

Diamonds in the Surf
A Baywatch Novel
By Adam Altman
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Part One: A Little Diamond Heist and a Lot of Calamari

The sun rose on another perfect southern California day. As the sky brightened, it was apparent that it would be a gorgeous day. Even the weatherman agreed. The forecast called for temperatures in the mid-70's, light winds and not a cloud in the sky. Soon the beaches would be teeming with people, young and old, all enjoying the Malibu surf, sand and sun.

As it was, however, at 7 AM, there were just a few people populating the beach, most of them were Baywatch lifeguards getting ready for their morning shifts. Two of these, Matt Brodie and Mitch Buchannon were having an age-old (for them anyway) argument about the qualities of various surfboards. Mitch, the older of the two, his broad chest slightly damp, gleaming in the morning sun, his thick wavy hair looking perfect and windblown and just like you'd always expect him to look, argued that the older, longer surfboards are the way to go.

"They just have more style and more class, Matt," Mitch said. "You young kids just don't know what you're talking about." The two men were carrying their boards from the Baywatch headquarters building down to the surf. The friends often would surf together on days that they shared a morning shift, and most of the time their talk came back to this subject and whenever that happened, it turned to a friendly argument.

"That longboard of yours looks like it belongs in a museum, my friend," Matt countered. He, like Mitch, looked absolutely perfect, dark hair blowing gently in the breeze, his tanned body working effortlessly as it carried him and his shortboard across the sand. "Get with the times. You've got to modernize."

"I don't have to do any such thing. We don't even have a DVD player at home."

"I know," Matt teased, "Hobie comes over to my place to watch movies."

"So that's where he goes. Come on, what's so great about DVD's that our Betamax machine doesn't have?"

Matt's efforts to keep from doubling over in laughter almost worked, but at the last second he failed. Mitch watched as his friend and fellow Baywatch lifeguard collapsed in the sand in hysterics.

"What? What did I say?" Mitch asked, truly perplexed. But Matt was unable to answer, and Mitch continued on toward the water as the younger man could do nothing but pound his fists in the sand and laugh.

Elsewhere, it was turning out to be less than a perfect day in California. Specifically, 20 miles southeast of Matt and Mitch's location, at the Santa Monica airport where two shadowy figures struggled to remove a tarp from a small single-engine plane. These shadowy figures should be ridiculously happy, having just absconded with \$23 million worth of diamonds. They'd robbed Nero's Diamond Shack in Beverly Hills and

Nero wouldn't even know he'd been robbed for another 3 and a half hours. The police wouldn't know it for another ten minutes after that. By that time, these two should be well on their way to their hideout in the remote reaches of the Olympic Mountains, laying low, sipping champagne and waiting for their fence to call. The whole plan had gone off without a hitch. Until now.

Max, a tall man with roguish good looks and a day's worth of stubble gracing his chin fought with the cover on the plane. He couldn't believe that Barbara, his partner, hadn't managed this detail. She was supposed to take care of every aspect of their escape and here they were, spending precious minutes trying to remove the damned tarp from their plane. The tarp had gotten caught in the pilot-side door and was not coming off.

Barbara, a six-foot tall Slavic-looking blonde woman, the kind of woman many women would kill to look like (and the kind of woman that wouldn't blink an eye about killing any of those women herself, just for kicks) stood and watched as Max fumed. Max was usually so cocksure and confident and here he was, being reduced to an awkward klutz by a simple tarp. Knowing they had plenty of time and being a bit annoyed with her partner because of an earlier tiff – Max had accused her of flirting with their waiter at dinner the previous evening and had ended up putting the poor man in traction with very few bones in his body left intact – she let him struggle without offering any assistance. Fighting back a giggle, she finally gave in and lent him a hand.

“Stand back, you fool,” she said, the slightest trace of a Russian accent in her voice. Barbara removed a nasty-looking knife from a hilt attached to her right boot. Max took a step or two away from her, never quite knowing her intentions, nor her mood. Barbara merely thrust her blade through the tarp and slit it neatly from the top of the plane down to the ground. The tarp fell away from the aircraft.

“Take care of that garbage,” Max commanded, trying to reassert his dominance. “I'll stow the goods.” He set about loading the black duffel bag filled with their haul in the luggage compartment.

Barbara gathered up the tattered tarp and put it into a garbage dumpster nearby. She'd been trying to figure out a way to ditch Max for some time now. The guy was really bringing her down. Years and years ago, when they first met, he'd been dashing, charming and he had easily won her affections. These days, however, she wasn't so sure what she was doing with him. More often than not, he was snapping at her over some infraction of one of his seemingly endless amount of unspoken rules. It was as if she couldn't do anything right. She didn't know when things had changed, but they definitely did and she was a strong enough woman to know that she deserved better. Besides that, he was becoming dangerous. She never knew when he was going to take an unneeded hostage, shoot some innocent by-stander or beat the crap out of a traffic cop. Risks were par for the course in their line of work, but Max was making life harder by taking unnecessary ones. There'd been a time when she would have gone to jail for him, would have taken a fall for him, might even have taken a bullet for him, but those days were long since in the past.

But, for the moment, she was stuck with him. For one thing, he was the only one fully qualified on the plane they were about to make their escape in. He also had sole possession of the combination on the lock on their bag of jewels. Perhaps once they had fenced the goods, she'd be able to take enough money to get away and make a new start. She would play it sweet, make him happy and then leave him somewhere.

“Ready to go,” she said. “Let’s start pre-flight.”

Max nodded and entered the plane, settling into the pilot’s chair. He pulled the headset off its hook and placed it over his ears. Barbara sat at his side and did the same and then took out a clipboard with a pre-flight checklist. Barbara began naming tasks on the list as Max repeated them and flipped the appropriate switch, or turned the appropriate knob. The plane checked out and soon they were ready to go.

Skip Harrelson checked in for his morning shift in the control tower at Santa Monica Airport. As soon as he had placed his headphones on his head, he heard a voice.

“Tower, this is Moonie A7392 requesting clearance to taxi.”

Skip jumped a bit. It wasn’t unusual for a plane to be departing first thing in the morning, but he’d never been surprised by a request the second he’d settled in. He hadn’t even stirred the non-dairy creamer into his coffee yet.

Skip cleared his throat and keyed his microphone. “Moonie A7392 this is tower. Good morning. Can you give me a second here? Gotta work the crick out of my neck.”

There was a pause and then a moment later, Skip heard a voice that was obviously dripping with poorly-concealed frustration and anger.

“Tower, we’re in a bit of a hurry here. We’d like to go now, if it’s all the same to you.”

Typical Californians, Skip thought. So laid-back and worry free until it’s inconvenient to someone else. Skip was from the Midwest where things moved at a slower pace, or at least if it was hurried, there was courtesy and politeness in spades. Part of Skip wanted to delay A7392 out of spite, but Skip had been raised well by his parents and he knew that two wrongs don’t make a right.

“Okay, Moonie, sorry about that. We’ve got your flight plan here, straight up to Portland, right?”

The voice in his headphones was more relaxed now. Still strained, but the pilot’s frustration was obviously tempered by the kindness Skip had shown. “Roger that, tower.”

“Permission to taxi right, Echo Bravo 3,” Skip said.

“Right; Echo Bravo 3,” came the pilot’s voice.

Skip looked up from his radar displays and watched as the small plane lurched forward as the pilot released the brakes. The aircraft turned right and headed down taxiway echo bravo 3 as instructed.

“A7392 turn right at Hotel Charlie 2 and proceed to runway 22 left,” Skip said.

“Roger. Right at Hotel Charlie 2, runway 22 left.”

Max briefly considered stopping the plane near the control tower, running up the stairs and strangling the controller there, all because he’d suggested that he wait a moment for the controller to do his morning stretches. As if he didn’t have a schedule to keep! The thought left as quickly as it had come, as he’d looked over at Barbara who must have seen the anger flare up in his eyes. Chastened, he’d held his rage in check and brought his emotions – and his voice – under control. No need to jeopardize the job now that they were so close to being away free and clear. He brought the plane around to face down the runway, applied the brakes and increased the throttle to $\frac{3}{4}$ power.

“Tower, this is Moonie A7392 requesting clearance for takeoff.”

The controllers nebbish-sounding voice came across the radio. “A7392, you are clear to proceed. After takeoff turn to a heading of oh-two-oh degrees.”

“Roger, oh-two-oh degrees.”

Max released the brakes and the plane’s engine sent the tiny craft hurtling down the runway. Max expertly brought the plane into the air and soon was making the right turn to the assigned heading.

His radio crackled again. “Moonie A7392, switch to SOCAL control, 17392.98 on your radio dial.”

“Roger, 17392.98.”

“Good d—” The controller’s traditional farewell was cut off as Barbara punched in the new frequency.

Skip frowned. Dealing with an angry and snobby pilot was no way to start his day. He reminded himself that the pilot’s tone was nothing personal and that he’d handled himself appropriately and professionally. Taking a few deep breaths and smelling the aroma of his Folger’s coffee, Skip was able to calm himself. No need to get worked up over nothing.

Skip looked at the list of flight plans scheduled for the morning. There wasn’t another plane due in or out for 45 minutes. After that, the morning was pretty hectic, but until the next plane, Skip had plenty of time to himself and that was just fine by him. Because of the chaotic nature of his job, Skip treasured his alone time, and that was his plan until he had to start pushing tin again later in the morning. He stretched out in his chair, looked out the window at the sky and saw it was going to be another perfect day in sunny California.

Max and Barbara flew North, began making their way towards Oregon and their new lives. The flight was going smoothly. Max followed the directions of the SOCAL air traffic controller and soon they were over the Pacific.

“What are we going to do with all that money, Max?” Barbara cooed.

Max warmed to the game. If there was anything that could break a dark mood of his, it was talking about money. The sexy hint of a sultry tone in Barbara’s voice didn’t hurt either.

“Babe, we’re gonna live like kings. We’re gonna have the finest wines, the best food, the fastest cars, the hottest women...” Max trailed off, knowing he’d gotten carried away. He waited for a furious reproach from the woman at his side, but none came. Max risked a to his right. Barbara looked at him expectantly and nodded, urging him to continue.

Maybe she hadn’t heard him right. Maybe she thought he’d said something a little more innocuous; something that didn’t sound like he was ready to dump her the first chance he got. Maybe she just thought he was kidding (he certainly wasn’t.) Or maybe she just didn’t feel like fighting. Still, the look on her face was like she was hoping he’d find another woman; like *she* was trying to get rid of *him*.

But Max didn’t have the time to think about the issue further, nor did he have time to ask her about it as at that moment, a dozen different warning alarms, bells and buzzers began going off at the same time.

“What the hell?” Max exclaimed.

“We’re losing oil pressure!” Barbara cried.

“I can see that!” Max shouted back.

“The fuel gauges are dropping too. Hydraulics are failing. The whole plane is falling apart!”

Max pulled back on the throttle and began attempting various such maneuvers that might keep their little plane aloft.

Mitch and Matt were enjoying their last run of the morning. Soon they’d have to hang up their boards and don the orange swim trunks of the L.A. County lifeguard. Matt didn’t mind though – he absolutely loved his job. Being a Baywatch lifeguard meant everything to the young man and he always looked forward to his times on duty. He enjoyed it almost as much as he enjoyed ribbing Mitch.

“Hey Mitch!” he shouted as he cut across a wave right in front of his boss. “Eat my wake!”

“You little punk!” Mitch cried. Here he was: Lieutenant of the Baywatch Lifeguards, a former Navy Seal, and father of a teenager and he couldn’t get a little respect on a surf board. But Mitch knew that once he was in his tower, his eyes on his water, alert and ready to go at the first hint of trouble, he got the respect that he deserved. That was when Lt. Mitch Buchannon was at his best; when he felt the most alive.

Matt glanced back at Mitch, and seeing that the older lifeguard was okay, or at least still on that ridiculously oversized board of his, waved and shouted, “See ya at Headquarters!”

That was it. The young lifeguard had pushed Mitch over the edge. Remembering his Navy Seal training, and more recently, remembering the tricks his son, Hobie used in that surfing video game he was always playing -- something Mitch didn’t understand at all – why play a surfing video game when you live less than 15 minutes from the Pacific Ocean? Hobie never had an adequate answer to that question – Mitch positioned himself on his board such that his body produced less wind resistance and he quickly gained speed on Matt. Matt risked a glance back and saw that Mitch was fast approaching him. Reflexively, he tried to speed up by using his front foot to paddle as if he were propelling himself on a skateboard.

This, of course, only had the effect of putting Matt well off-balance. Mitch saw his opportunity and stripped off the band attaching his board to his ankle. He sprang from the board, leaping at Matt, whom he hit directly in the back. He pulled Matt from his board and the pair landed in shallow water. They wrestled their way up to the beach.

“Okay, okay! I give up!” Matt cried, laughing, as Mitch pinned him to the sand. “Let me go!”

“Not until you admit the only reason you ride that short board is because you don’t have the skill to ride the long board,” Mitch laughed.

“No way! I could ride that dinosaur of yours any day of the week.”

“Is that right?” Mitch asked, rolling off Matt. “You’re on! How about Monday?”

Matt racked his brain for any excuse not to live up to his claim but couldn’t find one. “Uh, yeah, sure. Why not?”

“Great,” said Mitch. “Same time, same place.”

Matt sighed, realizing his big mouth had gotten him into yet another jam. He’d have to find some way to make Mitch forget about this little agreement.

The two lifeguards lay in the sand, catching their breath. As they lay there, Matt scanned the sky. It was perfect. There was none of the usual California smog that morning. Not a single cloud. The sun, low on the horizon behind Matt, was beginning to speed its ascent. Matt knew it would soon be a busy day at the beach.

“We better go get ready, Mitch,” Matt said, propping himself up on his elbows.

“You’re right. It wouldn’t be right for the senior lifeguard to be late for duty.”

“Senior?” Matt laughed. “More like senior citizen!” He jumped to his feet.

Mitch jumped up too, ready to administer another thrashing to his friend.

“You’ve done it this time, pal!” Mitch yelled as he ran after Matt. Mitch was about to jump on Matt’s back to pull him to the ground again when he noticed that Matt had suddenly stopped in his tracks and was looking up at something in the sky. Mitch stopped and looked up as well.

A small plane was crossing the sky and it was obviously in trouble. Smoke was billowing out from the engine and it looked as if it was going to crash into the water.

Matt’s shock lasted only a moment. He immediately set off running in the direction of headquarters, going as fast as he could. Mitch was right behind him, occasionally looking over his shoulder to watch as the aircraft fell towards the sea. Both men knew that their day was going to get very hectic very quickly.

Upon entering headquarters, Mitch immediately began barking out orders to people.

“Call the police! Call the fire department! Call Garner! Bring me everyone!”

“What do you mean, ‘everyone’?” asked a young staffer named Benny.

“Everyone!” Mitch shouted. “We have a plane going down in the ocean as we speak.”

“A plane?” asked Logan Fowler, a young Australian lifeguard. “A commercial jet?”

“No,” snapped Mitch as he made his way back outside. “A single engine prop plane. Get a move on. To the Scarabs!”

Every one of the lifeguards and staff members knew exactly what to do. Several of them flew to the phones and began making calls while others rushed to close off the beach. The rest rushed after Mitch to board the Scarab speed boats.

Several Scarabs circled in the water over the downed plane. One by one, Baywatch lifeguards, equipped with full scuba gear, dove into the ocean with Mitch and Logan in the lead. They swam straight down and could soon see the plane resting on the ocean floor.

Inside the plane, Max was struggling to free himself. His door wouldn’t open, and Barbara was unconscious, so she was no help. He tried undoing her seat belt but it seemed to be jammed. Max kept his panic in check.

“Been in tighter jams than this before,” he told himself. “Just remember Barcelona! That was a scrape and a half.”

The doors wouldn’t open because the water pressure outside the plane was greater than it was inside. If he could change that, things would turn around. Water was coming into the cockpit at a steady pace already, but Max decided to speed up the process. Max leaned across Barbara’s body and opened the glove compartment, revealing a pistol. He

used the weapon to hammer at the windshield until a crack ran through the plexi-glass. Bracing himself against his seat, he kicked the window until the crack was large enough that water was rushing into the cockpit. Before the compartment filled completely, Max took one last breath. It was a damn shame about Barbara, but there were more important things to worry about.

Max exited the cockpit, and began moving back toward the rear compartment and his bag full of diamonds when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked around and saw a man in scuba gear looking down at him. It was Logan, who always prided himself on being first to reach the victims anytime there was trouble. He gestured to Max to ascend with him and offered Max the second respirator on his oxygen tank.

Max took the respirator but refused to surface without the diamonds. He knew it would be next to impossible to retrieve them if he left them behind now. Max hoped to stall the lifeguard by gesturing at Barbara with a pleading look in his eyes. Logan was tempted to leave the man and go for the more attractive of the two victims, but knew that other lifeguards were nearly at the wreck and would attend to the woman. Logan shook his head and pointed towards the other rescuers. Still, Max refused so Logan simply used his superior strength to loosen the man's grip on the plane and head to the surface.

Mitch reached the plane next and watched Logan win his struggle with Max. Mitch looked down to see long blonde hair streaming up through the open windshield. He sped down to find a beautiful and unconscious woman trapped in her seat. Mitch tried to loosen the safety belt but found that it was jammed. Calmly, he took a knife from a sheath strapped to his ankle and neatly sliced through the restraints and freed the woman. As he pulled her from the wreckage, she came to and she looked Mitch right in the eyes. Mitch tried to smile to keep her from panicking. He wasn't sure if it worked because she passed out again.

Mitch pressed the extra mouthpiece on his tank to the woman's lips, hoping to get her some oxygen as they rose to the surface. The strong lifeguard held her tightly against his chest, careful not to aggravate any injuries she might have, but also attempting to stabilize her neck and spine.

Back at the surface, on a waiting Scarab, Michael "Newmie" Newman helped Mitch bring Barbara on board. The boat Logan had brought his victim to was already speeding towards the pier. Mitch could see ambulances and other emergency crews waiting at the water's edge and was proud that his entire staff had performed their duties.

"Take us in, Newman!" Mitch shouted.

Newman turned the boat towards the pier and brought the craft to speed. Soon as they were docked, Mitch handed Barbara up to two waiting EMT's who carried her to a waiting ambulance. The technicians began working on reviving the young woman as the vehicle sped off.

The rescue over, Mitch's adrenaline levels and heart rate returned to normal. As Newman passed, Mitch said, "Great work, pal." Newman returned the compliment with a nod and a smile. Mitch allowed himself and his crew just one moment to feel proud and relaxed.

"Back to work, people!" he shouted. "We've got plenty to keep us busy now. Those of you who should be in towers, get to them. You other folks can help with the

cleanup. And anybody who wants to do my paperwork for me is more than welcome to it," he added jokingly.

Barbara's eyes opened and when her vision cleared a little, she saw Max standing over her.

"What – where am I?" she asked groggily.

"You're in the hospital. You passed in and out of consciousness after our plane crashed. You were delirious and babbling. You started talking about the diamonds!" Max hissed angrily.

"I didn't give us up, did I?" Barbara asked.

"No, fortunately you passed out right before you said anything too incriminating. You've been out for a day or so."

Barbara looked around, taking in her surroundings. It was a standard hospital room. Another patient lay in a bed on the other side of the room. It was an older man who seemed to be asleep.

She looked back at Max, "I couldn't get my seatbelt unbuckled. How did you save me?"

Max looked chagrined. "Well...er, actually we were rescued by L.A. County lifeguards."

An image flashed in Barbara's mind; an image of Mitch – her rescuer; her savior. He was handsome, rugged, brave and genuine. Except for the handsome part, Max was none of those things. Barbara had been panicked, nearly drowned when she "met" Mitch but she could somehow tell he was the real deal.

Max broke into her reverie, "We've got a big problem though."

Barbara put aside her thoughts of Mitch for the moment. "Where are the..." she remembered the other patient and looked over to see if he was listening and then finished her sentence in a whisper. "Where are the diamonds?"

Max too looked around to make sure nobody was eavesdropping. He drew closer to Barbara's side. "They're in the bag. In the plane. *At the bottom of the Pacific*," he said through clenched teeth.

"How deep?" Barbara asked.

"I'm not sure. Two-hundred? Three hundred?"

"Deep," Barbara said dejectedly. "Do we just walk away from it?"

"Walk away? That's nearly \$23 million sitting down there. You don't just walk away from that kind of money. Besides, do you think they're just going to let the plane sit down there? The thing is leaking oil and fuel into the ocean. Greenpeace would kill somebody before they let it sit down there. Besides that, the FAA wants to take a look at it. Frankly, I'd like a look at it too, find out what went wrong. It didn't feel right from take-off. Something was off, and I'd like to know what it was. But *whatever* – the point is that if they raise that plane and find the diamonds, we're as good as caught. They know who we are and it's not as if Nero has kept quiet about being robbed."

"Okay, okay. Just calm down. Let me think here for a minute," Barbara said. "When are they going to raise the plane?"

"Next week. They'd do it right now, but there's some piece of equipment they need that's up in San Francisco, so they're waiting on that."

"Well, that's good. At least it gives us some time."

“There’s nothing preventing them from sending divers down in the mean time though,” Max pointed out.

“It’s too deep for casual divers and they won’t send anyone official down until they’re ready to raise it....” Barbara trailed off as she noticed a lovely bouquet of flowers on her bedside table.

“What?” Max asked. “What is it?”

“Max, the flowers. They’re beautiful. You haven’t given me flowers in so long.”

Again, Max looked chagrined. “*I didn’t get those for you.*”

“You didn’t? Then who did?” Barbara had no idea who’d do such a thing. It wasn’t like she had a whole lot of people in her life who were concerned about her welfare.

“I don’t know,” Max said, reaching for the attached card.

“Give me that!” Barbara cried.

Reluctantly, Max handed the card to Barbara. She quickly removed it from its envelope and read it to herself.

“Oh my! I think I might know someone who can help us with our little problem,” she said, smiling.

“Who? Why? What does the card say?”

Barbara read the card aloud, “Barbara – hope you’re feeling better soon. Perhaps we will meet again sometime when you’re more conscious. Yours, Lt. Mitch Buchannon.”

Mitch wasn’t in the habit of sending flowers to the beautiful women he rescued, though there had been quite a few that he wouldn’t mind pursuing some extended mouth-to-mouth activities with. That sort of thing was frowned upon though, but Mitch hadn’t had much luck with the ladies lately. As much as he hated to admit it, Mitch was hard up for a date.

And there was just something about Barbara that Mitch liked. For the brief moment that her eyes had been open during the rescue, Mitch had seen something special in there. Beyond the panic, shock and fear, he’d seen a passion for life and for living that he just hadn’t come across before. So he’d broken a rule (a very minor rule, mind you) and sent her the third cheapest “Get Well” arrangement the florist showed him.

Mitch looked at the clock. It was 8:30 on a Friday night and there he was, sitting on the couch, playing one of Hobie’s video games. Even Hobie had a date that night. He’d been saving up his money to take out a girl from his school, had gotten up the courage to ask her and she’d said, “Yes.” Mitch had heard the story from an ecstatic Hobie a dozen times, and each time Mitch became less and less sure that Hobie wasn’t just trying to rub his father’s face in his own dating failures. Oh well, Mitch would get back into the swing of things in no time.

He thought about calling the hospital to see if Barbara had woken up yet, but decided that might be too much too soon. Besides, he wasn’t a family member or even a friend so there was no reason for them to give him Barbara’s status. He could have called some of his contacts on the police force, or at the hospital, but it might raise too many questions. He wasn’t sure that he could manage to sound like he was merely a concerned rescuer and not some dorky, infatuated lifeguard.

Maybe he should go through his little black book to see if there were any prospects in there he might have missed the first time through. That would probably be too depressing though. So many old names and memories. So much rejection, too. Mitch sighed. The fact was that he was getting older and the longest relationship he'd had lately was with his toothbrush. No, nothing to do but sit here and play this stupid surfing game.

But he just couldn't get his mind off Barbara. He hadn't seen any rings on her fingers when he rescued her, so that was promising. Mitch didn't know if she was romantically involved with that Max fellow she'd been on the plane with, but he decided to go with the assumption that she wasn't. He just had to wait and hope the flowers would do the trick.

Even though Max was less than thrilled at being continually tied to Barbara, he was even less happy with her idea of using this lifeguard's attraction to her to get the diamonds. There was too much that could go wrong and if she didn't play it right, they could both wind up in jail. Max was also more than a little jealous. The tanned and toned buffoon thought he could send flowers to his girl and get away with it? There was a time when Max would have used a less overt gesture as an excuse to put someone in the hospital. Once, a guy at a bar in Reno had complimented Barbara's hair and the unlucky man had ended up with a couple broken bones and a bloody face. It didn't matter to Max that the man happened to be Barbara's brother.

Barbara, on the other hand, wasn't a bit worried about her ability to "play" Mitch. She knew from the flowers and the card that he'd sent that she should have no problem getting Mitch wrapped around her little finger. She was used to having men fall all over themselves trying to get her attention and she was not at all shy about using her beauty and charm to get what she wanted. She'd done it so many times it was almost second nature to her now.

The only problem was that Barbara really thought Mitch had a lot of potential. It had always been easy for Barbara to take advantage of the saps she didn't give a damn about. Could the old "love 'em and leave 'em" routine work without the leaving?

The ringing of the telephone shook Mitch out of a stupor. He'd been sitting, barely half-awake, staring at the wall and the noise of the phone made him jump.

"Hello?" he said into the handset.

"Mitchell Buchannon?" said the voice at the other end. It was a female voice; a sultry female voice.

"Speaking. Yes. This is he," Mitch fumbled. The sexiness of the voice, along with the grogginess he felt didn't help him act in his usual cool and calm manner.

"Hello Mitchell. This is Barbara O'Daley. We...um. We 'met' the other day."

Mitch was silent, shocked. Amazed. The woman he'd been thinking about all day was actually calling him.

Barbara, unused to a lack of recognition from a male, struggled to make a connection. "We met underwater? You rescued me...?"

"I know who you are, Miss O'Daley," Mitch blurted. "I'm sorry, I'm just...."

"Did I interrupt something?" Barbara asked, starting her game. "I know it's late on a Friday night. I thought for sure I'd just get your answering machine. It was just that

I'm so lonely here in the hospital and the flowers you sent are so wonderful and I wanted to thank you."

"Oh, you're very welcome," Mitch said. "I take it you woke up then?" Mitch wanted to kick himself. Why was he talking like a total idiot? It was as if he had traded places with Hobie.

But Barbara actually laughed, and it didn't sound like she was laughing at Mitch. Rather, it seemed like she was laughing at what she perceived as a joke Mitch had told.

"Yes, Mitchell, I am awake, and the first thing I saw was that beautiful bouquet you sent. It really brightened the room, and my day."

"Miss O'Daley, please, call me Mitch."

"Well then you must call me Barbara," she replied.

"Alright...Barbara."

"Mitch, I just can't thank you enough for rescuing me. I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't been there."

"Well, I'm sure your boyfriend would have gotten you out of there alright," Mitch said, testing the waters.

"Boyfriend? Oh you mean *Max*?" Barbara laughed merrily. "He's not my *boyfriend*. He's my *pilot*."

Score one for the home team, thought Mitch. "Ahh, I see. Must be nice to have your own pilot."

"It is. Especially when I had my own plane," Barbara said wryly.

Mitch chuckled appreciatively and then turned serious. "Do you have any idea what caused your crash?"

"I haven't got a clue, Mitch. Max doesn't know either. He's real curious to find out though."

"Well, as soon as they raise the plane, everyone can know what happened on that flight," Mitch replied.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Barbara responded less than enthusiastically.

An awkward silence took over the conversation. Mitch shifted uneasily on the sofa. He groped for something to say.

"So..."

Barbara interrupted, taking control again. "Mitch, would you like to have dinner with me after I've gotten out of the hospital? I'd really like to treat you to a nice meal and properly show my appreciation," she said.

Mitch blinked. This last addition to her offer was stated very suggestively. Was Mitch hearing things or had she just proposed an illicit sexual liaison? Mitch didn't usually date such brash, suggestive women, but on the other hand it had been a while.... Besides, dinner was dinner and he couldn't turn that down.

"Sounds great!" he said. "Do you know when that will be?"

"Well, Mitch, I'm no doctor, but I don't think they'll be keeping me in here much longer. Why don't I give you a call when I know a date and time?"

"Okay Barbara, sounds like a plan," Mitch said.

"Great! Talk to you then. Bye, Mitch."

"Bye, Barbara."

Mitch hung up the phone and leaned back on the sofa, smiling. A date with a beautiful woman? Take that, Hobie!"

Hobie had never been so nervous. He'd wanted to take Sarah Hanson out ever since he first saw her, almost four years ago. He finally worked up the courage to ask her and he's saved up money from his summer job to pay for the whole evening himself. He couldn't believe she'd agreed to go out with him. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity that Hobie couldn't afford to screw up. He knew he had to be calm, cool and collected or else Sarah would drop him like yesterday's garbage.

Hobie had never had much luck with girls, even though he was relatively popular, knew how to dress and took lessons from lady-killer Matt Brodie. He just never found himself able to approach and talk to women. He wondered why the ladies were always fawning over his father, who, to Hobie, seemed like the biggest dork on the planet. There must be something Hobie was missing, but he could never put his finger on it. But though Hobie didn't think much of his dad's style, he kept hoping that he'd inherited, genetically, whatever it was that women found so irresistible.

They'd agreed to meet at the corner near Sarah's house and then walk from there. California's weather definitely made it easier if one didn't have a car, though the sprawling distances could certainly be an issue. Hobie couldn't wait until next year when he'd be able to get his license and go anywhere he wanted, whenever he wanted. Hobie's Dad, Mitch, had offered to drive Hobie and Sarah on their date but Hobie didn't want to seem like some pathetic little kid. Besides, Hobie had said, didn't Mitch have a date of his own? It was a Friday night after all. Mitch had just nodded vaguely.

Hobie came around the corner and saw Sarah standing there, looking beautiful as ever. Immediately, his pulse began to race and his palms began to sweat. He had the urge to turn around and run back home but she had already seen him. There was no going back now. He had to go through with it.

"I'm cool," he told himself. "I'm cool I'm cool I'm cool."

"Hi Hobie!" Sarah called. She sounded happy to see him. A good sign, Hobie thought.

"Hi, Sarah!" Hobie said. Amazingly, he hadn't stuttered and his voice hadn't cracked. Not bad. He tried some more, "How are you?"

"I'm great, thanks! I was talking to Debbie and she told me that Tina told her that Gary was thinking about asking Lucy out to the dance but Lucy like Mike and...."

Hobie, overwhelmed by the sudden deluge of names, information and gossip was unable to do anything but nod and smile. It looked like he wouldn't have to worry too much about being a brilliant conversationalist if Sarah kept this up. Hobie shifted his wait from foot to foot and waited for her to finish.

"...but I said I'd rather go out with you, so here I am!"

Woah, thought Hobie. Rather go out with me than what? See a movie with her friends? Donate blood? Swim naked with Brad Pitt? Hobie wished he'd been paying more attention. Whatever it was though, Hobie would take it.

"So here we are," Hobie said. "I'm glad you wanted to go out with me."

"Well, let's go!" Sarah said, as she put her arm through Hobie's.

Hobie smiled inwardly. She was actually *touching* him. This was going great.

As they walked, Sarah indeed took up most of the conversation with talk of people Hobie didn't know, places Hobie had never been and movies Hobie hadn't seen. He made a greater effort to pay attention but often found himself falling behind the

conversation. He was so involved with thinking about the feeling of her arm on his, that it took most of his remaining brain power to keep himself from tripping over his shoes.

Finally, they made it to the restaurant but as he held the door open for Sarah, she asked, "What are we doing here? Do you have to go to the bathroom or something? I'll wait outside."

"No, this is where we're eating," replied Hobie without thinking.

"But... Hobie? This is a White Castle? You're taking me to a White Castle?"

"Yeah! It's great! They've got these little square hamburgers and you can order a whole bunch of them and they're awesome! And chicken rings. They have rings made of chicken!" Hobie said, oblivious to the fact that his enthusiasm for the restaurant chain was doing nothing to impress or convince his date.

"I wonder if I can still catch Tracy," Sarah mumbled, pulling her cellular phone from her purse.

"Wow! You have a cell phone? That's awesome! Those are awesome!"

"Uh yeah. Do you mind excusing me for a second?" Sarah turned from the door and headed towards a bench near the road, dialing her phone.

"Sure, should I order for you? What do you want?"

"Oh, whatever, Hobie," Sarah said, and then spoke into her phone. "Hi, Tracy!"

"Okay! Great!" Hobie called, entering the restaurant. He stood in line and looked over the vast menu, wondering what Sarah would like.

Hobie thought maybe a sack of 12 burgers and some fries would do. A couple of Cokes and they'd be set. He'd still have enough money left for some video games at the arcade later on in the evening. He looked through the window and saw Sarah talking animatedly on her phone. He wondered if she was telling Tracy how great their date was going. Hobie reached the front of the line and placed his order.

When the food was ready, Hobie took the tray to an open table. He sat, waiting for Sarah to join him. Finally, not wanting the food to get cold and a little worried about his date, he went to the window, just in time to see her get into a yellow convertible filled with raucous teenagers.

Hobie returned to the table in shame and sorrow. He sat, slumped over the food, wallowing in self-pity. He'd just been dumped and ditched in the middle of a date. All because he wanted to go to White Castle? What was so bad about this place? Sarah was probably used to fancy restaurants with tablecloths and normally sized, round hamburgers – things Hobie couldn't even begin to afford to pay for.

Just then, someone sat down opposite Hobie. He looked up to see C.J. Parker, the drop-dead gorgeous Baywatch lifeguard all the men were always fawning over.

"C.J.," Hobie said in disbelief. "What are you doing here?"

"Hi, Hobe," C.J. said. "I was just passing by when I noticed you in here alone. I'd thought I'd stop in and say hello."

"Well, hello," Hobie said, dropping his gazed dejectedly back to the food tray.

"Aww, what's the matter, Hobie? You seem so glum!"

"Yeah, well, I was out on a date and the girl decided she'd rather go out with her other friends than eat here with me."

"You took a date here?" C.J. asked incredulously.

"What does everyone have against White Castle?" Hobie demanded.

“Oh, nothing really. It’s just not very romantic... or very good. Can I have some fries?”

Hobie pushed the fries across the table, but then looked quizzically at C.J.. “I thought you were a vegetarian.”

“I am. Potatoes are vegetables.”

“They’re vegetables fried in animal fat.”

“They are?” C.J. made a face. “We’ll just pretend you didn’t say that.” She began wolfing down French fries.

“Right,” Hobie said. “Whatever. Look, if you don’t mind, I’d like to be alone.”

“Really?” C.J. acted shocked. “You’d rather be alone than with a blonde bombshell like me?”

“I’d rather be with a girl I’d have a chance of kissing at the end of the night. But, since that’s not happening, I think I’ll just go home.”

“C’mon Hobie. Don’t be such a party pooper,” C.J. smiled. “Besides, I’d say you’ve got a great chance of kissing me at the end of the night. And maybe even before the end of the night....”

Hobie swallowed hard. Was C.J. Parker coming on to him? This was the woman whose pictures he’d found at the bottom of his dad’s sock drawer. The woman from whom not even that ultra-handsome and cool Matt Brodie could get anything. Here she was telling Hobie he might get a kiss from her? At the very least, being seen with a super-hot babe wouldn’t hurt his reputation at all.

“Earth to Hobie,” C.J. said. “Come in, Hobie!”

“Y-y-yeah. Sounds good!” Hobie stammered.

“Don’t blow a gasket yet, kid. You’ve got a ways to go to earn that kiss. The night’s still young. Now, eat your dinner.”

Hobie scarfed down his food, eager to get on with the rest of the evening.

A dark figure skulked across the beach towards the dry docks where the Baywatch Scarabs were stored. The man stayed in the shadows and managed to get to the building without being seen. Getting inside would be a bit trickier, however, as the building was locked up tight as a vault. But that shouldn’t prove to be a problem to a man whose profession it was to break into vaults of all shapes and sizes.

Max removed an electronic lock pick from the satchel he wore around his waist and inserted it into the lock. He pushed a button and the device made a whirring noise, beeped six times, whirred again, clicked, did a sort of “gunkwhistleshtoop” noise, ticked, tocked, clanged (softly), and finally beeped twice more. Max replaced the gadget in his bag and turned the knob. The door swung open easily.

Max entered the building, wary of infrared alarms, security cameras and patrolling guards. Fortunately, he encountered none of these things and easily made it to a Scarab whose keys were still in the ignition. He grabbed some scuba gear from a rack, checked that the tank was fully charged and slipped into the boat. He untied the lines and started the motor.

Max figured it was his best chance to make a dive for the diamonds. He didn’t trust Barbara’s abilities or her loyalty and felt he may as well make his own play as soon as possible. If Barbara became involved with that lifeguard, Max might soon become a

third wheel and get shut out of everything, or worse yet, he might end up in jail or even dead.

Max pulled the Scarab away from the dock and out through the open end of the building that faced the water. There was a full moon out and the sky was cloudless, so he had little trouble seeing where he was going. The rescue team had placed several buoys at the site of the wreck and soon Max was anchoring the stolen boat directly over the crashed plane.

Max began his dive preparations, getting into a wet suit and flippers and rechecking his tank and respirator. Everything checked out, so he checked it again. After the debacle with the plane, he wasn't taking any chances.

Only when he was certain that everything checked out did Max enter the water. He dove straight down, following the line from one of the buoys, lighting his way with a bright, waterproof flashlight. In a matter of moments, the plane was illuminated by Max's light. Soon, the diamonds would be his.

Did you know that Matt Brodie lives on a house boat? Well, he does, and that makes him even cooler than his leather jacket or his motorcycle. Cooler than his bad-ass haircut. Matt Brodie kicks serious ass 24/7. The motherfucker lives on a houseboat, for the love of God. Just try and top that.

Matt Brodie was sitting in his bedroom on his houseboat when he heard the Scarab start up. Matt kept his houseboat docked close to the Baywatch motor pool so he'd never be too far from the job he loved. He knew there was no reason for anyone to be taking a boat out so late at night. He hurriedly shoved some photos of C.J. back into his sock drawer, pulled up his pants and rushed outside, carrying his high-powered binoculars.

Matt scanned the water with the binoculars and soon spotted the bright yellow boat cutting across the waves. It was heading for the site where the plane had gone down! Matt knew nobody at Baywatch had any need to go back there, unless Caroline had dropped one of her implants during the rescue.

Matt chuckled at the image, and then got hung up on the idea of a naked Caroline, but quickly shook it off. Focus, Brodie! He thought. We've got a stolen Scarab and somebody returning to the wrecked plane. What would Fonzie do?

Matt jumped into the small motorboat tied to the side of his houseboat. He cast off and sped to the Scarab docks. He grabbed scuba gear of his own, took a Scarab and went after the stolen boat.

By the time Matt reached the buoy, Max had already dived off, so Matt secured the two Scarabs to each other, and took both sets of keys. Then, after checking his equipment, he dove into the ocean and followed the line down to the plane. Below him, he could see the light from Max's torch moving back and forth across the surface of the wreck. He could also see something that Max could not: a giant squid, guarding the wreckage. Matt sped his descent. Boat thief or not, this guy didn't deserve to become squid bait.

Max was almost there. He could see the compartment. Just a few more feet and he'd have it. He couldn't believe he'd been this close just a couple days before. If that lifeguard hadn't interfered, he'd have made off with the diamonds as easy as pie. Now he had to go through all this trouble to steal a boat and dive for the treasure. Why was everything always so damn complicated? Max cleared his head of these distracting thoughts. No use in dwelling on these matters.

Just then, Max felt something tapping on his shoulder. That's it! He thought. If it was another stupid lifeguard, he was going to get a knife to the throat. Max whirled around, ready to confront whoever was interrupting him and was, needless to say, more than a little shocked to come face to face with a giant squid. The squid greeted Max with a tight, many-armed hug. Max was completely immobilized, unable to do much more than blink, and he was being brought closer and closer to the gaping maw of the humongous beast.

Matt saw the squid grab Max and knew he didn't have much time if he was going to save the man. He kicked faster, using every last bit of strength he had left to make his descent as swift as possible. He'd wrestled giant squid before and knew exactly how he had to hit it to get it away from its prey. As Matt swam down, he used his forward momentum to slam his fist into one of the squid's large, blinking eyes. The monster immediately let go of Max, who swam a little ways away, clutching his throat and fighting for air. Matt repeatedly punched the giant squid in different locations in an attempt to confuse the beast.

Max looked around. Could it be possible that he'd just been attacked by a giant squid and then saved by a lifeguard who seemed (at first glance) to be at least as cool as he? It didn't seem at all likely, but who was Max to argue with reality?

The squid was turning on Max's rescuer, so Max took the opportunity to escape with his life. He didn't pass up a chance like that very often. As the squid grabbed for Matt, Max saw something shiny fall from Matt's pocket. It was the two sets of boat keys. Max held out his hand and expertly caught the keys as he swam past. Max gave Matt a mock salute and headed for the surface and began wondering if any amount of money was worth this kind of grief. He honestly didn't know.

Max reached the boats, entered the one he'd stolen, cast off from the other and took off into the night.

Of course, Matt thought, you save a guy's life and how does he repay you? He takes off, steals your keys, takes a boat and leaves you with a deadly freaking giant squid. These things weren't even supposed to exist and Matt had to deal with one for the third time in the past six months. What were the odds on that? Needless to say, Matt's previous experiences with the creatures allowed him to prevail over this one. In an indescribable act of courage, bravery and daring-do, Matt vanquished the foul squid and returned to the surface.

Panting, Matt lay in the boat. Without the keys, there was nothing for him to do but wait until morning when his co-workers showed up. Matt closed his eyes and wondered what was in the plane that was so important that someone would steal a boat and make a late-night dive to recover. Certainly anything that was there now would still

be there when the boat was raised from the bottom. Matt didn't think about it too long, however, as the gentle rocking of the waves quickly put him to sleep. It reminded him of home.

Hobie looked at his watch before opening the front door of his house. It was 1:30 AM. Certainly not the latest he'd ever come home, but his dad would undoubtedly have questions for him. Could he possibly tell him about the party that C.J. had taken him to or all the crazy things he'd seen? He definitely couldn't tell him about how C.J. had pressed her ample breasts against his own chest as she'd given him an otherwise chaste kiss goodnight. That was an image he'd be taking with him to bed that night. He didn't even need to raid dad's sock drawer. No, he'd just have to make up a story about his evening. He didn't like lying to his father, who aside from being a total dork, was a pretty cool dad most of the time.

Hobie entered the house and found his father sitting on the couch in the living room. He was playing his surfing video game and had a huge grin on his face.

"Hey dad," Hobie said cheerfully. "What's up?"

"Hey pal!" Mitch called. "Come on in, see if you can beat your old man at this thing. I've been practicing."

"Actually, Dad, I'm pretty beat. I think I'll just call it a night."

"You're getting old, son. How was the date?"

Hobie shifted uneasily. "It was alright."

"Alright? It's past one in the morning. Surely, it had to be better than alright."

"Well, Sarah wanted to meet up with some of her friends, so we hung out with them for most of the night. I couldn't get a ride home until just now."

"That's too bad. You know you could have called if you needed a ride."

"Yeah, I know. It was okay. Just not what I had expected."

"Mmm-hmm. I know how that is."

"Besides, I thought you'd have a date."

"No such luck tonight, pal. But I do have something lined up for next week."

"That's great, Dad," Hobie said, wanting to pre-empt any disclosure about his dad's dating futures. "I'm gonna hit the hay."

"G'night, Hobe."

Hobie rushed up to his room, wanting to be in bed before the wonderful impression C.J. had left on him faded.

The next morning, Mitch headed to the beach early. This was the day that Matt was supposed to try riding Mitch's long board. Matt was nowhere in sight, however, so Mitch started a run of his own. After 20 minutes of surfing, Mitch became concerned. Matt might have been nervous about living up to his claim, but he certainly wouldn't have just ditched out on a surfing date. Mitch gathered up his belongings and headed into headquarters. As he entered the communications room, he heard a voice on the radio.

"Baywatch, this is Brodie. Come in Baywatch."

Mitch quickly grabbed the microphone. "Matt, this is Mitch. Where are you?"

"Mitch! Thank goodness. I spent the night in a stranded Scarab. Come out and get me."

"I'm on my way, pal. What's your location?"

“I’m at the site of the plane wreck. I’ll explain when you get here.”
“I’m out the door.”

Mitch reached the boat where Matt was stranded. He helped the shivering young lifeguard onto the Baywatch patrol cruiser and then secured the disabled Scarab to a tow line so that they could bring it back to shore. Matt helped himself to some coffee and wrapped himself up in a thermal blanket. He’d spent many nights on the open sea before, but it was no fun if you weren’t prepared for it.

As soon as Matt told Mitch the entire story of what had happened, Mitch started laughing.

“What’s so funny, Mitch?” he demanded.

“I know you were afraid to live up to your claim that you could ride a long board but that’s the worst made-up excuse I’ve *ever* heard, and I’ve got a 15-year-old at home,” Mitch said between guffaws.

“Ha ha, Mitch,” said Matt, very annoyed. “It’s all true except for the part where I said I was making out with Summer Quinn when I heard the stolen boat. I made *that* part up.”

“Oh yeah? That was the one part I did believe. What were you doing then?”

“Uhh... Watching television,” Matt lied.

“So you went, alone, in the middle of the night, after a stolen boat, made an unauthorized dive, fought a giant squid and didn’t catch your man?”

“That’s right,” Matt said ruefully.

“That has got to be, single-handedly, hands down, without a doubt, unquestionably, the king of the hill, top of the heap, cream of the crop, A-1, acme, superstar, all-time...” Mitch paused for breath.

“Do go on,” said Matt.

“...dumbest thing you’ve ever done!” finished Mitch.

They reached the shore where various nameless and faceless Baywatch lackeys were waiting to deal with both boats.

“I know. I wasn’t thinking,” admitted Matt.

“I should say you weren’t!” Mitch shouted. “Next time, you call for backup. Next time you do not go running off by yourself. Next time...” Mitch trailed off.

“Next time what, Mitch?”

Mitch started sobbing uncontrollably. “What if something had happened to you? What would I do without you?”

“Oh Mitch!” Matt embraced his friend. “Nothing happened! I’m okay! And I promise I’ll be more careful in the future. Okay? There there.”

Mitch’s cries quieted and his heavy breaths slowed. Soon, he was recomposed. “Do you promise?” he asked.

“I promise, Mitch,” Matt said. “Now are you going to be okay? I need to take a shower. I feel gross.”

“I’ll be fine,” Mitch sniffed. “Go on ahead.”

Mitch watched as Matt walked off towards the shower room. He sure could use a few more Matt Brodies around Baywatch. He grabbed a passing lackey.

“See to it that that man gets put in for a commendation,” Mitch told it. “I’ll sign the paperwork myself.”

“Um, which man are you talking about, sir?”

Later on, in his tower, watching his water, Mitch wondered, as Matt had the night before, what was on that plane that was so darn important that people were risking their lives to get it. Logan had told Mitch about how Max had refused to surface with him even after he’d seen that other lifeguards were going to be able to rescue Barbara. And now there was someone going back down there in the middle of the night. What could possibly be that important?

Like Matt, Mitch didn’t have much time to think about it. Unlike Matt, it wasn’t because Mitch fell asleep, but because there was suddenly trouble in the water!

A young girl was struggling to stay afloat out in the water. Mitch saw her head go under and grabbed his red rescue can from its holder on the wall of his tower. He then knocked the phone off the hook, signaling to headquarters that a rescue was in progress and backup was needed. Mitch ran down the ramp of his tower, pounding across the sand, yelling to everyone to clear the water in the area. He hit the water, running until it was deep enough and then leapt gracefully into the air and hit the water swimming, letting his can fly out behind him. Mitch stroked through the water powerfully, making his way to where the girl had gone down.

When he got to the last place he had seen her, he could tell why she was having trouble. Mitch could feel a powerful riptide pulling at his feet, trying to drag him under.

“We meet again, ‘old friend,’” Mitch said angrily. “You’ve never won before and you won’t be winning this time either.”

Mitch dove down, looking for a sign of the drowning girl. He could see nothing, but he didn’t panic. Mitch had rescued hundreds of thousands, if not millions of drowning people and it was never easy. Well, sometimes it was. Sometimes it was really easy, like the time he fished an 86-year-old man from the water with a large net. Or the time a passing whale had flipped a drowning child right into his arms. Those times had been pretty freaking easy.

But they weren’t all like that. Most of the time, Mitch had to put forth some serious effort to earn his paycheck. Rescuing people was serious work; something not to be taken lightly.

Mitch finally spotted the girl. Her long braided ponytail was streaming up towards him. She seemed to be unconscious. Mitch had only a matter of moments and every second counted. He dove down towards her and scooped her up in his arms. Mitch sped upwards. When he broke the surface of the water, he spied an ambulance and other lifeguards doing crowd control and waiting to assist him. Mitch swam the young girl towards the shore.

When he got there, he immediately began chest compressions and CPR, waving off aid from the other lifeguards. Mitch preferred doing this part on his own. He knew of other lieutenants who might do a rescue or two, but when it came down to locking lips with a complete stranger, always shied away, preferring to have lackeys do it. Mitch knew that lackeys had their place, and there was definitely a time to use them, but he prided himself on *keeping it real*. Mitch would never be labeled a sell-out.

“No pulse,” he muttered, compressing the girl’s chest. “1. 2. 3. 4.” Mitch checked again. “Still no pulse.” He breathed into her open mouth. “Pullllllse....no. Still no.”

Mitch switched back to doing chest compressions. Suddenly the girl coughed up a couple pints of sea water and sat straight up. Mitch checked her pulse again.

“Pulse!” he shouted. “Everyone, she has a pulse!”

The crowd went wild.

“Little girl, where are your parents?” Mitch asked.

“I dunno,” the girl said, still coughing up water.

“Well, let’s take you up to headquarters and we’ll figure everything out.”

“Okay dokey,” the girl said, gasping for breath.

Mitch took the girl in a Baywatch truck to headquarters. Throngs of cheering people trotted behind the truck as it drove up the sand.

Out in the ocean, the riptide shook with rage. *One of these days, Mitch Buchannon*, it thought. *One of these days you will not be so lucky and I will finally have my revenge upon the world! One of these days!*

And with that, the riptide sank to the ocean floor and slept.

At lunch at Hobie’s school that day, Hobie’s friends, Joey and Wheels confronted him.

“Hey Hobe!” Joey called. “How was the big date with Sarah?”

“It was alright,” Hobie lied. He didn’t want to get into the whole thing with his friends, at least not yet.

But then, a shadow fell over the three friends. It was Tommy McGraw, the biggest kid in Hobie’s grade, and as these things usually work out, also the meanest, loudest and dumbest kid in Hobie’s grade.

“Hey Buchannon!” Tommy shouted. “How was your White Castle? Enjoy eating it by yourself?”

Hobie turned bright red and said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure you do, Buchannon. Sarah told me all about it. She left you there without saying goodbye ‘cause you’re too much of a dweeb to know what to do with a girl on a date.”

Hobie’s friends began edging towards Tommy, faces flushed with anger.

“Guys,” Hobie said. “He’s not worth it.”

“Yeah, Hobo,” snarled Tommy. “You better call off your dogs before those puppies get hurt.” Tommy flexed his muscles menacingly.

Joey and Wheels backed off, but Hobie could tell that they still wanted a piece of McGraw. It was nice having friends that would go to bat for you.

At that moment, a group of girls approached. In the lead was none other than Sarah, who upon seeing Hobie, burst into a fit of giggles. She began whispering to her friends while pointing at him.

“Subtle, she is not,” said Wheels.

Hobie had had enough. He said, loud enough for both Sarah and Tommy to hear, “I was glad she took off. It gave me a chance to hook up with C.J. Parker!”

This elicited more laughter from the girls and Tommy said, “Yeah, right!” Joey and Wheels, however, looked shocked.

“C.J. Parker?” Joey asked incredulously. “*The C.J. Parker?*”
Hobie smiled, “You better believe it. We ate dinner together and then we went to a party. A *hippie* party.”

“Woah!” Joey cried.

Wheels asked, “Did you smoke weed?”

Hobie nodded. “It was *awesome*,” he whispered.

Joey leaned in close and asked, “Did you get to... you know?”

Hobie smiled enigmatically. “A gentlemen does not kiss and tell,” he said.

“Since when have you been a gentleman, Hobie?” Wheels demanded. “I want details!”

“Okay, okay. We just kissed good night,” Hobie admitted.

“With tongue?” Joey asked.

“No. No tongue.”

Hobie’s friends looked disappointed.

“But she said there was more where that came from!” Hobie hastened to add.

“She’s taking me to a rave on Friday. We’re gonna do ‘X’!”

“Woah,” said Wheels.

“No way!” said Joey.

“What’d I miss?” asked Snake, the fourth member of their little group of friends. Snake was always showing up late for everything.

“Hobie’s ‘in like Flynn’ with C.J. Parker!” Wheels exclaimed.

“C.J.?” Snake asked. “Isn’t she the blonde lifeguard with the *pow!* And the *blammo?*”

“That’s the one,” Joey said.

“My dad has pictures of her in his sock drawer,” Snake said thoughtfully.

“We know,” said Wheels.

Hobie was starting to regret he had said anything about it at all. C.J. had told him it had to be ‘their little secret’ or else they’d get into big trouble. None of the hippies at the party had cared that Hobie was just 15 – they thought it was, “wild, man!” – but Hobie knew if anyone at Baywatch, especially Hobie’s dad, found out, there’d be hell to pay. And if C.J. found out Hobie told his friends, she’d never forgive him, and probably never let him kiss her again.

“Uhh guys,” Hobie said, “can we please be a bit more discreet about this? I don’t want the whole school to know.”

“Sure, Hobie, sure,” Wheels said.

“Think she’ll let you touch her boobs next time? She’s got an awesome rack!” Joey proclaimed.

“Joey!” the others said in unison.

Joey wore a shocked and pained expression as his friends left him alone in the cafeteria.

“What?” he asked. “What did I say?”

Barbara called Mitch at home that evening. “Mitch! They’re setting me free tomorrow! I’d truly love to see you.”

Mitch was ecstatic, “That sounds wonderful, Barbara. Where and when should I pick you up?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it, Mitch. I’ll pick you up. Say around 8?”

Mitch couldn’t believe it. A woman picking a man up on a date? Mitch guessed that crazier things had happened but he couldn’t name one.

“Sounds good, Barbara,” he said. “I’m really looking forward to it.”

Upon being discharged from the hospital, Barbara went to meet Max at a nearby hotel room he’d reserved. She knocked on the door and heard the unmistakable sounds of someone rushing to put photos back into their sock drawer and pull up their pants. Barbara shook her head, amused.

Max opened the door and welcomed her inside, not making much of an effort to display any enthusiasm for her appearance. Barbara was used to it, however, and didn’t mind much.

“Tell me this plan again,” Max said, as Barbara took a seat on the king-sized bed.

“I take Mitch out, get him to fall in love with me, and then you and I fence the diamonds and live free and clear,” Barbara said.

“Barb, have you really thought this through?”

“Of course I have. And don’t worry, I don’t mind ‘suing up’ again.”

“It’s not that. I’m just not clear on how we get from Mitch falling in love with you to the part where we fence the diamonds.”

Barbara paused, started to speak, thought about it, paused again, started to speak, stopped, crossed her eyes, sniffled and then collapsed on the bed. “This scheming business is hard.”

Max stroked Barbara’s hair and said, “Maybe they let you out too early. I think you might have hit your head during the crash.”

“I used to be smart, right?”

“Yes you were, babe,” Max said. “That’s why I kept you around.”

“What happened to me?”

“There was a plane crash...” Max rolled his eyes. “Look, here’s what we do. You get Mitch to fall in love with you and then when they raise the plane, you tell him there’s something incredibly personal and important of yours and that you need to go on the dive to recover it so that nobody else can see it.”

“What should I tell him it is?” Barbara asked.

“Well, it’s so personal, you don’t have to tell him, right?”

“But if we’re in love, then we should have no secrets.”

“But if there were no secrets, there’d be no mystery. And with no mystery, there is no romance. And without romance, can there truly be love?” Max wondered.

“I’ll just say it’s my dirty underwear.”

“Fine. Now, what time are you picking him up?”

“At eight. Oh gosh, it’s almost seven! I need to get ready!”

Hobie watched as Mitch got dressed for his date.

“Where did you meet this woman?” he asked.

“Well, okay, don’t tell anyone, but she’s a woman I rescued the other day,” Mitch admitted.

“You’re kidding! What happened to the rule against dating victims that you came up with after that actress, Candi Candello. Remember her? She tried to *drown* herself and you rescued her and dated her?”

“Of course I remember that, Hobie. It happened last month. But, it’s been a while since I’ve had a date with anything more interesting than your video game system, so I figured it’d be nice to get out. Besides, we had a connection.”

“You had a connection with Candi too. Look how that turned out.”

“That was different. She was a backstabbing, scheming, manipulative Hollywood actress who only wanted to use me to further her own career. Barbara is different. Barbara is...”

“Barbara is what?” Hobie asked.

“Well, now that you mention it, I don’t know a thing about her,” Mitch admitted. “But don’t worry. I learned my lesson. I’ll find out more about her before I let it go too far.”

“You’d better, Dad. I don’t think I can handle another fiasco like that last one.”

“Trust me,” Mitch said, as the doorbell rang. “Now go answer the door – that’s probably your new mommy.”

“What did you say?” Hobie asked incredulously.

“Huh? Nothing! Go get the door!”

Barbara lowered a strap on her dress to reveal a tantalizing sliver of cleavage. She knew that getting the date started just right was the key to her plan. The way to a man’s heart is not through his stomach, she thought, but through his zipper.

The door opened and instead of the tall, tan and buff Mitch Buchannon, she was greeted by a 15-year-old version of the man. Who the hell was this?

“Uh, hi there,” Barbara said. “I’m Barbara. Who might you be?”

“My name is Hobie. Dad didn’t tell you about me?”

Oh great, Barbara thought. A kid. A kid complicated matters immensely. It meant that Barbara had to change several factors of the plan, including finding some place to “entertain” Mitch without the kid bothering them.

“As a matter of fact, he did not,” Barbara said, readjusting her dress. “But I’m just delighted to meet you. You said your name is Hobie?”

Hobie didn’t like this woman from the start, but he had to stay on Mitch’s good side if he was going to have enough freedom to go out with C.J. again. Besides, if this Barbara woman kept Dad happy, he’d be likely to slack off on his otherwise strict parenting. He showed Mitch’s new slut into the living room.

“Dad will be down in a minute. Can I get you something to drink?” Hobie asked.

“Sure, can you make me a Manhattan?”

“Lady, I’m fifteen years old. I’ve never even *been* to Manhattan.”

“Of course,” Barbara laughed. “I was just kidding.”

“That’s funny stuff.”

Mitch came down the stairs to find Hobie and Barbara sitting across from each other in an awkward and uncomfortable silence.

“Ah, Barbara! You look lovely,” Mitch said. “I see you’ve met Hobie. Good! You two will be the best of friends, I’m sure.”

Hobie rolled his eyes. “Whatever, Dad.”

“You didn’t mention you had a son,” Barbara said.

“I didn’t? I’m sure I must have. He’s all I ever talk about. Isn’t that right, champ?” Mitch said, tousling Hobie’s hair.

“Whatever, Dad.”

“Ever since his mom died, Hobie’s been the center of my world.”

“Mom’s not dead, Dad. She left you when she found those pictures....”

“Kids!” Mitch laughed, guiding Barbara to the door. “Such vivid and active imaginations they have. Don’t stay up too late, son.”

The couple exited the house in a hurry, leaving behind a very bewildered and worried Hobie.

The doorbell rang again, just fifteen minutes after Mitch and Barbara left. At the door was a man in his mid-30’s, who looked to Hobie to be at least twice as cool as Matt Brodie. Hobie attached the security chain and spoke to the man through a partly opened door.

“Who are you?” asked Hobie.

“Oh, my car broke down. I was wondering if I could use your phone.”

Hobie looked around the man and saw, parked in the street, a sleek-looking black sports car with its hazards blinking and its hood raised.

“No problem,” Hobie said. “I let strangers into my house all the time. Are you kidding? This is L.A. Use your cell phone, idiot.”

“Listen, you little punk,” the man said, “my cell phone is broken. My car is broken. Let me use your phone.”

“I’ll tell you what. You just give me the number you want me to call, and I’ll go make that call for you. Tell me what you want to say.”

Exasperated, the man said, “Okay. It’s 509-555-2322. Tell them to come pick me up at your address.”

Hobie closed and locked the door and went to the phone. Halfway down the hall, he stopped.

“Wait a second,” he thought. “That’s a totally fake number.”

He returned to the door and found that the man was gone and there was no car outside. Hobie wondered what was so important inside his house that the man wanted in so badly, he’d lie about a disabled car.

Max drove off angrily. Barbara hadn’t said anything about there being a kid. It was just one more complication to add to the dozens already piled up in this whole fiasco. It was as if his plane had crashed into a living, breathing soap opera from which there was no escape. All he wanted was his damn diamonds. Was that too much to ask?

Barbara drove them to the restaurant, a trendy new establishment on Rodeo Drive. The valet took the car and Mitch and Barbara waited while their table was prepared. It wasn’t long before they were seated at a private table for two toward the rear of the restaurant.

“So, Barbara,” Mitch started. “I’m not sure I know exactly what it is that you do. You’re not an actress, are you?”

“Heaven’s no, Mitch. Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Oh, no. I was just checking.”

“No, Mitch. I run an import/export company.”

“Ahh. Very interesting....” Mitch tried to think of something else to say about it.

“So....”

“We import cheese from Honduras and export sugarcane to Zaire.”

“Fascinating. Simply fascinating.”

“Well, it does have its moments, to be sure. But, I’m looking to get out of it. Perhaps to sell the company. Maybe settle down with a big strong man and his son.”

Barbara fluttered her eyelashes seductively.

“Barbara! Let’s not rush things!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mitch. I did not mean you, but now that I think about it, I see why you might have gotten that impression. I just noticed how closely you resembled the man of my dreams.”

“Oh, Barbara!” Mitch nearly swooned. “You also resemble the woman of my dreams!”

“Tell me about your dreams, Mitch,” Barbara said, taking his hands into hers.

“Well, okay. But this might sound really weird. I’m standing in a parking lot in Detroit, only I don’t know if it’s Detroit, because I’ve never really been to Detroit, you see? And it’s not really a parking lot per se, because there are all these pillars and bleachers and you couldn’t fit more than a couple cars in there. And I’m hungry, so I go up to the hotdog vendor. Did I forget to mention the hotdog vendor?”

“Umm. Yes,” Barbara said. A waiter hovered nervously nearby, ready to take their drink orders.

“There’s this hotdog vendor and he’s wearing a blonde wig and he’s shouting ‘Get your red hots here!’ just like they do in the ballpark, but I don’t know how I know that because I’ve never been to a ballpark. But I just know this guy works, or worked, at a ballpark. You know how in dreams you just know things?”

“Yes, Mitch. But I really think we should --”

“Wait, I’m not done yet. So I order a hotdog with everything on it and the vendor says that he only has pickles and daisies and I say that’s fine. So he gives me the hotdog, but I realize I don’t have any money with me. I tell him I can’t pay and he says I’ll just have to sing for my food. So I’m singing that John Cougar song? The one about Jack and Diane?”

“You mean, ‘Jack and Diane’?”

“No, no. The other one. Whatever. I’m singing, only I can’t sing too well because I’m eating, right? And the vendor’s getting really angry saying I’m cheating him out of his hard-earned food and he’s going to have me brought up on charges. So I start to run, still eating and still singing and I’m running through this field all of a sudden and I look back and I see that the entire cast of ‘Family Ties’ is chasing me and Michael J Fox is yelling at me that I stole his look. You remember that show?”

“Yes of course, Mitch,” Barbara said. “But I really think that we ought to order --”

“Almost done. The cast is running me down. They’re everywhere and I’m running slowly, like I’m trying to run through molasses or quicksand or... or, I don’t know what.

You get the picture. All of a sudden, they're on top of me. Meredith Baxter Birney is pulling my hair and Justine Bateman is punching me in the kidneys. Even the baby. What was his name?"

"Andy. Played by Brian Bonsall."

"Right. Even Brian Bonsall is biting my ankles. I can't believe it! Somehow, I fight my way to my hands and knees and I'm crawling along, dragging them behind me when suddenly there's a woman in front of me. Tall, blonde and beautiful. A vision. A savior. She waves her hands and one by one, my pursuers disappear. I stand up and take her in my arms. We kiss for a long while and then she disappears before I get a chance to ask her name or thank her."

"That's quite a dream, Mitch."

"I know! And all this time, I've wondered who she was." Mitch lowered his eyes. "It wasn't until I met you that I figured it out. Barbara, *you* are that woman."

"Mitch!"

"I'm serious, Barbara. I'm certain of it."

"That's amazing."

"I just wanted to thank you for saving me from the cast members of 'Family Ties.'" "

"Think nothing of it," Barbara said. "Now Mitch, can I tell you something?"

"Certainly, Barbara. Anything."

"I think I'm falling in love with you, Mitch."

"Oh, Barbara!"

The waiter had had enough. It was time for his smoke break anyway.

After dinner, Mitch and Barbara drove to Lookout Point, a popular spot amongst young couple. There, they were treated to a magnificent view of the City of Angels sprawling out below them.

"Oh, Mitch. It's so beautiful here. I could just stay here forever," Barbara said.

"But you won't, will you?" Mitch asked. "Now that you're out of the hospital, you can continue your trip up to.... Where were you heading, anyway?"

"Oh, we were going to Portland. I had a business meeting there. Of course, I had to cancel it. No, I'll be going back to San Diego.... Unless I find something compelling enough to keep me in Los Angeles, of course." Barbara smiled.

"I might be able to help in that department, Mitch said, reaching out to her.

Barbara held back. "Mitch, there is nothing I'd like more than to kiss you right now, but I'm still really freaked out by the accident and I just don't know if I'm thinking straight right now. I want to be sure. I'm sorry, Mitch."

"I understand, Barbara," Mitch said, reassuringly. "I don't want us to rush things either. And I want you to be sure that it's right too."

"Perhaps we had better call it a night, Mitch."

"Yes, perhaps we best."

Barbara drove Mitch back to his house. The couple parted awkwardly. Mitch felt there were things unsaid and kisses unshared and he didn't know how much time he had left to do these things.

Hobie immediately told Mitch about the man that had come to the door.

“Well, Hobie,” Mitch said, “I’m proud of you. You acted smartly. Never let strangers into the house, especially if I’m not home.”

“I know, Dad. I’m not an idiot.”

“Nobody said you were, son.”

“No, but everyone treats me like I am. Like I don’t know what I’m doing. Just because I’m not good at surfing and I don’t get all the girls, it doesn’t make me a moron. I’m good at plenty of other things.”

“I know, Hobie.”

“Oh yeah? Name one thing I’m good at. Name one thing I like doing.”

“Well, you like your video games. I know that much.”

“Oh, alright. Well... Did you know that I like to knit? Or that I’m really into the history of the island of Tuvalu? Did you know that Tuvalu is the smallest island nation in the world? Bet you didn’t know that, did you?”

“Actually, I know plenty about Tuvalu. Like its population is about 11,000 people, the median age is 24.2 years and the life expectancy at birth is 67 years.”

“Great! The one thing I had. The one thing that made me unique, you’ve ruined.”

“Ahh, Hobie, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ruin it for you. I thought you’d appreciate that I share some of your interests,” Mitch said.

“Well, I don’t! I don’t appreciate it one bit,” Hobie said, storming out of the room.

Teenagers! thought Mitch. He just didn’t know what to do to keep that boy happy.

A few days later, Hobie was riding his inline skates around the Santa Monica pier when he nearly ran smack dab into Garner Ellerbee, his dad’s cop friend. Garner spent a lot of time around Baywatch – Hobie thought perhaps a bit too much time, if the man was looking for any real criminals and not just ogling the hard-bodied female lifeguards. But, he was a nice enough guy, even for a cop.

“Woah there, Hobie!” Garner said, smiling broadly. “You better be more careful, or I’ll have to tell your dad!”

That was one of Garner’s favorite lines, it seemed. Always joking about telling Mitch about some minor infraction Hobie had committed. It was getting old, but you don’t screw around with cops, so Hobie did as he always did: smile and laugh appreciatively.

“Sorry, Garner. I guess I got a little too into my run here.”

“You look like you’re going at it pretty hard, son.”

“I’m just trying to work off some steam. You know how it is.”

“What’s troubling you, Hobie?” Garner asked, still joking around. “Can’t get past the third world in Super Mario Brothers?”

Hobie tried to avoid rolling his eyes, “No. Just sick of being treated like such a little kid all the time. I’m at that age where kids feel like they’re more adult than they are and adults think they’re more childish than they are. There’s very little common ground available and neither side ever really wants to back down. Communication breaks down and misunderstandings run rampant. It results in a lot of tension in the house. I figured I’d do what I can to ease some stress in a constructive and positive manner.”

Garner blinked, and did a double-take, unsure of how to respond to Hobie's evaluation of his situation. Unable to pick up his end of the conversation, he took a different tack: "So, what's her name?"

"I'm sorry, Garner. I don't think I follow you. There's no girl involved, unless you're referring to my dad's new girlfriend. I'm not so sure about her."

"You mean Barbara O'Daley?" Garner asked, finally finding something he could speak intelligently about.

"That's the one," Hobie said. So much for Dad keeping this thing under wraps. As soon as Mitch found a new lady, he was always going on and on about her to anyone who would listen. That usually was limited to Garner. "She seems a little weird."

"Well, you didn't hear this from me, but the police did bring her and her pilot, Max Fischer in for questioning yesterday."

"You're kidding!" Hobie exclaimed. "What for?"

"Well, it's pretty standard stuff. They had a couple FAA agents in there with them, just asking about the plane crash and whatnot."

"Did anything interesting come out of it?"

"Well, their blood was drawn at the hospital and neither of them were drunk or high while flying and there was nothing out of ordinary about their flight. But this Fischer character does have a rap sheet a mile long. He's been in and out of jail for most of his life. He's done time in some exotic locations too – Malaysia; Singapore; El Paso, Texas. Doesn't seem like a very nice guy."

"I wonder why she hangs out with him," Hobie said, more to himself than to Garner.

"Well, he is a pretty handsome guy," Garner said, chuckling. "And he's got a lot of money. He was trying to throw tips around down at the precinct. Can you believe it? He was trying to tip cops! Said it was normal to do in Europe. I'll tell you, some of the cops were tempted to take those twenties, but with the Captain watching? Not a chance!"

"Well, I should keep going," Hobie said. "Gotta keep my heart rate up, you know?"

"Alright, Hobie. Be seeing you," Garner said, chuckling. "Stay outta trouble, y'hear?"

"Okay, Garner. I will!" Hobie said over his shoulder as he bladed off.

"Good luck with that video game of yours!" Garner called after Hobie.

Hobie shook his head disgustedly. Freaking adults, he thought. They just never listen.

"I don't like this new woman of yours, Dad."

"Her name is Barbara," said Mitch.

"Barbara shmarbara. I think she's after something."

"Now that's just childish, Hobie," Mitch said. "Though it is pretty funny."

"Funny or not, I don't like her. There's something not quite right about her."

"Hobie, you've said those exact same words about every woman I've ever dated. You used to say that about your mother at least twice a week."

"Granted, but this time I mean it. I *really* mean it. Look, I found out – don't ask me how – that her 'pilot', that Max Fischer guy, has a record as long as that surfboard you ride."

“You’ve been hanging out with Matt too much,” Mitch said, slightly upset. If Hobie was going to get on him about the length of his surfboard, what was next? Hobie telling him how to properly perform a fireman’s carry with an unconscious victim? “But I’ll take your feelings under advisement. Now leave me alone. I’ve got to get ready.”

“You do look sharp, Dad.” Hobie said. “Where are you two going?”

“La Bella Donna. It’s at 4th and Sunset.”

“Sounds fancy. When’s she picking you up?”

“Very soon.” The doorbell rang. “That’s probably her now.”

Hobie ran downstairs to answer the door. Instead of Barbara, however, there was a different busty, leggy blonde standing on the other side. C.J. Parker greeted Hobie, smiling.

“C.J.!” Hobie exclaimed. He caught himself and lowered his voice to a whisper. “What are you doing here? We’re not going out until 8.”

C.J. pushed past Hobie with a grin. “That’s no way to greet a lady, Hobie. And what did we agree that you would call me?”

“I’m sorry, C.... I mean, Miss Parker. It’s just that my dad’s still here and he can’t find out that I’m going out with you. He’d kill me. He’d kill you too!”

As if on cue, Mitch called out from upstairs. “Barbara, honey, I’ll be right down.”

“Honey?” C.J. whispered to Hobie, stifling a laugh. Then she called out in a falsetto voice, “Mitchy darling! Do hurry up!”

“Stop that!” said Hobie.

C.J. stepped closed to Hobie and snaked her hand up his shirt, massaging his chest. “Okay. What about this? Should I stop doing this?”

Hobie shuddered. “Yes! No! I don’t know.”

“What about this?” C.J. asked, tugging at the zipper on Hobie’s jeans with her free hand.

Hobie was certainly having a hard time deciding what to tell C.J., but when he heard footsteps on the stairs he hissed, “Stop that!”

Mitch called, “Here I come, sweetheart!”

C.J. pulled her hand from under Hobie’s shirt just as Mitch came into the living room.

“C.J.!” Mitch said, surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“Miss Parker just came by to say hello,” Hobie lied.

“Yes, I did,” C.J. said, smiling and giving Mitch a hug, pressing her surgically enhanced bust against his muscular chest. “It’d been way too long since I’d seen little Hobie so I thought I’d just drop in.”

“How nice of you, C.J.,” Mitch said. “Too bad Hobie has a date tonight and can’t hang out with you.”

“Oh he has a date, has he?” C.J. asked. “And who is the lucky young lady?”

“Sarah Hanson,” Hobie said uncomfortably.

“Well, if you have sex with her, be sure to use a condom,” C.J. smirked. “You don’t know where these girls have been nowadays.”

“C.J.!” exclaimed Mitch. “Now, that’s very good advice, but hardly appropriate. Hobie, your Auntie C.J. means well, but I don’t want you to get into any sort of trouble tonight, if you know what I mean.”

“Don’t worry, Dad, I won’t be having sex tonight.”

“Not with Sarah, anyway,” C.J. said, under her breath.

“What was that, C.J.?” Mitch asked.

“I said, ‘It is simply amazing what our government is able to perpetrate under the guise being the world’s police force. Consider the situation in Iraq. Our nation forbids other nations from invading their neighbors, and yet we send troops halfway across the world and do the same thing, only we call it nation-building and a war on terrorism.’”

“Oh,” Mitch said. “Because it sounded like you said ‘Rot in Harrah’s heyday.’”

“What on Earth does that mean?” C.J. asked.

“I honestly don’t know,” Mitch said. “That’s why I asked you.”

“Well, I don’t know. The two things don’t sound a bit alike.”

“I know,” Mitch said, confused. “This is very perplexing.”

“Yes, it is.”

Breaking up this verbal repartee was the doorbell; the savior of the uncomfortable, the destroyer of awkward situations. Oh great and powerful doorbell, amazing and wonderful bringer of new life into dull and tired scenes, we give your our praise and glory and hope that you will bless us with fresh blood. Ding-dong.

Mitch opened the door and greeted Barbara. He ushered her into the living room.

“Come in, come in. I’d like you to meet my friend –“

“C.J. Parker,” Barbara said, extending her hand.

C.J. shook it, smiling warmly. “Have we met?” she asked.

“No,” Barbara said. “I’ve seen pictures.”

“Sock drawer?” C.J. asked.

Barbara nodded. Mitch and Hobie smiled knowingly.

“Well, let’s get going, Mitch. They won’t hold our table if we’re late.”

“Okay. C.J., I’ll let Hobie show you out. Hobe, have fun tonight. Don’t stay out too late. You know the deal.”

“Bye, Dad. Have fun.”

Mitch and Barbara left the house. Hobie went to the window and watched as they drove off. Just as he was about to lower the blinds, he spied a second car pulling away from the curb. The car looked awfully familiar to Hobie. It took him only a couple moments to remember.

“That’s the car that was here the first time they went out.”

“What are you talking about, Hobie?” C.J. asked, lying seductively on the couch.

Hobie told C.J. about the strange man who’d tried to get into the house that night. “Why is he here again? Is he following Dad and Barbara?”

“You worry too much,” C.J. said, unbuttoning a button on her blouse. The other buttons struggled as they were forced to redistribute the pressure inflicted upon them by C.J.’s ample bosom. “Why don’t you come sit down next to your ‘Auntie C.J.’?”

But Hobie couldn’t be distracted. Even as C.J. fully unbuttoned her blouse, exposing a lacy, black silk bra and her perfect abs and stomach, the young man continued going over the possible reasons that someone might follow his father and his date. To Hobie’s credit, he did briefly consider the idea that Barbara and the man were international jewel thieves who had just pulled off a huge diamond heist, crashed their plane into the Pacific and were now devising a harebrained scheme which somehow involved using Mitch to recover the diamonds from the ocean floor. Hobie wrote it off as irredeemably trite and implausible. (The little shit. Here I give him access to one of the

most fantasized-about pair of tits in the world and he takes the opportunity to slag my story line? We'll just see about that.)

Hobie couldn't come up with an explanation that satisfied him, and although C.J. sat on the couch, now in nothing but her bra and panties and high-heels, cooing to him, "Come tell Auntie C.J. all about it," he was determined to get to the bottom of the mystery.

"C.J.," he said, "will you take me over to 4th and Sunset?"

"Fine!" C.J. said, exasperated. "But if I have to sleep with Alain tonight just to get some, I'm never going to talk to you again."

C.J. dressed and they went to her car. Along the way to the restaurant, she kept trying to grab at Hobie, but he warded off her advances, advising her to keep her hands on the wheel and her eyes on the road. When they reached the restaurant, Hobie had her circle the block several times until he found what he was looking for: the man's car, parked in a lot kitty-corner to the restaurant. So it was true! That guy was somehow connected to Mitch or Barbara. Hobie had his evidence. He just needed to know why.

Barbara had spotted Max the second they left Mitch's house. Max was never very good at tailing people without being seen. If he was anymore obvious about it, Mitch would figure it out, even though he was totally absorbed by the lights and buttons on Barbara's car CD player.

"This is sooo cool!" he squealed. "And you say it plays 'compact discs'? Are those like records?"

Barbara turned from the rear-view mirror where she was watching Max's clumsy attempts to be sneaky and looked at Mitch in utter amazement. "Well," she said, "they're similar in that they're both round and have holes in the middle. But that's pretty much where the similarities end. Compact discs are digital. That means there can be no degradation of sound quality over time. You don't get the hisses and pops that you do with records."

"Must be a mighty small needle to fit in there," Mitch said, trying to peer through the slot on the face of the stereo.

"Well, CD players don't use needles. To decode the digital information on the surface of the disc, there is a laser --"

"A laser? That's so cool!" Mitch exclaimed. Then, suddenly, he was concerned. "Isn't that dangerous?"

"It's not a very powerful laser. It might damage your eyes if you looked directly at it, though."

Mitch pulled his head back from the stereo. "I'm scared," he whimpered.

"There there, Mitch. Don't be frightened. The laser won't hurt you."

"Promise?"

"I promise," Barbara said, holding Mitch's hand.

Barbara wondered if she had actually seen a spark in this man's eyes or if she'd just been infatuated with him because he had rescued her. Maybe he'd been hit in the head since the last time they met. Repeatedly. And brutally. To within an inch of his life.

"Did Max hit you?" she asked.

"Max? No. Why?"

"Just wondering. He gets violent sometimes."

The couple reached the restaurant. As Barbara gave the keys over to the valet, she spotted Max pulling into a parking lot just across the street. So, he was going to wait out there for them to finish, was he? She thought. Didn't he have anything better to do with his time? Barbara began wondering what Max's real plans were – she knew he was never completely sold on the whole Mitch-seduction scheme, and she wouldn't put it past him having an alternative plan that he kept her completely in the dark about. It wouldn't surprise her in the least, even, if Max's plan included taking the diamonds entirely for himself.

Hobie and C.J. snuck up behind Max's car. Hobie peeked over the trunk and confirmed that Max was indeed inside.

"What's your plan, little man?" C.J. asked.

"I was hoping you'd just go talk to him, Miss Parker," Hobie replied.

"I'd be glad to. Hopefully my talents won't go to waste on him like they did on you."

Hobie handed her a small audio bug which had adhesive on the reverse side. "Just plant this on him somewhere. I want to be able to listen to him."

"Okay, Secret Agent Hobie," C.J. teased. "Where'd you get this, anyway?"

"Oh, my dad has a bunch of stuff like this. He's talking about opening a detective agency."

"You're kidding!"

"No, not at all. I don't see it lasting more than a couple years though. It's pretty ill-conceived."

C.J. unbuttoned a few buttons again and pulled up her already ridiculously short skirt. She stood, approached the driver's side of the car and leaned inside the open window.

"Hey baby, wanna date?" she asked.

Max jumped, obviously startled. "Don't do that! I nearly killed – wait a second! C.J. Parker?"

"In the flesh," C.J. smiled. Max was certainly getting a view of a great amount of her flesh. "Hey, I recognize you too. You're the guy Logan fished from the plane the other day."

"Yeah, that was me. Where the hell did you come from?"

"Well, my momma says I came from heaven. I can take you there if you like."

"You're turning tricks on Sunset?" Max asked.

"I don't get paid squat at Baywatch. Most of the lifeguards do this, actually. Even Logan. I hear he can suck a ping pong ball through a garden hose, if you're into that kind of thing."

"No thanks," Max said. "And as much as I'd like to take you up on your offer to visit heaven right now, I'm kinda busy, and a little low on cash."

"First time's free. Get you hooked, you'll never go anywhere else."

Max laughed, but was obviously torn. The business side of him won out, however and he turned C.J. down again.

“Well, alright. Perhaps a rain check? What’s so important that you can’t take some time for a little of this?” C.J. asked, running her hands up and down her voluptuous curves.

“Oh, um, I’m just waiting here to pick up a friend. Can’t be late for that. You know how it goes.”

“You sure I can’t be your friend?” C.J. asked, reaching into the car towards Max’s pants, determined to plant the bug at any cost.

Max caught her arm and guided it back out the window. “I’m sure,” he said. “Very tempting. But I’m going to have to pass. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

“Sorry,” C.J. said, much chagrined. “Guess I’ll be going.”

C.J. turned and walked away, heading back to her car where Hobie was waiting. Along the way, she received numerous catcalls, whistles and propositions, which she returned with a steely-eyed gaze and an extended middle finger.

“Learn anything?” Hobie asked.

“Yeah,” C.J. said sadly. “I learned that I’m losing my touch. How come nobody wants me anymore?”

“We all want you, Miss Parker. Trust me,” Hobie said consolingly. “It’s just that I’m worried about my dad.”

“Oh, alright. Yeah, the guy’s name is Max Fischer. He was the one flying the plane that crashed into the ocean the other day. The plane Barbara was on. I couldn’t get the bug planted, though. He just wasn’t having any of it.”

“Holy smokes!” Hobie exclaimed. “That *is* unexpected. I wonder what all this means?”

“It means,” said a voice behind Hobie, “that you don’t get a piece of this sweet honey pie tonight.”

Hobie whirled around to find Max standing behind them, an ugly looking gun leveled in their direction.

“Max!” C.J. said. “What are you doing?”

“You think I can’t put two and two together? One Baywatch lifeguard goes out with my girlfriend and another happens to come by to offer herself up to me? I’m smarter than that. I know you’re on to us.”

“No, Max. It’s true. I just happened to come by here.”

“Sure you did, and this kid was going to be your next trick, right?”

“Well, actually...” C.J. said.

“Look, mister, I just want to know why you’re following my dad. Is it because Barbara’s cheating on you?” Hobie asked.

“Cheating? Pah!” Max shook his head. “She’s doing this for us... Wait a second. Are you telling me that you didn’t know that we’re a pair of international jewel thieves who just pulled off a huge diamond heist, crashed their plane into the Pacific and were now devising a harebrained scheme which somehow involves using Mitch to recover the diamonds from the ocean floor?”

“Are you serious?” Hobie asked, amazed.

“Oh yeah,” said Max. “Dead serious.”

“Man, I did briefly consider that but dismissed it as trite and implausible.”

“Sure you did, kid.”

“No, really, I did,” Hobie insisted.

“Whatever.”

“It’s true!”

“Okay, okay. I believe you,” Max said. “Damn whiny kid. Jeez.”

“Max,” C.J. said, unbuttoning yet another button on her blouse. “Why don’t you let us go?”

“Too late for that, sweetheart. You’ll just go running to the police. I’m going to have to shoot you.”

“Oh man,” Hobie said.

“Told you we should have just fucked tonight, you little weasel,” C.J. said angrily. “But no, you wanted to follow this asshole.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Parker.”

“Hold on a minute,” Max said. “You were actually going to sleep with this little twerp? That’s just sick!”

“Well, yeah,” C.J. admitted. “I have a thing for little boys. Plus, Mitch is so square, I thought it would be fun to corrupt his precious little Hobie.”

“I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: I’ll take what I can get!” declared Hobie.

“Hmm. Hold on. You *are* his ‘precious little Hobie’ aren’t you? You’re worth more to me alive than dead.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” C.J. said, relieved.

“Not you, you floozie,” Max said. He shot C.J. twice in the chest and she crumpled to the ground.

“Oh my God!” Hobie shouted.

“Don’t worry, kid. You didn’t want none of that anyway. She was dirtier than a bowl full of dirt.”

“She was my friend,” wept Hobie.

“Stop your crying and get in the trunk.”

“What was that?” Mitch asked as he and Barbara waited for the valet to bring the car around.

“Sounded like gunshots,” Barbara said. “Pretty close, too.”

“I knew that,” Mitch said. “I’m starting a detective agency. Don’t worry, I’ll protect you.” Mitch flexed his muscles.

“I feel so safe when I’m with you,” Barbara said flatly. “I really do.”

They returned to Mitch’s house. Barbara noticed that Max wasn’t following them. He must have gotten bored or fallen asleep, she thought. Either way, she was glad he wasn’t watching as Mitch led her inside.

“So,” started Mitch. “are you feeling more certain of your feelings? Is your head clearer?”

“Well, Mitch. My head’s not too clear, right now. But, I’m certain that I want to do this.”

With that, Barbara grabbed Mitch and pulled him close to her. She kissed him passionately, pressing her body against his.

“Oh, Barbara, I’ve wanted you for so long, I can’t even tell you,” Mitch said, when they came up for air.

“Mitch, this feels so right. So very, very right. I can’t begin to explain how right this feels.”

“Yes, I too feel right, and good, and sexy. I feel so sexy!” Mitch cried.

“I do too,” said Barbara.

“I need you, my darling. I need you so badly!”

“I need you too,” said Barbara. Then she turned away. “But there is something else I need. Something I need very badly as well.”

“What is it, my dear? Mitch asked. “Is it something I can help you with?”

“Oh, yes!” said Barbara. “Or...no. I don’t know. It is so embarrassing.”

“Oh, Barbara. You can tell me anything.”

“Anything?” she asked.

“Absolutely anything,” Mitch said.

“Truly? *Anything?*”

“Well,” Mitch said, thinking about it. “Yes! Anything! Everything!”

“If you’re sure,” Barbara said.

“Oh, I am. I certainly, definitely, positively am.”

“Well, okay. I guess I can tell you.”

“Don’t guess,” Mitch said vehemently. “*Know.*”

“Okay. Okay. Yes, I can tell you.”

“Good. Yes, that’s the spirit.”

“Well,” said Barbara. “It’s about the plane.”

“Which plane?” Mitch asked.

“The plane I was on that crashed into the ocean.”

“Ohh, that plane. Of course,” said Mitch. “What about it?”

“Well, I left some personal items on board that I’d rather people not see.”

“What is it?”

“Well,” Barbara said, “that’s the embarrassing part.

“Why? What’s so bad about what you left on the plane?”

Barbara’s eyes began to tear up. Her lower lip quivered. Mitch could tell he was about to have a hysterical woman on his hands.

“Barbara, no. Don’t cry. It’s just me here. Mitch!”

But it was no use. Barbara began to cry harder. “Mitch!” she sobbed. “It’s a bag of my dirty underwear!”

“Oh, Lord, no!” cried Mitch. “Anything but – wait a second. It’s just a bag of dirty underwear?”

“Yes, and I’d just die if anyone saw it.”

“Oh, Barbara,” Mitch said. “Don’t worry, nobody will look inside anything on the plane.”

“Really?” Barbara asked. “They’ll just give it back to me, no questions asked?”

“Absolutely! Unless of course, it’s a duffel bag filled with \$23 million worth of stolen diamonds.”

“What did you say?”

“Oh nothing. I was just kidding. Don’t worry about it!”

“Look, Mitch. Do you think we might be able to go down there earlier? Before they recover the plane?”

“You mean tomorrow?”

“I mean tonight.”

Hobie tried to keep the general directions that Max’s car was traveling in mind but after just a few turns, he had no idea where he was.

“This is harder than it sounds,” he said to himself.

It didn’t matter much though because soon Hobie knew exactly where Max was taking him: the ocean. He could smell the saltwater even though he was locked in the trunk of Max’s car.

Soon they stopped. Hobie heard a door open and close, and then footsteps coming in his direction. He braced himself for the trunk opening, but the footsteps faded. Hobie felt his muscles cramping, and found the air in the trunk getting stale. He started banging on the trunk lid and yelling, hoping someone would help, but nobody came. He was alone. He wondered if his dad would come to his rescue or if he was just going to be fed to the fishes.

Then came a persistent tapping on the trunk lid. Hobie thought that either Max had come back just to mess with Hobie’s head, or else someone was trying to send him a message. Hobie began mentally translating the taps into Morse Code. He’d read a book on the subject the year before and had memorized all the letters and numbers of the Morse alphabet in hopes that it would come in handy someday.

“T-A-K-E O-F-F Y-O-U-R C-L-O-W-N G-E-A-R T-H-E C-I-R-C-U-S I-S I-N N-E-W-A-R-K.” Hobie translated.

What the hell did that mean? Hobie went over the combinations of dots and dashes that he had heard and decided he’d not mis-translated the message. Either whoever was doing the tapping was terrible at transmitting Morse Code, or they were simply insane. Or else it... Or else it was just that it had started raining.

Listening closer to the noise outside, Hobie realized that’s what it was. The weatherman had predicted a heavy storm for that evening and apparently, it was under way.

“Tonight? Are you serious?” Mitch asked. “But that would involve –“

“Getting a boat and some scuba gear and going out to the plane.”

“Yeah. Exactly right,” said Mitch. “Hold on a minute. It must have been Max that Matt chased down there last week!”

“What are you talking about?” Barbara asked.

“Someone stole a boat and dove to the plane. Matt chased him and had to fight off a giant squid that’s made its home in the wreckage. Max didn’t tell you about it?”

“No, he didn’t say a word.”

“Maybe it wasn’t him then. But why would someone else go down to the plane? Is there something else down there besides your... underwear?”

“No, that’s it. I think you’re right though. I think it was Max. It sounds like the sort of thing he might do. He’s terribly bull-headed sometimes and he doesn’t think of the consequences of his actions. Oh, Mitch, I’m terribly sorry about that. Matt wasn’t hurt, was he?”

“Matt’s fine. Don’t worry. I just can’t believe Max would risk his life and the lives of others for some dirty panties.”

“He’s done much crazier things in the time I’ve know him. Believe me.”

“Like what?” Mitch asked.

“Well, one time, we were in Atlantic City and the bellboy delivered one of my bags to the wrong room. Max mad him go from room to room at 3 in the morning, looking for the bag. I was asleep. I didn’t even need the bag!”

“Why do you hang out with this guy? He sounds dangerous, unstable.”

“Oh, he has a contract. And he’s a very good pilot.”

“All this aside, Barbara, I don’t think making another dive for your unmentionables is a good idea.”

“Well, then we should go over there to stop Max from making another dive of his own.”

“What do you mean?”

“He followed us to the restaurant tonight, but he wasn’t there when we left. He tried the dive before, I think he might try it again.”

“Oh, hell,” Mitch said. “Let’s go.”

“Mitch, it might be dangerous. Max has certainly got a gun.”

“Is this guy your friend or not? Do I really have to go up against him?”

“You never can tell with Max.”

“Well, we Navy Seals are always prepared,” Mitch said, leading Barbara into the basement. He opened a storage closet seemingly filled with boxes labeled “sweaters” and “vacation slides” and felt around the inside of the doorframe. He found what he was looking for: a well-hidden button which, when pressed, activated a mechanism in the wall.

What Barbara saw astonished her. The wall of boxes split down the middle and separated, revealing a large cache of weapons. Mitch went through the stockpile, methodically picking out items he thought he might need. He strapped on a shoulder holster, placing his favorite pistol inside. Around his ankle went a survival knife, and into his pockets, several clips of ammunition. He briefly considered tying a red bandana around his forehead but decided against it.

“Want one?” Mitch asked, offering Barbara a gun.

“No thanks,” she replied. “I hate guns.”

“But what if –“

“Don’t worry, Mitch,” Barbara said with a smile, “I can handle myself.”

They rushed out of the house and to Barbara’s car, just missing the ringing of Mitch’s telephone.

Max cursed as he hung up the phone. Surely Barbara and Mitch were done with dinner by now. Any normal couple would have been. Mitch was probably going on and on about some ridiculous beach story or another. Max didn’t put much stock in do-gooders. Lifeguards were just cops without guns and Max absolutely hated cops. The fact that lifeguards were always out rescuing people too weak to fend for themselves really bugged him. If they didn’t know what they were doing but put themselves in harm’s way anyhow, they deserved to drown. As a matter of fact, Max would have rather died than let Logan save him when the plane crashed. It was the way of the world. The strong prevailed over the weak, and the species got stronger. As far as Max was concerned,

lifeguards were interfering with the natural order of things. Mitch was certainly no better than the rest of them.

And what about that whiny little kid of his? What a little bastard! And then there was his name! It was 'Hobie' for the love of God! Who but an addle-minded hippie fool would name his kid Hobie? And the kid was actually going to sleep with *the* C.J. Parker? Max just couldn't make heads or tails of the world anymore. Nothing made sense.

He did feel slightly bad about killing C.J. though. She hadn't really done anything. Not that many of Max's victims ever really had, but he did feel a twinge of guilt on this one. The only way he knew how to deal with it was by working himself into a rage.

And for Max, that didn't take much. He resumed thinking about Hobie and Mitch and getting angrier and angrier. Such vapid, shallow idiots! Whiny, brawny goody-two-shoes! Max clenched his jaw and trembled with anger. He successfully killed the nagging voice of his conscience. He had to focus on the task at hand.

The task at hand involved rigging an elaborate death trap for Hobie. He'd built such diabolical devices under worse conditions, but he'd always been working from a set of blueprints. This time, he was going to have to improvise.

He started by making several lists. First, he wrote out his assets. He had:

- 1) A hostage (Hobie);
- 2) a building (the Baywatch motor pool);
- 3) access to water (the Pacific Ocean);
- 4) a gun; and
- 5) his roguish good looks, devil-may-care attitude and damn fine haircut

Then, he listed aspects working against him:

- 1) No blueprints;
- 2) Mitch;
- 3) Barbara (he didn't know where she fit these days, so he put her on this list);
and
- 4) the giant squid

Finally, he listed attributes he wanted the death trap to include:

- 1) A gag to shut the kid up;
- 2) an elaborate and torturous method of killing Hobie that would take slightly less time to work than one might expect Mitch to be able to dive for and retrieve the diamonds, ensuring Mitch's compliance and (hopefully) Hobie's death; and
- 3) a panic button which would bypass the intricate and devilishly clever death sequence mentioned above in case:
 - a. The method above failed;
 - b. Mitch somehow beath the clock; or
 - c. The kid became too annoying to bear

Max took some quick measurements of the building and then strolled outside. It had started to rain heavily, and as Max took shelter in the building's entrance, he noticed

that clouds on the horizon were being lit up by lightning, ever increasing in its frequency. This storm was not going to blow over anytime soon.

“Hobie!” he called. “I’m opening the trunk. I’ve got my gun pointed at your head. Don’t do anything stupid, alright?”

“Okay,” replied Hobie in a weak and muffled voice.

“Alright, then,” Max said to himself. He approached the car, opened the trunk lid and found a very pathetic looking 15-year-old.

“For crying out loud, kid,” Max exclaimed, helping Hobie out of the trunk. “You’ve only been in there for 10 minutes.”

Hobie moaned.

“For crying out loud,” Max repeated, placing a pair of handcuffs on Hobie’s wrists. “Kids these days and all that.”

Max gagged and blindfolded the youngster and marched him inside. Once in the motor pool, Max secured Hobie to a pipe with a length of chain. Hobie slumped against the wall, totally drained. Max shook his head at the weak little kid and then took Hobie’s measurements to ensure a perfect fit into the device he was constructing.

It would be water-powered, using the steady, measurable and constant flow of the tide to slowly crush Hobie into a small cube. It would have a built-in gag, a cup-holder and the on/off switch and the “Insta-Kill” bypass switch would be mislabeled so if Mitch did somehow manage to get to the controls, he would press the wrong button and kill his own son.

Oh, thought Max, that’s good stuff. He made a mental note to patent and market the contraption at the earliest opportunity. He knew arch-villains who would pay an arm and a leg for this thing.

Max started production of the devilish device and since he’d planned everything out before hand, the construction process went very smoothly. It seemed like he’d only just begun his work when he was hammering the last nail into place.

Max stood back to admire his handiwork. It was a beautiful machine, integrated perfectly with the existing architecture so there was no jarring of old and new construction. Everything was built to code, and would have passed any inspections given to it. Max tested some load-bearing beams. They were solid as a rock.

“Hey kid,” Max called. “It’s a pity you’ll never get a chance to see this. She’s a real beaut!”

“Mmmfff,” Hobie moaned through the gag in his mouth.

“My thoughts exactly,” Max said, unlocking Hobie from the pipe. “But there just ain’t time for a test run before the main event.”

There was a crash from behind Max and suddenly light flooded the room.

“There’s less time than you think, you bastard!” cried a voice.

Max spun around, holding Hobie before him as a human shield. He held his gun to Hobie’s temple.

“Mitch Buchannon,” said Max, squinting in the glare of the spotlight that Barbara held on him. “Could your timing be any worse? Seriously? Could you come back in five minutes? And could you turn off that damned light?”

“Let Hobie go,” Mitch said, aiming his gun at a spot between Max’s eyes.

“Oh you shouldn’t oughtta done that. Put the gun away, buddy, or the kid gets it.”

“What’s this all about, Max? A bag of dirty laundry? You don’t need to worry. Nobody’s going to find Barbara’s panties. You don’t have to protect her anymore.” Mitch glanced back over his shoulder at Barbara. “Right, honey?”

Barbara nodded slightly and said, “Uh, yeah, right.”

“Dirty panties?” Max snorted. “You really told him it was dirty panties? I thought you were kidding! And he fell for it? Amazing!”

“What’s he talking about, Barbara?” Mitch asked, not taking his gaze from Max.

“Yeah! Tell him what it’s all about, Barb! Tell your sweet Mitchy what’s going on.”

“What is it, Barbara?” Mitch asked again.

“There’s a bag of stolen diamonds in the plane. \$23 million worth.”

Mitch’s jaw dropped. “Are you serious?”

“I’m serious,” Barbara said, sadly.

“I guessed that earlier!”

“Sure you did,” said Max.

“No, really. I did!”

“Whatever you say, Mitch. Now—“

“Actually, Max, it’s true. He did,” Barbara said.

“Well, great. Ten points for you, Mitch. Let’s see how far that gets you when you’re dead! *Put your gun down!*”

“Okay, okay!” Mitch said, placing his gun on the floor.

“Now, kick it over here,” Max instructed.

Wishing he hadn’t been absent for the Navy Seal “How to shoot someone while kicking your gun in their direction during a hostage situation” training course, Mitch did as he was told. Max kicked the gun backward with his heel and it landed in the water with a splash. Only after he was sure that Mitch had no weapons in his hands, did Max approach Mitch and frisk him. He was very thorough in his search, finding all the weapons Mitch had brought with him, including the knife strapped to Mitch’s ankle and the length of piano wire Mitch had hid between his well-defined butt cheeks. All the while, he kept an eye on Barbara.

“You don’t have any naughty items on your person, do you Barb?” he asked her when he’d finished with Mitch.

“You know me, Max. I hate guns,” she replied.

“Nonetheless, I think I’d rather be sure,” Max said. He directed Mitch to stand far away from the both of them as he roughly ran his hands up and down Barbara’s figure. It was more of a display of lewdness than a security check and when it was done, both of them were slightly breathless.

When Max resumed his position at the controls of the deathtrap, Barbara asked, “Nice machine you’ve built here, Max. Whose plans are they?”

“Thanks, Barb. Made it myself,” Max beamed.

“You’re kidding! Impressive. Some of your best work, I think.”

“Aww, gee, Barbara. You’re too kind. Of course, I modified some other designs I remembered, but the main mechanism and the overall execution of the... well, of the execution, that’s all mine.”

“Amazing. What’s this thing here?” Barbara asked, reaching towards a single wing-nut.”

“Ah, that’s the... Uh. I’m not sure. Please, don’t loosen it though.”

Barbara began turning the nut anyway, having realized it was the lynch-pin of the contraption. As she pulled it off, ignoring Max’s protests, creaks and groans from the entire machine could be heard. In a matter of moments, the deathtrap was coming to pieces, and the three adults were forced to dodge falling debris.

“Fuck! Fuck fuck fuck!” Max fumed. “Barbara... Dammit. Okay, okay. So there was a bit of a goof in the design. But... Dammit, Barbara. I never even got to see it work.”

“Sorry, Max, but your fatal flaw was always that your designs had a fatal flaw,” Barbara chuckled.

Max was quick to regain his composure, realizing that although his deathtrap had been disabled, he still had the upper hand.

“Now, Mitch. You’re going to do me a favor and I’m going to do you a favor. This is your lucky night. I’ve already been very generous to you this evening.”

“Oh yeah?” snarled Mitch. “How do you figure?”

“I saved this brat of yours from a crippling venereal disease by killing that top-heavy whore you call a lifeguard.”

“You killed C.J.?” Mitch yelled. “You monster!”

Barbara restrained Mitch from leaping at Max. Only by using every last ounce of strength was she able to hold the enraged man back causing the certain death of his son.

“Don’t do it, Mitch,” she whispered.

Max began laughing. “Oh this has been quite a good night already. And soon, I’m going to have my diamonds back. Plus, I’m finally rid of my snotty, stuck up girlfriend.”

“Well, if that makes it official, I’m happy to be rid of you too, you jackass,” Barbara growled.

“Look... Shut up! No more name calling or I’ll shoot you,” Max said. “Listen, here’s what’s going to happen. Mitch, you and Barbara are going after the diamonds. You will recover all of them or this rat-faced punk son of yours gets a little facial redecoration.”

“I don’t get it,” Mitch said.

“Oh, good Lord,” Max said. “I thought it was pretty clear. Which part didn’t you understand?”

“What did you mean by ‘facial redecoration’?”

“What? Are you an idiot?” Max roared. “Wait. On second thought, don’t bother. I already know the answer to that question. Mitch, when I said ‘facial redecoration’ I meant that I would shoot your son Hobie, right in the face!”

“Okay. That’s what I thought you meant. I just wanted to be sure.”

“Why me, Max?” Barbara asked. “Why are you sending me down there? You know I’ve never gone scuba diving, I hate water, I can’t swim, and I’m allergic to cephalopods.”

“Those are good enough reasons for me,” Max chortled. “Besides, I don’t really feel like hanging out with you right now.”

“Max, you are a bastard.”

“What did I say about the name calling, toots? But yes, you’re right. I am a magnificent bastard.”

“Let’s get this over with, already!” said Mitch impatiently. “And if you hurt one hair on my son’s head, so help me God, I’ll make you pay.”

“Pay for what? A new haircut?” Max said, laughing. “I’m tembling, Mitch. I really am. Seriously though, I admire your spirit. It’s good to feel that strongly about something, and I’m glad you feel that strongly about your son. Me? The only thing I feel that strongly about is my fucking money. You got that? *My* fucking money. As in, my diamonds. As in, mine. So, if you don’t mess with what is mine, like by taking or hiding or switching my diamonds -- in fact, if you do anything but bring them directly back to me, I’ll consider them messed with. But, if you don’t mess with my money, I won’t mess with your son’s face. Meaning that I won’t shoot it. Do we have an agreement?”

“Yes,” Mitch said grudgingly, “we have a deal.”

“Great,” Max said. “So we’re all friends now. Fantastic! Let’s get to it. Pick a Scarab, any Scarab.”

“We’ll take number thirty-seven. Barbara, find some gear that will fit you,” Mitch ordered.

Barbara could see that once Mitch was in his element, he became cool and competent. Intelligent. Commanding. There was the spark she had seen before. Barbara obeyed his commands. They put on wet suits and checked their gear.

“Alright,” Max said. “Now that you two are all dressed up, let’s head on out!”

Mitch loaded the gear onto the boat while Max and Barbara helped Hobie get on board. Max placed Hobie in the bow and insisted that Mitch pilot the craft. Max took up position in the stern, able to watch each member of the strange group, making sure that nobody did anything foolish.

Barbara approached him. “Max, it doesn’t have to be like this.”

“Not too close there, dearie. You wouldn’t want to make me nervous. You know how I can get.”

“Sure, Max. I’m sorry,” Barbara said, backing off. “But really, can’t we just let Hobie go? We don’t need him.”

“Hold up a second, Barbie. What’s all this ‘we’ business? There is no ‘we’ anymore. That’s over. It ended the second you fell in love with Mr. Muscles here.”

“Okay, Max. But remember: you sent me to him. What did you expect to happen the way we’ve been lately?”

“I know. Honestly, I’m glad he took you off my hands. Twenty-three million divided by one is so much nicer than twenty-three million divided by two.”

“Selfish and greedy to the last, Max,” Barbara said disgustedly. “I honestly don’t know what I ever saw in you.”

“Oh yeah? Well, let me remind you. You saw a handsome, witty, intelligent guy who could get you anything you wanted, take you wherever you wanted to go and get you off like no other man ever could. Remember *that*?”

“Oh yeah,” Barbara said dreamily, thinking back on better times. She quickly snapped out of it though. “That man left me a long time ago. Back in Leningrad. And he was replaced by... by you. A psychotic, depraved, ruthless degenerate.”

“Barbie, Barbie! Stop with the compliments! I might start to think you still like me! Okay, enough of this. Get back to your boyfriend, sweetie. I think he’s getting lonely.”

Barbara moved forward on the boat to Mitch who was just pulling the Scarab away from the dock and out into the rough and stormy sea.

“Mitch, I –“ Barbara said.

“Save it, Barbara,” Mitch said angrily. “I don’t want to hear it. I just want to get this maniac his diamonds and get the two of you out of Hobie’s and my lives.”

“I understand, Mitch. And I’m sorry. You have every right to be angry.”

“Oh, thanks for understanding,” Mitch said sarcastically. “I was worried that you wouldn’t validate my feelings. You used me, Barbara. You used me and you lied to me and now my son is bound and gagged and we’re being forced to help a psycho lunatic get away with millions of dollars. So just save it!”

“Mitch, it started as business. It started as me using you to get the diamonds. But along the way it all changed. *I* changed, Mitch. I don’t care about the money. I just care about you.”

“I wish I could believe that. And even if I did, I don’t know if it would make a difference. You lied to me and I don’t know if I could ever trust you again.”

“I understand that. When this is over, you’ll never hear from me again, if that’s what you want. But,” she added, “you have my word – for whatever that’s worth – that I will do everything I can to keep you and Hobie safe. I won’t let Max hurt you guys. I promise.”

Mitch was silent, focused on piloting the boat through the choppy water to their destination. Barbara returned to the midsection of the boat and sat there, mentally preparing herself for the coming task.

Matt Brodie sat in his meditation room, relaxing his mind, body and soul after a rough day at Baywatch. He’d had to deal with several rescues, and the ensuing paperwork, along with angry parents who tried to blame him for their kids needing rescuing in the first place. If the parents had been paying attention to what their children were doing, there wouldn’t have been any need for Matt to get a single strand of his wavy brown hair wet, but they didn’t see it that way. No, these people were expecting Matt to be not just a lifeguard, but a babysitter as well. Matt had given up trying to reason with them and had just let each one vent their anger and frustration. If they needed to let it out, Matt figured he might as well let them.

But a day spent being a verbal punching bag takes its toll and Matt was careful to deal with the residual tension peacefully, lest he let it out on someone else, thus being a link in a never-ending chain of anger and negativity. It was much better to put a stop to it when given the opportunity.

So, Matt sat on a simple rug in his darkened room. His legs were crossed in the lotus position. He held his hands atop his knees, forefinger and thumb touched together. In this manner, he attempted to clear his mind.

“Ommmmm,” he chanted. “Ommmm mani padme hummmmm.”

Matt began to feel relaxed. He became one with himself and the universe and every thing within it. The troubles of the day fell away from his mind and his tension was eased. He was definitely going to have to thank C.J. for getting him into this.

Just as he thought that, a giant wave rocked his houseboat. It shook him from the relaxed mental state he’d achieved and nearly knocked him onto his back. He’d been so relaxed he hadn’t heard the noise of the boat approaching, but he could hear it clearly

now, along with some shouting, all but totally masked by the boat's engine and the roar of the storm.

"Great!" Matt said. "Not again!"

He sprang to his feet, again taking his binoculars to the rail of his boat and saw the Scarab speeding off. It was another late-night trip to the site of the plane crash, it seemed.

This time, however, it looked as if there were multiple people on board the boat. And if Matt wasn't mistaken, the man piloting the boat was none other than his boss and friend, Mitch Buchannon.

What would Mitch be doing going out with a bunch of people in the middle of the night in such terrible weather? And furthermore, why had he tried to swamp Matt's houseboat? Matt sensed trouble. It was no accident that Mitch had sent his wake crashing into Matt's boat. He must have been sending a message. What on Earth was going on?

"Here we go again," said Matt, as he lowered himself into his motorboat.

"What the Hell was that?" Max yelled as Mitch narrowly missed hitting a large dark shape in the water.

"Houseboat!" Matt cried over the roar of wind and water. "Didn't see it till we were on it! Those guys squat here for the night and you never know where they are."

But Mitch had known exactly where the boat would be. In fact, he was banking on it. He was hoping Matt would be home, even though all the windows of the boat had been completely dark. He hoped Matt would get the message and know that something was going down that wasn't at all kosher. Above all, Mitch hoped that Matt would remember the conversation they'd had last week and that Matt wouldn't chase after them without backup. It was a long shot, and the last thing Mitch wanted to do was to endanger his friend's life, but he knew he needed help and Matt was the only person he could get a message to without Max knowing.

Mitch was starting to wish he had heeded his own advice and called for backup himself. Of course, he went into this thinking it was just about dirty laundry and Barbara's need to protect her reputation, not about millions of dollars. People don't kill for underwear, but there's no telling what they might do over that kind of money. If Barbara had just been honest with him, knowing the true nature of the danger they were facing.... Well, things would be different.

His jaw clenched as he thought of her. Hobie had been right this time. She had just been using him. She was as bad as the others who had just taken advantage of his kindness to further their own goals. And yet, when they kissed, there had been real passion. Mitch had blinded himself to false passion for the sake of, for lack of a better term, "getting some" and so he knew how false passion felt and he knew that at least Barbara's kisses had been genuine.

Or it could just be that she was a better actress than he had dealt with before. She was a professional liar; a criminal. That Mitch was even considering forgiving her in light of that fact was just ridiculous. She belonged in prison, paying for whatever crimes she had committed and for whatever terrible deeds she'd helped Max commit as well.

And yet, he wanted to forgive her. He knew how money could blind and corrupt a person. How it could twist even the purest, most innocent soul into a sick and evil monster. And he also believed that people could be redeemed, saved, and restored.

People *can* change. The question was whether or not her change was genuine. He wasn't even sure that this current situation wasn't just part of her plan. She and Max might still be partners, pretending to have split up to confuse Mitch and make him trust her. It would make it easier for Barbara to get the diamonds and for them to run off together, even if Mitch somehow managed to get the loot away from Max.

Of course, even if Barbara wasn't still working with Max, she could just be looking out for herself, trying to get Mitch back to her side, only to turn on him when her opportunity came along. There were far too many angles she could be playing for Mitch to truly know her intentions.

But, when Mitch cast a glance in her direction, and saw the grim smile on her face and the sad but determined look in her eyes, he thought he might just believe her. She might actually be playing it straight this time. Mitch's hardened expression softened slightly; his jaw unclenched.

Then he looked forward and saw his son, bound and gagged before him and his anger returned.

Matt started up the motor on his small boat, not worrying too much about being quiet. As long as Mitch kept the Scarab roaring and the storm kept raging, the other people on the boat would have trouble hearing their own thoughts, much less another boat hundred of feet behind them.

He wasn't sure if he should head for the motor pool and a Scarab of his own, and some scuba gear to boot. Was there time? Was it necessary? Matt decided he'd best be prepared and headed to the motor pool as quick as he possibly could.

He reached the building and was shocked by the scene of destruction. The elaborate machine Max had built lay in total disarray. Debris was everywhere. All of the Scarabs looked to be disabled. Many of them were swamped with several feet of water. Matt skinned his clothes quickly and donned a wet suit. He wasn't sure if a Wave Runner would have the range to get him to the crash site with a full scuba load on top in a raging storm, but he was determined to try.

Once he was fully equipped, Matt boarded one of the small crafts and pulled out of the motor pool, urging the Wave Runner to go faster and hoping that he wasn't too late.

Mitch stopped the Scarab at the crash site and then he anchored the boat in place. He and Barbara began making final preparations for the dive. Having never used scuba equipment before, Barbara needed a lot of assistance from Mitch. He showed her what went where and how to use it and soon they were ready. Mitch attached an electronic device to her weight belt and placed an earpiece into her ear.

"What's that?" Barbara asked.

"It's a walkie-talkie that will work underwater. The earpiece doubles as a microphone. Even with the respirator muffling your voice, the earpiece picks up the words you're saying through the vibrations of your skull."

"Cool," Barbara said.

"Look, if we run into a giant squid down there, I want you to come back to the boat. I can handle it, but I can't keep an eye on all its legs."

Barbara nodded. She didn't need to be told twice about the dangers of the giant squid. She'd had her own run-in with the creatures as a child. At the age of 9, she'd been forced to watch as a group of Thai mercenaries working for the crime lord Nan See Eew fed her parents to his "pets": a pair of man-eating giant squids. The experience had scarred her for life and given her a rather healthy dislike for the beasts.

Before going over the edge, Mitch squinted through the storm, struggling to find a sign that Matt had received his "message." The rain and wind were so intense that he could see nothing though and he was forced to give up. But he did not give up his hope that help was on its way. Mitch tested out his walkie-talkie.

"Barb, can you hear me?" he asked.

She gave him the thumbs-up sign and replied, "Loud and clear, Mitch. Are we really going to do this?"

"I don't think we have much of a choice," he replied grimly.

Mitch returned to the rear of the boat, shouting to Max to be heard over the storm, "Alright! We're ready to go. Just one thing – can I have my knife back? It might come in handy with the squid."

Max shook his head. "Afraid not, Mitch! Can't have you getting any funny ideas."

Mitch shrugged, trying not to show too much disappointment. It would have been relatively easy to sneak back on board under the cover of the storm and slit Max's throat before Max even knew what was coming. Mitch hadn't missed *that* particular Navy SEAL class.

He returned to Barbara's side. "Ready to do this?" he asked her.

"Ready as I'll ever be," she said.

"Let's go."

They seated themselves on the edge of the boat. Barbara went in first, pushing herself off backwards and away from the craft. Mitch took one last look at Hobie, who was shivering in the rain and looked weak and exhausted. Mitch then tumbled backwards into the dark water below.

Yet another person entered the Baywatch motor pool that night. This one breathed awkwardly and was moving a little slower than normal but was otherwise okay. Another wet suit was taken and more scuba gear was checked and re-checked. The intruder took a sea sled -- a device that pulls its user along quickly underwater – and dove into the ocean, speeding silently towards the crash site.

Matt's Wave Runner fought its way across the rough sea. Matt could tell that the wind and the waves were too much for it though and soon the engine sputtered, coughed and died, leaving Matt floating, stranded again in the middle of the ocean.

"Oh well," he said to himself. "Nothing to do but press on, right?"

With that, he placed his respirator into his mouth and tumbled backwards off the craft.

Barbara was surprised at how calm everything was under the water. It was in stark contrast to the violent and chaotic surface of the ocean. Even just a few feet below, she could hardly tell there was anything amiss above.

It was quiet, and peaceful floating there, waiting for Mitch to join her. She nearly forgot why she was there and what they were about to face. But the task returned to her when Mitch swam down to her side and she saw the grim look of determination in his eyes.

“Remember,” Mitch said over the walkie-talkies, “take it slow. Don’t rush things. People die when people rush. Just follow the buoy lines down. We can’t get lost and we’ve got plenty of air.”

Barbara nodded but thought he’d forgotten to mention the very important fact that there was probably a giant squid hanging around their goal. Well, if Mitch wasn’t concerned, why should she be? She was in good hands. Good, competent, strong hands. She had no fear that Mitch could handle anything that came their way. Now the only question was if she could handle Max... and Mitch as well.

Matt figured he was a good 500 yards from the crash site. He was making decent time but was unable to use his flashlight except for very sparingly for fear of alerting whomever was out there to his presence. He was young, strong and most importantly, very persistent and knew he’d be able to make it under his own power.

He was completely shocked when a dark shape brushed past him and sped off in the direction he was traveling. He fumbled with his light and managed to snap it on in time to see what looked like a pair of flippers zooming into the darkness beyond.

Things were getting weirder and weirder. The number of people interested in the downed plane was growing every minute, it seemed. Matt redoubled his efforts, determined to add his name to the list.

Once Mitch and Barbara left the boat, Max dropped his cool demeanor and immediately grabbed his cell phone. He was only able to obtain a weak signal and he hoped it would be enough to make the call he was about to attempt.

“C’mon, c’mon!” he said as he huddled under a raincoat, keeping one eye on the LCD screen of the phone and his other eye on his hostage. Miraculously, the call was connected.

“Vlad!” Max shouted. “How are we looking?”

“Not so good, Maxy. The weather is – how you say it? – a real bitch,” replied a Russian voice.

“No shit, Vlad. I’m sitting on a boat in the middle of it right now,” Max said. “But that doesn’t change my needs.”

“Da, da. I understand, Max. But it may be impossible to pull your...” Vlad searched for an appropriate American idiom. “To pull your grease from the fire.”

“That’s not what I want to hear, my friend,” Max said, forcing the sound of anger from his voice. “Remember, you still owe me that favor.”

“I know, Max. In this weather, though, this is a favor returned plus another half of a favor owed. A helicopter in these conditions? It might well be suicide.”

“Find a way, Vlad. Find a way. I’m coming off this boat with a lot of money. You stand to get a sizeable chunk of it if you provide my means of escape.”

A heavy sigh was audible even with the wind screaming around Max’s head.

“Okay, Maxy. We will find a way. Somehow.”

“That’s more like it, Vlad. I’ll be in touch.”

Max disconnected the call. He hated dealing the Russians in on the hand, but it never hurt to have a couple of the vodka-hounds around when there was trouble. The men were used to inclement weather and their equipment, when it was working, was built to stand up under the roughest conditions. Hopefully, rougher conditions than Max found himself in at the moment. Plus, the Russians were usually good for a laugh or two, and Max could use a good laugh.

He put his phone away and tried to stay as dry as he could. This was hardly the scenario he had imagined when he and Barbara drew up the plans for the diamond job. They were supposed to be in and out before anyone even knew the gems were missing. Here it was, more than a week after they'd gotten the jewels and he *still* didn't really have them.

"Soon," Max said aloud. And then he repeated it as a mantra, "Soon soon soon." His voice was lost in the wind.

Mitch and Barbara had little trouble making their way down to the plane. The buoy lines led them directly to their goal and in no time, they spotted the wreck. Mitch made sure to keep in constant communication with Barbara to make sure she was staying calm and didn't panic. After a time, he started making small talk to keep her mind occupied and off the dangers below.

"So, tell me about your parents," he said.

"Mitch, that is the worst possible question that you could ask me right now," Barbara said, fear entering her voice as she thought again about her parents.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Uhhh, what about your pets? Did you have any pets?"

Barbara had had two puppies while growing up. Both had also been eaten by giant squids in separate and unrelated incidents.

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" she cried.

"Sorry! Sorry!" Mitch replied, feeling there just wasn't a single thing he could safely talk about. Perhaps it was best to just finish their descent in silence.

Matt finally came to the resting Scarab. He held himself in place using the boat's anchor chain and tried to figure out his next move. He could faintly see lights playing about below and so figured someone had already gone off the boat. He wasn't sure if anyone was still on board, and didn't know whether to go up or down.

"Come on, Brodie," he thought. "You're wasting precious time here."

He checked the readout on his oxygen tank. Even though he'd expended a great deal of effort in getting out to the crash site, he still had plenty of oxygen available.

"Well, you brought this scuba gear all the way out here," he thought. "You might as well use it."

With that, he gave a powerful kick and headed down, swimming towards the dancing lights below.

Barbara saw the squid first. It was resting inside the damaged aircraft, apparently sleeping.

"Mitch... I... The squid," she managed to say.

"Where?" Mitch asked.

"The pilot's chair. It's in the freaking pilot's chair."

“Okay, stay calm. It’s asleep. If we’re quiet and careful, we can get out of here without disturbing it.”

“Mitch, the diamonds are right *behind* the pilot’s chair.”

“This just keeps getting better and better. Well, we knew it wouldn’t be easy.”

“Yes, Mitch,” Barbara said, fighting off panic, “but what do we do? What’s the plan?”

“Well, Barbara. I guess I’m going to have to distract it and you’re going to grab the diamonds. And we’re going to hope for the best.”

“But Mitch! What if something happens to you?”

“You take those diamonds and you get out of here. Take them up to Max. Do whatever it is you plan to do with them. But I’m counting on you to live up to your word – do not let anything happen to Hobie. Okay?”

“Okay, Mitch. I promise,” Barbara said solemnly.

“Alright. Now, when the squid comes after me, go right for the diamonds. It may seem like he’s guarding the plane, but don’t give it that much credit. He’s going to be looking at nothing but me. But no matter what happens to me, your job is just to get the diamonds and get out, okay?”

“Okay. I’ve got it,” Barbara replied.

Mitch looked over and saw the fear and concern in her eyes and allowed himself to give her a little smile. He reached over and patted her shoulder.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “it’s going to be alright.”

Barbara smiled back. “Thanks, Mitch. Let’s do it.”

Mitch swam down towards the plane, keeping his eye on the squid the entire time. He’d never had to face the creatures before, and could only go on what he knew from shows on the Discovery channel and stories Matt had told him. For the millionth time that evening, he wished that Brodie was there to help.

Matt was nearing the plane and could make out the shapes of two figures below him. He watched as one of the two people swam away, down and towards the wreck. The other figure hung back, waiting for something it seemed. Matt didn’t know if they were friends or foes, but he knew anyone going towards the plane would have a giant squid to deal with, and more often than not, a creature like that made everybody pals. He pressed on.

Mitch had some idea of what to expect when he prodded the squid with a long piece of steel that had broken from the plane. He knew the thing would be huge and terrifying. But no description of the beast could have prepared him for what he saw. It was beyond huge and it was beyond terrifying. He had never felt so scared in his life as he watched the cephalopod unfold itself from the seat of the plane and turn its gigantic eyes in his direction. Each one of its ten legs looked as if it could crush Mitch, and they all reached in his direction. He began swimming away as fast as he could, attempting to draw the mollusk from the plane to allow Barbara access to the diamonds. Before he got too far, however, the squid was on him, wrapping its tentacles around his body, squeezing the very life from him.

Barbara looked on in horror as the squid grabbed Mitch. She could hear him grunting and straining through the walkie-talkie. Her instinct was to swim to the surface as quickly as she possibly could, but she fought against it, remembering her instructions and not wanting Mitch's struggle to be in vain. If he did die, she became responsible for Hobie, and if she didn't have the diamonds with her when she surfaced, Max would just as soon shoot them both as bat an eye. Going against everything that her panicked brain was telling her, and hearing her heartbeat so loudly that she figured Mitch could hear it through her earpiece, she went towards the plane.

"Mitch," she cried. "I'm going after the diamonds."

The only response she received was a choked cry. She knew she couldn't look in his direction or else her resolve would leave her and she'd chicken out. She kept her eyes on the plane and made her move.

Matt was close enough to recognize Mitch's form when the squid grabbed him. He still didn't know who the other diver was, but the streaming blonde hair and the nice figure she cut in her wet suit made him bet that it was Barbara.

"Definitely too small to be C.J.," he confirmed.

Matt saw the woman head towards the plane and Matt realized that Mitch had planned on distracting the squid long enough for the woman to get in and out of the wreckage. The question was why they were going to such trouble. Matt figured he'd find that out later.

Mitch wasn't doing very well with the squid. Matt had told him time and time again that it's not about out-muscling the beasts – that's just not possible – but that it's about out-finessing them. And Mitch, true to form, was trying to wrestle the beast into submission.

"Just like when he's wrestling that long board of his. Dammit, I told him there's a different skill set you have to use sometimes," Matt thought angrily.

Matt dove faster, heading straight for Mitch and the squid. He again used the same technique he'd learned through trial and error in his previous encounters with the creatures. He began hitting it in its eyes and soon, it loosened its grip on his friend. Mitch's unconscious body floated down to the ocean floor and the squid turned its attention towards Matt.

Again, Matt was able to disable, distract or confuse the creature without permanently, or even seriously harming it. Unfortunately, the bastards over at PETA have successfully petitioned to keep a detailed description of that scene from this account. This is exactly the kind of liberal, left-winged hypocrisy that is destroying our country from within. Censorship of this nature, for the sole purpose of protecting the "rights" of a few squid who serve absolutely no purpose and make no positive contributions to our society at large is anathema to what our country stands for. Our forefathers did not fight and die to create a nation whose people were unable to read an in-depth description of a tanned, buff, young lifeguard beating the crap out of a giant squid. I apologize and urge you to take the opportunity to write an angry letter to the people at PETA, and to your representatives in Congress in hope that we might reverse this situation. Until then, you're going to have to use your imaginations. Thank you.

Barbara made it to the plane and at long last was able to retrieve the duffel bag filled with diamonds. It seemed it had been years ago that she'd originally put the jewels into the bag, but it had only been little over a week. So much had happened since then, and she'd changed her outlook so much that she felt like it was a different person who'd stolen the diamonds from the person who was retrieving them now. But, when she held onto the bag, she could feel the lure of the diamonds within, felt the grip of greed and avarice clutching at her soul. There were so many diamonds inside the bag and it would just take a few of them for her to be able to live a life of leisure. She would be long gone before Max even noticed what she had done and she'd be able to make sure that he could never find her. She was on the verge of unzipping the bag when she came back to her senses.

"No," she thought. "It's definitely time to turn over a new leaf."

Barbara looked around but could see no sign of Mitch or the squid. Their fight must have taken them out of her range of vision. She cast the light of her torch around wildly, looking for even a glimpse of the man and beast but could see nothing. It seemed she would have to face Max alone.

Matt swam down to where Mitch had landed and was grateful to see that bubbles were streaming from his respirator, indicating that he was still breathing and still alive. It didn't look like the squid had managed to do any damage to Mitch or his scuba gear. Matt switched on his flashlight, shining it into Mitch's face. Matt could see Mitch's eyes flickering and then open. Mitch's mouth began moving, trying to make words. Matt shook his head vigorously. If Mitch was disoriented and didn't remember where he was, he might start swallowing water and the rescue, which at this point should be relatively easy, would get a whole lot harder.

But Mitch did still know where he was, and while he knew Matt couldn't hear him, he knew there was another who could.

"Barb. I'm alright," Barbara heard through her earpiece. She had never heard sweeter words in her life.

"Mitch! Where are you? I can't see you anywhere?"

"I'm down below the plane. I'll flash my light. Matt saved me."

Barbara looked below her and saw the flickering of Mitch's flashlight. She hastily sped down to the two lifeguards.

"Oh, thank goodness you're alright, Mitch," she said. "I've got the diamonds. This will all be over soon."

"Yes, let's hope so," Mitch replied.

Mitch knew that he had to communicate to Matt what was going on. The only thing he could think of was to attempt Morse Code with his flashlight. He began transmitting a message to the younger lifeguard using a series of long and short flashes of light.

"What are you telling him, Mitch?" Barbara asked.

"I told him that Max has Hobie on the boat above and that we need to return the diamonds to him."

Matt began flashing his own sequence of lights back at Mitch.

"What did he say?" Barbara asked.

“It’s pretty confusing. I think he told me to take off my clown gear because the circus is in Newark.”

“New Jersey?”

“He didn’t say,” Mitch replied. “I think I need to schedule a refresher course in Morse Code.”

Hobie was cold, soaked through to the bone, completely disoriented and just about ready to totally shut down and give up. He had very little idea of what was going on or who was where. All he knew was that he was on a boat in the middle of what felt like a hurricane. The young man was being pushed to the very edges of his admittedly limited endurance.

That said, he nearly leapt clear of the boat when he felt someone rise from the water behind him and put their hand over his mouth.

“Don’t worry, Hobie,” said a familiar voice in his ear. “I’ve got you.”

Hobie felt warm relief spread through his body. His strength and resolve returned and he felt like he could do anything now.

Max figured it was time to call in the cavalry. There was a break in the storm and it was now or never. The chopper was coming from a Russian frigate that was sitting just outside the United States territorial waters. It wasn’t as comfortable as a cruise ship, but his waiting cabin seemed like paradise in Max’s mind.

He made the phone call. “Vlad, come now.”

“Da, Maxy, da,” Vlad replied. “Now is good. Well, not so good, but at least better than before. The chopper, she is on her way.”

“Good to hear. I’ll be seeing you soon, Vlad.”

Max pocketed his phone and repeated his mantra: “Soon. Soon soon soon.”

Mitch attempted to signal to Matt that he should wait below until Mitch signaled for him. The three had ascended to the waiting Scarab and were ready to deliver the diamonds. Mitch wasn’t sure if Matt’s shaky Morse Code skills allowed him to understand, but the young man had nodded vigorously, so Mitch hoped the message had come across. Barbara began climbing the ladder onto the Scarab and Mitch followed her up.

Just as Hobie heard Barbara’s voice announce that she and Mitch were coming aboard, he felt the gag ripped from his head and a respirator pressed into his mouth.

“It’s gonna get kinda cold in a second, little man,” said the voice in his ear, and Hobie was pulled backwards off the boat and into the water.

“What the fuck?” Max screamed, “Where the hell did he go?”

He rushed to the front of the boat, looking into the water for his hostage. Hobie was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is my son?” Max heard from behind.

He wheeled around, pointing his gun right at Mitch.

“Just back off there, pal. Your kid decided to take a little swim. Now let’s have those diamonds. Now!”

Trembling, Barbara handed the duffel bag to Max who felt through the material of the bag and was satisfied that the diamonds were inside.

“Good girl. Now, it’s time for me to bid you both *adieu*.”

At that moment, a bright floodlight lit up the sea around them. The loud whirr of a helicopter’s rotor blades could be heard over the roaring wind. The copter struggled to maintain its altitude, hovering over the boat. A rope ladder descended within Max’s reach. He placed the strap of the duffel over his head and looped one arm through the rungs of the ladder. His other hand still held his gun.

“You know, Mitch,” he shouted, “I may have been sick of Barbie here. I may have been ready to ditch her. I may have been grateful to you for taking her off my hands. But you know what? You should never *ever* mess with my girl. *Ever*. Good bye, Buchannon.”

Mitch watched the scene unfold as if in slow motion. Max pulled the trigger of the gun. The bullet exploded from the barrel, spiraling in his direction. And then Barbara dove between Mitch and the bullet. She cried out and hit the deck of the Scarab, hard.

Mitch dove for her, willing her to be okay, but it didn’t look good. The bullet had done its job, albeit to the wrong person. The color had drained from her face as her blood spilled from her body.

Mitch grabbed her hand, telling her she was going to be okay but Barbara just shook her head.

“No, Mitch,” she said weakly. “It is over for me. Just know... know that I really did love you.”

Her eyes closed and her hand slipped from his and she was gone. Mitch’s eyes began watering, his chest tightened. Anger filled his mind. He looked up just in time to see Max tossing a hand grenade from the helicopter. It hit the deck of the boat, bounced once and then rolled to the stern.

Matt felt the explosion in every bone in his body. It seemed to shake the entire world around him. He was spun around, and turned upside down by the force of the blast. He maintained his composure, and was able to reorient himself quickly. Matt struggled to swim away from the flaming wreckage that covered the surface. When he had reached a safe distance, Matt poked his head above water and saw that the Scarab had been completely destroyed. He looked up and saw a helicopter speeding away into the night, somehow staying aloft in the rough weather.

Matt began searching frantically for his friends. Shining his flashlight around the area, he was able to make out two figures not too far from him. He swam over and found Hobie being held afloat by a figure in a black wet suit. Hobie looked to be in bad shape, but at least he was conscious and breathing. He gave a weak thumbs-up to Matt as he approached.

Hobie’s rescuer removed her mask. As Matt drew closer, he was surprised to see it was C.J. Parker.

“C.J.!” he cried. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s a long story, handsome. How about I tell you once we’ve found Mitch and Barbara?” she said.

“Oh my God! Mitch! Did he get off the boat?”

“He was on the boat?” she asked, a look of grave concern crossing her face. Matt and C.J. scanned the water, hoping for any sign of Mitch.

Mitch had felt his SEAL reflexes kick in the second he saw the grenade. Knowing there was no way he could get to the explosive in time and that there was nothing that he could do for Barbara, he sprang to his feet and leapt clear of the Scarab, hitting the water just as the boat exploded into a ball of flame. The force of the blast momentarily dazed him, but soon he was able to resurface.

“Matt! Hobie!” he cried desperately.

“Over here!” shouted Matt.

They were reunited at last. When Mitch saw C.J., he nearly cried with relief.

“C.J.! I thought you were dead!” Mitch said.

“Yeah well, I’m smarter than your average bear,” C.J. said, smiling.

“And a lot prettier too,” Hobie said weakly.

“That’s my boy,” C.J. said, smoothing back Hobie’s hair. “Good boy.”

“There will be plenty of time for explanations later,” Matt said. “How are we going to get back to shore? The storm’s undoubtedly going to pick up again soon. I can feel it.”

“Don’t worry about it,” C.J. said. “We’ve got backup coming.”

“Smart girl,” Matt said, sheepishly. Then he remembered there was a missing member of their party, “Hey, hold on. Where’s Barbara? She didn’t.... Did she make it off the boat?”

Sadness crossed Mitch’s face again. “Max.... Barbara took a bullet that Max had intended for me.”

C.J. reached out to touch Mitch’s face. “Oh, Mitch, I’m so sorry.”

Suddenly, a large police patrol boat was upon them. A floodlight illuminated the sea and a loud, friendly voice was heard over a megaphone.

“Howdy folks! You are being rescued by your friendly neighborhood Garner Ellerbee. Just stay where you are, assistance will be rendered shortly.”

Police divers from the ship went over the sides. They swam to the stranded group and assisted each one in boarding the boat.

“Garner, you old reprobate,” Mitch said. “I don’t think I’ve ever been happier to see you.”

“Good to see you too, pal,” Garner beamed. “But look at you. You look like you just went ten rounds with a giant squid. What happened?”

“Garner,” Mitch said, “you wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

Part 2: Diamonds in the Rough

Hobie awoke a few days later in a hospital bed. The first thing he saw was the beautiful visage of C.J. Parker.

“Hi C.J.... I mean, hi, Miss Parker,” he said weakly.

C.J. looked up from the magazine she was flipping through and smiled at the young man. “Hi Hobie. Don’t worry, I’ll let it slide this time. How are you feeling? You’ve been out for a while.”

“I’m alright, I think. I feel like a frog crawled into my throat and died though.”

C.J. made a face. “Well, it looks like I won’t be kissing you any time soon,” she grinned mischievously. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t do some other things.”

Hobie smiled but then his face fell as the events of the fateful evening began to come back to him. “Miss Parker, I’m so sorry I got you into that mess the other night!”

“Oh, don’t worry about it, Hobie! I’m sorry for all those bad names I called you. I was just trying to stall for time with that bastard, Max.”

Hobie shook his head. “I knew that. But what I don’t understand is why you’re not dead. I saw Max shoot you!”

C.J. laughed. “Yeah, he sure did. Sweetie, when you’ve been shot as many times as I have, you learn a thing or two.”

“Like what?”

“Well, for one, people will shoot at the largest target presented to them. Men especially.” C.J. looked down at her breasts. “These are the biggest targets I’ve got. When I got my implants, I went with a bullet-proof option.”

“They make bullet-proof implants?” Hobie asked.

“They sure do. Wanna feel ‘em? Can’t even tell they’re there,” C.J. said, unbuttoning her blouse.

“Do I ever!” Hobie exclaimed.

Then, of course, the door opened.

“Knock knock!” said a nurse. “Visitors!”

C.J. re-buttoned her top, muttering, “Saying ‘knock knock’ is not an adequate substitute for actual knocking.

Hobie’s friends, Wheels, Snake and Joey, followed the nurse into the room. C.J.’s mood lightened considerably and she stopped buttoning her blouse, imagining certain possibilities the situation might present. The nurse, however, burst her bubble with a sour glare.

“You, missy, have a phone call at the nursing station,” she said to C.J..

C.J. frowned. Just when life was getting interesting. “Don’t go anywhere, boys,” she said saucily. She stalked past the nurse and down the hall. The nurse followed her, glaring reproachfully at C.J.’s back.

Hobie’s friends leaned out the doorway to watch C.J. as she walked away. They then burst back into the room.

“Was that C.J. Parker?” Wheels asked excitedly.

“Of course it was, you numbskull,” Joey said. “Hobie, did you get some action? A little ‘pick-me-up bouquet?’”

“Well, I was gonna,” Hobie said with mock anger in his voice, “but then you three yahoos busted in.”

“Aww, Hobie, I’m sorry,” Snake said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Hobie said confidently. “There will be other opportunities.”

“Man, that’s awesome!” said Wheels. “Totally awesome!”

“How are you feeling, Hobe?” Snake asked.

“Pretty good, I think.”

“When are you getting out of here?” Joey asked.

“I’m not sure. I just woke up, actually. I haven’t talked to a doctor or anything yet, which is pretty weird if you ask me. I’ve been unconscious for a few days and nobody seems the slightest bit concerned, nor interested in the fact that I’ve come to. And another thing: how did you guys know I was up? You weren’t coming in just to watch me sleep, were you? Because that would be really creepy.”

The three boys just shrugged and looked uncomfortable.

“Furthermore,” Hobie continued, “the nurse didn’t even seem surprised or pleased that I was conscious. You’d think that at the very least she’d comment on it.”

Wheels said, “Well, she did seem to be something of a crotchety old lady. I think it’s well within her character to ignore your awakening.”

“Maybe,” Hobie replied, “but she is a health-care professional. She really should have said something.”

“Perhaps she was confused by everything that was going on. There were three visitors and the phone call for C.J.. She might have been flustered,” Wheels countered.

“Guys! Guys!” Joey interjected. “I’d love to listen to this amazing meta-fictional debate for hours, but there are more pressing issues at hand.”

“Meta-whotimal?” Snake asked.

“Can it, Snake,” Wheels said. “What are the pressing issues, Joey?”

“Well, like our good friend Hobie getting to do it with C.J. Parker!” Joey exclaimed. The group laughed heartily.

Hobie unknowingly stole a line from the fiend Max Fischer: “Soon,” he said. “Soon soon soon!”

As if on cue, C.J. reentered the room, inexplicably dressed as a nurse – the “naughty” kind.

“Who was on the phone, Miss Parker?” Hobie asked.

“It was your dad. He says he’s going to Chicago,” C.J. replied. “And I’m going with him.”

“Chicago?” Hobie asked wonderingly.

“Chicago?” bellowed Garner Ellerbee.

“Chicago,” replied Mitch. “Some of my former SEAL team members are now agents with various government organizations capable of tracking individuals even if they don’t want to be found. They found Max in Chicago and I’m going after him.”

“I can’t let you do that, Mitch,” Garner said. “You have no jurisdiction in Chicago. Hell, you don’t have any power the second you set foot off the beach.”

“I know, Garner. But I also know you can’t stop me. This is just a courtesy.”

“Mitch, if you go, I can’t help you. You’ll be on your own.”

“Yeah, except I’m bringing along a little help this time.”

“Alright, Mitch. Alright. Just do me a favor, okay? Be careful out there.”

“Don’t worry, Garner. I will be.”

“Good luck, buddy,” Garner said, shaking Mitch’s hand.

“Thanks pal,” Mitch said. “Hold down the fort for me while I’m gone.”

“You bet I will. I’ll make sure to keep an eye on all the lovely ladies down at the beach for you, Mitch.”

Mitch rolled his eyes as he walked out. “Whatever, Garner. Go catch some bad guys, huh?”

“Chicago?” asked Matt.

“Yeah. You in?” Mitch asked. “I’d like to have you at my sid when I go up against this guy.”

“Sure, but I’ll have to see if I can get time off from work,” Matt said. “So...boss. Can I have like a week off?”

“Sure. You have big plans?”

“Gonna go to Chicago, catch me a crook,” Matt replied.

“Sounds fun,” Mitch said. “Can I come too?”

They met the next morning at Mitch’s house, each with his or her bag packed and ready to go.

“So, where are we staying?” Matt asked, as he sipped some orange juice that Mitch had poured for him.

“I’ve got a cousin who lives there. He said we could shack up with him while we’re in town,” Mitch answered.

“Sounds great,” Matt replied.

“Yeah, great,” C.J. said sarcastically. She’d been hoping to try out one of Chicago’s many famous 3 and 4 star hotels. “Ummm, I might look up some old friends while we’re there.”

“Alright. You guys ready?” Mitch asked.

“Yep,” said Matt, finishing his juice. “Let’s roll.”

They were met at the front door by Hobie, a duffel bag at his side. “Not without me, you don’t,” he said.

“Oh, no way, pal,” Mitch said. “It’s way too dangerous. You’re not coming.”

“Dad, Max almost killed me. I want – no, I *need* to be there. I need to help bring him down.”

C.J. perked up at the thought of Hobie joining them. She might have to spring for one of those hotel rooms herself. “Come on, Mitch. We’ll take care of Hobie. And he can be a big help. He figured out that Max was up to no good before anyone else did.”

“What about school? You’ll miss a week of classes,” Mitch said.

“I’m two weeks ahead of everyone as it is. This will give my teachers a chance to catch up with me. Besides, I already called myself in for the week.”

“You did what?” Mitch asked angrily.

“Sure, I do it all the time.” Hobie then offered his best impression of his father’s voice: “Hi, this is Mitch Buchannon, Hobie Buchannon’s father. Hobie can’t come to school today because he was stung by a jellyfish.”

Matt and C.J. laughed.

“That’s perfect, Hobie!” Matt said.

“Do me next, Hobie!” C.J. said, a glint in her eye.
But Mitch was not amused. “Hobie, you can’t do that. It’s not right.”
“Oh, forget it, Mitch,” C.J. said, guiding Hobie outside. “Come on. We’ll miss our flight.”

And so the intrepid band of heroes set off for LAX where they purchased four ridiculously overpriced round-trip tickets to Chicago’s O’Hare airport.

“Too bad we couldn’t plan this trip two weeks in advance,” Mitch said, sadly thinking about his next bill from American Express.

“Don’t worry about it, Mitch,” C.J. said. “Remember, this is all about revenge. You can’t put a price on that.”

“C.J.,” said Matt. “I’m shocked at you. Those are very negative principles. Vengeance is a terrible thing to preach. ‘Something of vengeance I had tasted for the first time; as aromatic wine it seemed, on swallowing, warm and racy: its after-flavour, metallic and corroding, gave me a sensation as if I had been poisoned.’”

“Whatever, Buddha,” C.J. said.

“It’s Charlotte Bronte, actually,” Matt replied huffily.

“Okay, what’s this trip about, if not revenge? Max left you for dead, stranded in the ocean overnight. He tried to kill Hobie using some ridiculous machine straight out of a James Bond movie. He *shot* me and he actually *killed* the love of Mitch’s life. This one’s got revenge written all over it.”

“I’m not coming to get revenge. I am coming to ensure that justice is done and that you guys don’t accumulate any bad karma.”

“Admit it,” said Hobie. “You just want to pound his ass a couple times. It’s okay. We all do.”

“I’m above such base emotions,” Matt said serenely.

“Stop it, you guys,” Mitch said, annoyed. “We’re just going to find Max and hand him over to the proper authorities. Nothing more.”

“Ah, what’s the fun in that?” C.J. asked, pouting. “He deserves to get his ass handed to him.”

“C.J.,” Matt said, “that is not for us to decide.”

“I think it is,” she replied. She took Hobie’s hand and lead him down the concourse. “Come on, Hobie. Let’s leave the ladies to their tea and biscuits and knitting and soft-core pornography and celibacy and diet soda. We can go talk about how fun it will be to show Max what his heart looks like.”

“Can you really do that?” Hobie asked.

“And a whole lot more, kiddo,” C.J. said. “I wonder if there’s a private bathroom around here anywhere. I can show you some really interesting things too.”

All too soon (to Hobie and C.J., anyway, who were just finding a lockable door when the announcement came) it was time to board the plane. The foursome found their way to their seats and had an uneventful flight to Chicago. C.J. slept most of the way, occasionally snuggling up to Hobie who was seated next to her. Hobie tried to pretend he didn’t notice so as not to raise the suspicions of his father who spent most of the flight examining and being amazed by the various gadgets on and around his seat. Across the aisle, Matt alternated between attempts to meditate and frantic typing on his laptop. He

was working on his second novel, a follow-up to his self-published debut, “Zen and the Art of Lifeguarding” entitled “The Tao of Sand.” He was around 30,000 words into the new work and quite pleased with his progress.

A little under four hours later, the stewardesses came around the cabin, checking that everyone’s seatbelt was buckled (C.J. checked Hobie’s personally) and that the tray tables and seat backs were in their locked and upright position. Soon after, they were landing in the beautiful city of Chicago, and their plane pulled up to a gate at the world’s largest, best and most efficient airport: O’Hare field.

Mitch’s cousin, Louis Larsen, was waiting for them at the baggage claim area. Mitch and Louis hugged warmly. It had been six years since the two had seen each other. They once were close as brothers, but had let their communications lapse over the past few years. It was no fault of either of them, but just one of those things that happens sometimes. You know how it is – when two people live over 500 miles from each other, sometimes they don’t talk as often as they used to. On the other hand, it sometimes happens that they talk *more* than they used to. One person moves away from the other and all of a sudden, they’re closer and talking more than ever before. Sadly, this was not the case with Mitch and his cousin. It’s not all that sad though; they still liked each other very much, they were just each busy with their own lives and all that. Stop crying.

“Mitch,” Louis exclaimed. “You look great! And who’s this hottie with you? Is that C.J. Parker?”

“In the flesh,” C.J. said, smiling and looking Louis up and down.

“And you remember me,” Hobie said, jealously stepping between the two, “Cousin Louis.”

“Hobie!” Louis said, struggling to take his eyes off of C.J.. “You’ve really sprouted up. How’s it going?”

“Just fine,” Hobie growled. “C.J., come help me look for the bags.”

“Okay, Hobie. But, what did you call me?”

“Sorry. Miss Parker.”

“That’s better.”

Hobie and C.J. walked off towards the baggage carousel which was just beginning to dispense the luggage from their flight.

“Hi, Louis,” Matt said, extending his hand. “I’m Matt Brodie.”

“Oh, I know all about you,” Louis said, shaking Matt’s hand. “I’ve read Zen and the Art of Lifeguarding at least a dozen times. Great stuff.”

“You’re kidding! I thought nobody but Californian surfer burnouts had read it.”

“Well, that still may be true. I’m a former Californian surfer burnout.”

“Ahh, that explains it. Well, nice to meet a fan anyway.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Louis replied. “Well, it looks like Hobie and.... I can’t believe it’s C.J. Parker. Amazing.... Anyway, it looks like they’ve got your bags. My car’s right outside. Shall we go?”

Louis helped the group load their luggage into his SUV and soon they were on their way down I90 towards the heart of Chicago.

“This city kicks ass,” Hobie exclaimed as they sped through Chicago. He was awed by the sights and sounds of the Windy City. He’d never been to the Midwest before

and he was amazed by how polite and laid-back everybody was. “This is what they say California used to be like,” he said, apropos of nothing.

“Uh huh,” said Mitch, not really listening. “Say, Louis, where are you living these days?”

“Real nice neighborhood, Mitch,” Louis replied. “Wilson and Broadway. Great community. Lotsa nice folks.”

“Sounds great,” said Matt.

C.J. shrugged. “Wilson and Broadway is a shit hole, Louis. I think I’ll take Hobie to see some nicer parts of the city.”

Hobie smiled to himself at the special treatment C.J. was showing him, and he especially enjoyed her rough talk with Louis. Mitch, however, wasn’t so pleased.

“C.J.,” he said, “this isn’t a vacation. Remember, we’re here on business.”

“Nasty business at that, from what you told me, Mitch,” Louis said. “Who is this Max Fischer fellow anyway?”

“The less you know about it, the better,” Mitch said. “I don’t want you getting involved. Max is a very dangerous man and if he finds out that we’re in town looking for him, there’s no telling what he might do. He’d use any advantage against us that he could, and that might include seeking you out.”

“Alright, Mitch, if that’s the way you want it. I’ll just mind my own business.”

Matt changed the subject. “So, Louis, how come you moved here?”

“Well, Matt, it’s like I said – I was a Californian surfer burnout. And I just got way too burnt out.”

“Louis became addicted to surf and sand and sun,” Mitch explained. “He had to get to a town that has none of those things.”

“Ahh. It makes perfect sense now,” Matt said. “Yeah, this town’s pretty bleak compared to Los Angeles.”

“Oh, there are bleaker towns out there,” Louis said. “All the towns in New Jersey, for example.”

“Oh yeah, Jersey’s pretty bad too,” Mitch said. “That’s where I did my SEAL survival training. Nearly dropped out when I had to spend a night alone in Trenton.” Mitch shuddered at the memory.

“Anyway, the doctors said if I didn’t get away from nice weather, I was going to overdose and buy it, so I came here.”

“That’s a serious bummer. I’ve never heard of anything like that before.”

“It’s a pretty rare situation,” Louis said. “You have to have a very addictive personality to wind up like I did.”

“But Louis is doing great now, aren’t you, pal?” Mitch asked.

“Sure am. Got a great pad, a great job. If I just had a nice lady friend, things would be perfect,” Louis said, glancing at C.J. in the rear-view mirror.

“Good luck with that, Louis,” Hobie said.

“Thanks, kid. Well, here we are,” Louis announced, double-parking in front of a dilapidated apartment building.

C.J. bolted from the car with her luggage. “Taxi!” she yelled. A yellow taxicab stopped immediately, the driver ogling her with all his might. “Hobie, come on!”

Hobie quickly followed C.J.'s orders and took his own bag from the car. He rushed to stow it in the cab's trunk before the driver could take off. The hack obviously wanted C.J. to himself. Not on my watch, Hobie thought.

"Hobie, C.J., where are you going?" Mitch called.

C.J. lowered the window. "I've got some friends I can ask about Max. We'll meet you for dinner at around 7? Where should we meet?"

"Why not come back here?" Louis asked. "I can whip up something real good."

"On second thought, let's meet downtown. How about at Les Nomades on Superior? I'll make reservations."

"Uhh, okay. See you then," Mitch cried after the departing cab.

Max Fischer paced up and down the sitting room in his suite at the Hotel Inter-Continental in downtown Chicago. He'd managed to contact a buyer for the diamonds and had generated enough cash to stay afloat for a few days, but the buyer was hedging on buying the whole lot and Max was getting nervous. Soon, he was going to run out of money and without a buyer, he was going to be hard-pressed to find anymore.

It was too bad about Barbara. He was shocked to find that killing her had hurt him deeply. Feelings of remorse and regret were foreign to Max and he was having a hard time dealing with it. He told himself that it was just because she had had all the contacts with all the right people and if she were around today, he wouldn't be having the money problems he was currently facing.

But it was more than that. Despite the fact that he had been growing sick of her, was wanting to be a free man again, he had had deep feelings for her. It was perhaps the first time in his life that he had been so connected to a single person and he wasn't used to how it felt when that was cut off. The feeling of loss was incredible and it was keeping Max from operating at full capacity.

So, Max paced, trying to figure out what his next move should be. He knew of a couple other fences, but he'd never worked with them before and so was way of approaching them with such a large quantity of stolen goods. He had friends in other cities, but didn't know how to contact them anymore. The kinds of friends that Max kept were the kind of people that didn't often leave a forwarding address. Max hadn't kept in touch regularly since he'd hooked up with Barbara. She'd been a competent partner and she came with her own set of contacts. Max hadn't really needed to keep up to date on his old cronies' whereabouts.

He'd only been able to move about \$10,000 worth of the diamonds, and he'd blown through most of that trying to reestablish himself as a player in the Chicago scene. He couldn't pull another job without a partner or any contacts, so this was going to take some legwork.

Max hated legwork.

The taxi pulled up in front of the nicest looking hotel Hobie had ever seen. From the outside, it seemed like it would be a pretty expensive place.

"How on Earth can you afford this, Miss Parker?" he asked C.J. "I mean, I have a couple bucks, but you know me. My idea of a fine dinner was White Castle."

“Don’t worry about it,” C.J. said as she paid the cab driver. “I’ve got quite a nice little nest egg saved up for a rainy day, and from the looks of it, it’s going to start raining soon.”

Hobie looked at the sky. Thick gray clouds were rushing East like they had an important meeting to get to. They seemed to be running from even darker and more ominous clouds that hovered off to the West. Even as he watched, small droplets of rain were falling and the air had the tension that always precedes a big storm. He’d last felt it the night Max kidnapped him.

“Looks like that storm followed us out here,” Hobie said as the bellboy took their luggage.

“No kidding,” C.J. said. “It’s gonna be a pain in the ass beating the streets looking for someone if it sticks around very long. I hope Mitch has some leads we can investigate. Otherwise, we’re going to have a soggy trip.”

C.J. approached the front counter and soon had obtained the key to a room in the north tower of the hotel on the 25th floor. “Come on, Hobie. Let’s go check out the room. I hear they have oversized bathtubs,” she said suggestively. They went off towards the elevators.

As Hobie crossed the lobby, an elevator opened and let out its passengers. One of the people, a man that looked terribly familiar to Hobie, walked straight towards them. Hobie recognized the man as Max Fischer and fear ran through him. He quickly grabbed C.J. and pulled her into a gift shop to hide as Max passed.

“What on Earth was that for?” C.J. asked. “Did you want some candy? A Chicago snowdome?”

Hobie checked that the coast was clear. “No,” he hissed. “I saw Max!”

They exited the gift shop and scanned the lobby, but there was nobody that looked like Max to be seen.

“Are you sure you saw him?” C.J. asked.

“Sure, I’m sure. At least I think I am,” Hobie replied.

“Maybe you’re just jet-lagged and overexcited. I’ve been seeing him everywhere too, every time I turn around.”

“Maybe you’re right. I am pretty beat.”

“Come on, let’s go upstairs and I’ll give you one of my world-famous massages.”

“Sounds great!” Hobie said.

They entered a waiting elevator and rode it to their floor.

At the front desk, the bellboy asked the clerk, “Was that C.J. Parker?”

The clerk nodded, barely suppressing his excitement. “I can’t believe it’s really her!”

“I know,” said the bellboy. “I mean, I’ve got tons of pictures of her in my sock drawer.”

The phone rang and the clerk answered, “Good afternoon, Hotel Inter-Continental. This is Chet; how may I help you?”

After dropping off their bags at Louis’ apartment, Mitch and Matt hit the streets, looking for leads on Max’s whereabouts. They visited several of Mitch’s old friends,

none of whom knew anything useful. Disheartened and discouraged, they returned to Louis' place.

"Mitch, you really ought to get a cell phone. There were about a million calls for you," Louis said as Matt and Mitch walked through the front door.

"A million? Really?"

"Well, only three. But that's more than my phone's rung all month!"

"Who called, Louis?"

"Well, the Illinois State Police called."

"What did they want? Do they have Max?" Mitch asked excitedly.

"Actually, they called to thank you for your generous donation last year."

"I didn't give to the Illinois State Police last year. Or ever. Why would I give money to them? I'm from California."

"That's what *I* said," replied Louis, "but the guy insisted that you gave them money last year."

"How much?" Mitch asked.

"How much what?"

"How much did I give them last year?"

"I asked and he said he didn't have access to that information but that it said it was very generous."

"It actually said that?"

"That's what *I* said. I said, 'You mean to tell me that you have a sheet of paper in front of you with a name, a phone number and the words "very generous donation" on it and nothing else?'" Louis said.

"What did he say?"

"He said that's exactly what he had."

"Sounds like a lie to me," Mitch said.

"That's what *I* said," Louis replied.

"And what did he say to that?"

"He said I'd better watch myself on the state highways from now on."

"Who else called?" Matt asked, exasperated by this exchange.

"A woman named Skinny. Or was it Sunny? Or maybe Sticky?"

"Was it Lisa?" Mitch asked.

"Yeah, that's it!" Louis exclaimed. "Lisa Davenport. She called because she heard you were in town and wanted to have dinner with you but I reckon that's not all she wanted to have with you, you know what I mean, she had a little, you know, edge in her voice that told me she had something more on her mind."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it sounded like she wanted to do some really freaky bondage type stuff with you, Mitch. Some crazy stuff."

"You got all that from talking to her for five minutes?" Mitch asked.

"Naw, I told her I was you."

"You did what?"

"Yeah... Uhh, Mitch, we had phone sex," Louis admitted.

"Louis, you promised you would stop doing that with my girlfriends," Mitch said angrily.

"Sorry, cousin. She just sounded so hot...and I was so lonely."

“Jesus, Louis, you need to get out more often,” Mitch said.

“Sounds like he doesn’t get out *at all*,” said Matt, under his breath.

“What was the third call?” Mitch asked.

“The third caller was a man named Jasper Mc Sweeney. He had some information he thought you might find very interesting,” Louis said.

“Really?” asked Mitch excitedly. “Does he know where Max is?”

“He sure does!” exclaimed Louis. “He knows the best place where you can get Max...imum return on your investment of only \$19.95! That low, low price gets you in the door with Millennium Marketing. And remember, this is *not* a pyramid scheme, and is completely, 100% legal.”

“Oh Lord, Louis,” said Mitch, shaking his head sadly. “So what you’re saying is that nobody important called?”

“Sorry, Mitch. I just wanted to help out so badly.”

“It’s alright, Louis. I know you meant well.”

Matt looked at his watch. “We’ve got to get ready if we’re going to meet C.J. and Hobie for dinner.”

“You’re right,” said Mitch. “Man, I hope they’re having better luck than we are.”

Face down on the king-sized bed in their hotel room, Hobie moaned with pleasure. “Miss Parker, that was, without a doubt, the best massage I’ve ever gotten.” He thought for a second and then added, “Actually, it’s the first massage I’ve ever gotten. But it was amazing!”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it, Hobie,” C.J. smiled. “Now you know why it’s world famous, huh?”

“Oh yeah,” Hobie said. He was completely relaxed and didn’t have a care in the world.

“What do you say we check out that bathtub now?” C.J. asked hopefully.

“Great idea,” Hobie said languidly. “I’ll be right there.”

C.J. went into the bathroom and was pleased to find that the tub was as big as she’d heard they were. They could have a nice party in that tub and there was just enough time before they had to meet Mitch, Matt and Louis at the restaurant. She began drawing a bath and as the room steamed up, C.J. disrobed. She looked over her figure, pleased to note that the bullet wounds Max had inflicted were hardly noticeable. It paid to have Beverly Hills’ finest plastic surgeons on emergency call. The tub soon filled up and she slipped in, savoring the feel of the hot water on her skin. Relaxing in the tub, she began to wonder about Hobie and called out to him, “Hey, Hobie, come on. Auntie C.J. is waiting!”

Hearing no response, she stepped out of the bath and donned one of the hotel’s oversized plush terry-cloth robes. Luxuriating in its comfort, she left the bathroom and approached the bed.

“Hobie?” she said. “Aren’t you coming?”

But the young man was fast asleep.

“Damn my massages. Sometimes they’re too good,” C.J. said angrily. But she gently pulled a blanket over Hobie’s sleeping form, tucking him in lovingly. “Well, I guess you’d better get your strength, little man. You’ll be needing it.”

C.J. went back into the bathroom to drain the tub but then she thought she might as well not let a good bath go to waste. She slipped off the robe and slid back into the water which was still hot and relaxing. Just as she leaned back and closed her eyes, she heard her cell phone ringing from her purse. "If it's not one thing, it's another," she thought, frustrated. She climbed back out of the tub, back into the robe and padded across the thick carpet to her purse. She fished out the phone and flipped it open.

"This is C.J.," she said.

"C.J., it's Gray Samuels."

"Gray! It's great to hear your voice," C.J. said happily. She'd called Gray just after leaving the hospital the evening before. He was an old friend who'd relocated to Chicago and had many contacts in the seedy underground world there. He'd always managed to keep his actions legal, even though he ran with the proverbial "bad crowd." C.J. often told him, "If you hang out at a barber shop all the time, sooner or later you're going to get a haircut," but Gray countered with the fact that he was completely bald so it didn't apply. But, he had kept on the level, and C.J. was happy to call him a friend. In this situation, his contacts would certainly come in handy.

"So you're in Chicago, eh, pretty lady?" Gray asked. "Any chance we can get together for a recreation of the last time we saw each other?"

C.J. actually blushed at the memory of their last meeting. Suffice it to say that it had lasted three days and had involved the breaking of several state and federal laws that though they were outdated and outmoded, were nonetheless still on the books. "Afraid not, Gray. No time for that this time." She glanced at the sleeping teenager on the bed hoping that she wouldn't regret turning Gray down. If Hobie failed her one more time....

"Well, that's a shame. My wife will be disappointed."

"How is Shannon anyhow?" C.J. asked.

"She's doing great, she sends her love and kisses," Gray replied.

"That's wonderful. Send her mine back, if you please."

"Will do. Now, if this isn't a social call, it must be business."

"You've got that right. I need to find a man."

"What am I, C.J.? Chopped liver?" Gray asked jokingly.

"Ugh, not at all. I'm a vegetarian, remember?" C.J. laughed. "No, Gray, I need to find a guy who hurt me and my friends back in L.A."

"Hurt you?" Gray asked, suddenly very serious. "Tell me a name and he'll be at the bottom of Lake Michigan by morning."

"No, Gray. It can't be like that. We want to take him down ourselves, and we want to take him down the right way."

"Alright, I understand. No violence."

"I didn't say that, Gray. I just said *we* want to do it."

"Okay, okay. What's the name and what's his game?"

"His name is Max Fischer and he left L.A. with over \$20 million in stolen diamonds on him," C.J. said. She went on to explain the events of the past couple weeks to her friend.

"That's quite a story, C.J.," Gray said. "I'm glad you and your friends are okay."

"We found out that he headed to Chicago and that's all we know."

"Well, I haven't heard anything about someone trying to move that much ice. That's the sort of thing that would get a lot of people talking and I'd probably catch wind

of it. It's possible that he's moving chunks of it at a time, which is what I'd do. But let me ask around and I'll see what I can turn up."

"Thanks, Gray," C.J. said. "I really appreciate it."

"No problem, that's what friends are for," Gray replied. "Just promise me two things, C.J."

"What can I do for you?" C.J. asked.

"Promise me you'll be careful. A guy carrying that much stolen loot around is going to be awfully jumpy and people will do amazing things for that kind of money. Watch your back and all that."

"Absolutely, Gray," C.J. said. "What was the other thing?"

"That the next time you're in Chicago, you'll come visit Shannon and me and you'll bring that bag of tricks of yours."

C.J. laughed, "You got it, Gray. Call me when you find something."

C.J. disconnected the call and looked at the clock. There was no time for a bath now, she decided. She needed to rouse Hobie and get ready for dinner.

Hobie and C.J. met Louis, Matt and Mitch at Les Nomades, all dressed to kill. Even Hobie looked dashing in a nice sport coat and tie. They converged upon the bar while they waited for their table to be prepared.

"C.J., how did you manage to get reservations for this place on such short notice?" Louis asked noticing the growing dinner crowd. "It seems like they're turning people away left and right."

"The owner and I go way back," C.J. explained. "We were in culinary school together."

The men all shared the same look of complete surprise.

"Culinary school?" Matt asked. "You never told me you went to culinary school."

"I didn't? I talk about it all the time," C.J. said. "Sure, we were at the New England Culinary Institute. I used to cook at Gascogne in New York City. Then I moved to L.A. and I was head chef at Bastide in West Hollywood. I got bored with cooking so I became a lifeguard. I never told you guys all this?"

They all shook their heads. "I'm pretty sure I would remember that," Matt said.

"I don't remember seeing any of that on your resume when you applied, C.J.," Mitch said.

"Well, it's not like I'm making it all up, you guys. Stop looking at me like that," C.J. said, getting annoyed.

"Look, C.J.," Matt said. "It's just that we never knew there was this side of you is all. To us, you're the no-nonsense, hard-bodied Baywatch lifeguard that we all have pictures of in our sock drawers."

Though the men looked uncomfortable at this last bit, C.J. couldn't help but smile. "Thanks, Matt," she said. "But you don't have to take *my* word for it. Let me see if I can find Andres and he'll confirm everything I just told you."

C.J. made a move to get up from her chair at the bar, but she needn't have bothered as a short man with a long handlebar moustache approached. He was wearing chef's clothing and a tall chef's hat.

"*Say-Zhee!*" he shouted with a French accent. "It is so good to see you!"

“Oh shit, not this again,” Matt groaned. Mitch elbowed him discreetly, trying to send the young man a message to be more tactful, even though Mitch felt just about the same way. They’d had enough of French men and French accents when C.J. was fooling around with the soft-core porn director Alain Begere.

“Andres!” C.J. exclaimed, jumping from her seat to hug the chef. “It’s good to see you too! Thanks for getting us a table tonight. I really wanted to try out your new restaurant. The place looks fantastic!”

“This hole in the wall? No, this place is complete garbage compared to your beauty, *mon chere*. I wouldn’t think it possible, but you look lovelier every time I see you.”

“Oh, Andres, you’re too sweet.”

“But we are being rude! You must introduce me to your friends,” Andres said.

“Of course, Andres. How could I be so inconsiderate,” C.J. said. “This is Mitch Buchannon, my boss at Baywatch; his cousin, Louis; his son, Hobie; and my co-worker, Matt.”

Andres turned to each member of the party as he was introduced and shook his hand warmly. “It is a pleasure to meet you all. Any friend of *Say-Zhee*’s is a friend of mine, *naturellement!*”

“Andres, we’re only in town for a few days, but I wanted to be sure to come see you. My friends here don’t believe that I used to be a chef.”

Surprise took over Andres’ face. “*Non?* Oh, but *Say-Zhee* was one of the finest chefs in our class! Truly, the world lost an artist when she turned away from cooking. But, I understand that you have gained an artist in the realm of saving lives, yes, Mitch?”

“It’s true,” Mitch said enthusiastically. “She’s one hell of a lifeguard.”

“Good, good,” Andres said. “Now, let me show you to your table.”

Andres lead them through the large dining room to a secluded table towards the back of the restaurant. On the way, he reached up to put a hand on Hobie’s shoulder and whispered to the young man, “Be careful with her, she is like a... how do you say it? ... like a *putain* in bed. She will tear you apart.”

“Oh, uh, thanks, Mr. Andres,” Hobie replied, confused.

“I hope this table will suffice,” Andres said as they arrived. “It is the best I could do on such short notice.”

“This is perfect, Andres. Thank you so much,” C.J. said, stooping down to give the little man a kiss on the cheek.

Andres smiled at the party and took his leave, promising to visit them later on in their meal.

The chef had prepared a special meal for the group and waiters were constantly coming and going with different courses and wine selections perfectly suited to each plate. Mitch wouldn’t let Hobie drink any and he was all set to pout throughout the meal until, in a whisper, C.J. promised Hobie they’d raid the mini-bar back in their hotel room. During the meal, they shared notes, and as they’d not made much progress that day, there wasn’t much to share. Mitch and Matt were hopeful that C.J.’s friendship with Gray would bear fruit but they knew they’d have to put out more feelers on their own. Conversation stalled during the meal. Louis and Mitch had already done all the catching up they needed to do and everyone was tired from the events of the day. Mostly, the group ate in silence.

While their final course was being cleared from the table, C.J.'s cell phone rang. C.J. took the call and was delighted to find that it was Gray, phoning with some information.

"You've discovered something already?" C.J. asked, amazed.

"Well, he's not exactly keeping a low profile, which is pretty interesting for a guy who's got as many people looking for him as he does," Gray replied.

"He's scared then? Nervous about money, probably. Plus, he's not used to being alone. I gather that he and Barbara had been together for quite some time. He probably doesn't know what he's doing anymore."

"That definitely sounds accurate. I got a call from a friend and it turns out that soon after you and I talked this afternoon, there was a guy out and about looking for someone to take a lot diamonds off his hands."

"That must be him, right?" C.J. asked.

"There haven't been any other major diamond thefts recently. That's got to be him."

"So do you know anything about his whereabouts?"

"Not at the moment, and I don't know where he's staying, though I'm guessing it's somewhere downtown and it's probably one of the nicer hotels. Look, C.J., this guy might not be acting very smart right now, but he is dangerous. He broke my friend's hand this afternoon just because he looked at him funny."

"How was it funny?"

"I'm not sure, I think he twisted up his face like this," Gray said.

"Like what, Gray?"

"Like this."

"Gray, we're on the phone, I can't see you," C.J. said.

"Wait, let me try this. Okay, can you see me now?"

"Ummm, it's still not happening for me. Look, just forget it. Do you know where he's going to be? Anything else at all?"

"Well, that's the problem. My friend was so scared after Max broke his hand that he thought Max was liable to kill him if he couldn't set him up with a fence for the diamonds. So, he told him he'd get him hooked up with someone who'd take the whole lot."

"And the problem is that your friend can't do any such thing, am I right?"

"That's exactly it. See, my pal – his name is Tony – he's strictly small potatoes. He's not connected very well at all. That's why he called me, to see if I could find him anybody."

"He'd probably been making a lot of phone calls," C.J. guessed.

"Yeah, he'd already been on the phone for a while. I told him to stop telling the entire city about it, that it would just bring him more trouble. Hopefully he listened."

"So, do you know anybody who can take those diamonds off his hands?" C.J. asked.

"Me? No way. I'm not much more connected than Tony is. But I told him I knew someone, hoping to keep him from getting himself killed. But now, I'm not sure what to do."

"Don't worry, Gray," C.J. said, an idea forming in her head. "I might just know a fence we can set Max up with."

“Oh yeah? What’s his name?” Gray asked.

C.J. looked across the table at Mitch’s cousin. “It’s Louis,” she said.

“No way!” Louis said. “Definitely not!”

C.J.’s idea had not gone over particularly well with Mitch’s cousin, though the rest of the group thought it would be a decent plan, or at least the best they had. C.J. suggested that Louis pose as a fence, recommended by Gray to Tony. Louis was the only one of the group that Max hadn’t seen and thus the only one capable of meeting with Max before the trap was sprung. Gray had offered to do it himself, but C.J. hadn’t wanted to risk her friend’s life. It wasn’t that she was willing to throw Louis’ life away, but Gray had a wife and a young daughter and didn’t think he should be putting himself in harm’s way. Besides, Louis had wanted to help, hadn’t he?

“Sure, I wanted to help you, but I was thinking of driving you around, making dinner, giving backrubs, that sort of thing. He really broke this guy’s hand?” Louis asked.

C.J. thought it might have been a mistake telling him that much. “Yeah, but this Tony guy, he can be pretty annoying. He’s not suave like you, Louis.”

All the men at the table but Louis had seen this before. When C.J. wanted something, she could really turn on the charm. They’d all developed various methods of resisting it, though none of them were impervious to the effects of her feminine wiles. Louis, however, had never borne the brunt of C.J. Parker in full force.

She slid closer to Louis and placed her hand on his knee. She looked him in the eye and could tell that he was very nearly falling into her deep blue eyes. “Louis... Louie,” she purred. “We *need* you. You’re the only one who can do this. You’re our only hope.”

Mitch and Matt needed all their willpower not to burst out in laughter. There was no hope for Louis. He’d lost the second he tried to resist C.J. Even Hobie, who was more than a little jealous and angry about the attention C.J. was now lavishing on Louis had to suppress a smile. The woman was a pro. It wasn’t a matter of if Louis would agree to play the fence, but how long it would take for her to convince him. Hobie started the timer on his wristwatch.

It took exactly 38 seconds. Louis’ resistance fell quickly to C.J.’s cooing, nuzzling and stroking – both of his ego and his right leg – and soon he was in full agreement with the plan. He tried to play it off that he’d just been kidding about being nervous and the other men let him in order to save face. Any ribbing or teasing on the subject might make him reconsider his decision. For the rest of the evening, Louis played the part of the tough and confident rebel, obviously trying to continue to impress C.J. She knew better than to immediately drop her charade and skillfully played the role of the awed damsel in distress.

After dessert, Mitch, Matt and Louis excused themselves – Louis was reluctant to go, but even though he believed he had wowed C.J. with his bravado, he still knew he had no chance with her – and left, heading back to Louis’ apartment for the evening. C.J. promised Mitch that she would take good care of Hobie, somehow managing to keep even the slightest suggestive note from her voice. Mitch knew better than to argue with the woman at this point knowing that once she had gotten her charms working, she would get on a role and even with his experience of resisting her, he knew that nothing short of physically wrenching her away from Hobie would work. And he wasn’t even sure if that

would be enough. She promised they'd stay out of trouble and would meet up again the next day.

After the three men left, C.J. and Hobie enjoyed an aperitif, Hobie reveling in the freedom from his father and the fact that C.J. treated him like a grown-up. Here was a woman who really knew, understood and respected him.

Andres approached the table, apologizing for not having visited them earlier and sad that he'd been unable to say good-bye to the departed members of the party. C.J. assured Andres that they'd thoroughly enjoyed the meal and had passed along their compliments.

"They're just old. They can't hang with me and Hobie, right Hobe?" C.J. asked.

"Thass right," Hobie slurred. "But we...we're keeping it real, aww yeah."

"Your young friend seems to be drunk," Andres said, eyeing Hobie's glass. "...on a few sips of cognac."

C.J. sighed and asked, "Hobie, are you alright?"

"I feel great! Best I've ever felt in my life!" Hobie said, waving his arms in the air wildly.

"Oh dear, I'd better get him back to the hotel room. Andres, could you send our check?"

"Oh, *Say-Zhee*, are you trying to insult me? Are you trying to make me feel like I'm 5 feet 3 inches tall? Are you trying to reach into my mouth, down my throat, grab my heart, pull it out, and show it to me as it pumps its last ounces of blood?"

"Andres, no, of course not!"

"Then why would you even suggest that I would make you pay even one penny for this meal? *Non!* It is my gift to you."

"Andres, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to insult you. Thank you so much for the wonderful evening."

"Oh, *Say-Zhee*, it is nothing. Do not trouble your very very beautiful head about it. Just take care of this young friend of yours and promise you'll visit me again soon."

"I promise, Andres."

As C.J. stood and attempted to extract Hobie from the booth, a waiter approached with a bottle of champagne.

"Oh, thank you, but we're just leaving," C.J. said, struggling with Hobie. Andres rushed over to help her, but it was proving to be a monumental task.

"This is compliments of the man at the bar," the waiter said, setting the bottle down.

"Which man?" C.J. asked suspiciously.

"That man," said the waiter, pointing at a dark-haired man in a leather jacket, seated with his back to C.J.

"Well, send it back to him with my apologies."

"He said not to take no for an answer. He was really quite insistent that I be quite insistent."

C.J. let go of Hobie's arm. "Well he doesn't know what insistent is. I'll be right back."

C.J. picked up the bottle and stalked across the dining room to the bar. As she was halfway across the restaurant, the man turned to face her. C.J. stopped in her tracks. Smiling, the man waved. It was Max Fischer.

Max had been out wandering the streets of Chicago. After his successful day, he'd wanted to celebrate, but none of the bars or clubs had called out to him. The Rush Street establishments all seemed too noisy and crowded and the Rush Street women were brash and unattractive. He was considering returning to the hotel when he stumbled across Les Nomades. Figuring there was no point in wasting the entire evening, he entered the quiet restaurant and took a seat at the bar. He ordered a martini and sipped it, going over the events of the day.

He'd considered it a success, not just because he'd managed to track down someone who knew a fence, but also because he'd gotten to work out some of his pent up aggression. Breaking that punk's hand had given Max a satisfaction he hadn't felt in a long time and that was cause for celebration in and of itself. He had spent much of the past few days moping and had forgotten how much a little bit of old-fashioned unprovoked violence could help.

He was just about to call it a night when he noticed a gorgeous blonde woman struggling to support a young man in the back of the bar. She was a vision of beauty in the ugly, dark city and Max thought he might attempt to win the woman's affections, at least for the evening.

He stood and was about to approach her when he realized that he knew this woman. He'd spoken with the woman before. He'd actually put a couple bullets into her oversized chest. It was C.J. Parker

Max immediately sat back down in his chair, his mind racing. By all accounts, C.J. Parker should be dead. She'd gone down like she was never coming up again and yet, there she was, alive and well and trying to get Hobie Buchannon out of a booth like he was a drowning victim. How had she survived? She should at least be flat on her back for a few weeks, recovering from multiple bullet wounds.

And more importantly than that, he thought, what the hell was she doing in Chicago? That pair of meddlers seemed to show up where ever Max went. It was like a nightmare. He would have loved to meet C.J. under different circumstances, maybe get a chance to act out on some fantasies of his, but Max didn't mix business with pleasure. And C.J. Parker's bothersome interference was definitely not pleasure.

At the very least, C.J. was alone – well, not alone, but Max didn't put much stock in Hobie's presence. None of the her other annoying friends were around. Max had assumed that Mitch bought it on the exploding boat as well, but C.J.'s presence cast serious doubt on that assumption. He would have to figure he was still alive and kicking. Max cursed himself for not paying attention to the news or obituaries from back West. These were the kinds of details that Barbara would have nagged him into remembering. But since C.J. and Hobie were alone, he figured she must have brought him to Chicago on an unrelated trip. Perhaps she wanted to get him away from his father so she could consummate their sick little relationship.

Max wondered how he should play this one and eventually came to the conclusion that calm, cool and suave was the way to go. He signaled to the bartender and had a bottle of champagne sent to the table.

C.J. couldn't believe her eyes. Of all the bars in all the restaurants in the city of Chicago, she and Max had to stumble into the same one. The odds against it occurring

weren't astronomical, but they were pretty high. C.J. figured they were somewhere around 1 in 10,000 against. Just her luck.

C.J. regained her composure and kept walking towards the villain, determined to play it cool.

"I think you sent this to the wrong table," C.J. said, placing the champagne bottle in front of Max.

"Oh, there was no mistake," Max said, a huge smirk on his face. "That bubbly's for you, my dear."

"Well, I'm afraid I'll have to decline. We were just leaving."

Max looked over C.J.'s shoulder at where Andres was now struggling to support Hobie. "It looks like you have time for a toast. The kid doesn't seem like he's in any shape to do much traveling."

"Still, I'm going to have to decline," C.J. said, turning away from Max.

He grabbed her arm and whirled her back around. "You're supposed to be dead," he hissed.

"Yeah, well, I rarely do what I'm supposed to do," C.J. growled, wrenching her arm from Max's grasp.

"That's for sure. What's with the Chicago trip? You and the kid on your honeymoon?"

C.J. laughed, "Something like that. Jealous much?"

Max made a disgusted face, "You are too much, you know that?"

"That's what they all say, Max."

"I'll bet they do. Now look, I want to know what you're doing in Chicago, you bitch."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," C.J. said. "Hobie and I decided we needed a break from the West Coast after you shot me and you killed his father. Looks like we picked the wrong city."

Max beamed with pleasure. "So, Buchannon's dead, huh? Too bad I didn't get both of them. Could have wiped out the blood line; done the world a favor."

"You're despicable. What's to keep me from calling the cops right now?" C.J. asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe this gun that I've got pointed at your gut?" Max said, smiling evilly.

C.J. looked down and saw that Max was indeed holding a small revolver against her stomach. She shook her head. "You tried that once, already, Max. See how well it worked?"

Max frowned. "Yes, you seem to be indestructible. Or at least, your breasts are. I wonder how well you'd do with a stomach wound, though?"

"You wouldn't make it out the front door, Max. You know that."

"It might be worth it, just to watch you die for real this time."

"Do I really piss you off that much?" C.J. asked.

Max thought about it and shook his head. "Actually, no. I may just be taking this whole 'bad guy' thing too far."

"Gee, do you think?" C.J. asked sarcastically.

"Hey, what do you say we take this bottle of champagne back to my room and we finish what we never really got to start?"

“You think that I want to sleep with you after everything you’ve done?”

“Come on, C.J. You know you want me. Deep down you’re attracted to my bad boy image. For some reason, you’ve gotten hung up on the little boy thing recently, but I won’t hold that against you. I’ll hold something else against you though, if you’d like,” Max laughed suggestively.

“Oh, good lord. You disgust me, Max. I’d never want to be with you.”

“Are you trying to convince me or yourself? You and I are so much alike it’s ridiculous. We were made for each other.”

“How do you figure?”

“I have no idea,” Max admitted. “I just thought it might help convince you. I assumed it would work better than begging and pleading, although I’m not above doing that.”

“Save your breath,” C.J. said. “As amusing as that might be, I’d really rather not see it.”

Max again looked past C.J. “Well, it looks like your date for the evening has disappeared. You’re gonna have to find someone else to warm your bed tonight.”

C.J. spun around and saw that Max wasn’t lying. Hobie and Andres were nowhere to be seen. “Oh, shit!” she exclaimed. “I can’t believe this.” She rushed off towards the table and could see no sign of either man. Frantically, she searched for their waiter and finally located him in the kitchen.

“Do you know where Andres and my friend went?” C.J. asked.

“Uhhh... Je ne parle pas Anglais,” the waiter said.

“Crap,” C.J. replied. Her French was very rusty but she gave it a shot. “*Comment est-ce que j’apprends comment baiser?*”

The waiter’s eyes widened. “*Vous ressemblez à vous savez déjà. Mais je serai heureux de vous enseigner.*”

C.J. wasn’t sure she’d made her point properly. She tried again. “*Non, non. Vous ne comprenez pas. J’ai perdu mes poitrine. Cependant, je suis constamment excité et ai besoin d’un grand pénis à l’intérieur de moi.*”

The waiter looked shocked, but a smile began crossing his face. He reached out towards C.J and said, “*Vous êtes tout à fait la putain. Je pense que je suis dans l’amour avec vous.*”

C.J. pushed him away, shaking her head. “*Non! Non!*” The waiter kept smiling and whispered, “*Vous jouez dur pour obtenir, mais vous savez que vous me voulez.*”

C.J. kned the man in the groin and he fell to the ground, doubled over in pain, groaning. She kicked him again, for good measure and then added a couple more blows out of frustration. She never did care much for the French.

Breathless from her effort, and embarrassed by the wondering stares of the kitchen staff, C.J. went back to the dining room. She looked to the bar and saw that Max too had disappeared, leaving her completely alone. She was beginning to wish she had left with Matt, Mitch and Louis. They, at least, were getting a good night of worry-free sleep, she thought.

As Mitch and Matt lay in the darkness in Louis’ living room on the lumpy sleeper sofa, Mitch tossed and turned, trying to get comfortable. Matt had passed out the moment his head touched the pillow but Mitch was having trouble getting to sleep. Eventually his movement roused Matt.

“What’s wrong, Mitch?” Matt asked sleepily.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Mitch replied.

“No, I can tell there’s something bothering you.”

“Really, don’t worry about it.”

“Mitch, c’mon. This is Matt here. You can tell me anything.”

“Oh, alright,” Mitch relented. “I’m worried I didn’t lock the front door of my house when we left.”

“That’s it?” Matt laughed. “*That’s* what’s bothering you?”

“It’s a very valid worry,” Mitch said. “Don’t laugh at me.”

“But Mitch, we all watched you lock your front door. You had each of us sign an affidavit attesting to the fact that we had witnessed the locking of the door and had tested the security of the door and that, to the best of our knowledge, the door was locked.”

“I know, it’s just –“

“And then you had pictures taken of you locking the door. And you had a large banner made up stating that the door was indeed locked and you made smaller, keychain-sized versions made as well and gave one to each of us.”

“I know, Matt but –“

“And then you recorded yourself saying, ‘I locked the door. I locked the door,’ over and over again, hundreds of times and you’ve been playing that tape on your Walkman the whole time we’ve been gone.”

“I know, I know, Matt. And still I think about it all the time. Locking the door is such an automatic, brainless act and I forced it into the realm of the conscious. In fact, by calling so much attention to it, I forced it into the *super*-conscious. And now I’m doubting that it ever happened.”

“What?” Matt asked, confused.

“Yeah, I don’t know if it ever happened or if my brain’s just fooling me into thinking that it happened.”

“I was there, Mitch,” Matt said. “Trust me, it happened. And it was pretty sad, too.”

“How do I know you’re not making that up?”

“Why would I do that? Cripes, Mitch. You’re off your rocker. Good night.”

“No, seriously Matt. How do I know you’re not just making this whole story up? And that my memory of locking the door has been placed in my head through the power of suggestion? That is to say that simply by hearing your repeated telling of the story of the locking of my door, it has actually become a memory of my own.”

“What about the banner? The photos? The cassette?”

“Props? Fakes? Figments? What is memory, anyway? What’s your earliest memory, Matt?” Mitch asked.

Matt thought about it for a moment and then replied, “Throwing up on my mom at a black-tie dinner at the United Nations when I was two years old.”

“Are you sure?”

“Sure, I remember it like it was yesterday.”

“Isn’t that the sort of story your mom might tell over and over again?” Mitch asked.

Matt snorted, “C’mon, Mitch. You’ve met my mom. Does she seem like the type of woman who’d tell an amusing anecdote about being puked on in front of Boutros-Boutros Gali?”

“Now that you mention it, no, she doesn’t. But it is the sort of story that *you’d* tell. Especially every time someone says the U.S. should pay its late fees for its U.N. membership. You *love* telling that story.”

“What’s your point?”

“Well, you’ve told the story so much, and you’ve heard me tell it a few times, and I’m sure you’ve got other friends you’ve heard tell it.”

“Sure. And?”

“Well, how do you know it’s a real memory and not just a story? Is there actual recollection of an event or are you just remembering a retelling?”

“Wow, Mitch. I think I’m starting to see your point. You don’t know if you remember locking your door or if you remember a story in which you locked your door.”

“Exactly,” replied Mitch. “And therefore, I’m having trouble sleeping.”

“Well now I am too,” said Matt.

“How come?” asked Mitch.

“Because I’m worried that I didn’t plug the drain in the houseboat and the whole thing’s going to be underwater when we get back.”

“That would suck.”

“Tell me about it,” Matt replied sadly.

“Wanna play flashlight tag?” Mitch asked.

“Would I ever!” Matt exclaimed.

“Keep it down out there!” Louis shouted from his bedroom. “I gotta work in the morning!”

“Sorry, Louis!” Matt and Mitch said together.

Even though they were forced to muffle their cries of glee and delight, it was the best game of flashlight tag either man had ever played.

C.J. ran from the restaurant, searching the immediate area for Hobie and Andres but to no avail. The streets were empty and she had no idea where to begin looking. What would a short French chef want with a drunk 15-year-old boy from California? C.J. couldn’t begin to imagine what had happened to them. She wished Mitch had allowed Hobie to get a cell phone, but there was no use in dwelling on that, now, was there?

She returned to the restaurant and asked the hostess if she had any idea where Andres might have gone, but she did not. She wouldn’t even give C.J. the chef’s cell phone number despite C.J.’s insistence that she and Andres were good friends.

“If you’re such good friends,” the hostess asked, “why don’t you already know the number?”

C.J. suppressed the urge to leave the hostess in the same shape that she’d left the pushy waiter but figured that beating up one Les Nomades staff member was already bad enough. She was turning into a female version of Max. Maybe he was right. C.J. did have poor impulse control and a general disregard for the law. Maybe she should just hook up with him and live a life of leisure.

She snapped out of that quickly. She couldn’t believe she’d even briefly considered taking Max up on his offer. The man had hurt her and he had tried to hurt her

friends and he deserved the worst punishment that C.J. could think of. She might have a low moral center, but at least she had a moral center to speak of at all. No, she would never betray her friends and she would do her best to bring Max down.

But first, she had to find Hobie.

When Hobie saw C.J. speaking with Max, he was filled with rage. Just the sight of their enemy made Hobie's pulse quicken and his heart skip a beat. He felt as though steam might shoot from his ears. He felt as though he instantly became sober, as if the anger in his blood had eradicated all traces – what little there were – of alcohol in his veins. He wriggled free of Andres and the waiter and stormed across the restaurant. Halfway to the bar, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Hobie? What are you doing?" Andres asked. "Allow me to help you."

"Shove off," Hobie said angrily, pushing Andres away. "I'm gonna go kick that guy's ass."

Andres looked and saw C.J. apparently smiling at a handsome young man.

"Hobie, I can not allow you to do this thing. Clearly, she was meant for someone else." Andres moved to block Hobie's path.

"Outta my way, Frenchie," Hobie said.

"Francois!" Andres shouted to the waiter. "*Aidez-moi!*"

The waiter grabbed Hobie's right arm, and Andres took his left. In this manner, they forcibly removed Hobie from the restaurant through the back door.

"Hobie, I am sorry to do this to you, but I can not let you interfere with young lovers."

Exasperated, Hobie attempted to reason with the Frenchman, "Andres, you don't understand. The guy in there, he's the reason we're in Chicago."

"*Exactement!*" Andres said. "*Say-Zhee* has come to Chicago to find her one true love, this man in the bar. I understand why you would be jealous, but Hobie, she is no longer interested in you."

"But she's supposed to be with me!" Hobie cried.

"I know how you feel, Hobie. I too was once completely, *talons finis de tête dans l'amour* with *Say-Zhee* but I realized that I had no chance with her. How is a man who is barely a man, and a Frenchman at that, to have anything to do with the wonderful and beautiful *Say-Zhee* Parker? She is too much for me, and she is too much for you."

"Speak for yourself, buddy," Hobie snarled. "*Say-Zhee*... I mean, C.J. wants me. Bad. That Max guy, she was probably just telling him to go to hell. She doesn't want him."

"You saw him," Andres said. "He is charming. He is dashing. He obviously has a lot of money. Who wouldn't want him? In fact, I want him. Now, you must face the facts, young man. You have been ditched. You should run along."

"But, I –"

"Tut tut, Hobie. It is better for you to accept it now. You must go." Andres turned his back on Hobie. The young man attempted to get Andres' attention, but the Frenchman pretended he couldn't hear him. It was rather childish and insipid, but that's what you get when you're dealing with the French. Hobie turned away in disgust, thrust his hands deep into his pockets and stalked off down the alley, and around the corner.

He reentered the Les Nomades from the front but could not see Max or C.J. at the bar. He searched the restaurant but found no sign of either his friend or his foe. The hostess was no help at all, alternating between ignoring Hobie's questions and hostile refusal to answer him. So much for the laid-back hospitality of the Midwest, Hobie thought. Finally, however, he was able to wrestle some information out of the woman. C.J. had left the restaurant alone.

He exited the restaurant again and decided he may as well head back to the hotel. If anything, C.J. would return there as well and they would be reunited. He found his way back to the Hotel Inter-Continental and entered the lobby. He was thankful that he'd remembered to get a spare room key from C.J. before they left and walked across the lobby to the elevators. He was too late to catch an elevator and watched as the doors closed. There was a sole passenger in the car and though Hobie only saw the man briefly, once again he could have sworn it was Max Fischer. Hobie would have thought his eyes were playing tricks on him again and that the coincidence was too much to be real, but Max had already stumbled upon them once that evening, why not believe that he was staying in the same hotel?

Hobie watched the lighted indicator for the car Max had taken as it rose. It stopped at the 12th, 16th and 19th floors before it descended again. Hobie checked a hotel directory and saw that the pool was on the 12th floor and there was a fitness room on the 19th floor, so it was reasonable that passengers would get on and continue up from those floors. That didn't rule out Max disembarking on one of those floors, however, so he was only slightly wiser than he had been before making his observation.

"That was only a slight waste of time," he thought.

Hobie went to the front desk and got the attention of the night clerk. "Hi," he said, "I'm staying here with my uncle, but I've forgotten our room number. Could you tell me what room Max Fischer is in?"

The clerk shook his head. "You're not staying here with your uncle. You're here with C.J. Parker. I know all about you. Tell me, kid, is she as good in bed as I think she is?"

Hobie groaned, for the first time upset about the world-famous nature of his traveling companion. "She's better," he said knowingly. "You haven't seen her around, have you?"

"Kid, hundreds of people pass through here all the time. You think I notice all of them?"

"Oh, don't give me that. I'm asking you about *C.J. Parker*. You're telling me you wouldn't notice when she walked across the lobby?"

Defeated, the clerk shook his head. "Alright, I've been watching for her all night. She hasn't been through here."

Well at least she wasn't with Max. That didn't rule out him hurting or killing her and leaving her somewhere, though. Though they'd left the restaurant separately, Max could have been lying in wait for her somewhere. Hobie had no choice but to return to his room and wait for C.J. to show up. At least they had cable.

C.J. stumbled into the room at around 3 A.M., exhausted, discouraged and desperate. When she spotted Hobie, sleeping soundly in the bed, the television still on

and tuned to the soft-core pornography station he'd been watching, she nearly collapsed with relief and anger.

"Where the hell have you been?" she demanded, roughly waking the young man from a deep sleep.

"What? Who? C.J.! I was so worried about you!" he said, wiping sleep from his eyes.

"You were worried about me? I was worried to death about you!" she cried, alternating between hugging him and shaking him vigorously.

"C.J., stop that. I'm okay. I've been here all night," Hobie said.

"You have been? But I... Oh."

"Where have you been?" he asked.

Embarrassed, C.J. said, "I've been out. Looking for you. Everywhere. Except here."

"Oh. Why didn't you come back here?"

"I'm really not sure. It didn't even occur to me. What is wrong with me?"

Hobie changed the subject. "Was that Max Fischer you were talking to in the bar?"

"Yes it was. He just happened into the restaurant and spotted us. But our cover is still good. He thinks Mitch is dead and that you and I are here to get away from Los Angeles."

"He could easily verify that dad's not dead."

"Oh, I think he believed me."

"Why do you think he bought it? He doesn't have any reason to trust you at all."

"Because I refused to sleep with him."

"Well, that's a good thing, but I fail to see how that will convince him that you're genuine."

"All men know that when an impossibly beautiful woman throws herself on you that she either wants something big or she's lying about something big. I didn't throw myself on Max, so I must be telling the truth."

"Well what's it mean when you throw yourself on me?"

"What are you talking about? I've never thrown myself on you."

Hobie's mind nearly imploded with the pressure of C.J.'s last statement. If her actions of the past couple weeks didn't count as her throwing herself on him, then he didn't know what would. Had he been reading her all wrong? Was he completely clueless on how to figure out what a woman was doing? C.J. started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Hobie asked.

"I was just kidding, kiddo. Don't let your brain get hurt there. I was absolutely throwing myself on you. But don't worry, it's genuine."

"How am I supposed to know that?"

"Because I've never lied from you, and I don't want anything you've got except yourself."

Hobie blushed, and his eyes filled with tears. "C.J., that's so sweet."

"Well, I mean it, Hobe. Now, move over, I've been walking around this city all night and my feet are killing me."

"Well, maybe you need one of my world-famous foot massages," Hobie said, making room for C.J. on the bed.

“World-famous foot massages? I’ve never heard of them,” C.J. said, stretching out on the bed.

“Well, maybe not world-famous, but.... Well, let me just give you one here, okay?”

“Whatever floats your boat.” C.J. kicked off her shoes and Hobie moved down the bed and began caressing and kneading her tired feet. “Wow,” she said. “You do a few more of these and they *will* be world-famous.”

“Really? You think so?” Hobie began picturing his future life as a world-famous foot masseuse, traveling the globe easing the stress and pain of celebrities everywhere by rubbing their feet.

“Oh yeah,” C.J. said, sleepily. “It’s putting me right...to....” And then she was out, dead to the world. Hobie sighed.

“We just can’t get it together, C.J.,” he said, pulling a blanket over the sleeping woman. Hobie lay down next to her and soon he was asleep as well.

Max resumed his normal pacing back and forth across his hotel room, highball glass in hand. He wasn’t sure if he had played the C.J. scene right. Sure, he’d been cool and had kept the upper hand throughout their encounter, but if he’d blown his cover by announcing his presence, it would be the mother of all screw-ups. He hadn’t exactly been laying low, which was precisely the thing that Barbara would have them doing right now, were she still around.

On the other hand, if C.J. had already known that Max was in town, and had come after him in Chicago, it might be a good thing that she know that he knew that she knew where he was. Or, it might not be. It might be the completely opposite of the best action Max could have taken at that moment. He stopped at the mini-bar and poured more bourbon into his glass. He downed it in a single gulp.

As Max went back and forth over and over the floor of his hotel room, he went back and forth over and over the various options he had had in the restaurant that evening. He kept wondering what Barbara would have done and it was driving him crazy. She’s gone, Max thought. Forget about her. Stop thinking about her. Stop nagging and chiding yourself like she would have done. But it was no use. The little voice in his head that often told him when he was being an idiot had taken on Barbara’s tone. He couldn’t get rid of her. He was haunted.

Max slumped in a heap and began pounding his fists on the floor in frustration. He stopped short of out and out sobbing, but it was close – probably the closest he’d been since he was a child. He felt the need to go out and break someone else’s hand, or to do even worse. He needed to hurt someone or something.

Eventually, the tantrum passed and his head cleared. He realized there was no use in worrying about how he had handled the situation that evening. There was no changing the past. There was only the future. He just had to make sure that however he played the future, he played it the way he always had – the way that had kept him alive and relatively well all his life.

Tomorrow, he would contact that punk, Tony, and get the hookup with his fence. He’d dump the diamonds, and walk out of Chicago with a suitcase full of cash. He’d get as far away as possible, take on a new identity, and never send a bottle of champagne to a woman he had shot again. And maybe he’d break Tony’s other hand for good measure.

Relaxed, placated, calmed, Max went to sleep.

Hobie was roused by a thudding sound on the ceiling above him. He drowsily mumbled a curse at his noisy upstairs neighbor, rolled over and fell back to sleep.

Matt slept uneasily. Even after the game of flashlight tag which had taken a lot out of him, he was still restless. He had one of his recurring dreams: a dream where he was living not on a houseboat, but in an apartment complex in West Hollywood. He felt confined and stifled by living on dry land, and even more disturbing were his neighbors. All of them seemed vindictive and insane. A woman named Amanda who looked remarkably like Heather Locklear kept attempting to destroy the lives of everyone else. In this dream, Matt was an advertising executive named Craig who ran an agency that was competing with one that Amanda worked for. The storylines of these dreams were so complex and convoluted that they eventually caved in on themselves, often ending with everyone apparently dying in some unbelievably horrible accident. Each new dream began with lengthy explanations of how they each survived the bomb, fire, earthquake or poison gas leak. Even though the dreams made Matt uncomfortable, he found them extremely entertaining and amusing and made no attempt to shut them off.

Max was having a recurring dream as well. In it, he was surrounded by puppy dogs and bunny rabbits. They were cute and friendly animals, and they all crowded around him, nuzzling against him and he petted their soft, furry bodies. It was so relaxing and peaceful and yet Max felt on edge and tense. All around him was a pastoral scene of trees and sunshine, singing birds and babbling brooks. The grassy field in which he sat was comforting and welcoming and still, Max found himself ill at ease.

It wasn't until all the rabbits and dogs bared their fangs and claws that Max understood why he was uncomfortable. It was a trap. It was a diabolical trap set by the cute and fluffy bunnies and the cute and cuddly puppies. They had lead him into a trap by making him feel happy and wanted, but it was just a trick. A lie. The animals set upon him, biting and scratching him. At first it was just a nuisance and slightly annoying, but as they got going it began to hurt more and more. Once they got the taste of Max's blood, there was no stopping them. They began to tear at his flesh, ripping him apart. He felt his left arm torn from its socket and there was a rabbit gnawing at his groin. The pain was unbelievable and Max wished he would just pass out and put an end to it. Then he felt the teeth at his throat.

That was always when he woke up, dazed and confused, clutching at his blanket like a little boy. He'd told Barbara about the dream once, but she had just laughed, saying it funny that such a scary man would be terrified of such "cute widdle bunny wabbits."

C.J. murmured and shifted in her sleep. She was having the same dream she always had. She was naked, lying in a drawer, trapped under rows and rows of socks: white sweat socks, argyle dress socks, fishnet stockings, ankle socks. It felt as though the weight of all the socks of the world were pressing down on her, keeping her pinned down. The air was still and stale, musty and thin. She had to fight for each breath and her lungs struggled to find any oxygen in the breaths she was able to get. Just as she thought she was going to suffocate, she felt her world shifting, the world sliding, and she was able

to see dim light between the pairs of socks above her. A hand appeared, rooting through the socks, searching for something. She tried to cry out, but her voice was muffled in her cotton and polyester cave. Finally, the hand reached her, caressed her and lifted her free. She was saved.

Amidst Hobie's usual dreams of Max, C.J., Matt, Louis, Barbara, Mitch, his friends, the rest of his family, question marks, western civilization, ear infections, radishes, throwing up, yesterday, underwear, insider trading, opium, plastic surgery, applesauce, solar flares, daffodils, flag burning, Greenwich Village, haberdasheries, jelly jars, koala bears, licorice, Zionism, xylophones, cranberry pudding, varicose veins, basketball, nocturnal emissions and mayonnaise, he had a dream he'd never had before. In this dream, he was walking home from school, his book bag slung over one shoulder, whistling a jaunty tune to himself. He took his normal route home and soon saw his house, but when he turned up the front walk, he turned up the wrong one and soon found himself opening the door of his next door neighbor, the often mean owner of a nasty little dog, Nancy "Boots" Scaripa. Hobie didn't know why everyone called the old woman "Boots" but he guessed it had something to do with the way she often kicked the neighborhood's stray cats out of her yard. Hobie had never been inside her house and was surprised to find that it was exactly like his own house except everything was reversed. Hobie walked in, unaware of his mistake until Boots stopped him on the stairs.

"What the hell are you doing in my house?" she demanded angrily.

"What?" said Hobie. "I'm just going home. This is my house. I'm going to my room. What do you mean?"

"No, you idiot. This is my house. You live next door."

"Oh, I see. I walked into the wrong house on accident. My mistake. I'll just be going home then."

"Not so fast, young man," Boots said. "I'm calling the police. Come with me."

Hobie obediently followed Boots to the phone which the old woman picked up and dialed. "Hello?" she said. "Police? Yes, this is me and there is a young man here. He has broken into my house and I would like you to come around right away and take care of him." She hung up the phone. "The police are coming," she said to Hobie.

"Just let me go home," Hobie pleaded. "It was an accident. An honest mistake."

"We'll see about that," Boots replied.

"Are they going to handcuff me?" Hobie asked.

"I don't know," Boots said.

"Are they going to shoot me?"

"Shoot you?" the old woman laughed, suddenly becoming very caring and concerned about Hobie. "Why would they shoot you?"

"Isn't that what policemen do?" Hobie asked, very worried.

"No, dear. Not at all," Boots said, rubbing Hobie's back comfortingly. "Oh, you poor, sweet little boy. Worried the police would shoot you over something as silly as walking into the wrong home. No, they won't shoot you." Hobie relaxed considerably. Boots continued, "They'll probably just rough you up a bit."

Hobie snapped awake, sweating bullets until he confirmed it had just been a dream. He looked around and found himself in a luxury hotel room with a beautiful blonde woman at his side and thought he might have trouble with the whole "what is real

/ what is fantasy” bit, but then decided he didn’t care. If it was a dream where he got to spend a night in an expensive hotel with C.J. Parker, then let him keep dreaming. Hobie drifted back to sleep and later would have a long, complicated dream concerning mold, natural fibers, bran flakes, violins, cast-iron skillet, xanthine gum, zebras, loopholes, klutziness, junk heaps, hall passes, granaries, faulty plumbing, dresses, abalone, portholes, onions, iodine, Utica, yelling, transcendental dentistry, rutabagas, Edward IV, and qualitative analysis. It was the most erotic dream Hobie would ever have.

Believe it or not, Louis was also dreaming. His dream, however, was incredibly boring. The details of the dream were so amazingly dull that Louis actually found himself wishing that his alarm clock would ring so that he might be rescued from the drudgery of having such a dull and uninteresting dream. Louis thought he had had a pretty interesting dream, and he had been having some very interesting thoughts concerning C.J. Parker and a stick of butter before he fell asleep and he wondered why his brain had not chosen to take any of these details – either the strange and exciting events of the day, or his fantasy with C.J. – as some sort of plot suggestion for his dream. Instead, Louis’ unconscious mind had gone out on its own, as if it had some sort of lifelong itch to be a novelist or playwright and thought perhaps this was its perfect opportunity to get its big break. Unfortunately for Louis’ unconscious mind, it simply sucked at coming up with its own plots. It had absolutely no hope whatsoever at becoming a professional writer, and should simply stick with the outlines handed to it by Louis’ actions and thoughts during the day and go from there. Louis felt as though he were being forced to watch the dullest movie ever made and he couldn’t even get up to get some popcorn or go to the bathroom. He couldn’t even stop the movie halfway through, pretending that he’d finish the rest later, maybe the next day, but surely before it was due back at the rental store.

Louis suffered through it, tossing and turning until finally, the alarm clock rang and he was wrenched from slumber. Thankfully, he rose from bed and began preparing himself for the day.

Just before Mitch woke up, he too had a dream that he had dreamt before. He dreamt that he was in Detroit, only he wasn’t sure if it was Detroit or not, because he’s never really been to Detroit. It’s just one of those dream things. He was standing in a parking lot, though it was a strange sort of parking lot because there were pillars and bleachers everywhere, and only a couple of cars would have fit. He was hungry, so he approached the hot-dog vendor. Did I forget to mention the hot-dog vendor? Well, there was one. He was yelling ‘Get your red hots here! Get your red hots here!’ just like they do at the ballpark, only Mitch had never been to a ballpark, so he didn’t know how he knew that, but he did. Sometimes you just know things in dreams.

He asked the hot-dog vendor to make him a hot-dog with everything on it, only the vendor only had pickles and daisies, would that be okay? Mitch replied that it certainly would be. The vendor handed over the hot-dog but when Mitch went to get his wallet to pay for the food, he found he’d left it elsewhere. He informed the vendor of his plight, to which the hot-dog man replied that Mitch would have to sing for his food. Mitch began singing the John Cougar Mellencamp song, “Jack and Diane” but since he had several inches of the hot-dog in his mouth, he was not singing very well. The vendor shouted that Mitch was trying to cheat him out of his hard-earned food. Mitch began to

run away from the hot-dog salesman and soon was running through a field. He looked behind him, shocked to see the entire cast of the television program, "Family Ties" chasing after him. Mitch tried to speed up, still eating and still singing, but was unable to. It was as if he were running through quicksand or molasses or something else that was equally sticky and cumbersome. Suddenly, the television actors were on top of Mitch. Meredith Baxter-Birney was pulling his hair, Brian Bonsall was biting his ankles, Justine Bateman was punching his kidneys. All seemed lost until a mysterious figure appears and waved a magic wand. One by one, the actors disappeared.

Mitch stood up and went to thank his unknown benefactor, but before he could, he or she disappeared, and he was unable to determine the identity of his savior.

Mitch woke up, troubled and dissatisfied, feeling as though he had been cheated by his dreams this time.

They met at a Golden Nugget pancake house for breakfast. Louis greeted Hobie and C.J. and then rushed off to work, promising to try to leave early so that they could make their plans for the evening. While they awaited the service of their harried waitress, – the restaurant was ridiculously crowded -- C.J. related the events of the prior evening – leaving out, of course, the fact that Hobie was drunk and that C.J. lost him – asking the rest of the group what they thought about Max's knowledge of her presence in Chicago.

"Of all the bars in all the city, huh?" Matt asked wonderingly. "What are the odds?"

"Well, I figured them at around 10,000 to 1 against," C.J. replied. "But that's beside the point. The point is that it happened and the question is do we need to change our plans at all?"

"Well, if he didn't see Louis, and he thinks I'm dead, then things are probably okay," Mitch said. "Assuming that he doesn't check up on what you told him, that is."

"Yeah, you fooled him once before, C.J.," Matt said. "Why on Earth would he trust you now?"

"Because she didn't throw herself on him," Hobie interjected.

"What are you talking about?" Mitch asked.

"Since C.J. didn't throw herself on Max in an attempt to distract him from what she was telling him, he'll have to think that she was telling the truth. If she'd draped herself all over him, pretending to be interested in him, he'd know she was lying and he'd be sure to check the information. Right now, he's more concerned with selling his diamonds and being pissed that C.J. rejected him."

C.J. smiled at Hobie. "The kid is good. It's true, Mitch. I think he really bought it that you've bought it."

"Well, in that case," said Mitch, "we can proceed as planned."

"So Gray sets it up with Tony who sets it up with Max. Max meets up with Louis and we settle his hash then and there, right?" Hobie asked.

"That's the general idea," Matt replied.

"Where do we get the money?" Hobie asked.

"What money?" said Mitch.

"Well, if Louis is a fence, Max is going to expect to see some cash before he shows him the diamonds, right? Where do we get *that* money?"

"What?" Matt asked. "Have you done this before?"

Hobie laughed. "Of course not. I've just watched enough television. I know how these things work."

The group all thought about it. "Where the hell can we get 20 million dollars?" Mitch asked.

"Dad, it doesn't have to actually *be* \$20 million. It just has to look like \$20 million."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he's not going to have time to count it all, so if it just looks like \$20 million, he'll take it."

"Where are we going to get 20 fake million dollars?" "I don't know." "I'm not sure." "It's a pickle." "Shall we think on it?" "Let's ponder for a moment." As one, they thought, putting their heads together as they tried to ideate some fashionable way that they might fake out one so worldly as Max Fischer, one thinking he is getting 23 million dollars is not easy to fool, for such a one is sure to be careful. Cautions. Certainly invested in the money he is allegedly receiving. "But we don't really have to show him the money for all that long, do we?" "No, probably not, because we can jump from the shadows whenever we like." "Before, even." "Before what?" "Couldn't we jump from the shadows before we show him the money?" "Why would we show him the money after we jump from the shadows?" "Couldn't we jump from the shadows *instead* of showing him the money?" "That is a fine idea. That precludes the need for finding 23 million dollars." "Unless Louis is a method actor?" "What do you mean?" "Well, it is highly possible that Louis would be unable to pull off the charade of being a fence with 23 million dollars if he doesn't have 23 million dollars. It's called method acting." "Louis will have to make do." "What is the opposite of method acting?" "I don't know." "It's a mystery." "It's decided, though." "Yes, Max will come and think Louis is an honest fence – if there is such a thing – and will be vulnerable. We will jump from the shadows and surprise him." "But what if there aren't any?" "Aren't any what?" "Aren't any shadows." "How could there not be any shadows?" "Well, for instance, if the building in which this takes place is very well lit, there will not be any shadows." "We will have to make sure there are shadows." "We will have to prepare ourselves." "We will have to prepare the building." "If there are no shadows in the building to jump from, we could jump from a cake." "Why would we jump from a cake?" "People are always jumping from cakes." "Wouldn't Max be suspicious if he came to see a fence and there was a giant cake in the building?" "Maybe it's the fence's birthday?" "Is it?" "Is it what?" "Is it Louis' birthday?" "Not until next July." "Well that won't work then." "Why not?" "How is Louis going to pretend it's his birthday if he's already pretending to be a fence?" "Well, certainly a big cake that said 'Happy Birthday, Louis' would help." "Maybe it's the fence's birthday." "What do you mean?" "I perhaps it's the birthday of the fence that Louis is pretending to be." "This is getting too complicated. Let's just make sure there are shadows available for us to jump from." "Good idea." "I don't understand something." "What's that?" "Why is Louis pretending to be a fence?" "So Max will bring him the diamonds." "Why would Max bring the diamonds to a fence?" "Where else would he take them?" "How about to a diamond buyer? Or someone who specializes in the buying and selling of stolen goods?" "That's what a fence is." "No kidding?" "Yes. Were you thinking of the chain-link variety?" "Actually, white-picket. But, yes. You can understand my confusion." "I certainly can." "Can I take your order?" "Who are you?"

"I'm the waitress." "Oh, hello there. I would like pancakes and toast." "And I would like waffles, French fries and applesauce." "White or wheat?" "I'm sorry?" "I was asking your friend if he would like white toast or wheat toast." "This is very confusing." "Wheat toast, please." "Okay, wheat it is. And for you, ma'am?" "I would like soup, popcorn and asparagus." "And for you?" "I'd like a grilled cheese sandwich with tomatoes, fries and a Coke." "Sounds good." "What were we talking about?" "Shadows." "Fences." "Diamonds." "Cake." "Sounds about right." "This really is confusing." "Deal with it." "What do we do after we jump from the shadows?" "One of us should probably grab him." "Who?" "And where?" "Where? Is that really important?" "The more planning we do now, the fewer surprises there will be then." "If we jumped from a cake—" "We're not jumping from a cake." "I'll grab him." "Where?" "I'll grab him around the waist." "I'll grab him as well. Perhaps around the arms so that he can't do anything against us." "That's a good idea." "I like it as well." "Who had the grilled cheese?" "Who are you?" "I'm the waitress." "Oh, hello there." "I ordered the grilled cheese." "I thought *I* ordered the grilled cheese." "This is too confusing." "Oh, deal with it." "Bite me." "Bite *me*." "Come on. Cool it. Let's not create a scene." "This is really good food." "Mine's pretty tasty too." "I'm sorry I told you to bite me." "I'm sorry too." "That's nice, guys." "I'm going to rock your world tonight." "Quiet! Everyone can hear you." "No they can't. I'm whispering." "Then why are they all looking at us like that?" "They don't know any better." "Can I get you guys anything else?" "Who are you?" "I'm the waitress." "Oh, hello there." "Could we just have our check please?" "Okay, I'll bring it right over." "Great, thanks very much." "Where are we doing thing, anyway?" "Doing what?" "Hiding. Leaping from the shadows. The whole business." "We've got a place." "A place?" "An old warehouse." "Where?" "In the south loop." "Perfect." "What do you know about it?" "What do you mean?" "How is that perfect? Why is a warehouse in the south loop perfect?" "I don't know. It just sounds perfect, doesn't it?" "I suppose it does at that." "Well then, it's perfect." "Here's the check. I'll take that whenever you're ready." "Who are you?" "I'm the waitress." "Oh, hello there." "How much do I owe?" "Don't worry about it. It's on me." "Aww, you don't have to do that." "No, really. I want to buy you all breakfast." "Well, thank you so much." "It's my pleasure." "That was delicious." "It certainly was." "Shall we go then?" "Yes, let's go."

Max woke late that day, feeling refreshed and relaxed. He'd slept well despite the strange dreams he'd had. The tantrum he had the night before had taken a lot out of him mentally and physically so he'd fallen asleep the second he lay down. This morning, he whistled in the shower, hummed as he shaved and caught himself actually singing a little tune while he dressed. He didn't know what to make of the mood that had come over him, but he took it to be a good sign and an indicator that things were going to go well for him all day long.

Max ordered a light breakfast from room service. The woman who brought the tray into his room was quite attractive and Max flirted with her shamelessly. She responded to his advances and agreed to have dinner with him that night. She didn't even flinch when Max suggested she bring her work clothes with her so she could stay the night.

"Mmm," she said. "It'll be a nice, short commute."

Max closed the door behind the woman as she left. He sat and ate his breakfast. Such a great start to his day and things were only going to get better. He continued feeling that way even after he found himself standing over Tony's bloody body.

Gray knocked on Tony's door and heard an unfamiliar voice tell him to enter. He stepped inside the darkened apartment and saw a man lounging on the couch, sipping a cup of coffee.

"You must be Max," Gray said, extending his hand.

"I must be," Max said, not bothering to stand or even acknowledge Gray's greeting. "And what's your name? Mauve? Orange?"

"It's Gray. And that joke never gets old. Trust me."

"Glad to hear it," Max said coolly. "Take a seat."

"I'd much rather stand, I won't be staying."

Max looked up at Gray, a steely glint in his eyes. "And I'd rather you took a seat," he commanded. Gray sat down in a chair across from the couch, wondering if maybe he'd gotten in too deep this time. He'd hung out with some shady characters before, but there was an edge in Max's voice and a sense of danger in his demeanor that Gray didn't like.

"Where's Tony?" Gray asked, looking past Max at the closed bedroom door. "He in there?"

"Nah, he had to split," Max explained. "Some sort of family emergency or something. Said to say hello, though."

"That's too bad," Gray said nervously. "I hope it's nothing serious."

"I wouldn't worry about Tony," Max said. "Now, let's get down to business. Tony said you knew someone that could help me with my particular problem."

"Right. You need someone to fence your diamonds and I happen to know someone who could take them off your hands."

"That sounds very good, Gray. It sounds a little too good, actually."

"I'm not sure I follow you, Max," Gray replied, fighting to keep his nervousness in check. He knew that Max would be able to sense fear and would interpret fear as weakness and would likely use that weakness as an excuse to do something terrible to him.

"Well, I don't know you and you don't know me, and yet here you are, trying to help me out," Max said, looking Gray hard in the eyes.

"Well, I'm not sure it's all so altruistic," Gray laughed. "I am getting a cut, after all."

"Yes, you are, aren't you? A pretty big one at that, eh?" Max said, his eyes flicking towards the coffee table. Gray looked down and saw what Max was looking at.

"Before you get any ideas, you should know that this guy won't do any business with you if I'm not there. He doesn't know you either."

Max laughed. "Relax, friend. Don't worry about a thing. Now, where's this all happening?"

Gray leaned forward and placed a slip of paper on the table. "Address and time are on there. No exceptions. And don't be late."

Max took the paper and read it over carefully, committing the location of the deal to memory. He then took a cigarette lighter from his pocket and set the paper on fire. He

tossed the flaming paper onto a dirty plate on the cluttered table. He stirred the ashes around until he was satisfied there was no evidence left behind.

Gray stood. "If that'll be all, I'll be going now." He walked toward the door, but before he could open it, Max was upon him, slamming Gray's head into the wall.

"Let me just make one thing clear, pal," Max said. "If I get the slightest inkling that you're trying to screw me, or that this deal isn't 100% legit, I will make sure you never walk again for the rest of your life. You hear me?"

Gray nodded. "I hear you. I hear you."

"Good," Max said, letting Gray go. "See you tonight."

Max couldn't say why he'd killed Tony. It might have just been the look on the guy's face when he'd broken his other hand. It could have been because Tony had brought Max down from the wonderful high he'd been floating on in the morning. There was definitely something about the guy that rubbed Max the wrong way. Maybe he just wanted to get Barbara's voice out of his head, and he figured that if she wasn't the last person he'd killed, it might silence that. Whatever the reason, after Tony told Max that Gray was coming over with the information about the deal, he'd put two bullets into the little bastard and that was that. Judging from the lack of personal effects in the apartment, and from the general demeanor of the lowlife scum, nobody was going to miss him.

Then Max thought that one could say much the same about him. Who would really miss Max Fischer if he was to die? Barbara was the only person that might have cared before, and now she was gone. Max's family had disowned him long before and he didn't have anybody that he considered a friend, and certainly there weren't people out there who considered him a friend. He had contacts, acquaintances, lovers and victims. Not friends, family, loved ones. He was a loner, a rebel, an outcast. There was nobody waiting for him to come home at night, nobody waiting for his call unless it was business. Nobody really looking forward to his visits. Tony certainly hadn't been.

"I'm worried about C.J.," Matt confided in Mitch.

"Why's that?" Mitch asked.

"Well, for one thing, she seems obsessed with your son."

"I've noticed that. It's kind of creepy, don't you think?"

"Creepy? That's an understatement," Matt snorted. "It's downright terrifying the way she's draped all over him. And they're sharing a hotel room, Mitch. Isn't that a little odd?"

"Well, I figure there's no stopping C.J.," Mitch admitted. "If she wants something, then she's going to get it. And if she wants Hobie, well then, more power to him."

"Yeah, but, aren't you concerned that she's corrupting him?" Matt asked.

"I'd rather it be C.J. Parker that corrupt Hobie as opposed to some woman he finds on the streets, or worse yet, at school."

Matt shuddered. "Good point. Those 15 and 16 year old girls are scary these days. But really, shouldn't you at least attempt to put a stop to it?"

"Maybe I should, but honestly, I just don't care enough to try."

"Well, then, aren't you at least the slightest bit jealous?" Matt asked.

“Hell yeah, I’m jealous. I can’t believe she’s going for that pipsqueak when she could have me.” Mitch noticed the look on Matt’s face. “Sorry, pal. I can’t believe she doesn’t want you either.”

Matt nodded, “It’s okay. But I mean, she and I went out for two years and most of that time, I had to beg her for a kiss. There were so many times that she’d get super jealous about some girl that would just be looking at me and then she’d go off and nearly fall in love with some asshole that would tell her she looked good in a thong. Talk about mixed up priorities. Remember that whole thing with Neely Capshaw?”

“Of course I remember,” Mitch said. “C.J. freaked out. And then she was off screwing that Alain guy.”

Matt glared at Mitch. “She never screwed him.”

“Right, right,” Mitch said. “Of course not. Anyway, she’s not one that we’ll ever figure out. And, trust me, even if you can’t get the supermodel in bed, there’s always average girls out there who’d jump at the chance to be with you.”

Matt laughed, “You’re kidding, right? Average girls?”

“Of course, I’m kidding. You just have to find the right supermodel, pal,” Mitch said. “But this can’t be what’s bothering you for real. Spit it out.”

“Alright,” Matt admitted. “I’m a little concerned that she and Max seem to have this love/hate relationship going. I mean, here’s this guy we’re being very careful to catch, very careful to not inform of our presence in the city, and she’s chatting with him in the bar last night.”

“Remember that it’s not C.J.’s fault that Max showed up there. And it’s not for us to worry about. Even if Max checks out C.J.’s info, it’s not going to keep him from attempting the diamond deal tonight. Even if he realizes that C.J. lied and I’m not dead, he still needs money, and this is the only way he can get it.”

“I suppose you’re right. Still, I’d feel a lot better if we were going into this without him knowing that C.J. was in town. He’s going to be a lot more careful now thinking she might be out to get him.”

“Well, we’ve got no choice. We’ve got to play it as we’ve got it and there’s no way around it.”

C.J. and Hobie arrived at the warehouse and found it in pretty decent condition. It looked like it hadn’t been used much during the past decade but other than that, it was in fine shape. There was dust and cobwebs in the corners but it wasn’t anything they couldn’t deal with swiftly enough.

“Remember,” said C.J., “we’re not hosting a dinner party here. It’s okay if it looks kind of shabby.”

“Got’cha,” said Hobie, as if he hadn’t already known that.

They set about setting up the warehouse for that evening. It really didn’t take much. All they needed was a table for Louis to sit at and some cover for them all to hide behind. They set up some packing crates to form sort of a tunnel that would lead Max right to Louis. They could also hide behind, on top of, or in the crates and at the arranged time, leap from them and overpower Max.

“Why aren’t we just calling the cops and having them pick Max up?” Hobie asked.

“The cops aren’t going to let us beat on Max before they take him away,” C.J. reminded him. “We’ll let the police have him when we’re finished with him.”

“This whole thing just seems really bizarre,” Hobie said. “And why am I here anyway?”

“You’re here,” C.J. said, her voice turning to a growl, “for me to play with.” She pushed Hobie backwards so that he landed on his back on the table. She then leapt onto the table, straddling the bewildered young man. She pulled at his shirt, popping buttons off as she opened it.

“I’ve been wondering about this, too,” Hobie said when he’d managed to catch his breath.

C.J. stopped disrobing the boy. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, I’m wondering why you are so single-mindedly fixated upon de-virginizing me. Do you have some obsession with corrupting young men?”

“What’s it matter to you?” C.J. asked, running her hands up and down Hobie’s chest.

“Well, actually, see, it does matter to me. See, I like you a lot, but I don’t love you.... Well, okay, I *do* love you. But I love you in the complicated way that I love friends of mine where I really care about them and would do anything for them.”

“That’s sweet, Hobie,” C.J. said, sitting up on him, looking down into his eyes. “I love you too.”

“But I don’t have sex with them,” Hobie finished.

“Well, I’m not them,” C.J. replied.

“C.J., I want my first time to be special.”

“Honey, you can ask anyone I’ve slept with. They’ll all tell you, it’s very *very* special. Trust me.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Hobie said. “I mean I want it to be with a girl I’m in love with. I want it to be with the girl I’m going to be with for the rest of my life.”

“Well, that’s *very* sweet, Hobie. But I don’t think you realize what you’re saying. You’d be passing up on all this.” C.J. ran her hands up and down her amazing figure, modeling for Hobie the perfection he was turning away.

“I know, I know,” Hobie said. “And I’ll probably regret it for the rest of my life, but mmmmmmmfff—“ The end of Hobie’s sentence was lost as C.J. abruptly fell on forward and her gigantic breasts muffled Hobie’s speech. At first the young man thought C.J. was just trying to shut him up but when she didn’t move, he began to worry. He was quickly running out of oxygen and he began flailing his arms and slapping the woman’s back, trying to get her to get off of him. Finally, Hobie was freed from the fleshy prison. As he watched her chest rise, he realized C.J. was being lifted off him rather than getting up under her own power. Hobie looked at her face and saw that her eyes were closed and her jaw slack. He scrambled out from under her and up the length of the table. He finally got a clear view of who was lifting C.J. up and his heart sank. It was Max. The thief held C.J.’s body up by her hair. In his other hand, he held a gun. On his face, he wore a grin.

“So we meet again, you little rat,” Max said. He had laid C.J.’s body out on the table. Hobie was cowered against a packing crate. Max seemed not to care what Hobie did however, and hardly even looked at him as he spoke. He paid more attention to C.J.’s body than to anything else.

“Were you really going to pass up on getting some from *the* C.J. Parker?” he asked. Hobie was silent. Max yelled, “Answer me!” and waved his gun about violently.

“Yeah,” Hobie said. “I was.”

“You weren’t just playing hard to get? You were going to let the finest piece of ass you’d ever get in your life just walk on by?”

“That’s right.”

“Amazing,” Max said, shaking his head. “Simply amazing. There are men out there who’d give their left nut just to lick a drop of sweat from her cleavage and she’s all over *you* and you’re turning her down? You got something better lined up? Elle MacPherson? Neve Campbell? What? She’s not your type?”

“No, she’s a very sweet girl, but I’ve just been doing a lot of thinking lately and I want my first time to be with someone I have deeper feelings for, you know?”

Max couldn’t believe his ears. He took a knife from his pocket, flipped it open, and used it to cut the front of C.J.’s shirt open, exposing her breasts. “Kid,” he said, “this is what you were passing up. *This*. You see this? She’s not even wearing a bra. She’s got *these* and she don’t even gotta wear a bra. And you’re saying, ‘No thanks!’”

“Yep,” Hobie replied.

“I should put a bullet in your head just for being so stupid,” Max said, leveling the gun at Hobie. “I really should. You’d thank me for it too. Years from now, when you still haven’t gotten anything off any chicks, certainly not off a chick as fine as this, you’ll be wishing I had killed you.” He lowered the gun, lowered his eyes to gaze upon C.J.’s breasts again. “Damn!” he exclaimed. “I’m usually not into doing unconscious chicks, but... Damn!”

“What are you going to do with us?” Hobie asked.

“Oh yeah!” Max said, remembering the events that had lead them all there, his surroundings, the two people who had become his arch-enemies. “I’m really curious to know something.”

“What’s that?” Hobie asked.

“Just what the *fuck* are you two doing here?” Max bellowed.

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” Hobie said, quickly looking for a lie.

“Don’t give me that shit,” Max said. “I’m supposed to meet a fence here tonight so I cam early to check this place out and I find Miss Top-Heavy here trying to convince you to play ‘hide the salami’ with her, only you’re not into it. I didn’t know what was more ridiculous – that I run across you two again, or that you weren’t jumping at the chance to get some action from her.”

“She and I were out for a walk and she pulled me in here so she could try to seduce me,” Hobie said.

“I don’t think so, pal. I don’t buy it that it’s all a nice and tidy little coincidence anymore. I’m not having any of that, thanks very much.”

“Well, it’s true. I don’t know what else to tell you.”

“Try telling me the truth. How about that? Tell me that you’re here to get revenge for me killing your dad. That’s it, isn’t it?”

Hobie shook his head ‘no’ but Max didn’t see, lost in his own world. “That’s it! Gotta be it! Unless... Unless, Mitch isn’t even dead and he’s here too. Mitch!” Max called out. “Come on out! We’re having a real party out here.” Silence was the only reply he received. “I know you’re there!”

“Max, he’s not here. We buried him,” Hobie lied.

“No way. No way. I can tell he’s still around. He’s here with you.” Max’s eyes were darting wildly around the room, his voice was shaky and he seemed to be losing it.

“Look, Max. Calm down. C.J. and I are here in Chicago alone.”

“What are you doing here, then? Why are you in this warehouse?”

“It’s a coincidence. It’s just a coincident. Come on, Max, we’re no strangers to coincidence, right?” Hobie forced a laugh. “I mean, our paths are always crossing at the strangest times, you know?”

Hobie’s reasoning and his mellow voice seemed to calm Max down significantly. “Yeah. Coincidence. Sure. You’re right. Just a coincidence.” Max slid down against a packing crate and sat on the floor. The raging paranoia always took a lot out of him. He caught his breath, resting against the large crate.

Hobie eyed Max warily, not trusting that the man had truly accepted his explanation. A long time passed, the two of them sitting on opposite sides of the table in uneasy silence, C.J. laid out on the table half-naked like a buffet.

“So, Max,” Hobie said. “What now?”

Max looked up. “What?” he asked.

“What now?” Hobie asked. “What do we do now?”

“Oh that?” Max asked half-heartedly. “I don’t know. What do you think we should do? Should I shoot you or let you go or what?”

“Hmmm,” Hobie said. “If it’s up to me, you should let us go.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Max said. “I figured you’d say that.”

“Well, yeah, what did you expect? I have a healthy sense of self-preservation.”

Max laughed. “Sure, kid. So do I. I really should probably just kill the two of you.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Yeah, I understand that. I do. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you and all that. It’d be a shame to snuff it out right now, wouldn’t it?”

“I certainly think so.”

“Look, I’ll tell you what I’m going to do –“

Max’s thought was interrupted by the sound of the warehouse door crashing open.

“C.J.? Are you here?” someone shouted.

“Who the fuck is that?” Max asked Hobie, jumping to his feet. He brandished his gun, alternately pointing it at Hobie and towards the entrance of the warehouse which was hidden from his sight by the crates.

Footsteps approached. The person called out again, “Look, C.J., I don’t know if I can do this, I think Max killed Tony....” Gray Samuels stepped into view. “Oh.... Hi.”

Max shook his head in disbelief. “What the hell are you doing here? How do you know C.J.? Is someone going to tell me what the fuck is really going on?”

Hobie stood up. “Max, it’s not what it looks like.”

“Don’t tell me what it looks like and what it is. You guys are setting me up, huh? Is that it?”

Gray stepped forward, waving his hands, trying to placate Max. “Max, no. Nobody’s setting you up. C.J. just told me she was hanging out down in this neighborhood and I was in the area and –“

“Don’t fuck with me, Gray,” Max said angrily, waving the gun around, not knowing where to point it. “I’ve got eyes. I wasn’t born yesterday. Step over next to the pipsqueak there.”

Gray moved over next to Hobie. “You must be Hobie, huh? I’m Gray Samuels. C.J.’s told me a lot about you.”

“This really isn’t the time for chit-chat, Mr. Samuels,” Hobie said nervously.

“No, it’s not. He’s right about that,” Max said. “Now, I want the truth and I want it now. I don’t want another song and dance about the mystic nature of the universe or any other ‘it’s a small world’ horse shit.”

“Okay, okay, Max,” Gray said. “When you talked to Tony, he got scared and he called me, asking me if I knew anybody that would be interested in purchasing a sizeable amount of diamonds.”

“Go on,” Max said, gesturing with his gun.

“Well, I knew C.J. was in town and I thought maybe she knew somebody. She used to be pretty connected around here and I figured she might help. Tony was really scared, like I said, and I just wanted to help him out. C.J. knew somebody and was helping me set up the deal. She never knew it was you that she was hooking up though. I swear.”

“So what were you all doing here, then? Why the hell are these two here?”

“I honestly don’t know, Max. Maybe they’ve never seen a diamond deal before?”

Max turned the gun on Hobie. “Spill it, kid.”

Hobie shifted his weight nervously. “If C.J. was awake, she’d be able to tell you, I’m sure. I just came along for the ride. I had no idea any of this was happening.”

“I don’t buy it. You’re going to have to do better than that.”

“Look, Max, honestly. I’ve got nothing to do with any fence business. I just came here to get away from California for a while. I don’t want to have anything to do with you anymore. Honest!”

Max considered this. Again, he began to wonder how he’d ended up in such a complicated situation. It was supposed to be such a simple and easy job, a quick turnaround on the goods and then easy street from then on. Instead it was *Beach Blanket Bingo* and *Untouchables* rolled into one. He paced back and forth, tracing a short figure-eight on the warehouse floor, the side of his gun pressed to his temple, his face set in a frown as he thought.

“Why the hell did you have to make this so complicated?” he asked the gathered group. “I just wanted to get my diamonds and go home. That’s all.”

“Max, if you want, Gray and I will take C.J. out of here and I promise you’ll never see any of us again,” Hobie offered.

“That’s a real nice thought, kid, but how do I know you don’t just walk around the corner, call the cops and yuk it up all the way back to Los Angeles? I killed your father. As much of a runt as you are, you don’t seem like the kind of person that would let me get away with it.”

“No you didn’t,” said a new voice. It was Mitch. He and Matt stood at the open end of the packing crates, grim and determined looks upon their faces. Matt had a duffel bag slung over his shoulder.

“Aha!” Max cried triumphantly. “I *knew* it. I knew you couldn’t be dead. That would be too easy.”

“Dad!” Hobie cried. “Boy, am I glad to see you. But where’s –“

Mitch cut him off. “Max, put the gun down. Nobody has to get hurt tonight.”

“Oh really?” Max said, backing away from everyone, trying to cover them all with his pistol. “And who are you to say that?”

Mitch gestured to Matt who put the duffel on the floor and slid it towards Max. It skidded along the floor and thudded heavily against a table leg and came to a stop.

“Because of that,” Matt said.

“What’s that?” Max asked, pointing at the bag with his gun. “Another trick?”

“No tricks,” Mitch said. “We’re buying the diamonds from you. There’s \$20 million in there. That should be enough to get you out of our lives for good, right?”

“That certainly would be nice, huh? We each go our separate ways? But you’ve forgotten one thing, Mitch.”

“And that is?”

“I’m still pissed at you for stealing my girl,” Max shouted and fired a round in Mitch’s direction. Mitch and Matt dove in opposite directions, each rolling behind large wooden crates. The bullet sent splinters flying as it buried itself into a shipping pallet. Gray showed an amazing feat of agility and strength that he didn’t realize he had when he flipped backwards over a crate to safety. Hobie was left stranded out in the open, unsure of what to do or where to go. He made to duck under the table but was stopped short by the feeling of the cold steel of Max’s gun against the back of his head.

“Now, now, boy. Don’t go down there. You wouldn’t want to miss the excitement,” Max said, pulling Hobie back up. Hobie had nowhere to run. He surrendered to Max’s grip and allowed himself to be lifted to his feet.

The warehouse was eerily quiet after the gunshot and ensuing action. The silence was thick with tension. Hobie’s ears were ringing but he could still hear his heart pounding loudly in his chest.

Max caught his breath and shouted, “So, Mitch. It’s come down to this. *Again*. Feels like we’ve run through this one before, doesn’t it?” Max wrapped his arm around Hobie’s neck and pulled him down the length of the table to where the duffel bag lay. “I suppose I’ll just be taking this bag here and be heading on out.”

Max released Hobie, and while still covering the boxes behind which Matt and Mitch were hiding, instructed Hobie to open the bag. Hobie kneeled down and slowly unzipped it, not knowing what to expect inside. When he found several neatly wrapped packages of fried calamari, he had to stifle a laugh but was mostly unsuccessful.

“What’s so funny, kid?” Max said, glancing down at the bag. He pushed Hobie aside and rooted through the duffel, but found only more calamari. He kicked the bag away. “Very fucking funny, Mitch. Squid. Circular humor. I get it. Clever. Let’s see how funny you think it is when I shoot this kid here.”

Max whirled around, bring his gun to bear on Hobie but found, instead, someone he’d never seen before, carrying a baseball bat.

“Who the hell are you?” Max asked, shocked into inaction.

“I’m your fence,” Louis said as he swung the bat at Max, knocking the gun from his hand. “Here’s your payment. In full.” He struck Max twice more, once in the shoulder and once more in the head on his backswing. Max crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

The police had no choice but to accept the story the group had concocted. They'd told the officers who arrived on the scene that they'd just happened to coincidentally run into Max and had been forced to apprehend him. Since they'd had no official connection with Max, or with the diamonds – which were recovered from Max's hotel room the next day – they were allowed to go after a minimal amount of questioning and with the thanks of the chief of police and the FBI agents who'd been unsuccessfully trying to nab Max for many years. The six friends – Hobie, Matt, Mitch, C.J., Louis and Gray – spent the rest of that day and the next resting and relaxing. Gray and Louis showed the Californians many of Chicago's wonderful attractions before dropping them off at the airport.

"Thanks for your help, Gray," C.J. said, hugging her dear friend tightly at the security checkpoint. "I'll never forget it."

"Oh, it was my pleasure, sweetheart," Gray said, smiling. "Just don't forget those promises you made me. Come back soon."

"Don't worry," C.J. said slyly. "I'll be back."

"I'll see you soon, cousin," Mitch said, shaking Louis' hand. "And I owe you one. You really came through on this one. And hitting him with the bat, that was just too much. Really nice touch."

"Don't mention it. Just glad to help."

Mitch, Matt, C.J. and Hobie waved good-bye to their Chicago friends and walked down the concourse.

"I don't understand, Dad," Hobie said, confused. "Why was it so funny for Louis to clock him with a bat? Seemed like just a stroke of luck to me."

"Didn't I mention?" Mitch asked. "Louis could have played baseball professionally if he hadn't been injured by a diamond thief back in 1994. It really shattered his dreams. So, it was incredibly ironic and clever and all that."

"Ahh, I get it now," Hobie said, chuckling. "That's pretty good."

"You know what would have been better?" Matt asked.

"What's that?" asked C.J.

"If Mitch had hit him with a short board.... Or if I'd hit him with a long board. But a short board would be better in that situation. Definitely much easier to swing in the close quarters."

"That reminds me, pal," Mitch said, smiling. "We've got a little bet to settle when we get back."

"Oh, no way," Matt said. "I'm not getting into that again."

"We'll just see about that," said Mitch.

The four friends boarded their plane and soon were winging their way back to sunny California and home. Everything was all wrapped up, nice and tidy and neat, the way all things should be.... Or were they?

Epilogue

The sun rose on another perfect southern California day. As the sky brightened, it was apparent that it would be a gorgeous day. Even the weatherman agreed. The forecast called for temperatures in the mid-70's, light winds and not a cloud in the sky. Soon the beaches would be teeming with people, young and old, all enjoying the Malibu surf, sand and sun.

Two Baywatch lifeguards stood, looking out at the water, silhouetted against the horizon by the rising morning sun. They each carried a surfboard at their sides. The older lifeguard carried a board that wasn't as long as his outstretched arms would reach and the younger lifeguard carried a board that was several inches taller than he. Each one felt awkward and silly with their chosen rides.

"Are we really going to do this?" Matt asked, looking doubtfully at the long board as he lugged it towards the surf.

"A deal's a deal," Mitch said, wondering how such a light and flimsy piece of foam core and fiberglass would ever carry his weight.

"Okay, let's give this a shot," Matt replied.

The pair jumped into the water and paddled out to start their first run of the day. As they floated in the deeper water, waiting for the first big waves, Mitch scanned the sky.

"Looking for something in particular?" Matt asked.

"Not really," Mitch said. "Just making sure there are no crashing planes out there that might get you out of it this time."

"Oh yeah," Matt said sourly, looking hopefully at the clear blue sky for something that might save his bacon.

"Come on," Mitch said. "Quit stalling. Let's go!"

Later that night, Mitch came home and found Hobie sitting on the couch, playing his surfing video game.

"Hey, pal," he said, "how's it going?"

Hobie looked up from the television and smiled. "Pretty good, Dad. Pretty good."

Mitch sat down next to his son. "Hey, I never got a chance to say it, but I'm real proud of how you handled yourself in Chicago. You kept cool under pressure and you stalled Max long enough for us to show up. That was good work."

"Thanks, Dad. That means a lot to me."

"Sure thing, pal. And another thing. I had a little talk with C.J."

Hobie's heart sank. Here it came: the big chew-out.

"Yeah? What did she say?"

"She said you were a perfect gentleman with her and that she's really impressed with how I brought you up."

Amazed, Hobie could only manage to say, "Oh. Good."

"Yep. She says you're a pretty amazing kid."

Regaining his composure, Hobie said, "That's really nice of her." He turned off the game. "I think I'm going to head to bed now. I'm pretty beat."

"Alright, pal. Sleep well."

Hobie nodded and smiled and headed for the stairs.

Mitch called after him, "So you never slept with her, huh?"

Hobie stopped in his tracks and then whirled around. He looked at his father who suddenly broke out into a grin.

"Aww dad, of course I did," Hobie replied, his mouth forming a grin of his own.

"That's my boy," Mitch said. "That's my boy."