was like a hammer on Nicky's head.

"Yeah!"

Carlos entered. He was a mess. He hadn't gone home last night. He'd been too worried about Nicky to leave. Instead, Carlos had decided, seeing as how he had already pulled out the deep fryer to make chips for Nicky, he might as well make some of his special cocktail doughnuts.

Carlos had been up all night filling the freezer with the tiny gourmet circles. He still had a couple more batches to do up before the dough was gone. He placed the coffee service, three honey glazed doughnuts and several newspapers on the coffee table.

"The word is out, sir. You should know."

Nicky threw back some coffee.

Carlos began collecting debris from Nicky's desk.

Nicky picked up a cheesy gossip rag, Page one's headline read: Startling Stalker Strikes Star's Unborn Son. Under the headline was

a composite picture of what Nicky and Lara's son might look like when he was born. Nicky tore the paper in half, then in another half, then another half. He downed the rest of his coffee, inhaled a doughnut and poured another cup.

"The papers can be so distasteful," Carlos commented. He was horrified upon discovering the ash drawer. "Rather nasty, actually." Carlos bravely cleaned out Nicky's ash drawer. He tried to be normal. "How's your new desk?"

"Yeah, I don't like it," Nicky was straight from the shoulder.

Frustration filled Carlos' face.

"Don't take it so hard! I'm just being honest."

"It's appreciated, sir," Carlos was sincere, "but I don't think I can return it. There seems to be several burn marks on the teak, where you missed the drawer."

The phone rang, wracking both their nerves. It was Ilena on intercom.

Ilena spoke efficiently. "Lieutenant Lightfoot's here. He's got something to tell you. Are you available?"

Nicky took a deep breath. "Give me five!" he instructed then turned to Carlos. "The Lieutenant's here. We're going to need more coffee."

"Yes, sir!" Carlos said turning to grab the trash, and haul it to the kitchen.

Nicky speed limped into the bathroom, clawing off his scarves and robe. He doused his face with cold water, no time to shave. He brushed his teeth, grabbed his scarves and speed limped back into his office. He whipped open a closet door, ripped a fresh shirt off its hanger and somehow got it on. Nicky pulled on a sports jacket then re-draped the three scarves around his neck, which had just gotten colder from the icy water he'd splashed his face with. He plopped himself into his chair and eased his feet onto his desk. He didn't have any shoes on, so he eased them back down. He assumed a posture of confidence. Ilena tapped on the door.

“Enter!”

Ilena opened the door and showed Lightfoot in. Their expressions were stoic, respectful. However, once they took one look at Nicky behind his new desk, looking pompous in his scarves, they burst into laughter. Ilena's laughter turned to tears. Lightfoot eased her onto the couch. He addressed Nicky.

“You just can't play it straight, can you Faime?” Lightfoot began then finished up. “No one's going to take you serious, sitting behind that thing. And what's with the scarves and sports jacket? You look like a demented Playboy.”

Nicky was indignant for about three seconds then hung his head.

Ilena observed Nicky's reaction. “Let's just sit around the coffee table,” she suggested, composure regained. She pushed a stray black curl back into place.

“That'll work,” Nicky said rising. He began to walk out from behind his desk, then retreated, raising a hand. “One sec!” He hit

intercom. “Carlos, drop what you’re doing for a minute, and report to my office!”

Lightfoot sat down near Ilena. Nicky remained standing behind his desk. Ilena placed some folders on the coffee table. Lightfoot looked over to Nicky. Ilena looked over to Nicky. Nicky smiled back at them.

“The lieutenant is here to catch you up on the Julie investigation,” Ilena expressed with a positive note.

Nicky nodded an uncomfortable silent agreement.

Carlos mercifully showed up. Nicky waved him over, and said something in a low voice. Ilena and Lightfoot watched in silence as Carlos walked over to the couch, retrieved Nicky’s shoes and placed them on the floor behind Nicky’s desk. Carlos head back to the kitchen without saying a word. Nicky negotiated his shoes onto his feet then confidently ambled over to the coffee table. “What do you have Lightfoot?”

“Thanks to the surveillance photos Seiji’s team gathered, we’ve been able to issue an APB for Julie. We still don’t know who she really is. Her name might be Julie, but she registered for Extras duty under Carol Clark. The agent that sent her said it was her first booking with the agency. We’ve checked the social security number she gave. It’s real, but belongs to one Gregor Hansen, a farmer in Oklahoma. There’s probably no connection, but it’s death to assume, so I’m having someone check into it.”

“How did Julie get onto set with all the precautions we had in place, including circulating her picture,” Nicky demanded to know.

“Sometimes people look different in their photographs than they do in real life,” Ilena made an excuse.

“Or maybe they weren’t paying full attention,” Nicky accused, filling the air with tension.

Fortunately, Carlos returned and dropped off a fresh service of coffee. Accompanying the fragrant java was a heap of homemade doughnuts, still warm. All tension was put on hold, as Nicky and Lightfoot dug in. Ilena took a minute to pour coffees all around then continued taking notes.

“Your guys did a great job,” Lightfoot spoke, ate and drank in a natural rhythm, “collecting data, pictures and fingerprints. You’ve even got a psychological profile partially developed.”

“She’ll be back,” Nicky said, sounding both sure and bitter at the same time.

Lightfoot nodded affirmation, “She’s had a victory. She’ll come back to gloat. I’ve seen this M-O before.”

“Is she in love with Nicky?” Ilena wondered out loud.

”I think she’s in hate with me,” Nicky threw out for all to consider.”

“Love and hate sit beside each other. There’s a fine line between the two, but they’re both intense passions.” Lightfoot waxed stern.

Nicky took an actor’s moment, then spoke, “So what do we have?”

“Attempted homicide, a battery of assault charges and stalking in the fourth degree. Julie will go down.”

“Yeah, if we can catch her.” The truth Nicky heard in his own remark made his neck seize. He adjusted his scarves. The pain in Nicky’s back shot into his sore arm. He massaged it gently. “Julie’s in fantastic physical condition. She didn’t get there sitting in a chair. I’ll look into gym memberships, athletic clubs and that type of thing”

“Christ! What is this, the Nicky Faime Precinct?” Lightfoot grumbled. “You think we’re not aware how fit Julie is? Let the professionals handle it, Faime!”

“You’re right!” Nicky agreed.

“Finally!” Lightfoot was relieved.

“I’ll put Seiji on it!”

“Your driver?” Lightfoot was incredulous.

“Security,” Nicky insisted.

“Look Faime, you’re like a microscope on a germ. Relax will you! You’ll lose the big picture.”

Nicky winced, as he felt words of wisdom coming.

“Me, I like working on a few cases at the same time. One thing distracts from the other, as much as one thing leads to another. The trick is not to get sidetracked.

Lightfoot could see Nicky was only half listening. “So you’ve solved the Brookers mystery, or is that bullshit now?” Lightfoot challenged.

That did it! Lightfoot got Nicky’s full attention. It even pissed him off. “I’m close,” Nicky mumbled through clenched teeth.

“Well, let me know if it happens,” Lightfoot pushed up his sleeve and glanced at his watch, “by Monday. We’re closing the case next week.” He ate another doughnut. “Where can I get some of these?”

Although Nicky had been slowly finding his own way to a solid surface, seeing Lightfoot had sped up the process immeasurably.

When Lightfoot had split, he had made sure he’d had the last word. He’d told Nicky not to spin his wheels, to use his energy wisely. The police were doing everything that could be done. Julie would make the next move.

Annoyingly, Nicky couldn’t cease fuming about Julie’s control of the situation. It was the exact consumption Lightfoot had warned about. At least Nicky could see it, but how could he get completely on top of it? Inadvertently, Carlos helped him do it.

“Excuse me,” Carlos stood in the doorway.

“Yes,”

“Well,” Carlos hung his head, “under the circumstances, I’m wondering if you’d like to cancel your dinner party. It’s only four days away.”

Nicky didn't know what to say. He supposed under the circumstances, it might be the expected thing to do. Those thoughts only served to make Nicky angry. Why, and how long should he be expected to remain in Limbo? His eyes flared at Carlos. However, whatever he was about to say was forgotten, as Nicky took a good look at Carlos for the first time today. Carlos was a neglected disaster. "Not buttoning up today?" Nicky asked instead.

"I've been extremely busy, sir," Carlos explained with a hand gesture, exposing his palms. They were scrubbed clean, to the point of rawness.

When Nicky saw Carlos' hands, he finally understood. Carlos was in the throes of depression, and the only thing keeping him going was food preparation.

"It's not your fault,"

"I just feel so bad." Carlos started to break down.

"We all do, but there's only one person to blame, and it's not you."

"Thank you sir," Carlos choked back tears.

Nicky arose. He walked past Carlos. "Follow me!" He led Carlos down the hall and around the corner to the solarium. Nicky swung open the clear glass door, positioning it between the two of them. "Look at us!" They stared at each other through the crystal pane in the frame. It revealed like a mirror. "We look bad, sick, and not in the good way. You understand?"

“I think so,” replied Carlos, buttoning his vest.

Nicky was ardent, “The dinner’s on!”

Carlos knew Nicky was correct to think that way. He admired Nicky’s strength, and drew from it. “Of course.”

Nicky continued, “When you came to work here I warned you about the dinner parties. You were thrilled by the challenge. You said each dinner would outdo the one before it.”

“I remember,” admitted Carlos.

“That’s what I want.”

Carlos’ spirit rose. “I do have a wonderful menu planned.”

Nicky gave Carlos a one armed guy hug of power around his shoulders, not just because of what they’d been through, but because of where they were going.

“There’s been some changes to the guest list,” Nicky advised.

“Sir?”

Nicky took a deep breath, “Lara won’t be coming. The doctor says she should stay in the hospital for observation for at least another two weeks. Ilena will take her place.”

Carlos was saddened, but remained dutiful. “Very well. Will Lara’s friends Daphne and Moira still be attending?”

“The Hair and Make-up gossip team,” Nicky almost laughed as their images fed into his brain. Instead, he dove into a well of thought.

Carlos waited patiently, watching Nicky’s flickering eyes, waiting for him to answer. “Sir?” he prodded gently.

“Yes!” Nicky replied. He spoke under his breath, as he remembered what Lightfoot had said. “One thing distracts from the other, as much as one thing leads to another,”

“Excuse me sir, but I couldn’t hear the last part.”

Nicky stroked his hairline. “Have you noticed my hairline receding in the last several months?”

Carlos was speechless.

“Don’t worry about it. It was merely a side thought. Have Ilena personally invite Lieutenant Lightfoot.”

“Certainly! Will that be all?”

Nicky took another deep breath. This time the scent of flowers met his nostrils. He followed it deeper into the solarium. “No, there’re two more guests.”

“Two more?”

“Loreen Brookers-Wright and Philip Stursberg,” Nicky had reached the wall at the far end of the solarium. “Carlos, we should enquire into making an arch this wall. I think it’s non-supporting. It would open the solarium into the living room. It would make an incredible dining room.”

“Inspired idea, sir,” Carlos complimented.

Then out of the blue, Nicky instructed, “We’ll have the dinner party in here.”

Carlos grew saucer eyed. “We’ll never get the wall out in time, sir. It will be at least a month until the building engineer can look at it. Then there’s permits, permissions, it could take a year.” Carlos proposed a sane idea. “Perhaps I could arrange some of the plants in the dining room?”

“We’ll set it up for the one night!” Nicky stared intently at the confused Carlos. “Okay, it’s a long way from the kitchen, but you can hire more staff, get more of those cart things. You’ll figure it out. You’ll be brilliant!”

By the time Nicky was fully human, having showered, eaten, changed his clothes and ditched the scarves, it was well past visiting hours at the hospital. He went anyway. Certain staff at the hospital, being loyal Nicky Faime fans, allowed him to quietly walk by the sleeping patients’ rooms, to Lara.

Nicky didn’t waken Lara. He preferred to sit in the dark by her bed. It was a good place to think about the love word. It had been coming up a lot lately in his thoughts, and Lara and his unborn son were attached to them. His entire life, love had remained elusive to Nicky, but this time he suspected he was close, real close.

A gentle hand on his shoulder woke Nicky up. “Mr. Faime? Perhaps you should go home and get some sleep?” a nurse whispered.

“Thank you!” Nicky whispered back.

Before Nicky left, he pulled a small gift out of his pocket. He'd bought it for Lara's birthday, but now was a good a time as any he figured. He placed it under Lara's pillow. It was the kind of present that didn't take up much space, but took up a lot of cash.

Nicky had intense feelings of guilt because he knew his celebrity had brought this horrid situation on Lara. In some feeble manner, Nicky was begging for an apology, and attempting to remind her about the good parts of his notoriety. As he studied Lara's ivory face in the dark's shadows, Nicky gained a deeper understanding of how his happiness was intrinsic to hers.

The next morning was a circus at Nicky's apartment. Although Carlos had told the staff to work quietly and not to awaken Mr. Faime, it had been a redundant effort.

Nicky was up, but not out of bed. He'd already spent an hour on his laptop before the first worker had arrived. Nicky's gut was in drive, and once again his curiosity about Lucille Brookers' death was burning hotter than hell. Nicky had a hunch about who killed her, but there were still a few facts that had to check out; and there were a couple of angles to be measured before he could prove it, even to himself.

Still tender from his big leap, Nicky took longer than usual to finish his morning routine. It started with the longest steamiest shower he'd ever taken.

The bathroom lingered in a pea soup fog, as Nicky reached for one of two similarly packaged moisturizers. Nicky accidentally grabbed Lara's. He realized it as soon as he squeezed a bit into the palm of his hand, and certain sweet scents made their way to his nose. They were the same fruit and flower aromas that filled the air when he and Lara made love, when the heat from their bodies activated the care that Lara always exercised when she made herself ready for Nicky.

With his next breath Nicky realized it would be awhile, maybe five or six months before he'd have sexual access to Lara. Can I wait that long, Nicky asked himself honestly? He couldn't answer himself. He tried another question. Have I ever, in my entire adult life, gone that long? He thought not, but there was a lot to

remember, and not enough time to remember it in at the moment. Nicky needed to get dressed. He had a lot to do today.

Nicky wanted to be comfortable so he threw on some black jeans and an icy blue chambray shirt. He grabbed a blazer, splitting up a suit because he liked its shade of black.

He opened the drawer of his nightstand, and removed his Medic Alert bracelet. Nicky clipped it onto his left wrist then buttoned the shirt's sleeve. He shook his left arm. The bracelet stayed inside the cuff of his shirt. Nicky threw on his black blazer then reached back into the drawer. He pulled out his phone then dropped it into one of his blazer's bottom welt pockets.

The last item Nicky retrieved from the drawer looked like a pen case. He opened it to inspect the EpiPen inside, his epinephrine auto-injector. It seemed fine. Nicky didn't like carrying it for the same inane reasons he hated wearing the bracelet. However, the Nicky who was having a son was a lot more mature than the single macho Nicky. He replaced the EpiPen into its case, and slid it into his inside jacket pocket.

Nicky walked over to the impressive mirror that was part of the dresser. Nicky swiped his Sunglasses from the dresser's surface, and fixed them on his head. They were ready to be pulled down when needed. He arranged his shirt collar, three buttons undone. Works for me, he thought, time to hit my office for a smoke and coffee.

Nicky grabbed his laptop off the bed, crossed the room and opened the door, exposing two skinny teenagers who were moving the solarium's wicker furniture to the dining room. Nicky identified them as Brandon and Marlon, two of Carlos' nephews.

“Uh oh!” Marlon sounded a little panicky. “Uncle Carlos said we shouldn’t bother you.”

A fresh blemish magically appeared on Brandon’s forehead. “The big table’s already ready to move into the sell, um, slor, ah, the room with the plants,” he explained.

“Hey, It’s all good,” Nicky said all cool-like, putting them at ease. Once they cleared the hallway, Nicky proceeded. As he approached his office he became aware of squabbling voices.

“I told you this wasn’t how we did it,” explained voice one.

“You keep saying that, but you don’t say how we did it,” voice two sounded lost.

“Because I don’t remember exactly, but it wasn’t like this,” one went on.

Nicky peered into his office to espy the two uniformed movers Carlos always hired, and who always argued. They had maneuvered the L-shaped workstation into an odd position that blocked the office entrance.

“We’ll have this desk out in no time at all Mr. Faime,” the larger one said as he caught sight of Nicky. The larger mover glared at the smaller guy, who shrugged his shoulders up in a “hey it’s not my fault posture.

“The smaller mover held up a package of cigarettes. “We found these in one of the drawers. They must be yours.”

Nicky stared at the tempting package for a few seconds. “Toss them!” he instructed. “I’m supposed to quit today anyway.”

Nicky crossed the bottom end of the living room, heading toward the dining room. There was a beehive of staff industriously cleaning everything, whether it needed it or not, As Nicky passed, they all worked harder, whether they needed to or not.

Nicky disappeared into the dining room where his ample banquet table, dismantled of its heavy carved legs, lay in sections. He took the service hall to the kitchen arriving at the counter where the coffee brewed. Nicky set his laptop on the table then turned his attention to the coffee. He poured a cup and took a chair by his laptop.

Carlos and his two brothers emerged from the pantry. As large as the kitchen was, their voices traveled clearly across the room to Nicky's ears. They were engrossed in dinner plans. Nicky picked up his cup, sat back, watched and listened.

"There are fifteen diners, six waiters and three bus boys. That should work just fine." Carlos was briefing his brothers, but sounding more like he was trying to convince himself.

"But they have to get the food all the way to the other end of the apartment," His older brother scattered seeds of doubt.

"And that's precisely why we timed the run." Carlos reminded.

"I think we should time it again," his younger brother said. "They're going through the dining room corridor, right?" he asked.

"No, no! It was eight to ten seconds faster using the bar access to the living room," Carlos pointed to a doorway near to the brothers, "and then cross-corner to the solarium hallway. In order

to avoid confusion, the dirty dishes get bussed back to the kitchen through the dining room service hall.”

Ilena entered the kitchen through the service hall. Her sleeves were pushed up, and curls that liked to stray around her face were held back with pencils. She was very busy putting her final touches on her new office. She wanted it completed well before the dinner happened.

Ilena poured a cup of coffee then seated herself happily in the chair beside Nicky. She joined him for a watch and listen.

“All right, we’ll do this one more time.” Carlos took position behind a service cart.

His younger brother pushed the start button on a stopwatch, “and Go!”

Using an even steady gait, Carlos guided the cart through the bar access doorway. His brothers, pacing on his heels, disappeared into the living room with him.

“You really threw Carlos a loop with this dinner in the solarium business.” Ilena commented.

“Yeah,” Nicky agreed. He liked the chaos he’d created. It was a comfortable distraction.

“Of course it’ll be absolutely fabulous, stunning eating in that jungle. Not to mention the intoxicating view of New York at our feet. Yes, it will be very dramatic,” Ilena continued.

“I thought so.”

“And now with the Lieutenant, Loreen Brookers-Wright and Philip Stursberg coming, I think you think you know who killed Lucille Brookers.”

“Maybe!” Nicky put his hand on her shoulder, “Ilena, I need you to help me out with a few things before the dinner.”

“Anything,” she said as she looked up into his dark mysterious eyes.

Nicky opened his laptop, waking up the blow up of Nicky night aka Cynthia. “I need to find out if Cynthia’s hair is real or a wig. We need to go back to Queens. You need to pay Mrs. Hall a visit.”

“I’d love to see her again!” Ilena was eager. “What else?”

Nicky pulled up so close to Ilena their bodies touched. He wrapped her in his confidence, and in a hushed tone began to explain what he wanted.

Nicky was at the wheel of his Impala, driving through the Holland tunnel. The evenly spaced shadows between the eerie hues of the tunnel’s lights slapped Nicky’s cheek over and over.

Nicky was engaged in a hands free call with Leo. Nicky had one question. It was about **The Handmaidens Hands**, and he wanted Leo to find the answer before the wrap dinner.

Leo reminded Nicky it was made eighteen years ago. He told Nicky that there would be only a small handful of high echelon people who would know the answer, if they even remembered. However, Nicky asked Leo to try. Leo said he would.

Nicky pulled up in front of “Jim’s American Used Cars” at one minute to noon. At noon, Loreen stepped out of the showroom, and into Nicky’s car.

Teary-eyed, Loreen threw her arms around Nicky. She felt the pain over his near-loss, and told him so. Nicky assured Loreen that Lara and the baby would be fine, and returned her embrace. He asked her where she wanted to eat. Loreen said she wasn’t hungry. Nicky said he wasn’t hungry, either.

Fifteen minutes later Nicky and Loreen stood on the boardwalk in Liberty State Park drinking bottled water. Nicky stared out at the Statue of Liberty. Loreen stared at Cynthia’s image, the blow up of Nickynight from The Nicky Faime Cafe.

“You really think this person killed Lucille?”

“Yes, possibly doing someone else's dirty work.” Nicky replied as he turned to watch the expression on Loreen’s face.” Someone filled with jealousy and hate.”

Loreen, feeling somewhat accused, shoved the photo into Nicky’s hand. “Like I told you before, I do not recognize this person. The only thing I know is the Mershe scarf.”

“Hey! I’m not accusing you.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“Inviting you to dinner Sunday night.” Nicky tilted Loreen’s chin up with his finger, and held her eyes with his. “No husband, no kids. Just you, me and a bunch of actors,” Nicky paused with some list left to go.

Loreen couldn't pass this up. When would she ever get an invitation like this again? She softened, "Of course I'll come."

'And Stursberg," Nicky' finished the list.

"Philip? He's invited?" Loreen sounded disappointed.

"Not yet, I can't seem to reach him."

"That's because he's practicing."

"At the Manhattan Symphony Hall?"

"No, at the brownstone."

Nicky cut his eyes.

Loreen explained, "Philip decided not to sell the house after all. He's going to rent it out instead. He says he likes practicing there because it's private. Besides, he says now that it's empty, it's like an echo chamber, makes his viola sound twice as good."

Nicky cleared his throat, "Makes sense." What didn't make sense was a faint tingling sensation that brushed across his lips.

An afternoon barbeque party had included roasting peanuts with their fare. Freshly roasting peanut fumes, travelling with a breeze across the green, worked their way towards Nicky and Loreen. The dangerous aroma met Nicky's nose. His head swung around to the direction of the barbeque. "Peanuts!" Nicky exclaimed. He felt for the needle in his jacket pocket.

“No thanks?” replied Loreen thinking it was a question, “I’m not wild about peanuts.”

“Me either,” Nicky said taking her arm. “Let’s split!”

Nicky dropped Loreen back off in front of “Jim’s American Used Cars” at precisely one, by Jim’s watch.

The Holland Tunnel was slow as was the Manhattan Bridge. By the time Nicky found himself on Flatbush, it was two forty-five. When Nicky pulled up in front of Stursberg’s brownstone, it had become obvious that the once sunny day was now threatening rain, but Nicky’s Sunglasses remained across his eyes.

Nicky stood at the front door listening to muted strains of Philip Stursberg going at it. Nicky liked piano, guitar, drums, saxophones, a lot of instruments, but violins annoyed him and this sounded a lot like a violin. Nicky was about to ring the bell, but stopped himself. Instead he turned the knob. The door opened. He walked into the foyer.

The crying, moaning strings of the viola engulfed Nicky, as they reverberated endlessly through the empty house. It was dizzying, disorienting. Nicky wanted the audio mire of Philip’s sensitivities to stop, as he searched the main floor.

Nicky found Philip Stursberg in the hallway near the bottom of the stairs to the Shrine, sitting in a chair, sawing away. Nicky circled round the chair to face Philip, but Philip’s eyes were closed as he played. Mercifully for Nicky, the piece ended.

When Philip opened his eyes, he reacted like he was seeing an extra terrestrial. “My god man! Where’d you come from?”

“You left the front door open, Stursberg.”

“I did not. It was merely unlocked.” He stood up and placed his viola in its stand. “Terribly sorry to hear about Lara, and its Philip, please!” His bland tone turned to one of complete irritation. “To what do I owe this visit?”

“Couldn’t get you on the phone.”

Philip Stursberg reached into his pocket, and pulled out his cell. He turned it on, and checked his messages. “So you couldn’t. Well, what if you couldn’t? What’s so important? Lucille? Playing detective, again, are you Nicky? I have nothing to hide so ask away.”

“There’s a dinner party at my place on Sunday, day after tomorrow. I want you to come.”

“You came all the way over here to invite me to dinner?” Philip’s voice was as dry as the Sahara.

“Of course, what with the short notice and all.”

“Thank you, but I have a previous engagement!” Obviously Nicky was up to something, and Philip wasn’t going to bite.

“Too bad! The cast and director from **Nine Black Lives** will be there. Ever scored a film?”

“No, but I’d love to.”

“Let’s see!” Nicky continued, “Daphne and Moira, great gals, they’ll be there. Lieutenant Lightfoot’s coming, and of course, Loreen.”

“My sister-in-law?”

“That’s right.”

Philip didn’t like the sounds of that. Nicky playing sleuth, Loreen at the party saying anything she wanted, him not there to defend himself, “That’s too bad! I’d love to see Loreen,” he muttered.

“Carlos has a special menu planned.”

“Carlos, from the petit-fours?” Philip remembered the delicious bits. “I hear he’s a four star chef?”

“That’s right” Nicky said sensing the upper hand. “You won’t reconsider?” Nicky shrewdly oozed politeness.

“Perhaps I might cancel my previous plans,” Philip feigned a moment of thought. “How can I resist. Yes, yes I’ll attend.”

“Dinner at eight!”

“Then cocktails are seven,” Philip noted as he un-cradled his viola, and sat down.

Nicky waved as he began walking away, “Until dinner!” He paused in his steps, his back to Philip. “Hear you’re not selling the house?”

“No!” Philip responded. “I put it up for two million, but the most I was offered was one point nine. I thought things through, and decided I can’t afford to sell it. I unfortunately lost a sizable sum on the market recently,”

Nicky turned and faced Philip. “How recently?”

Philip stood up. His eyes met Nicky’s directly. “Very! Don’t bother going to the insurance policy, Nicky. I loved Lucille, I didn’t kill her and I didn’t have her killed. Now if there’s nothing else,” Philip sat down, “I need to return to practicing my piece.”

“Viola Concerto by Walton, American, 1929.”

That took Philip by surprise. Finally, something about Nicky he could appreciate. “Ah, You’re familiar with classical music?”

“No, internet and lucky guesses.”

Philip drew his bow across the viola’s strings.

Nicky withdrew his presence.

Thunder rolled and rain poured as Nicky pulled the Impala into the driveway of The Atokad, where a valet took over the parking of Nicky’s car.

When Nicky walked into his apartment Carlos and Ilena both required his attention. Carlos was waiting to show Nicky the solarium conversion. He wanted approval so he could forge ahead with the dinner plans.

Ilena was hovering with an envelope in a baggie in one hand, and a pair of surgical gloves in the other. She thought the way the envelope was addressed looked familiar. She thought it resembled the one that the threatening note from Julie had come in. It had arrived in the afternoon mail.

Nicky put on the gloves, opened the baggie and extracted the letter. He carefully tore it open. Once again, a message constructed from magazine cutouts was in his face. He read out loud. "Are you suffering? Eternal happiness can be ours."

"Now what?" Ilena asked Nicky. "What should we do with the letter?"

"Hand it over to the cops," Nicky instructed.

"That's what I hoped you'd say," Ilena's face relaxed.

The corners of Nicky's lips betrayed a grin. Sure, he hated that bitch, but she'd made a move. It wasn't much of one, but Nicky knew that if Julie were the only one making the moves, Julie would be the only one who could trip up.

In a mirror's reflection, Lara mused upon a six carat ruby pendant resting perfectly between her clavicles. It was the little gift that Nicky had left under her pillow. She loved it, but Lara instinctively felt he might be trying to buy forgiveness with it.

Even though Nicky wasn't the perpetrator, it was his fame, his desirability that had caused this to happen to Lara. If Nicky wanted to buy Lara's love, which would come with the forgiveness she was sure he craved, he would have to marry her. Unfortunately, he hadn't asked yet. Lara put the hand mirror down on the side table then sat back into the pillow on her hospital bed.

I've just got to get Nicky to marry me, Lara thought, but what can I do?

Lara may have deceived Nicky into pregnancy, but her ambition to be the best mother ever was the truth. She considered the fact that in spite of her conniving, Nicky was standing by her and not only the baby. Selfishly, Lara saw that standing by in common-law was not as desirable as standing by in matrimony.

Lara closed her eyes, and instantly visualized the evil Julie she-devil running up the stairs towards her. Lara's eyes popped open, but the vision endured. She saw Julie make her grab. Lara could hear thudding sounds as her body tumbled down the stairs into blackness. How many more times would she relive those moments? When would it fade?

That cow almost ruined my life; Lara thought bitterly, she should be made to suffer. Lara wanted to see Julie in jail, but that

was the crime and punishment part. What about the reward part, the financial part? Could Lara sue someone? The Production Company? The Extras Casting Agency?

Lara had already spoken to a Lawyer, an old friend whose advice she could trust. She could hear him tell her that she could try suing anyone she wanted, but who for what and when? After all, it would take at least a half-year to find out if Lara's physical recovery would be one hundred percent.

Absolutely, Lara would follow the doctor's orders so the baby would be fine, but time would ultimately tell. Could she have more children? Would she be able to work? According to her friend, even though these physical concerns could be resolved within a year, there were mental and emotional issues.

There could be future negative manifestations, worse than her current state of emotional and mental anguish. The Lawyer suggested Lara start seeing a therapist, grief counselor, those types of professionals.

Julie should be the first in line for a legal suit, but who was she and did she have any money? She wasn't part of the Production Company per se, but the Production Company's pockets were deep enough to maybe make a shot worthwhile. Negligence was always a good angle, but a case would have to be put together. Production agreements, contracts and waivers would have to be studied. People would have to be interviewed, precedents looked at. An argument would have to be developed, and all with no guarantees. It would take time, years to be sure.

The more Lara thought about the whole suing idea the more tiresome and unattractive it became. Although, she was keeping the lawsuit on the table because of what her friend had said about

future pain and suffering that might not even be physical. Could that happen to her? Would Nicky always take care of her? Would she become like a crazy person? Would she be depressed, taking pills? Lara shuddered. This was an unattractive train of thought.

Lara needed to think of something attractive, so she thought of Nicky. He was attractive, and he was a stand up guy. Lara fingered the pendant. She estimated it could be worth as much as any lawsuit. Yes, sticking with Nicky was a definite. He just had to marry her!

At that moment, Ronnie Mann, entered Lara's room. She'd come by for a visit, and to deliver good news. The ruby pendant instantly caught Ronnie's high-end magpie eye.

"Lara, you're looking so much better," Ronnie gushed, her arms wide open as she approached Lara.

Lara weakly extended her arms a short distance. They hugged gently before kissing each other on both of their cheeks.

"A token of Nicky's love?" Ronnie asked as she fingered the ruby.

"Yes, his love," Lara replied sweetly.

"But you know it would be so much better if you were married when the baby starts at Sidgwick's.

Lara's face flushed, and she reached out to hug Ronnie, again. "You got him in!"

"Yes, but I told a little white lie. You know they require a full name upon registration, so I told them Nicky Faime Junior. They

love that sort of thing, you know, pedigree. You can always make up some excuse for changing the name later.”

“Or maybe not change the name,” Lara kissed Ronnie on her cheeks again. “I think you’re the best friend I have, and I think your advice is right. Nicky and I should get married, for little Nicky’s sake.”

“You’re going to be the best mother ever,” Ronnie cooed.

Nicky, sunglasses over his eyes, sat back behind the wheel of the Impala. He was waiting for Ilena to complete her mission.

Toting a Devign Foods shopping bag, Ilena walked up the six steps to the front door of the Johnson home. She took a breath, and rang the bell. Mrs. Hall answered. The security chain was in place.

“Mrs. Hall, it’s me Shelly. Cynthia called.”

Mrs. Hall, shut the door, released the chain and whipped the door wide open. “Cynthia called? When?”

“Last night. She was on her way out of town,” Ilena lied then lied again. “She said she’d call you when her heart healed, but I’m not sure what she meant by that.”

“I knew it!” Mrs. Hall shook her head in despair.

“What’s wrong?” Ilena appeared honestly concerned, and she was in a way. After all, Mrs. Hall had had nothing to do with

anything shady. She just happened to have passed a shadow one day. It was the same shadow that Nicky was chasing.

“Something happened between Cynthia and Jack. That’s why she left.” Mrs. Hall sighed, “They would have made such a lovely couple.”

“I’m so sorry,” Ilena commiserated, then cleared her throat. “Cynthia asked if I would pick this up and bring it to you.” She gave Mrs. Hall the Devign Foods bag.

Mrs. Hall peered into the bag. “House Brand Greens Juice and the Special Herbal Blend Tea for my arthritis.” She daubed her eyes on her sleeve. “Just like Cynthia. Always thinking of others. Excuse my manners, please come in! We’ll have a cup of this tea, and you’ll me everything!”

Shortly after a cup of the Special Herbal Blend Tea, Ilena arrived back at Nicky’s car. As Ilena got into her seat, she told Nicky that Cynthia did not wear a wig.

While Nicky drove, Ilena reported on the visit.

During tea, Ilena had commented on the beauty of Cynthia’s hair. Mrs. Hall had agreed, and had laughed lightly with memory. According to Mrs. Hall, there’d been an incident involving a large wad of Bobby’s well-chewed gum and the back of Cynthia’s head. Mrs. Hall had been in charge of removing the gum, first with ice, then eventually with scissors.

When Ilena finished the raconteur, she insisted that Mrs. Hall had been quite obdurate about the natural beauty of Cynthia’s very real hair.

Carlos, attired in black tie Maitre'd tails, stood incredibly stiff-backed in the center of the living room. Flanking his shoulders were his brothers. Uniformed in identical white sous chef jackets, black-checked aprons and matching pillbox hats, they were the bookends, and Carlos the book.

Carlos faced his serving staff. They were all at attention. They were all in a row. The waiters, lined up according to height from tallest to shortest, were uniformed in black pants, vests, bow ties and white shirts. In the same line-up, but several steps apart from the waiters, were three bus boys, two of who were Brandon and Marlon. They were in white short sleeve shirts with black slacks under black butchers aprons. Each person in the line-up was deadly serious. Each wore a black earpiece.

Carlos addressed his men. "As we all know, certain challenging logistics are in play here tonight. We've all had the opportunity to go over the floor plans several times." He was like an air steward pointing out escape routes before the jet took off. "Outgoing crosses the living room, incoming accesses through the dinning room service hall. Now, you've all done runs with the carts. You've all passed the time test. However, you're all wondering what the headsets are about. So, let me present you with a "what if" situation."

"What if I'm in the kitchen," Carlos proposed, "and you're serving in the solarium. A guest has a request. What are you going to do? Drop your service and run to the kitchen? Make the guest wait while you finish your service? Shout down the hall? Those are not options. Everyone I'd like you turn, and meet Seiji!"

The service lineup pivoted in unison to face Seiji who stood behind the bar. With the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up, no bow tie and massive arms crossed over his vest, Seiji meant business. “We have half an hour to get this perfect,” he began. He pulled a thin black wafer from his vest’s breast pocket. He adjusted his ear and mouthpieces.

Finally, Seiji took a deep breath, bursting the top three buttons on his vest. The troops gasped. “Let me introduce you to the S-Rec-Six-Fifty,” Seiji continued.

While the security and service communications equipment briefing was taking place, Ilena arrived carrying her attaché. She’d come early to take care of a couple of things for Nicky. She could hear Seiji as she passed through the foyer.

“We’ll be using two channels, one directly to Carlos and one open to everyone.

Ilena quickly slipped into her office and settled at her desk. She decided not to bother Nicky. If she was correct, and she was, Nicky would be in his office psyching himself up for an intense evening.

Over the years Ilena had been Nicky’s default guest at an uncountable number of events. She’d ritualistically paid special attention to her appearance on those occasions.

For tonight’s dinner, Nicky had requested that Ilena wear her hair up, away from her face. So using simple gold combs, she pushed her curls up and back onto the crown of her head, whereupon they burst like water from a fountain, cascading to her shoulders. A wide necked cocktail sheath in deep copper, hemmed shorter than her day skirts was worn over natural hose and with

copper pumps. Adorned with large gold hoop earrings and gold bangles on one wrist, Ilena had forgone a necklace in favor of the décolletage.

Thirty-five minutes later, all staff was at their stations. Carlos had returned to his ant farm of a kitchen where he had carefully changed from his black jacket to his white chef's coat and hat. He couldn't be in two places at once, so as planned, he placed the Tallest Waiter on the door to welcome the guests. The kitchen's intercom's light flashed, indicating a guest had arrived, and was headed up in the elevator.

There were two apartments on Nicky's floor. They shared two key coded elevators that opened into a large plush vestibule. The door to Nicky's apartment was opened with The Tallest Waiter standing at attention, ready to receive.

Carlos arrived at the door, having changed from his chef's coat to his black Maitre'd jacket. He explained to the confused Tallest Waiter that it was only proper that he, Carlos, should receive the first guests. Carlos stepped well out in front of the Waiter.

Daphne and Moira popped out of one of the elevators. Hot pink, magenta, tangerine and sparkles, it was hard to tell who was wearing what until they stood at least five feet apart from each other. Len Chan, in a dark suit, was with them.

"I can't believe my luck running into you in the lobby. I'd been down there since six. I didn't want to be late," worried Len, "but I didn't want to be early."

"Relax Len!" Moira fluffed her fingers at him. "We're on time." She saw Carlos waiting formally. "Hey, look! Nicky has a butler."

Maintaining his cool on the butler remark, Carlos was polite, inviting. “This way, please! Miss Ilena is expecting you in the living room for cocktails! She will join you anon,” and he led them into Nicky’s foyer.

The Tallest Waiter remained at attention, waiting for the next security call-up. He could hear voices dissipate as they crossed through the grand entrance into the living room.

“Wow! Daphne, can you believe this place!”

“Yeah, it’s like totally, decorated!”

“Totally!”

Carlos returned to the kitchen, and changed back into his chef’s gear. He then busied himself over seeing the first disbursement of hors d’oeuvres. Carlos inspected the arrangement of miniature tacos on a tray. They were red, white and blue. Each taco shell had been hand made, shaped with a stabilizing flat bottom, out of white, white with beet juice or blue corn flour. Carlos switched a few around then waved the waiter on.

At the same time that Carlos was sending out hors d’oeuvres, Nicky, fully dressed in a black suit, white shirt with no tie and top button undone, was running behind. He was hanging around his office, stalling, waiting for Leo to call. He felt like smoking a cigarette. He flipped up his laptop instead, and brought up the article he’d read and re-read on anosmia. He could barely focus. Leo finally called.

”Leo! Talk about last minute. What’d you find out?” Nicky listened while Leo explained that he’d only managed to locate one Producer from **The Handmaidens Hands**. The Producer’s memory

had been only so-so, but there was some information that Nicky might find pertinent. It wasn't exactly the scoop Nicky had hoped for, but Nicky was still pleased with what Leo had dug up. Surely there was importance in the information, and Nicky knew he could squeeze it out when the time was right.

No matter how hard Nicky had tried over the last few days, he was still short of being able to blatantly accuse his suspect. Yet, he had a case, and he desired to present it. However, Nicky reasoned that as things stood, perhaps it would be smarter if his guests did it for him.

Back in the kitchen, Carlos was embroiled in the correcting of his brothers' technique on the stuffing of organic boneless breasts of capon. It involved a mixture of long grain unbleached white rice, wild rice and wild mushrooms. He was demonstrating the precise pressure required for packing the dressing when the intercom light indicated another guest was on their way up.

Carlos couldn't help himself. He handed the stuffing back to his brothers. He washed his hands, changed back into his black jacket and hied to the foyer. Carlos arrived as the elevator doors parted, revealing Haps and Sharlaya.

"And that's why I think you'd be perfect for the role." Haps, in a dark charcoal suit and a new hearing aid was finishing a pitch.

All blonde, blue-eyed and breathy, Sharlaya poured it on. "Oh Haps, you're the sweetest! I'd love to do it." A stiletto tipped leg reached out through the slit on Sharlaya's Suzy Wong stretch satin number, as she made her way to Nicky's door.

"This way, please! Miss Ilena is expecting you in the living room for cocktails." Carlos greeted, and led them away.

The Tallest Waiter remained, inwardly disgruntled, at attention.

Carlos had just finished buttoning up his chef's jacket when the kitchen's intercom light flashed again. He immediately began unbuttoning.

Much not to the surprise of the Tallest Waiter, Carlos arrived panting, as Victoria and Claus emerged into the vestibule.

Victoria's auburn hair, piled up as usual, was the perfect compliment to a stunning burgundy silk velvet pantsuit. The jacket's break point was dangerously low considering it was worn with only a bra underneath. She moved rhythmically towards Carlos.

Carlos averted his eyes from Victoria's approaching, undulating cleavage. Instead he noted how smart Claus looked in his black tux. Claus had wanted to wear a cream dinner jacket, ala Bogart in Casablanca. However, he had suspected Holdens might wear one so had opted out.

Carlos opened his mouth to speak.

"Welcome Victoria! Welcome Claus!" Ilena's voice wafted in over Carlos' shoulder. She stepped out in front of Carlos.

"Darling," oozed Victoria, cheek kissing Ilena, her eyes on Carlos.

"Ilena! You look ravishing this evening," Claus kissed Ilena's hand.

"You look familiar," Victoria extended her hand to Carlos. Her brain raced through its files. "Okay, I know where I know you from.

You were in a magazine article about Nicky's kitchen. You're Carlos, Nicky's infamous four star chef."

Carlos accepted her hand gently and bowed, "Yes, thank you!"

"Then this dinner promises to be the epicurean delight of my summer!" Claus nodded a respect to Carlos.

"Thank you," Carlos said sensing a renewed pressure to deliver a perfect meal. He suddenly felt desperate to get back to the kitchen. He had to stop greeting the guests, but was having doubts about the Tallest Waiter. Perhaps I should have chosen the one with the deepest voice, Carlos chastised himself.

Ilena knew what Carlos was up to. She'd been here before, done this before. "After I show Claus and Victoria in, I'll receive the rest of the party."

Carlos bowed with relief, "As you wish." Gratefulness washed his face. As on many previous occasions, he would rely on Ilena.

Immediately upon being shown into the living room, Claus spotted Nicky's baby grand. It was polished to distraction. It sat in its place next to Nicky's fabulous commissioned wall mural. With nominal training and a lot of style, Claus could steal the spotlight at any party with his renderings.

Unfortunately for Claus, the room was already filled with pre-recorded music. He glanced around but couldn't find the sound system. He deduced it was built in. He searched around for a remote, and spotted one on a side table near the dining room entrance.

Claus retrieved the electronic device, and aimed it through the centre of the room. He pressed a button to lower the volume. It worked. As he walked toward the piano, he faded the music completely out. Claus placed the remote on the piano, sat on the bench and began tinkling out his repertoire.

Having shown Victoria and Claus in, Ilena was now headed back to the door. She was nearing the center of the foyer as Nicky, on his way to join his guests, entered from the hallway.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” Ilena said as they intersected.

“And I’m glad you’re here,” Nicky charmed with his appreciativeness.

“I mean, you’re just in time to take over the living room. Carlos couldn’t find a butler,” Ilena smiled. “I’ve inherited the door.”

“Funny how that always happens,” Nicky smiled back. “It’s his fear of butlers. Did you manage to get everything finished?”

“Everything!” Ilena replied. “It’s in my office.”

“Loreen Brookers-Wright,” the Tallest Waiter announced into the foyer, not sure what the hell he was supposed to do to any more.

Although it had taken a weeks paycheck from working at “Jim’s”, Loreen had treated herself to a classic little wrap dress from Saks. Sea foam, Nile green and turquoise waves undulated over her curvaceous figure. Her short sandy hair had been gently curled and played flirtatiously around her face. Exceptionally delicate chandeliers of antique abalone and mother-of-pearl dropped from her lobes. A long matching strand was wrapped twice

around her neck, ending just above two perfect globes that an expensive push-up bra displayed with pride.

As Ilena and Loreen had only ever spoken on the phone, Nicky introduced each to the other. Nicky told Loreen how great she looked. Ilena ribbed Nicky on his choice of words to compliment Loreen with. Nicky poked back saying he should be more like the character, Black, who he'd just finished portraying.

Nicky quoted Black. "You drive me mad with your beauty. There's nowhere you can hide. I want you, and I'll find you!" He presented an arm to Loreen.

Loreen floated into the living room on Nicky's arm. When Claus caught sight of Loreen, he was more than intrigued. He stopped his tinkling, and arose from the piano bench. The room became aware of Nicky's arrival.

"Everyone, thank you for coming," Nicky took centre stage. "You all know each other, so let me introduce you to someone you don't know, Loreen Brookers-Wright. Nicky began to his left. "Loreen, Claus Irons."

Claus took Loreen's hands, and kissed them softy. "Delighted!" He professed.

Loreen muffled a gasp. Claus Irons, critically acclaimed European import, was kissing her hands. "I can't believe this is happening. You're one of the most amazing actors in the world. You've done stage. You can play any role."

Nicky graciously continued the introductions. "Next to Claus is Victoria Plumner."

Loreen and Victoria shook hands. “This is fantastic. I love your work!” Loreen raved, her naive enthusiasm winning Victoria over.

Nicky gestured to the couch. It was his first look at Daphne and Moira. He blinked several times. He resisted the urge to rub his eyes. “These two beauties are Daphne and Moira.”

“Daphne Hair,” she bounced in her seat.

“Moira Make-up,” she bounced in her seat.

“Hello” Loreen bounced on her toes, unconsciously mimicking their energy.

“Standing by the marble sculpture is Haps Von Chapin, our director.”

Loreen recognized Haps from television interviews. “I can hardly wait to see **Nine Black Lives**,” she enthused.

“Yes! It could be the definitive movie of my career,” Haps bragged.

“Next to Haps, Sharlaya Shannon.”

“Oh, you’re the Champerelle Shampoo girl. You’re hair’s even more beautiful in real life,” Loreen fawned.

“Thank you! I’m also an actor, not just a model.” Sharlaya pointed the fact out with an air of importance.

“Over at the bar,” Nicky gestured to Len, “is another of our illustrious cast, Len Chan.”

“Hi Len!” Loreen waved not recognizing him at all.

“Nice to meet you!” Len raised his glass.

A waiter pulled up to Nicky and Loreen with hors d’oeuvres.

“Oh, what perfect little tacos.” Loreen admired. “What’s in the blue ones?”

“Crispy squash blossoms, avocado crema and watercress, “ the waiter answered.

“I’ll try that,” Loreen said as she selected one. The flavors were penetrating her taste buds when another waiter arrived, asking what she’d like to drink. Whatever was going on in Loreen’s mouth inspired her to one thing, “Champagne?” she requested.

“Champagne, how perfect.” Nicky praised her choice. “Have Seiji select something special!” he demanded of the waiter.

Claus had replaced himself on the piano bench. The first notes in the next melody of his repertoire drifted away to find spaces in conversations that needed filling.

Philip, in a dark tux-like suit, and Lightfoot, in his best tan sports jacket with dark shirt, were shown in. They’d arrived at the lobby at the same time. Although each had known the other had been invited, they had been discomfited to actually see each other. As they had rode up together, the elevator’s air had oozed with curiosity, suspicion and apprehension. When they walked into Nicky’s living room. Philip bee-lined to Nicky for proper introductions all around. Lightfoot bee-lined to the bar for a beer.

“My, my,” Victoria wondered to herself, her sights set on Philip Stursberg. “Where’s Nicky been hiding him?”

Nicky started over. “Everyone! That handsome guy over at the bar is Lieutenant Lightfoot, and over here is Philip Stursberg, Loreen’s brother in-law.”

At that moment, Philip knew it would be only appropriate for him to acknowledge Loreen with a compliment. He noted Loreen’s oceanic colored dress and seashells hanging all over. “Ah, Loreen you look like the beach.” It came out awkward, all wrong.

Nicky jumped in, “Philip plays first viola with the Manhattan Symphony Orchestra.” Nicky knew there was no first viola but was pandering to Philip’s vanity.

“Please, Nicky!” I’m flattered. However, there’s no first viola, only viola.” Philip wallowed in his own importance.

“Well there should be a first viola!” Victoria insisted supportively.

“You’re all coming downtown!” Introductions were interrupted when Charlie Broadfoot, in a dark suit, burst into the room boisterously doing his cop shtick. Charlie slapped hands, and did one-armed shoulder hugs all the way to Seiji at the bar.

Lightfoot recognized Charlie from a bunch of Nicky’s movies, and knew that in a certain sense, Charlie played him. Lightfoot extended his mitts, as Charlie neared him. “Lieutenant Lightfoot, homicide, NYPD” he barked in jest.

Charlie’s hands were almost as big as Lightfoot’s. The two men performed a solid double handshake.

“Hey man! I’m you in the movies.” Charlie was thrilled. He nodded at Lightfoot then at the bar. “Buy you a drink?”

Everyone had a laugh over the meeting of the two sides of a coin before Nicky finished the intros.

Meanwhile, Ilena was welcoming the last guests to arrive: Verdad and Holdens. Verdad wore her sexy black Anna Magnani dress as promised, but red was what you saw. Red accessories, red pumps, red nails and red lipstick worked with an oversized red flower in her full dark hair to make her a complete sensation.

Holdens had wanted to sport a cream dinner jacket, but had suspected Claus of such a maneuver. Instead, he’d opted out for a classically styled suit in black summer weight wool.

Back in the kitchen, a steadfast Carlos was focused on what would be, as Claus had put it, the epicurean delight of the summer. He’d checked on the second course, the gazpachos. The guarded family recipes were chilling perfectly. It was time to pull the first course together.

In the living room, cocktails and conversation catenated like spores from a fungus. Daphne and Moira, still taking up the entire couch, giggled relentlessly. Len, whose spot at the bar was at the end by the door to the actual dining room, seemed to be disappearing.

Two waiters entered the living room through the bar access door. One waiter migrated into the body of the living room. The other stopped at the bar, where Lightfoot was giving Charlie the business on what it was like to be a real cop.

Lightfoot eyed the mini tacos, wondering how he'd pick one up. After all, the thumb and finger that he'd be using were each larger than the tidbits. "What's in them?" he checked with the waiter.

The waiter pointed to the red tacos, "lobster with black bean puree, chili de arbol, cilantro and avocado."

"That sounds good," Charlie said grabbing a couple. They cracked in his ample digits. He swiped his napkin up from the bar.

"White are filet mignon with caramelized onion, truffle and a freshly ground pepper medley," the waiter went on.

That appealed to Lightfoot so he picked one up. It crushed between his fingers, but he got it into his mouth before it fell apart.

"Leave the tray on the bar!" ordered Seiji, aware that to men the size of Lightfoot, Charlie or himself an entire tray was barely an appetizer.

"Great idea," Charlie backed Seiji up, grabbing a white taco.

The waiter placed the tray on the bar then bowed out. Lightfoot and Charlie lay in.

"Might I bother you for a blue one?" Len asked from his shadow at the end of the bar. "I believe they're crispy squash blossom with avocado crema and watercress."

Charlie looked over at Len. "Hey man, you disappeared over there." He looked at the blue tacos. "Go for it! I'm sure not eating any flowers."

Lightfoot and Charlie had a good manly chuckle about the eating of flowers as Len slipped off his stool. He moved to the tray between Lightfoot and Charlie. They were like pillars on either side of him. Len selected one blue taco, returned to his stool and melted back into the decor.

“Funny little guy?” commented Lightfoot.

“Played the medical examiner in the movie” Charlie filled in.

“Makes sense.” Lightfoot nodded.

Over at Nicky’s fabulous wall mural, Philip, Verdad, Haps and Victoria passionately critiqued its merits. No matter how diverse their opinions were, they all agreed that it belonged in an art gallery. Unknown to them, that mural might have to be destroyed if Nicky went ahead with opening the living room into the solarium.

Loreen sat with Claus at the piano. She was on her second glass of champagne, and in a very happy mood. She was singing partial lyrics or refrains here and there, as she remembered them.

Nicky, Ilena, Holdens and Sharlaya sipped wine while being engaged by the mesmerizing view from Nicky’s living room. A waiter interrupted, offering a tray of hors d’oeuvres around. Sharlaya chose blue. Ilena chose red. Nicky and Holdens chose white.

“Rich flavor,” Nicky critiqued.

“The peppers a nice touch,” Holdens commented, lightly scratching a cheek.

“These are the yummiest!” Sharlaya reached out for a second helping as a waiter passed by, but resisted. “I’ve got to watch my weight,” she explained.

“Have you tried the red ones?” Ilena urged, her curls sweeping her shoulders with any movement of her head. “They’re to die for.”

At the mural, the topic of discussion between Philip, Verdad, Victoria and Haps had turned to a more personal note. Verdad asked Philip how he knew Nicky. Philip explained that it was actually his wife who knew Nicky, that they had worked together and that she had done his wardrobe.

“She’s not here tonight?” Victoria wondered aloud.

Philip sighed painfully, “No, Lucille’s passed on.” He was going for the sympathy bonus reaction.

Philip was momentarily sideswiped when Verdad crossed her hands beneath her throat and moaned. “Not Lucille Brookers!”

“Yes, did you know her?” Philip sympathetically took her hand.

“Lucille and I worked together at least three times. Nicky told me on set a few weeks ago. Verdad put her arms around Philip. “I’m so sorry!”

Victoria placed a comforting hand on Philip’s shoulder. “How awful for you. And Loreen? Is she,” Victoria asked putting two and two together, “Lucille’s sister?”

“Yes,” Philip confirmed sadly.

“I must go to her with my sympathies.” Victoria sighed, “Excuse me!”

Victoria hastened to Loreen at the piano. “Darling, I’m so sorry to hear about your sister’s untimely death. Philip just told me.”

Loreen’s happy mood went down a notch; a dizzy feeling took its place.

Claus stopped playing, put an arm around Loreen. “You poor thing. I wish I had been informed earlier.” He went on. “I feel so insensitive.” He picked up his tune with his free hand.

Victoria knelt down and placed her hand on Loreen’s knee, “If you need to talk, we’re here for you.”

Loreen fell into their voyeuristic caring. “I think she was murdered.”

“How horrid,” gasped Claus.

Loreen spilled. She needed, wanted to talk. “Philip could get ten million dollars if she was murdered. Nobody takes me seriously though, except Nicky and Lieutenant Lightfoot.”

“Lieutenant Lightfoot?” Victoria caressed Loreen’s hand.

“Yes he’s lead detective on the case.” Loreen sank further under Claus’ arm.

Claus and Victoria shot each other looks.

“Why don’t I leave you two to talk?” Victoria could see how much Loreen was leaning on Claus.

“I think that’s best,” Claus nodded to Victoria. He snapped his fingers at a waiter, indicating for another Champagne for Loreen. And pulled her in tighter with the arm he’d slipped around her.

Victoria didn’t want to be a gossip, but she had to tell someone about all these important developments. She buzzed over to Daphne and Moira.

Carts were lined up ready to be loaded with Endive ala Mer Limonettes. The kitchen staff was working with ant-like precision. Carlos had returned to his Maitre’d jacket. He rang a delicate glass bell. All kitchen staff stopped, and looked his way. Carlos pointed to a digital wall clock.

“Note the time. In seven minutes, I announce dinner. We give the guests thirteen minutes to reach the solarium, find their seats and get settled in. That’s a total of twenty minutes. The carts leave for the solarium in exactly twenty minutes from now!”

Carlos took a few deep controlled breaths. It was a ritual. He always took several deep breaths before walking into the guest filled living room to announce that dinner was ready.

Announcing dinner always went down the same.

When Carlos entered the living room, there would be a general din of chatting guests and music from Nicky’s sound system. Carlos would proceed to a remote that he routinely left on the side table nearest the dining room entrance. Carlos would retrieve the remote and then would slowly fade out the music causing the guests’ chattering to fade enough for him to ring his delicate glass bell. The

bell would get everyone's attention, whereupon he would announce, "Mr. Faime and honored guests, dinner will now be served in the dining room." He would gesture a hand to the dining room's entrance, bow and stand by while people filtered into the dining room.

However, tonight there was a twist to the routine. Instead, he would say, "Mr. Faime and honored guests, dinner will be served shortly in the solarium. Carlos would indicate to the foyer then stand by as Ilena and Nicky lead the diners down the hallway to the solarium.

Carlos took his final deep breath, and confidently strode out of the dining room into the living room where he smashed into a wall of silence. He was stunned. Carlos reached for the sound system remote on the table near the dining room entrance. It wasn't there. Afraid to move, Carlos guided his gaze to the party.

Everyone was just standing or sitting there. They were all staring, glaring at Philip Stursberg. Stursberg was glaring at Loreen Brookers-Wright.

Victoria had told Daphne and Moira about Lucille's death, and that it was possibly a murder. Moira and Daphne had then gotten the word out to everyone else about Lucille's murder. They hadn't forgotten to include that Lightfoot was in charge of the case, that there was a ten million dollar insurance policy with Philip's name on it and that Nicky had been sticking his nose into cop business.

Of course no one had said anything to Nicky, but he'd witnessed the gossip rip through the room like a rat through a cat farm. Nicky's eye caught Carlos frozen by the dining room. "Yes, Carlos?" Nicky called out, turning to face him face on.

“Yes, sir!” Carlos instinctively replied.

All eyes switched to Carlos. He ruffled under the scrutiny. “That’s dinner, then. Erm,” he lightly cleared his throat. “Ladies and gentlemen, please walk this way!” Carlos pointed to the foyer, saw the bell in his hand then rang it.

The procession to the solarium passed in hushed tones and low tattling murmurs. However, all that was being hushed and murmured about was temporarily forgotten upon entering Nicky's garden in the sky.

A green and white jungle surrounded the banquet table on three sides. The greenery, ranging from palms and oleanders to ferns and philodendrons, had all been compressed along the walls. A fresh truckload of flowering plants, all white blooms from Angels Trumpets to Alyssum to Zantedeschia, fell as a floral snow from the ceiling, gathered along borders in velvet snowdrifts and spiked up into the air. Nicky's favorite touch, white hanging Bacopa around the television screen in the fireplace, where a hi-def fire crackled away.

The fourth side, all windows to the south east, revealed the city in the growing gold highlights and blackening shadows of a summer day's dusk. Between the jungle and the windows, Nicky's massive table reached across the room. Over the table, an enormous American flag printed on four panels, formed a patriotic canopy. Red, white and blue silk ribbons streamed down from the corners in a festive finish.

Silverware, fanning out on each side of white china, gleamed atop a royal blue pure linen tablecloth. Extra-long white smokeless tapers, fixed into sterling candlesticks were lit, waiting the fall of night.

Roses, their stems cut to within an inch of their lives, floated in wide shallow crystal bowls. They were set beside matching crystal

decanter in which Bosan Ripasso 2004 and Brunello di Montalcino 1990 had breathed to perfection. On small silver platters assortments of delicate ancient grain breads, all baked by Carlos, were within reach of everyone.

Silver ice buckets on stands, each chilling a bottle of Puligny-Montrachet Grand Cru, dotted the circumference of the table. An extra bucket, chilling a bottle of Champagne, had just been brought in and placed near Loreen's chair.

"Look Daphne!" Moira discovered her name on a card. "There's cards on the table telling us where to sit."

Daphne ran around the table, and found her name across from Moira. "I'm sitting between," she smiled down at Holdens who'd already taken his place, "Holdens, and, hmm, that Philip viola guy. Who'd you get?"

"I got Claus and, oh rats, Lieutenant Lightfoot." Moira whined.

"Shit! Did you pay off that pile of traffic tickets?"

"Not yet! Shush, here he comes."

Lightfoot patted his stomach as he took his seat beside Moira. "Should be a good meal," he commented in anticipation.

Sensing he was being watched, Lightfoot glanced to his left. Len, that funny little guy who'd played the M.E. had snuck into his chair. His eyes were glued to Lightfoot. "Looks like we're in for a feast," Lightfoot woofed amicably.

Len agreed with an uncomfortable nod then re-aligned his sights onto his plate.

Lightfoot looked up and directly across into Philip Stursberg's eyes. "Aught to be a good meal," Lightfoot said.

"I'm quite sure," Philip responded; his usual dry self. Philip wasn't all that thrilled to be sitting across from Lightfoot, but was more than appeased when Victoria slipped into the chair on his right. Victoria was so engrossed with Philip she didn't notice Charlie was seating himself on her other side.

Claus, eternally with an arm around Loreen, was expounding wisdoms as he and Loreen happily realized they were seated next to each other.

Waiter One and waiter Two, who were posted full time around the table, began informing the guests of the first course, and advising on the wine selection.

Nicky took his place at the head of the table. Ilena took hers at the opposite end. On Nicky's right was Verdad, to his left, Loreen.

On Ilena's left sat Charlie. His rumbling voice was directed across the table to Haps who was on Ilena's right. Charlie was pitching a script he'd written, a spy thriller ending with a big blow-up finale on the International Space Station. Sharlaya was the last to take her seat between Haps and Len.

Nicky beheld the assembly around the table. Nicky thought everyone looked like a penguin or a peacock. Nicky hated to admit it, because he was one of them, but the men, all in dark suits and white shirts, really did look like penguins. Except Lightfoot, who wore a tan jacket and dark shirt, looked like a reverse penguin.

Against the men's statement of staid safety within conformist convention, the women, in their complicated concoctions of style and color, seemed kaleidoscopic visions, outrageous fantasies. Nicky felt like toasting the ladies, but that could wait.

When Nicky saw that all the wine glasses had been filled he stood and proposed, "A toast to Haps, our director who brought us **Nine Black Lives**, and to all of us who had the good fortune to have worked with him on it. Cheers!"

Everyone stood up, air toasted and clinked the glasses of the guests closest to him or her.

Daphne broke away, running around the table, clinking everyone's glass. Moira followed suit. Others got into the spirit and began moving around the table connecting and congratulating. Soon talkative splinter groups formed. They admired the view, the plants and wondered at the hi-def television tuned to the fireplace channel that sat under the faux mantel.

Waiter One glimpsed at his watch. The first course would be departing the kitchen in just over a minute. Stumbling backwards, he receded into a corner then radioed Carlos.

In the kitchen, four carts were loaded with appetizers. Waiters Three through Six were in position to wheel them away. Carlos was watching the clock, while attending the rose wine reduction for the capon. His radio went off.

"Waiter One to Carlos."

"Go for Carlos."

"Sir, is the appetizer leaving the kitchen in one minute?"

“Correct.”

“But, the guests aren’t seated,” Waiter One was stressed. “They’re all over the place chattering garrulously.”

“Don’t worry! This has happened at certain prior dinners. Miss Ilena will take care of it. I’ll have the men leave as scheduled, but they’ll wait outside the solarium door for an all clear.”

“Copy!”

“Roger and out!” Carlos was thrilled with how well the communications system was operating.

In the solarium, Ilena had managed to quietly get half the diners back into their seats then took hers. Nicky took his, and the rest followed.

People were settling nicely. Several were nibbling one of Carlos’ gourmet breads. It seemed opportune, so Waiter One radioed the all clear. Four waiters with carts appeared. They parted, two down each side and began serving the Endive ala Mer Limonettes.

Claus rose and proposed, “A toast to Nicky, our host, who has the style and grace to invite us all into his home to celebrate.”

All arose with a healthy “Cheers”, but before the moment was complete, Daphne blurted out, “And for helping Loreen find her sister’s murderer!”

The diners sent up a blood thirsty “Cheers!” Then fell mute.

Philip felt the weight of their twenty-eight eyes upon him. “Lucille was my wife. Is there no compassion?” he plead dryly.

In support, Victoria took Philip’s hand under the table. Philip and Victoria’s four eyes met the other twenty-six. “If I were guilty, I wouldn’t be sitting here tonight.”

“Could be a smoke screen,” Len suggested. Len’s possible sensing of a ruse impelled twenty-eight eyes to shift to him. “Look, I’m just saying. I don’t know if he killed his wife. I’m just saying. Was there any forensic evidence,” he asked Lightfoot?

Claus interrupted this train of conversation. “I’m sure this is the last thing Loreen wants to talk about tonight,” Claus deferred, his hand caressing Loreen’s arm.

Loreen, having pigged out slightly on Champagne, slurred her words carefully. “No, ish okay,” Loreen bubbled. “Achually, I feel, great, unless Philip minds. He found the body. He’s the one who has a new girlfriend.”

“You know very well that I’ve broken it off with her,” Philip defended.

Victoria squeezed Philip’s hand in continued support, as whispers of disgust in regards to Philip’s indiscretion escaped several people.

“You’re not going to believe how good this salad is,” announced Moira.”

“Moira’s right!” Ilena invited, “Please, everyone, enjoy.”

The salad was delectable. It was just what suspicious minds and alcohol-drenched stomachs needed, especially Loreen. Having been somewhat stabilized by the food, she blurted out, “Of course Philip could have hired someone to kill Lucille!”

“You could have hired someone!” Philip shot back at Loreen. Victoria gave his hand a double squeeze.

‘No, you could have!’ Loreen insisted belligerently.

“I stand behind my last statement.” Philip would not be one-upped.

“Was it covered by the press?” Charlie asked, attempting to break the childish volley between the two.

“Yes,” Loreen was diverted. “Not much though.”

“You’ve got to tell us what happened,” Sharlaya was honest if a tad insensitive.

Loreen left her seat, and wandered toward the window. “It happened in the Shrine.”

Gasps went up.

“Like a church?” Verdad clutched her heart. “Not Catholic?”

“A cult?” Victoria shivered.

“A sacrifice?” Holdens rasped in horror.

“There could be a movie here,” shouted Haps.

Philip shot a look at Haps. Philip thought if there was going to be a movie about Lucille, he should score it.

Haps squinted at Philip. He wondered if there wasn't some kind of a deal he could cut with Philip in order to get the rights cheap.

Nicky ate, sipped wine and ate. The only thing he savored more than the flavors in his mouth was observing how the prurience of his guests had taken on a life of it's own.

Fifteen minutes later the bus boys returned to the kitchen with their load of empty plates and dirtied cutlery. Carlos, still stirring the reduction while supervising the glazing of the capon, was pleased to see the empty salad plates.

"Things are going well then," Carlos stated, at the same time fishing for any compliments that might be coming his way.

"Yeah!" Marlon answered, excitement in his voice. "It's murder."

"Murder?"

"Yeah, someone got murdered and they're all taking about it."

Carlos didn't like the sounds of that. Murder couldn't be a stimulating topic of discussion for dinner. Well he couldn't worry about that now. The Gazpacho was leaving. Entrees would be up shortly.

The dark of night behind the windows provided Loreen with a ghostly mirror image as she continued acting out the tale of Lucille's demise. "She fell forward onto the mirror, breaking her

nose,” Loreen explained then placed her face up against the windows, demonstrating to a captive audience.

Waiters Three through Six entered and began serving the gazpacho. It was magnificent. Served in square bowls, the roasted red tomato and white tomato gazpachos were perfectly divided. A blue borage flower, placed exactly in the middle, imparted a light essence of cucumber.

“Then she lurched backwards, and fell to the floor.” Loreen lay down on the floor to show just how. “When she landed, Lucille hit the back of her head, and was knocked out. Because of von Willebrand disease, her nose kept bleeding and bleeding and bleeding.”

A gazpacho was placed in front of Victoria. The red tomato resembled a pool of blood. Victoria looked away before she had a chance to be sick to her stomach.

“Lucille was knocked out, and she never had a chance to come to, to save herself, because of the sleeping pill.” Loreen was slowing down. She had gotten far too sober from telling the story. Loreen decided she needed more champagne. Returning to her seat, she finished the tale slowly, dramatically. “The official cause of death, affixation. Lucille choked to death on her own blood!”

“Thank you, I don’t feel like soup,” Sharlaya waved hers away before the waiter could finish setting it down then grabbed a bread to settle her stomach.

Loreen sat down to find the gazpacho in front of her. Claus handed a champagne flute to Loreen, whereupon she immediately drank half then turned to Claus. Loreen spoke softly, “I can’t eat

that. It looks like blood.” Claus snapped his fingers to have her soup removed.

“Soups delicious!” announced Moira.

“Mines cold,” said Lightfoot thinking his bowl hadn’t been thrown into the microwave.

“As it should be,” said Holdens sipping from the white gazpacho only.

Nicky reflected on his soup. The timing of its arrival was unfortunate, but that wasn’t Carlos’ fault. Nicky had no intention of trying to control the organic unfolding of data to accommodate courses. However, not wanting to put off any guests who were eating, Nicky had several obligatory spoonfuls of his white gazpacho then traded his spoon for his wine glass. He turned to Verdad, caught her eyes and held them. He raised his glass, winked and took a sip.

Verdad had just finished her white gazpacho. She pushed the red away. “Delicioso!” Verdad licked her wicked red lips as she picked up her wineglass, raised it to Nicky and washed down her cold soup.

Len, who’d caught the exchange between Nicky and Verdad, was far too intrigued by the murder to let the topic slip to that of tedious social pleasantries. “Perhaps there was some forensic evidence that was over looked.” Len timidly asked Lightfoot for the second time.

Len had begun to annoy Lightfoot. Lightfoot was far too busy getting the last of his soup out of the corners of his square bowl

with pieces of bread. “We didn’t miss anything. We swept the place clean,” Lightfoot growled politely.

“Blood?” Len tried again, politely.

Lightfoot, in his officious voice, told Len what Len already knew. “The victim’s, in the Shrine.”

“Fingerprints?” Len pushed, politely.

“Nothing we can put a finger on!” Lightfoot tried shaking him with a joke. No one laughed.

“Hair?” Len wasn’t giving up.

Lightfoot wasn’t going to answer. He glanced at Nicky. Nicky looked like he was up to something. Lightfoot changed his mind. “All identified,” he said flatly then added, “That was your last question.”

“Matches?”

“Cut, cut! Len, you’re overreaching,” Haps criticized.

“Yes sir,” Len receded back into his more humble self.

“Haps you’re a riot,” Ilena laughed resting her hand on his forearm.

Haps put his hand on Ilena’s, “The guy can’t act,” he said.

“So who killed Lucille already?” Daphne was dying to get this bit of gossip under her belt. After all, there was a whole grist needing rumor mill out there to be fed.

“Cynthia Johnson,” Loreen unburdened herself. “That’s what Nicky thinks.”

“Cynthia Johnson? The exchange student, or Ilena’s friend?” Verdad remembered.

Victoria jumped in, “That’s right, Nicky, the person Ilena was looking for when Holdens, Len and I were at Verdad’s rehearsing. When you just happened by.”

“But it wasn’t the same Cynthia Johnson,” Len recalled. “It seems there was a twenty year difference between the woman Ilena was looking for and the Cynthia Johnson who’d once lived in Verdad’s building.”

“You were very rude about Verdad’s cookies.” Holdens added indignantly.

Nicky elected to talk, to throw fuel into the fire. “Cynthia Johnson is a forty year old woman who lived in Queens. Using the pseudonym Nickynight, she frequented an on-line fan site dedicated to me. “ He stopped to drink wine.

Ilena picked it up. “On this site, Nickynight met PurpleFaime, aka Lucille Brookers. PurpleFaime had in her possession a piece of Nicky Faime memorabilia, his costume from **The Handmaiden’s Hands**, a black jacket. Three nights before Lucille died, PurpleFaime met Nickynight in a bistro near Bloomingdales where Lucille gave the jacket to Cynthia.”

“You can’t convict on that,” Sharlaya, sounding like Kowalski, informed everyone.

“Yeah, Where’s a motive? Charlie asked. “Cynthia got the jacket.”

“Where’s Cynthia now?” Moira nosed.

“Disappeared into thin air,” Loreen said to a snap of her fingers.

Philip looked directly at Nicky. “That’s convenient, Nicky.” Philip was snide, “accusing someone who’s not around to defend themselves?”

“Hold it!” Claus’ commanding stage voice halted the rabble. “Nicky’s tale wasn’t finished.”

Everyone shut up, suddenly anticipating Nicky’s finish.

“Before she murdered Lucille,” Nicky’s eyes circled the table taking in his guests at the precipices of their own breaths, “Cynthia Johnson attempted to kill me.”

Although everyone else gasped or remained struck silent by Nicky’s disclosure, Lightfoot let go of a chuckle.

“This amuses you Lieutenant?” Claus confronted.

Lightfoot tried to wave it off, “Ahh!”

“No, do tell Lieutenant,” Claus insisted. “After all, you’re lead detective on the case. Your thoughts are of great interest to us.”

“Please, Lieutenant!” Nicky was gregarious. “Don’t hold back on my account.”

There was no doubt left in Lightfoot's mind. Nicky was up to something. Lightfoot decided to be a sport, play along, at least for a while. What is it with these actors, Lightfoot wondered to himself. Do they all mince reality in with parts they once played?

"Faime's got this theory that Cynthia Johnson substituted the oil in a bottle of safflower oil with peanut oil. She crashed into Carlos' cart at the supermarket, and made the switch."

"So, Cynthia followed Carlos to the store?" Daphne tried a hand.

"She wouldn't have to," Victoria offered all in the know. "Anyone who'd read the article on Nicky's kitchen would know that Carlos shops at Devign Foods routinely on Wednesdays from two until three."

"Anyway, how could switching oils kill anyone?" Daphne said wishing she'd read the article.

"Nicky's allergic to peanuts," Ilena informed in a practical tone, letting the cat that had been kept so carefully in the in the bag for so long, out.

Nicky had given Ilena permission to divulge this information. He was tired of living a dangerous lie. He had decided facing truths made him more of a man than hiding them, even in the public eye.

"That's right!" Verdad's memory surfaced, "There was a rumor going around on set, oh at least six years ago. Nicky had been working on another set, and word was he'd been taken to the hospital because of peanut butter."

"I'd heard that rumor myself," Holdens recalled.

“I remember something,” Charlie confessed, “but I had no idea it was true. I figured it was just gossip.”

“That’s why Nicky doesn’t eat with us at work,” Len deduced. He’s playing it safe.”

“Oh, so its not because you’re a snob.” Moira spouted then wished she hadn’t said that. She clumsily tried to cover. “Not that anyone talks about it,” she assured, “but if they do, Daphne and I keep things straight.”

Like I give a shit, Nicky thought, his dark eyes gleaming like shot silk with a secondary blue punching through. Clearly, keeping the whole peanut allergy low-key hadn’t worked to perfection. He felt safer with his cards on the table.

At the same time, bus boys trepidatiously trucked the unfinished soup course into the kitchen.

“Gazpacho returned uneaten?” Carlos was freaked. He gawked at the boys, “It’s unheard of!”

“I know Uncle Carlos,” Brandon nervously explained, “but the red gazpacho looks like blood.”

“Blood!”

“Yeah, you know, from the murder.”

“They don’t stop talking about it,” Marlon piped in.

Carlos inhaled forever before letting out a monster sigh. He waved the waiters on their way with the Entrees.

Back at the table, Nicky's allergy had fallen like a bomb. The guests were digging through debris of the blast.

Victoria was first to speak. "Aren't there medicines for a peanut allergy?"

"Not preventative," Len explained. "Not having anything to do with peanuts is the prevention. However, if there was an incident an adrenaline injection should be taken," Len the voice of recited knowledge spoke. "Extreme cases would prove fatal within minutes," Len raveled on. "A severe case could need to see an injection of epinephrine within minutes to help prevent anaphylactic shock. Even with a syringe loaded and ready to go, or say an EpiPen, it could take a second person to administer it."

"I can't buy that theory," Philip played devil's advocate. "Nicky's chef is gourmet. He would have smelled something. Surely someone going to all the trouble Cynthia did, would be smart enough to know the aroma of peanuts would ensure the oil never landed on Nicky's plate."

"Not if it was an extra light processed peanut oil," Victoria threw in, "I use it all the time. It doesn't smell."

"That might not work," Len knew better due to a mad scientist role he'd delivered two movies ago. "Too much of the protein gets refined out. In order to assure fatal success, the perpetrator would need to use a cold pressed peanut oil. The peanut odor would be extremely prevalent."

"What do you say to that?" Claus challenged Nicky.

"Anosmia," Nicky replied.

Everyone stared at Len.

Len was silent. As he hadn't played a part involving anosmia, he had nothing to say.

Eager not to miss out on further developments of the murder, Waiters Three through Six sped into the solarium with the Entrees.

"Well I can smell and this smells amazing," Loreen praised, as a plate was set before her. "Thank you," she said

Nicky understood the peanut smell, how peanuts are a definite in the nose and on the palate. Nicky flashed on being with Loreen at Liberty State Park. He recalled the smell of the roasting peanuts from the barbeque party that had been working its way towards Loreen and himself. It had been at that moment Nicky realized for his theory to work; Cynthia Johnson must have anosmia.

"Cynthia Johnson can't smell, so she didn't think of it." Nicky concluded out loud.

"Maybe she had a cold when she did it?" Len questioned.

"Nah, think about it," dissed Charlie. "Even if you have a cold you still know the peanut smell exists. You know peanuts smell. Case over! Nothing to do with smarts, but Cynthia messed up on a detail, a detail she wouldn't know to consider." Charlie backed-up Nicky, " She can't smell, so she didn't think of it."

"Ahh," Claus mused theatrically, citing Burns "The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men, Gang aft a'gley."

Lightfoot stared at Claus. Actors! He thought to himself.

“Wow!” This chicken looks yummy,” exclaimed Moira.

“Ahem!” Philip fake cleared his throat, his indignance homage to propriety. “Capon,” he corrected, “probably free range and grain fed.”

“I prefer capon over chicken,” Claus expounded elegantly as he sliced.

Len finished a mouthful. “Exceptional!“ he raved, “But Cynthia went to a lot of trouble. First, she’d have to drain the safflower oil, and then replace it with peanut oil. And all without breaking any seals on the bottle. Why not, maybe just use a syringe and poison the oil?”

“She didn’t have access to the right poison,” Victoria guessed?

“No, no,” Charlie came in. “Again, think about it! Cynthia didn’t want to kill anyone else but Nicky. If she poisoned an entire bottle of oil, and Nicky had a dinner like tonight, we’d all be dead.”

Only Nicky, Lightfoot, Charlie and Ilena kept eating.

Lightfoot looked up at the table, “Like Charlie said, we’d all be poisoned by now. Eat up!”

Verdad didn’t care about eating anymore anyway. “Nicky, why did you come to my place that day?” she asked outright.

“To find Cynthia Johnson or someone who knew her,” Nicky answered outright.

“And I told you she was a twenty year old exchange student who’d gone back to England. Ilena told me she was a forty something year-old friend of hers?” Her woman’s intuition was at work. “They’re not the same person?”

“No, but student Cynthia Johnson’s telephone and internet accounts were transferred to the home of Cynthia Johnson, forty year old Nicky Faime fan.”

“Where she seemingly lived with her husband, son and housekeeper.” Ilena added.

“But not?” Len went along.

“Not,” assured Ilena, “but Cynthia went to extreme lengths to make it appear that way. How about this? Although she was only renting a room, the house happens to have the name Johnson on the mailbox.”

“She’s an identity thief!” Len surmised.

“More like a borrower,” Nicky corrected.

“Whoever the forty year old Cynthia was, she didn’t use the other Cynthia’s identity to obtain credit cards, run up bills, the usual,” Ilena explained. “Seems she paid everything in cash. Interestingly enough, Cynthia Johnson had a job that took her out of town.”

“Ah ha, I get it,” Charlie slapped his hand on his knee.

“Oh do share, Charlie!” Claus encouraged.

“The real person needs to live two lives at once, so they create a persona. The persona has a job that takes them out of town. That allows the real person some time for their real life. The real person might even have a job that takes them out of town, creating time to live the persona’s life. The persona works it real hard. She makes friends, leaves tracks, builds trails and murders someone. Then the persona disappears. The real person lives freely, while the world searches for the persona, in this case Cynthia Johnson.”

“It could have been Verdad!” Loreen blurted out. “She lives in the same building the first Cynthia did. Verdad’s the right age.”

“I thought that at one time,” Nicky was honest.

“Nicky!” Verdad crossed her arms over her chest, “How could you?”

“But it’s not Verdad,” Nicky sounded confident.

“How can you be sure?” Loreen was still suspicious.

“According to my investigations, Cynthia Johnson’s beautiful auburn hair is real, not a wig. Therefore if Verdad were Cynthia, she’d have to wear a wig, when she’s Verdad.

“Verdad’s hair is totally real,” Daphne testified. “And it’s thick and healthy, there’s no way she’s been dying it back and forth. It would be a brittle disaster!”

“Oh my god, I’m sorry Verdad!” Loreen apologized loudly, “but I feel so desperate. Loreen put her face in her hands, and spoke to Lucille. “Why, Lucille? Why did you risk meeting someone from on-line?” she cried lightly.

“I have to ask that question as well,” Philip abided. “It’s always bothered me. Lucille was quite the critic of people who got in trouble from that kind of thing. Look Nicky, you showed Loreen and myself a picture of this Cynthia Johnson. You said it came from the web site. Is it possible,” he paused, “do you think, that Lucille recognized this person so felt safe meeting her?”

“That would make sense,” Victoria was impressed. “That’s why Lucille gave her the jacket. She knew her.”

“No, no, the persona wouldn’t look like the real person?” Charlie asserted. “

“Did Lucille put her picture up on the site?” Daphne nosed.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Philip was insulted.

“Doesn’t matter.” Claus noted, “When Cynthia met with Lucille to get the jacket, she would have recognized Lucille.”

“But Lucille wouldn’t necessarily have recognized Cynthia Johnson,” Len reminded.

“So Cynthia Johnson killed Lucille,” Moira was concluding nicely, “because Lucille didn’t recognize her!”

“Stunning deduction,” Philip was at his sarcastic best.

“Look Nicky,” Claus demanded. “I think it’s only fair we get to see this picture of Cynthia.”

A few others rumbled, “yeah, the picture!”

“I’d like to see it!” Haps asserted. “For casting notes.”

Not that Nicky thought he had to be fair, but everything was playing into his hands so nicely that he just went with it. “Ilena!” he started.

That was all the instruction she required, “Excuse me!” Ilena said rising.

All of the men at the table stood. As Ilena left the room, they re-seated themselves.

Meanwhile, Carlos was sprinkling giant white asparagus spears with finely minced pimento when the entree dishes were bussed back into the kitchen. Over half the guests had left a sizable amount of the course on their plates. Some were untouched.

Carlos’ throat tightened, and he held back tears.

His nephews felt bad for him. “It’s not your fault, Uncle Carlos,” Brandon consoled. “The whole poison thing threw some people off.”

“Poison!” Carlos went from near tears to disbelief.

“Yeah, you know, the murder,” Marlon reminded.

“Of course, the murder.” Carlos threw his arms in the air. “My entire dinner, upstaged by a murder.” He bravely waved the Asparagus De Milo on its way, wondering what state it would come back in. At this point he could only hope a spear wasn’t involved in the homicide.

“Don’t worry!” Brandon encouraged, “Wait ’til they get a load of the Cherries Jubilee.”

“Yes, yes,” Carlos muttered, his spirits rising at the thought. “The Cherries Jubilee!”

Waiters One and Two had purposely ceased keeping Carlos up on what was going on in the solarium. They knew he’d only get upset. Besides, they didn’t want to miss out on anything, and the other waiters and busboys were counting on them. Everyone with a head set was following the saga on the open channel, the channel that Carlos was not utilizing.

Ilena returned carrying her laptop and several photographs. Waiters Three through Six, with the Asparagus De Milo, were right on Ilena’s heels. She assumed her seat, and circulated several pictures of Cynthia around the table.

“Several days after Cynthia made the oil switch, she vanished.” Nicky measured his voice carefully as people had a good look and passed the pictures on. “However, whatever the jacket represented it was enough to make Cynthia surface twice more. Once to pick it up, twice to kill Lucille.”

“Lucille must have recognized Cynthia, somehow,” Loreen sighed.

“She’s not really pretty,” Victoria commented as she stared at Cynthia’s face.

“She’s not ugly,” Holdens was a tad more gracious.

“She’s kind of, average,” Len weighed in, peering over Victoria’s shoulder.

“Very non-descript, good for background work,” proclaimed Haps. “We’ll have to bump up her image for the movie. ”

“Great hair! Same color as Victoria’s.” Daphne pointed out.

“But it covers her entire jaw line and ears,” Philip said searching for some tattletale detail. “Most of her forehead’s obscured with those wisps everywhere.”

“She doesn’t have a neck, she has a scarf,” Claus complained.

“Stunning green eyes,” Verdad complimented, “Not many people have green eyes like that.”

“Ilena does,” said Haps, noticing her eyes for the first time.

“Ilena has brown eyes, “ Lightfoot asserted as he glanced up to see that in fact Ilena’s eyes had become green.

“So Cynthia Johnson wore contact lenses,” Philip shrugged like big deal.

There was more. “You look different. What’d you do?” Lightfoot asked, irked at himself for not having noticed sooner.

“If you changed your hair, I mightn’t recognize you in the street,” Philip remarked.

“Your eyebrows! Moira shouted at Ilena. “They’re thicker, higher changing the brow line, and your lips are different. You changed to a lighter color. And they’re smaller. You penciled inside the line.”

“How’d you get your brows so thick and perfect so fast?” inquired Sharlaya. “I don’t see any penciling.”

“Ilena peeled her brows off. “They’re one hundred percent human hair.” She placed them on a napkin and handed them to Sharlaya.

“Are those new?” Victoria asked, self conscious about her thinning eyebrows.

“They’ve been around awhile,” Daphne advised. “They’re mostly used by chemotherapy patients, but they’ve gotten really good and are totally getting popular.”

“This is priceless!” Philip haughtily snorted at Nicky. “All you’ve got is someone with auburn hair who can’t smell. You don’t know what color her eyes are, the shape of her face, her ears, her brow, her lips. You don’t even know what her neck looks like. What in hell does that leave you with?”

“With the one thing that connects me from Lucille Brookers to Cynthia Johnson,” Nicky took a sip of wine, “the jacket from **The Handmaiden’s Hands.**”

Carlos had decided to pull out all the stops. He emerged from the pantry carrying four bottles of Mistela Molt Vella del Masroig Vino De Licor. He’d been hoarding them since Christmas when Bella had given them to Nicky. Direct from her family’s home in the co-op Village of Masroig, Italy, it was a sweetie of a red dessert wine from one hundred percent Crinena grapes. It paired magically with chocolate, and Carlos shivered when he began to imagine it with the Nouvelle Chocolate Noir, his Cherries Jubilee the crowning glory.

Carlos wiped the bottles with a damp linen tea towel, placed them on the counter then turned his attention to his two brothers. They were fastidiously preparing the flambé carts. Fifteen diners would require two pans of the Jubilee. Each of his brothers had been assigned a cart to wheel in and serve from.

However, under the circumstances, Carlos had decided he would light the two flambé himself. He added extra kirsch to the cherries mixtures, and poured extra brandy into the warming pans. He moved away from the carts. He picked up his extra long barbecue lighter in sterling that was reserved for flambéing only, and pressed his thumb on the button. “Poof”; it tested perfectly. Carlos threw his shoulders back. The dessert course would not go ignored. It would be eaten.

Asparagus spears, superficially grazed due to defeated appetites that had been stymied by curiosity, were being bussed away. It was a perfect time for Nicky to stimulate further speculation. Ilena was the Master Of Ceremonies.

Ilena had had a Waiter position an end table in front of the faux fireplace, and connect her laptop to the fifty-four inch television. “Here are some more pictures of Cynthia,” she announced, as she stood by her laptop.

The high definition crackling fireplace fire went down, and an image of Cynthia Johnson came up. It was her face-on shot from the Nicky Faime Café, the one that had been circulating around the table.

A group murmur went up. The party eagerly gathered around Ilena to watch the show.

Ilena began a slide show of what appeared to be a series of three other photographs of Cynthia. “I had the graphics person from **Nine Black Lives** prep this for me,” she gave credit where credit was due.

The monitor then displayed quadrants. Each had one of the four pictures of Cynthia. “Look at all of these pictures of Cynthia!” Ilena suggested strongly. Look at them again then compare the new images to the original.” Ilena gave the crowd a few minutes then asked, “Do they all look like Cynthia?”

“Kind of,” Len sounded fifty- fifty. “They don’t not look like her.”

“The new ones are throwing me off,” worried Victoria, “but I suppose.”

“What I see is basically the same person, and that person looks like your Cynthia Johnston” Claus carefully stated. “I suppose you’re trying to illustrate to us all how someone with the right basic features, and who with the aid of make-up, hair and wardrobe combined with attitude can transform one’s self.

“Who knows that better than an actor?” Lightfoot mentioned.

Several others nodded and grunted in agreement.

“I’ll buy it,” Charlie said.

“They’re all Cynthia Johnson,” Loreen pushed. Whatever was going to happen she wanted it to happen fast.

Ilena elaborated. “Using the original picture of Cynthia Johnson, which as you can see is a direct on headshot, we isolated specific features: eyebrows, lips, hair, contours, and of course, the scarf.” She brought up a palette of Cynthia’s features to show everyone then docked them.

“We then acquired direct on headshots of three different people, each a person in this room,” Ilena continued. “We sized them proportionally. We isolated, and created palettes for their features as well. We removed everyone’s characteristics, and replaced them with Cynthia’s.”

There were four faces presented on the screen. The eyes of the guests raced from picture to picture. Every person was wondering the same thing. Who are the three people in this room who have been transformed via computer into Cynthia Johnson?

Fascination ruled as Ilena put the photograph of Cynthia up in the right corner, on permanent display. She picked one of the three other pictures, and placed it full sized on the left hand side of the screen. Finally Ilena brought up a palette of isolated features belonging to the person on the left of the screen. She set that underneath Cynthia on the right.

Ilena moved her cursor to one of the eyebrows. She clicked and dragged it to the trash then trashed the second eyebrow. Ilena replaced the expunged features with the eyebrows from the palette.

“Ah, you can see a change already.” Claus observed, “The brows are shorter, thinner, finer but I still can’t tell who it is.”

Ilena replaced the cheek contours. There wasn’t a word from the gallery. The lips were switched, Cynthia’s hitting the trash and the ones from the palette brought up.

“Actually the lips are incredibly similar,” Moira stated. “Some lip-liner and lipstick would take care of that.”

Green eyes were changed to hazel.

“Hey that looks like Victoria,” Moira guessed.

Ilena removed the scarf.

Daphne squealed out, "It's totally Victoria! You don't even have to change the hair. I can see who it is, and it's Victoria. You got it, Moira. You win!"

Moira bragged, "Victoria wouldn't even need a wig. Daphne could change Victoria's hair to match Cynthia's in half an hour, and I could do the make-up just as fast."

"Let's see who's under the second one," Victoria deflected.

"I'm curious, myself," Philip concurred.

Ilena began revealing. The scarf was the first item to go this time. Ilena allowed a minute for people to finish comparing necks.

"It's Daphne!" yelled Moira.

"There's no way that's Daphne," Philip argued.

"I have to go with Philip," Victoria agreed.

Green eyes became brown.

"Daphne has brown eyes!" Moira happily confirmed.

"Almost everyone in the room has brown eyes," Victoria pointed out. "Just look around!"

Ilena swept off the cheek contours.

"Oh it's so Daphne," Moira insisted gleefully.

A reserved murmur filled the air.

The brows changed.

“It’s got to be me!” Daphne squealed, elated to be singled out in the display.

Ilena quickly changed the lips and hair.

“We win again!” Daphne and Moira cheered in unison, jumping up and down, giddy with the taste of victory.

Applause erupted from the partiers.

“I’ll bet Sharlaya’s under the last one!” Philip wagered, his competitiveness beyond whetted.

“Let me do it!” Sharlaya excitedly wedged herself in beside Ilena. Assuming the perfect game show hostess poise, Sharlaya swept her arms across the television screen whereupon green eyes became brown eyes

“Sharlaya’s got blue eyes,” Loreen jabbed the fact at Philip. “You lose, Philip.”

The cheeks came off to a hushed room. No one would commit to a guess. It just wasn’t clicking. The scarf came off, betraying a thick neck.

“Ouch!” said Claus. “She should keep her scarf on.” He caught himself, “Pardon, no offense meant,” he said looking around, wondering who he’d insulted.

“That’s a guy’s neck,” Charlie sounded turned off.

“Holdens doesn’t have much of a natural beard growth,” Daphne pointed out. “He could pull off a switch.

“I have no Beard,” Len qualified himself.

“Ahh yes, but Len, Holdens has those non-descript commercial features required for this situation,” Claus remembered his tact this time.

Sharlaya waved an arm in front of the screen, and Ilena switched lips.”

Verdad cracked up. “I guess the power of suggestion is strong because It does look like Holdens in a wig,” she laughed, others laughing with her.

Ilena changed the hair and whatever else was left. In fact, it was Holdens.

“I said Holdens name first,” Daphne claimed the prize.

“Yes, you said his name first,” Verdad agreed, “but I said it looked like him first.”

“I’d call it a tie,” Ilena mediated, looking from Daphne to Verdad.

Applause trickled then everyone returned to his or her seats.

“Tidy little parlor game Nicky,” Philip conceded then condescended, “but I don’t think you can convict on a trick. It was a lot of fun, but all you’ve done is shown us how hundreds, thousands of people possibly, could transform themselves into Cynthia Johnson.”

“True,” Nicky admitted, “but only Holdens was in **The Handmaiden’s Hands.**”

Holdens, who was in the process of sitting down, missed his chair. “Now see here Nicky,” Holdens said from the floor. “How dare you make such an insinuation?”

Verdad helped Holdens up and into his chair. “You can’t just accuse him like that,” Verdad was outraged. “Holdens and I have been friends for years. He wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“Yeah,” Charlie went along with Verdad. “And anyway, what would his motive be?” Charlie demanded.

“And where’s the jacket?” Len asked, thinking he wouldn’t mind owning it.

Nicky couldn’t prove everything he was about to say, but he’d worked out the time line and the pieces had fallen into place. He took an actor’s pause then spoke. “**The Handmaiden’s Hands** was my big break.”

Everyone muttering agreed.

It was time for Leo’s information to be utilized. “However, prior to the part coming my way,” Nicky began, “someone else was about to grab the golden ring that I wound up nabbing. Holdens had risen to the top of a pack of would be leads in line for **The Handmaiden’s Hands**. Holdens was just about to sign. Instead, I came along, and seized the position of cast number one. In the end, Holdens wound up Zombie number three, cast number forty-two. On top of everything, as Holdens has already told us, they got his name wrong in the credits.”

“That experience deep seeded a resentment,” Ilena picked up the explanation. “Time went by. Nicky’s career flourished and Holdens resentment grew to hate. More time passed. Holdens was still a struggling day player, lucky to land anything near a supporting role. The hate became a pastime, an illness.”

“Holdens endured years of small jobs, mostly in television. Then he landed the supporting role of Heff in **Nine Black Lives**, a big Hollywood theatrical release only to find out it was in a Nicky Faime movie,” Nicky paused. “It was too, late. Cynthia had already switched the oils in Carlos’ shopping cart. I suppose she wonders to this day why I’m not dead.”

“So you’re saying Holdens hired Cynthia?” Haps rejoiced, knowing this was a perfect scenario for his type of movies.

“No, I’m saying Holdens is Cynthia.” Nicky said without prejudice.

Charlie’s voice of reason pierced Nicky’s logic’s cube. “Not so fast, Nicky. You said Cynthia’s hair was real. Holdens does wear a wig, but as we all know he’s balding underneath.”

“Ahem!” Daphne the hair expert doubled up the defense. “Yes, Holdens wears a hairpiece. He’s probably quite balding I assure you.”

Embarrassed, Holdens turned his head. Verdad gave him a pat of support.

At that point, Ilena held up a baggie with a hairpin in it.

”Victoria!” Nicky spoke sharply. “Do you remember being singled out on set for the crime of a hairpin?”

“It isn’t my hairpin, Nicky,” She plead. “I promise.”

“That hairpin cost us a take.” Haps shouted.

“It belongs to Cheryl, the AD,” Len recalled.

“At least,” Claus’ voice was filled with doubt, “that’s what we went along with for the sake of the moment.”

“All I know is its not mine,” Victoria insisted.

All sights focused on Nicky. All, that is, save Lightfoot’s. Lightfoot, confident that Nicky was on to something, preferred to keep his eyes on the guests.

“I think the hairpin belongs to Holdens!” Nicky indicted, “He wants us to think he’s almost bald, but under that hairpiece is Cynthia Johnson’s hair.”

Daphne made a grab for Holdens’ piece, but he caught her hand. ‘If Lieutenant Lightfoot wants he can get a warrant to search my head,” Holdens snapped.

“Well Nicky,” snarked Philip. “I think your full head of hair is clogging your brain, clouding your deductions.” He nodded in sympathy, to Holdens.

Holdens nodded a thank you back at Philip.

Daphne made another grab for Holden’s piece, this time with success. “Aha! She yelled as she tore off Holdens’ wig, exposing a

fringe of comb over hair pulled out from under a stretched out nylon stocking wrapping his skull.

A community gasp arose, “Ahh!” then fell, “ha!”

“Nicky’s mad!” Holdens hissed as he ripped off the stocking uncovering a nest of fine French braids tucked up with the odd hairpin. “And you people are just as crazy to believe this pathetic story Nicky has cooked up. This isn’t proof!”

“That’s right! It’s still all circumstantial,” Sharlaya asserted, executing her best Kowolski chop ever.

“Lieutenant Lightfoot,” Nicky stiffened, directing his attention to Lightfoot, “Maybe you weren’t quite honest with Len earlier, and the police have in their possession questionable hairs, auburn hairs found at the scene of the crime.”

“Maybe,” Lightfoot replied.

“So when you get a warrant to search Holdens’ head, you’ll be able to compare hairs,” surmised Len.

“And figure out if he has anosmia,” Claus added.

“Well, now that that’s settled,” Ilena spoke with ease, “we can all relax and enjoy our dessert.”

Ilena gestured to the dessert carts. Carlos’ brothers lit the burners under the Cherries Jubilee. The guests were momentarily side tracked.

During Nicky’s “parlor trick”, Carlos’ brothers had wheeled in their dessert carts. They’d been placed between the table and

windows. The Nouvelle Chocolate Noir, on individual dessert plates, had been prepped on the two outside carts. Those had been brought in by waiters Three and Four. The flambé carts were beside each other in the centre.

Mesmerized by the constant revelations, Waiters One and Two poured the Mistela Molt Vella del Masroig Vino De Licor in trancelike states.

However, as it wasn't quite time to flambé, the guests' collective gaze quickly re-gathered onto Holdens.

"Too, bad about missing out on that part that Nicky got in **The Handmaiden's Hands**," Haps prodded Holdens, wanting to know how this screenplay might end.

A great bitterness drenched Holdens' voice. "Yes, if Nicky hadn't come along, I'd be golden." His bitterness became desperate. Yes, it was true that Nicky had beaten him out for the lead part in **The Handmaidens Hands**, and it was also true that he was anosmic.

Holdens flashed back to the mini tacos offered on the hors d'oeuvres tray earlier. Nicky had commented on the rich flavor. He, Holden's, had commented on the pepper being a nice touch, and scratched his cheek.

For his entire life, taste had been like a rainbow without color to Holdens. One of the few flavors he could trust himself to identify to others was pepper. It gave his cheek a strange tingling sensation that he instinctively scratched. Nicky had seen his tell, and now Holdens knew Nicky knew. On top of everything there was there was the question of the auburn hairs found at the scene. Holdens

felt circumstantially cornered. He felt he had to explain what an unjust position he was in.

Holdens started in a loud resentful whisper. "It's been ceaseless, relentless really. Always one thing after another, humiliations, set backs."

The diners leaned in, each trying to hear Holdens better.

Holdens brought his voice up slowly, theatrically. "Eight years ago, I met this fantastic woman. We dated several times. Things were very, very promising. Then out of the blue, she stops returning my calls. My heart was broken. Next thing I know, she and Nicky are an item, their pictures plastered all over the media. Ohh the humiliation! Once again, Nicky had ruined everything for me, and for what? A month later he dumped her for that Swedish starlet."

"You decided to kill Nicky because he ruined your life?" Len simplified.

"No, no, no!" Holdens swayed his head in denial, as he neurotically undid a braid. "I decided Cynthia Johnson would kill him."

"Cynthia would never go along with an evil thing like that." Verdad defended.

"Oh, I know! She's a very decent person," Holdens agreed. "It was not that easy."

"You saying she was in on this with you?" Charlie questioned.

“In a way,” Holdens sighed his words. “You see, we met several years ago in the hallway at Verdad’s, after a rehearsal party. Cynthia was pretty, flirtatious. I was enamored. We talked for hours over fruit shakes. Cynthia was dazzled by the industry, you know, wanted to hear all about the famous people I worked with. We even dated a couple of times before she returned to England.”

“I had no idea,” Verdad threw her hands up in surrender.

“It was no big deal in the end,” Holdens fluffed it off. “We became more like friends, really. Before she left I helped her pack, drove her to the airport, took care of canceling her accounts, you know, friend things.”

“That was nice of you.” Philip sniped, “except for the accounts you had transferred to Queens.”

“Yes! I thought so, but I’d invented a new Cynthia Johnson and she needed Internet access. And I couldn’t believe Cynthia’s luck. A family named Johnson had just moved into Briarwood. They needed a few extra dollars to make ends meet so decided to rent out the basement. It was the perfect setup for a method actor.”

Holdens turned to Haps, beseeching for confirmation, “Haps, you realized I was method. That’s why I got the Heff role. Isn’t that right, Haps?”

“The original actor got sick. We needed a last minute replacement.” Haps reminded. “You were the first half decent available.”

“Thank you!” accepted Holdens, obviously having heard what he wanted to. “It took close to three years to make Cynthia a complete person. I thought things were going very well until I

caught her sneaking around without my knowledge. The ingrate. She'd developed a mind of her own. Eventually, she began telling me what to do. Imagine!"

"Imagine!" Claus echoed.

"Yes!" Holdens agreed to Claus' echo. "I can't tell you how I'd tired of her. After Cynthia switched the oils, I thought I'd never see her again. Her job was done. I wanted nothing to do with her anymore and told her so." Holdens appeared to be drifting off, considering something.

"But you did see her again," Charlie offered, in order to get Holdens back to the table.

"Yes." Holdens seemed annoyed. "I honestly didn't know Cynthia had gone to get the jacket from Lucille. I knew she'd developed a passion to own it, but I'd told Cynthia to forget the jacket, it wasn't worth it. It wasn't until Lucille saw me through Cynthia's disguise that I realized we were in the Bistro."

"Totally psycho!" Daphne awed.

"Totally!" Moira followed.

"Psycho?" Holdens questioned. "No, no, more ironic actually," Holdens laughed weakly.

"You'll have to explain!" Claus indignantly demanded, as he drew a weak, yet attentive Loreen tighter under his arm.

"Five years after **The Handmaidens Hands**, I worked with Lucille on an off, off Broadway one weekend run, "The Falsies". It

was a about a bunch of broke guys in a band who couldn't get a break, but when they dressed up as women they became famous.”

Coffee and tea arrived at the table. The Waiters fussed immeasurably about the service in a bid to be as close as possible to the conversation for as long as possible.

“I don't recall that play,” Philip's dryness had a nasty crackle. A waiter poured his coffee.

“What's to recall?” Holdens moaned loudly. “The show was a disaster, over in a minute.”

“Yet another career failure!” Haps emphasized.

Holdens took a moment to savor his bitterness. “Nonetheless, Lucille had taught us all how to become women, and not just hair, make-up, clothes, more than that. She taught us the subtleties of standing, walking, talking, all feminine entendres. I recycled those exact nuances into Cynthia.”

Claus passed on sugar opting for a package of artificial sweetener. He tapped his finger on it as he spoke, “Lucille was murdered by someone you had recreated out of someone Lucille had taught you to be. That is ironic.” Claus poured the sweetener and stirred.

Holdens spoke fondly. “Smart girl that Lucille, memory of an elephant, and so open-minded. She didn't care if I was still running around in drag thirteen years after the fact. I felt I had to explain. Well I couldn't tell her the truth, so I lied. I told her I was in the throes of a sex change.”

“You're having a sex change!” Moira raved, “I had no idea.”

“You’re getting dazzled by his method acting and getting the facts wrong,” Len corrected, as a waiter finished filling Len’s cup. “He said he lied.”

Holdens eyes had misted over. “Lucille was so very supportive of my sexual choice. She invited me over for some wine and girl talk. Of course I declined her hospitality. I had no intention of going, but Cynthia had ideas of her own.”

A couple of days later, the last time I saw Cynthia, she was wearing the jacket from **The Handmaiden’s Hands**. She told me everything. How she’d stolen one of my sleeping pills. How she’d slipped it into Lucille’s wine. How she didn’t have a real plan, but just played it by ear.” Holdens shook his head in disbelief. “So improv! So not method,” he moaned. “Not method at all!”

A Waiter moved in on Holdens left, and poured his coffee.

Holdens stared unblinking at his coffee cup. “They went upstairs, to look at this, this antique mirror. Lucille, poor thing, she was so stoned she tripped over her own feet just as Cynthia had been opening the closet door to see how thick the mirror really was. You know the rest.”

“What rest?” Victoria demanded.

“Cynthia had seen the bracelet. She knew Lucille had von Willebrand disease. So when she saw Lucille on her back with her nose bleeding, she understood what would happen if help wasn’t summoned.”

“So you watched her die?” Len put his cup down without taking the sip he’d planned to.

“Of course not. Don’t be absurd!” Holdens angrily dismissed Len’s accusation. “Cynthia watched her die. She had to make sure, you understand.”

Loreen smashed her champagne flute on the table, and made a break for Holdens. Claus tried to keep her under his arm, but she wriggled away like a mad cat. Claus made one last grab, catching hold of her dress’s tie belt. The bow unraveled. Her classic little wrap from Saks fell open, but Claus held on.

Loreen ran out of her dress. As she ran past Nicky, Nicky slipped a finger under the back of Loreen’s bra. She kept running, running until she couldn’t fight the elastic any more. She snapped backwards into Claus’ arms, the shattered flute coming within a millimeter of his face.

As Claus removed the razored flute from her hand, Loreen realized her situation and broke into tears. Claus threaded Loreen’s arms through the armholes of her dress as she sobbed her heart out. He placed his calming arm around her waist, and led her back into her seat.

Lightfoot had placed a call for back up, and was working his way around the table to Holdens. “Think I’ll pass on dessert.”

Holdens was unruffled. He took a packet of artificial sweetener from his jacket’s breast pocket, tore it open and sprinkled it into his coffee.

Nicky’s eyes closed in on the empty packet of sweetener. “I wouldn’t drink that coffee!” he strongly advised Holdens, all the guests’ taking note and wondering why.

“What’s wrong with my coffee?” Holden’s calmly stirred.

“It’s the wrong sweetener,” Nicky answered.

“Your chef is brilliant, but his choice of sweeteners leaves room for desire.” Holdens put his spoon down.

Claus glanced at the empty pack by Holdens’ saucer. “Holdens has been using that brand through the entire film.”

“That’s right,” Len said. He carries it around with him.”

“What if Cynthia poisoned the sweetener?” Nicky proposed. “Like she switched the oils,” he threw in.

Everyone quietly mocked the idea, but they had all pushed back from the table. Even Lightfoot was holding position.

“The man’s going to jail,” Charlie said. “Let him have his last decent cup of coffee.”

“Going to jail? I don’t think so. Everyone knows what happens to a man with my looks in prison. Besides, I’ve done nothing wrong. I understand Cynthia should pay for what she’s done, but I’ve got nothing to do with that.”

Nicky slid his cup over to Holdens. “It’s still black,” he offered. “Give one of Carlos’ sweeteners another try.”

“Cynthia could have laced your sweetener with Sodium Cyanide,” Len explained, one of his parts coming back to him. “No, Potassium!” Len changed his mind. “KCN as opposed to NaCN would leave the sweetener with a reasonably undetectable bitter almond essence,” Len prated on. “Although if Holdens should spill

any on someone, it would be absorbed through the skin causing irreparable damage.”

Claus guided Loreen up from her chair, and backed up. Verdad, Philip and Victoria followed suit.

Holdens was hurt and astounded, as he looked around at the nervous guests. “I can’t believe you would think Cynthia would ever do that to me. Holdens picked up his cup, and had drank most of his coffee.

“Besides Cynthia’s gone, and she doesn’t have the key to my place. I never gave her one.” Holdens finished his coffee, and placed his cup in its saucer. Holdens sat back, relaxed. “I told you it was impossible!” He motioned to a Waiter for another cup.

The Waiter approached, and Holdens began to shudder. The Waiter backed off, and anyone who was still sitting vacated his or her chair. Holdens’ shaking became violent, and he lurched up from his seat.

Lightfoot stood his ground as guests, waiters and busboys raced to position themselves as far from Holdens as possible, which was behind Ilena’s chair.

Holdens gagged then suddenly froze at attention.

At that moment, Carlos entered the solarium. He was ticked off by the fact that he’d been radioing the waiters for ten minutes with no results. He hadn’t thought of switching to the open channel. He’d been standing by, waiting on his frequency for the call to flambé. Too much time had passed, so with his black jacket freshly steamed and his long fancy lighter in hand, he head out anyway.

Carlos bowed his head politely when he saw Holdens at such a stiff attention, but before he could finish raising his head back up, Carlos became aware that guests, waiters and busboys were at the other end of the room with Ilena, and that they were all gawking in horror at Holdens.

Holdens went into convulsions, fell onto the table and with one final extravagant contortion, died.

Carlos fainted; hit the floor the floor like a blob of mashed potatoes.

“Cynthia poisoned him!” Daphne screamed, running on the spot.

“Oh my god, he’s dead!” Moira panicked. “I’ve got to get out of here!” She ran in blindly into the table, knocking over a candlestick.

The candle, flame intact, landed on a pure linen serviette, and it flew into flames before the blink of an eye.

“The table’s on fire,” Victoria screamed.

Nicky and Lightfoot reacted in two blinks, grabbing wine buckets and tossing their watery ice onto the fire. It wasn’t enough. The pure linen tablecloth had caught like paper, and flame tongues were already licking a path towards Holdens.

Holdens’ braided hair whooshed into an inferno.

Suddenly Seiji was at Holdens’ side with a fire extinguisher. In less than twenty seconds, the fire was out, but it was too, late. Most of Holdens’ hair had burnt away. Now he was truly almost bald.

“That was quite the earful,” Seiji commented as he took his communication device out from his vest’s breast pocket then turned it off.

Its amazing how rapidly gossip spreads, sometimes faster than fire. By the time Nicky, Lightfoot and Seiji exited the building there was more Press than Crime Scene Personnel. Lightfoot didn’t understand. He had placed the emergency calls himself, and as far as he knew everything had been handled with the utmost discretion.

Turns out Daphne and Moira had managed to get a few calls off before they were even questioned by the police. Of course at the time of questioning, all guests had been asked to remain quiet until the investigation was complete. Daphne and Moira had quietly uttered an “oops,” but no one had heard.

Len loomed out of the mayhem. He appeared angry as he approached Nicky and Lightfoot.

Seiji intercepted. “You should go home,” he suggested.

“Yes, I’ll leave,” Len assured, “but first I have to ask Lieutenant Lightfoot why he lied to me.”

“I lied?” Lightfoot snarled.

Len trembled as he made his case. “You told me all hair evidence was accounted for. Then later, when Nicky asked, you admitted you hadn’t been honest with me, that there were some auburn hairs.”

“Oldest trick in the book,” Lightfoot roared. “Nicky said, maybe I hadn’t been honest. I said, maybe. Meaning maybe.”

Len was mortified.

“Don’t take it so hard!” Nicky’s eyes pierced Len’s. “You weren’t the only one who fell for it.”

On a cold gray autumn day, a handsome dark-eyed man stands on the shore of a river. He pulls an envelope from his coat pocket, and reads the address: Hudson River.

The handsome young man rips it open then pours the earthen contents into the water. Nearby, a beautiful young woman is witness.

The woman approaches the man. “That’s the last one,” she speaks softly. “You’ve covered the entire city, Central Park, Wall Street, Times Square, The East River, Queens, The Bronx. Can you tell me who he was now?”

“My father,” the young man answers, “Nicky Faime, a cop who played an actor to perfection.”

Nicky rolled over in his new bed. He was trying to shake his dream, but it kept towing him in back under. It was the same dream he’d had every night since the dinner incident. He rolled over again, kicked his legs and woke up running. His sable eyes pierced into the gray tones of his darkened room.

Several seconds passed before Nicky placed himself. It was understandable. For two weeks Nicky had been waking up in a different bedroom, and now that he was back at home in his actual bedroom, it was different.

It was different because it had been painted due the fire, and partially refurnished to suit Lara's needs and wants. Today Lara was coming home. Tonight Nicky would begin sleeping in his den until the baby was born.

After the fire, but before cleanup crews had been allowed in, there'd been a thorough police investigation. This had allowed enough time for the unfortunate stench of smoke and sweet sickly reek of Holdens burnt hair and charred flesh to set in. Removing the odors had been a challenge, even to the highly skilled sanitization specialists that had been called in. Not only had the entire apartment been scrubbed to religious standards, it had been completely repainted.

Nicky sat up in bed. He was relieved to be out of the furnished apartment he'd temporarily moved his operations to. He knew all concerned felt the same way.

Carlos had gone into a depression after the dinner. Worse, having had to work in a strange and inadequate kitchen only helped feed the pathetic mood he'd resigned himself to. Then there'd been the salt in the wound, the media.

Especially biting to Carlos was an article titled, **Dinner At Nicky's - A Meal To Die For**. A notable cooking magazine had tried unsuccessfully to get an interview with Carlos. Nonetheless, they had managed to reproduce his entire evening's menu, and were running a contest on recreating the recipes.

However annoying that article had been, it had been only the tip of the iceberg.

Ilena was in a publicist's hellhole. Damage control, necessitated by speculative and sensationalized reporting, still involved fielding media non-stop.

Suicide Star Sizzles At Soiree had been a shameless item in tattle rag. It had focused on the horror of poisoning oneself, dying and then the gore of your corpse having had burnt at one of Nicky's dinners.

Eight Black Lives Left For Nicky Faime was a smoking gun type internet piece that attempted to expose Nicky's dinner as a planned publicity stunt gone wrong, and all to promote the upcoming release of his newest movie, **Nine Black Lives**.

Murder Has It's Rewards was featured in the *Celebrity Monthly's* current release. The magazine brushed over the story of how Nicky had solved the Lucille Brookers murder. It preferred the entertainment value of dwelling on the fact that Philip Stursberg, one of the police's original prime suspects, would now collect ten million dollars thanks to Nicky.

Postscript was a juicy tagline about Philip planning a six-month European vacation with his new fiancée, actress Victoria Plumner.

Ilena had used Nicky's web site effectively over the past weeks. With daily personal messages from Nicky to his fans, he was more popular than ever. She had orchestrated an on-line press conference, which in spite of its frenzied atmosphere had come off with Nicky looking beautiful, and Lightfoot, even better.

Nicky would, however, give up only one personal interview. The medium would be television. It was TBA, and the big guys all had their hands up.

Nicky got out of bed, took a shower in the dark then turned the lights on. He wandered into his closet, but when he got there, his closet was bare, for the most part. The few pieces, taking up whatever space they could, were new.

Nicky's bedroom, close to the solarium, had suffered some of the more serious smoke damage. He knew even if the cleaners could eliminate ninety-nine percent of the smell from his clothes, whenever he wore anything he'd always detect the lingering one percent of Holdens. His solution was simple. He'd buy a new wardrobe.

Nicky had figured he'd just have his clothes cleaned then dropped off at the Goodwill. At least that's what he had thought until Loreen had called.

Loreen had phoned Nicky shortly after he'd temporarily relocated. She'd wanted to thank him again, for finding Lucille's murderer. She'd also been feeling a growing guilt about how things had turned out, with the fire and all. She had felt a need to apologize.

Nicky had been easy going about her apology. He'd told Loreen not to stress. His place was getting renovated, and would be better than ever. It had been around this point in their conversation that Loreen had become aware of Nicky's Goodwill give away.

Needless to say, in the end, Loreen had convinced Nicky to let her haul it away to sell off on eBay. Loreen had offered Nicky the same deal she'd offered Lucille. Nicky had agreed, on the condition that Loreen would quit her "Jim's" job and resume her liquidating of the Shrine. Loreen had gratefully answered yes, but she might take the odd shifts.

Nicky browsed his clothing options. There were a few pairs of jeans, a small stack of t-shirts, one black suit and half dozen shirts. Ilena and Leo had been urging him to get more clothes, but buying new clothes, even hiring someone to buy them for him was an annoying distraction.

Besides, Lara was coming home, and Nicky would be living out of the closet in the den. The den closet was not a walk-in. Nicky figured once the baby was born, and he moved back into the bedroom, he'd buy more clothes. Nicky threw on jeans, a t-shirt and a shirt.

Nicky couldn't remember if he was supposed to see Lightfoot today, or not. Nicky had seen a lot of Lightfoot over the past two weeks. Lightfoot was winding up the Brookers case, and although not heading Lara's assault investigation was involved circumferentially.

As Nicky adjusted his shirt's collar in the mirror, he could smell aftershave on his hands. I can't believe I forgot to wash my hands after applying the after-shave, Nicky thought with part of his mind, as thoughts of Julie loomed predominantly into the rest of it. Nicky considered where that investigation had gotten, in as much as Lightfoot had told him, while he ambled to his bathroom.

At his bathroom sink, Nicky, whose mind was preoccupied with following Julie's trail, turned a tap on.

Okay, Lightfoot told me that the follow up on Gregor Hansen was complete, Nicky reminded himself.

Lightfoot had informed Nicky that Mr. Gregor Hansen was a congenial old-timer still farming a small patch near Afton,

Oklahoma. Gregor had been only too glad to help. He'd been sent photos of Julie.

When Lightfoot had called Gregor Hansen to ask him if he'd recognized the person in the picture, Gregor had answered, can't say as for sure, but can't say as for sure not!

That had been enough for Lightfoot. He'd forwarded the wanted poster and details to Deputy Sheriff Bob Fisher at the Ottawa County Sheriff's Department. Fisher had told Lightfoot he'd dispatch the posters. His guys would ask around, but it could take time as the Sheriff's Department serviced a large rural area.

In his imagination, Nicky clearly saw a rustic field, a farmhouse in the near distance and an apple pie cooling on a sill. It was so real that Nicky could smell the brown sugar and cinnamon.

"Shit!" Nicky swore as he realized he was scalding the palm of his left hand. He'd turned on the hot water, but had not turned on the cold.

Nicky instantly pulled his hand out from under the steaming torrent, twirled the hot water off and spun the cold tap into action. He thrust his palm under the cool relief. The cold water became frigid, and the annoying chill that Nicky had come to associate with pain and revelation placed itself on Nicky's neck. Now what, he wondered?

Nicky could still smell apple and cinnamon. "Carlos' special recipe," Nicky said aloud. Before he turned off the water, he soaked some tissues in cold water, and pressed the frigid wad into his raw left palm. Nicky curled his fingers around the wet blob, and took off for the kitchen.

The enticing aroma of fresh brewed coffee fused with the apple pie was spinning Nicky's appetite, as he entered the kitchen with a scarf draped over the back of his neck.

"Good morning!" Nicky said, observing Carlos body language. He hadn't seen Carlos this happy since before the Julie attack on Lara and his son had happened.

"Good morning, sir! It's nice to be back," Carlos greeted then removed two perfect pies from the oven. "You've caught that strange chill again," Carlos commented as he espied Nicky's scarf. "Let's hope it doesn't turn into a cold!"

"I'm not worried!" Nicky said, "not with two hot apple pies up for the eating."

"Actually, sir," Carlos corrected cheerily, "One pie is up for the eating, as you say. The other pie is all for Miss Lara. She's eating for two now."

In his imagination, Nicky saw Lara in all her blue-eyed blonde beauty. Her already petite waist was cinched further in with this crazy sexy apron. She held up the perfect apple pie, and began to eat it.

"Of course," Nicky's measured voice understood. In his mind, Nicky observed Lara's tiny waist growing larger and larger, until he once again realized he would have to wait several months before he and Lara could resume their sex life.

Mercifully, Ilena entered through the service hall, distracting Nicky from his unexpected Lara torment. "Good morning! The coffee hasn't smelled this good in weeks," Ilena raved heading directly to the pot, "and is that apple pie I smell?"

“Good morning Miss Ilena,” Carlos reciprocated, “Yes it’s apple pie. And Now with Miss Lara coming home things can get back to normal.”

Ilena took her cup to the table, savoring a sip on the way and wondering what normal was with Nicky. Carlos set pie slices in front of Nicky and Ilena. As they ate pie and drank coffee, Nicky’s brain resumed its sexually tormented train of thought about Lara.

Once again Ilena broke it. ”Seiji’s picking Lara and Ronnie up in two hours.” Ilena reminded. “Ronnie Mann has been with Lara since eight this morning, and has taken care of everything, including the nurse.”

“I don’t know what I’d have done these last two weeks without Ronnie,” Nicky admitted. “Especially with Lara’s mother having been away in the Orient.”

It was true. Ronnie had picked up all of the slack in the situation. Ronnie had spoken daily with Lara’s mother, and had set up daily Skype communications between Lara and her mother, Ruth Saint James.

Yes Nicky had gone to the hospital everyday to see Lara, but he’d only had so much strength containing certain sexual urges as he observed Lara in her extremely weakened, delicate state. Ronnie had been the strong one, spending hour upon hour with Lara.

Ronnie had screened, and had chosen the perfect nurse to attend Lara when she came home. Ronnie had organized Carlos with what his added responsibilities would be in terms of diet and what to keep his eyes open for once Lara came home. After all, the nurse could only be there eight hours a day.

Ronnie had kept Nicky up on everything, and she hadn't spared him any of her personal thoughts, either. Nicky could feel Ronnie's know-it-all droning voice gnawing away at him.

How do you expect Lara to gain any real strength when she's so insecure and vulnerable, Ronnie had chastised Nicky? I like you Nicky. You're a decent person and I think you'll do the right thing for your child, Lara and yourself in the end.

Nicky had known what Ronnie had meant. He'd known all along, even before Ronnie had so pointedly pointed it out.

Nicky got up for more coffee. "I've only got a few things to move over to the den."

"I can help." Ilena was definite. "As a matter of fact, I've already begun," Ilena informed Nicky, as she got up to get more coffee. "Your laptop and your paper are on your new desk."

Nicky sat down. "I got a new desk?" he asked hopefully. Carlos placed another slice of pie in front of Nicky.

"It arrived this morning," Ilena answered, as she refilled her cup.

"Sir!" Carlos implored.

Nicky turned his head to Carlos. "Yes."

Carlos looked uneasy. He wasn't responsible for the latest desk, and he didn't want to be blamed when it flopped. "I promise I had nothing to do with the new desk," he vowed.

Nicky looked back to Ilena. She was gone. Nicky tossed the wet wad he'd been holding, and blew on his palm. He topped off his cup and let his curiosity lead him directly to his office.

Nicky was fully braced for the next installment in the bad desk series. As he entered his office, Nicky was transported into a Film Noir when he saw the vintage structure.

The richness of the Mahogany quietly took prominence amid the largely black and grey shades of Nicky's office. Circa nineteen forty-eight, it was basically simple, straightforward and solid. However, lingering details of the more elaborate era preceding it graced the legs and drawer handles. It was Zen with the decor of Nicky's apartment.

Sam Spade himself could have sat at this very desk. Sure it was a richer wood than Sam would have afforded, but time had humbled the desk. Gone was the luster of a favored varnish, cigarette burns ran along the right side and a profusion of faint cup circles formed a mantric design to the left. Nicky ran a hand over the meditative formation. It had a good vibe.

"Why not?" Nicky tried to argue with himself, but couldn't. He took his seat behind it. Nice size, Nicky thought as he viewed it before him. It's not ostentatious, yet remains commanding, Nicky decided, as he picked up his morning paper. He put his feet up. The desk was the perfect height, and its rounded edges massaged his legs. It was beyond comfortable. It was therapeutic. He raised his left hand and blew on its palm.

There was only one person in the world capable of figuring this was the desk for Nicky. Nicky got Ilena on intercom. "Hey, get me Lightfoot!"

“He’s in court all day,” Ilena reminded. “He said you can thank him later.”

“Right! We’re not meeting today,” Nicky answered his earlier question to himself.

“Nicky!” Ilena spoke swiftly, preventing him from disconnecting. “The desk can be refinished.”

“Nah, it’s all good.”

Ilena had known that’s what Nicky would say, but It’s like Lightfoot had said, it’s death to assume.

Nicky took his feet off the desk, tossed his paper, got up and went to his filing cabinet. While pulling the files on Julie out of the top cabinet, he was interrupted by Ilena. It was Bella on two.

As soon as Nicky heard Bella was on the line, he knew it had something to do with Julie. Nicky sat on the desk, placing the files beside him.

“Bella!” Nicky was upbeat.

“Nicky,” Bella was offbeat. “I don’t know, things are just a bit unsettling right now, so maybe I’m not thinking right.” Bella took a moment to explain. “The buildings up for sale. I’m so worried about the restaurant,” she moaned.

After a deep breath, Bella went on to relate how she’d been seeing Mr. Goliath, the real estate agent, out the front doors. As they’d said their good-byes, she could hear the Maitre d’ talking to a woman. This woman wanted to make a reservation four months

ahead, November seventeenth to be exact. Bella didn't have to remind Nicky that that was his birthday, but she did.

Bella drew Nicky into her experience. "This woman looks around the room and points to the table she wants. It's your table for two, Nicky. When the Maitre d' asks for her contact information, she has none. Says she'll call two weeks ahead to confirm."

"What name did she book under?"

"Sandra Collins."

"Did she look like the picture I showed you?"

"Nicky, I was trying to get a good look, but I was busy with Mr. Goliath. I tried to grab as many glimpses as possible. I saw she had very dark hair, and wore sunglasses. Other than that, she seemed average height, average weight. I don't know what else to say?"

Nicky thanked Bella, and told her not to worry about the restaurant. He made her promise. Bella promised.

Nicky returned to his chair, and pulled himself up to his desk. Nicky browsed the Julie files. He paused to stare at a photograph of Julie with her heavy make-up and black hair.

The phone rang. It was Leo's direct line. "Leo!" Nicky answered.

"Faime, how's the apartment?"

"Good, Leo."

"Good, good! Good enough to go back to work?"

“Yeah, but no. Can’t focus on acting right now. A few months, maybe,” Nicky thought out loud. “But if you hear about a remake of Baby Doll, give me a call!”

“Baby Doll?” Leo wanted to make sure he was hearing right. Tennessee Williams?”

“That’s right, I’ll consider playing Vacarro.”

“Good move, Faime,” Leo agreed, understanding that Nicky was sliding into one of his artistic needs phases.

Leo said he’d call Nicky back later, but he didn’t get to say goodbye. Nicky had hung up.

A light rap sounded at the partially opened door then Ilena entered. She had a load of Nicky’s garments over her arm. She opened the closet door, and hung everything up.

Ilena was on her way out of Nicky’s room when Carlos entered with a laundry basket full of Nicky’s folded t-shirts and other non-hanging items. Carlos knew that only the top drawer in Nicky’s filing cabinet was in use. He intended to fill the rest with Nicky’s clothes.

“Ilena, don’t leave yet! I need to have a quick meeting with you and Carlos,” Nicky instructed.

Ilena and Carlos gathered in front of Nicky’s new desk. There were no chairs, so they stood. “I guess we should get some chairs,” Nicky mentioned.

“Certainly,” Ilena and Carlos responded.

“The doctor has informed me that Lara has made incredible progress since yesterday. Apparently she made more progress yesterday than all of the rest of her time spent in the hospital added together.”

“It’s because she’s coming home,” Carlos beamed.

“Partly,” Nicky said.

“And the other part,” Ilena asked quietly, already knowing the answer in her guarded heart.

“Yesterday morning I asked Lara to marry me.”

Nicky glanced up at Carlos and Ilena. “It’s to take place here in the apartment in the next several weeks. It’s to be a small affair, seven guests only, including Lara’s mother who will be back from the Orient. As per Lara’s mother’s wishes, we’ll require a Catholic priest for the ceremony.”

“Congratulations!” Carlos rejoiced. “I have the perfect menu in mind at this moment.” He started to speed out of Nicky’s office, to deal with the arrangements, then remembered the folded clothes. Carlos greedily hummed the wedding march, as he filed Nicky’s t-shirts and underwear in the cabinet.

Ilena remained at the foot of Nicky’s desk. She was in pain, but you’d never know it from her gregarious smile. “Congratulations!” she said sincerely. Not a curl budged.

“Thanks,” the corners of Nicky’s lips betrayed happiness. “I’m going on a three day trip to Afton, Oklahoma, with Seiji. It should happen after the wedding, while Lara’s mother is still here,” Nicky informed Ilena. “Can you check into travel and accommodation?”

“I’m Right on it,” Ilena assured. She head back to her office.

Carlos, who was returning to the bedroom to finish prepping it for Lara, was right on Ilena’s heels as he exited Nicky’s room.

Nicky was alone. He got up, and went to the walnut bookshelf where the preferentially lined-up books he’d kept to read abided. Nicky hadn’t read any, not one, not yet. He pulled out the first book in the line-up with his right hand. He raised his left hand and blew onto its palm. A specific pain had been intensifying in that area since he had thrown the wet wad of paper in the trash.

Nicky sat himself in his chair behind his desk. Testing, testing, Nicky said inside his head. I can finally hear myself, he thought. He picked up the Julie folder, and held it next to the book. “Time to consider the facts,” he sighed quietly aloud.

As he looked between the folder and the book, Nicky could hear Lightfoot’s words of wisdom. “One thing distracts from the other, as much as one thing leads to another. The trick is not to get sidetracked.”

He placed the folder on the desk then sat back in his chair. He put his feet up on the desk, placed the book on his lap and opened it. As he started to read, Nicky began to blow on his left palm. He stopped reading.

Nicky leaned a bit forward, and opened a drawer. Nicky drew a scarf out of the drawer then closed it. He settled comfortably into his chair, while pulling the scarf around the back of his neck. Let’s see, Nicky thought. Where was I? Oh yeah, Dedication.

