

**TOM SEDAR**

CHILDREN  
ARE MISSING  
IN  
PARADISE

**THE SNOW**  
*of*  
**ST. CROIX**

**Books in the St. Croix Series**

**The Gold of St. Croix**

**The Snow of St. Croix**

**The Strength of St. Croix (set for release the December of 2024)**

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## CHAPTER 1

My mind was at perfect peace that morning. My old red coffee mug was letting out just enough heat that my hands were warmed as they cradled the scarred plastic. I was perched in my deck chair on the back of my boat, my bare feet hanging over my freshly varnished teak rail. My dog, Dog, pretended to sleep beside me.

“You need to get a job,” I said to Dog.

Dog refused to answer, but his small blue-gray ears were tucked close to his head. He was exhausted just by the thought. I understood.

“Want a biscuit?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

Dog gave me an ears-up, “Yes,” and I threw him one of the treats in my shirt pocket. He took the brown treat between his paws and began to nibble on it.

“You spoil that damn mutt,” a deep raspy whisper said from behind me.

“He’s the only one who likes me,” I said in a quiet voice so I didn’t disturb my wife, Cheri, who was sleeping below me in our stateroom. I put my finger up to my lips and pointed down.

Ray Jones nodded. Ray is a tall rangy man with prematurely gray hair that he wears in a short stubble. As he climbed on the boat, he moved over the rail with a smooth feline grace and whispered. “Got coffee?”

I nodded toward the port side of the boat, indicating the passageway to the galley. Ray stepped behind my deck chair and gave my right shoulder a firm squeeze. Noiselessly, he disappeared down the port side of the boat.

In about a minute, Ray came back, set his coffee on the deck, and slid down into the deck chair next to me. He put his feet up on the rail, crossed his arms, and looked out over the quiet marina.

Across the marina by the mangroves a group of three pelicans were taking turns diving into the water. We both watched the seemingly clumsy antics as the large gray birds fished for their breakfast.

After a long relaxed pause, Ray said, “Welcome back.”

“Thanks.”

“How was Virgin Gorda?”

“Real quiet. Did some swimming, and this shoulder’s starting to feel pretty good?” I said and moved my arm in a slow circle.

It was amazing that the shoulder could even move. Five months earlier, a psycho by the name of Clark Jamison, AKA PADI, had shot a spear gun bolt through my right shoulder and pinned me to a wall like a bug in an insect collection.

That earned me a four-hour surgery to repair my shoulder, two weeks in the hospital and rehab. The rehab had been long and hard, and after four months, it appeared I had most of my motion in my arm back.

After my recovery and release from rehab, Cheri and I celebrated by taking our boat, Itchy Feet, to Virgin Gorda for a two-week vacation. We had gotten back to our dock at the Green Cay Marina in St. Croix the night before.

I made a quick jabbing motion with my right arm and said, "I'm back in fighting shape."

"Cool," Ray said, his gaze still fixed on the feeding pelicans.

"What's up?"

"Need a little help if you're up to it."

"Sure," I said, but my sore shoulder and the memories of Ray and my last adventure made me want to say, "No more excitement, thanks anyway."

"Remember Susan, my goddaughter?" Ray asked as he took his feet off the rail and turned his chair around so he faced me.

"Yeah, Cheri and I went to her birthday party last year. What was it? Her twelfth I think."

"Close, it was her thirteenth; she's turning fourteen in two weeks."

I did remember the slender girl. She had impressed Cheri and I, not so much with her youthful beauty, but by the way she had wrapped Ray around her little finger. That birthday party had shown us a whole new Ray. His usual cold, cynical style melted into a smiling, playful clown around the girl. From playful sparring to repeated joyful laughter at stupid jokes, Ray had shown a joy and comfort that had surprised Cheri and me. It was clear that Ray loved the little girl, and she was a light in his unusually dark world. "What's up?" I asked.

"She's gone," Ray said, a hitch of emotion catching in his rough voice, "She has been missing now for three days, and I'm helping Tony and Madge look for her."

“Run away?” I asked, but it didn’t seem right because only a year ago, she had seemed a happy and well-adjusted kid.

“Hell man, I don’t know. Tony and Madge say no way, but parents are the last to know. So, who knows?” Ray’s voice had raised and in it, I could hear a frustration and exhaustion that made me turn to my friend and give him my full attention.

“When was she seen last?” I asked, leaning forward into Ray, trying to remember the specifics of the girl’s appearance, and wondering how the child I had seen at her birthday party could have changed into a runaway kid.

“At school Monday, three days ago, and the cops don’t seem worried. So Tony called me.”

“Not really your gig, Ray. You ever try to find a runaway before?”

“I’m more a hoods and drug dealer kind of a guy.” He said, with a small grimace that showed his frustration.

What Ray said made sense. He really wasn’t built to find kids. If you were hunting for someone in the underbelly of St. Croix, he was good, but kids were different. “Any indication she is doing drugs or has a boyfriend?”

“Nope, even found her diary and she’s still suffering through adolescent crushes. In the diary she talked about a boy she liked, and I talked to him. He didn’t even know she liked him. Mad Dog, I hate to say it, but I think someone’s grabbed her.”

“That’s a cop thing, Ray, not a private deal.” I said, seeing a set in Ray’s jaw that let me know he wasn’t going to turn the search for his goddaughter over to the police.

“Look, you know what it’s like. They don’t care.” Ray’s head bowed as he looked at the tawny knurled masses that were his intertwined hands.

I rubbed my hands on the warmth of the big red mug and thought. Ray had always been there for me, and I had to be there for him. “I’m in.” I said.

“How about Cheri?” he asked nodding down toward the boat’s stateroom.

“Don’t know.” I said, knowing that she would help but not wanting to speak for her.

Ray looked at me hard and I paused before I said, “You know she will help any way she can.”

In an uncharacteristic tone that was more a plea than a question, Ray asked, “Can we wake her?”

At that moment Ray cracked with emotion and for the first time in the years I’d known Ray Jones, I saw real panic and fear in the big man. I reached across to where he sat and touched his arm. As I touched my friend, a pain came across his face and for a second, the muscles of his jaw and neck went tight, his eyes closed, and his body stiffened.

When his sun glass covered head rose, I knew his hidden eyes were locked on me, I said, “How long has it been since you slept?”

Ray pulled off his wraparound sunglasses and looked at me. His eyes were dull and blood shot. He ran his huge black hands over the stubble of his white hair. “Been a while, man, I’m a mess.”

I stood and said, “Come on in the boat and I’ll fix breakfast and get Cheri moving, and you can bring us up to speed.”

By 7:00, Cheri and I were sitting in the settee of the boat watching Ray clean up his second helping of pancakes. Dog was patiently sitting under him waiting for fall out, but nothing was falling.

“Hungry?” Cheri said looking at Ray as he wiped the last piece of pancake over the cleaned plate.

“Guess I been forgetting to eat,” he said before he popped the last bite into his mouth.

“More coffee?” I said.

“Nope.” he said sitting back and stretching his large frame.

“OK, Ray” Cheri said, taking the plate and setting it in the sink behind her, “let’s hear why you two think it’s so important I give up my beauty rest.”

Ray smiled his rouge smile and said, “You don’t need no rest, Cher you’re beautiful already.”

Cheri gave Ray a long hard look and shook her head, “Charming, Ray. Now talk.”

“Ray’s goddaughter is missing” I said, while Ray looked at Cheri and took a last sip of coffee.

“Susan?” Cheri said, finally sitting down at the end of the settee.

“Remember her?” Ray said leaning forward and putting his elbows on our small dining table.

“Sure.” She said leaning forward toward Ray slightly. “Define missing.”

Ray raised a finger, “Went missing three days ago.

We nodded for him to continue.

Ray raised a second finger, “Went to school till noon and nobody has seen her since, no problems at school.”

Ray raised a third finger, “Her best friend is missing too.”

Ray raised a fourth finger and I could see a quiver in his long fingers,” No clothes, money, or anything else missing from the house. Not so much as a toothbrush.”

“A child runs away, they take stuff,” Cheri said, “they just don’t disappear. They plan it out. They take money, clothes....” Cheri’s voice trailed off.

Ray seemed to sag a little and nodded, “Bad,” was all he could choke out.

“What bases have you covered?” I asked.

Ray looked back and brushed a hand across his face and straightened up on his chair, “Started with the parents,” He said, “Tony and Madge are a wreck. They called Tuesday about eight PM, but I didn’t get the call till Wednesday



morning. After I talked to Tony, I went over to the house. Tony and Madge didn't seem to know anything, but I did search her room. That's when I found her diary and read it," he said looking at me.

"Nothing in the room or diary?", Cheri asked.

"The mention of a boy she had a crush on was in the diary and the names and numbers of friends in address book. That's it."

"Any money?" I asked.

Ray nodded, "around eighty bucks, she was saving for a flute. Tony told her if she wanted to play an instrument, she had to pay for it." Ray smiled, "They got her a violin last year and she never played it so..." Ray's voice trailed off again.

"So, you want a flute, you pay for it," Cheri said.

"Yep,"

There was a long silence before I asked, "What did you do next?"

"Went to the school with Tony. The principal loaned us a room and I talked to all her teachers and three of the friends from the address book. I was able to figure out she left for lunch but missed all her afternoon classes. The last time someone saw her, she was with a kid by the name of Tracy Troy. It seems Tracy didn't make it back to school either.

"Still missing?" Cheri interrupted

"Yah," Ray went on, "I went to her home and no one was around, so I talked to some neighbors. Nice house but not a good scene. Mom is gone most of the time and Dad is working in the States. I don't know if Mom even knows if Tracy is missing. I haven't been able to track her down. The neighbors say she leaves the kid on her own for days at a time."

"She works?" I asked.

"Don't know. I got a number from the school for both of Tracy's parents, but neither are answering their phones."

“The school gave you the numbers for Tracy’s parents?” Cheri said a hint of disbelief in her voice.

“Kind of.” Ray said cracking a small smile and looking Cheri square in the eyes.

“Gotcha” Cheri said. For years I had watched Cheri work as a Deputy for the U. S. Marshal Service and have her investigations slowed or stopped by her having to play by the rules. I had to smile. I knew she would never say it out loud, but she liked the no holds barred approach Ray seemed to embrace in his investigations, even though some of his techniques are considered felonies in every civilized country in the world.

Ray winked at her and went on, “The dad works offshore on a long liner and his boat is fishing for the next week. I talked to the wife of his Captain and she is trying to get a message to him. But I really don’t expect much. He’s been gone for about a month and, when he’s home, I don’t think he and Tracy get along really well.”

“Mom work?”

“Kinda.” Ray said, holding his hand up and moving it in a so-so motion.

“Meaning?”, Cheri asked.

“Listening to one of the nosier neighbors, her hours are kind of wild and she’s not usually dressing like a nun.”

“Hooking?” Cheri said.

Again, Ray gave us the so-so hand flap of his hand and shrugged his shoulders.

“All I can safely say is, young Tracy seems to be raising herself, but according to the teachers she’s doing a good job of it. Both Susan and Tracy are straight “A” students and doing a lot of extracurricular activities. They are both well liked and neither seem to be sending off any bad vibes to the people at the school.”

“Which school?” I asked trying figure out if they were still in middle school or high school.

“Willard, they are both in 9<sup>th</sup> grade.” Ray said.

“What else have you done?” I asked.

“I have managed to talk to a few of their friends, but all dead ends.”

“What are you doing now?” Cheri asked.

“Doing all I know to do. I’m working the street.” Ray ran his hands through the short gray stubble of his hair again and sighed.

“Hang outs?” I asked.

“I been sneaking around more juvenile parties and hang outs than I can count. I’ve talked to every bad boy and street person I know.” Ray’s voice was now showing the edge of exhaustion and frustration.

“Nothing?” I asked.

“Thin air, bro, thin air.” Ray said as his body visibly sagging.

Cheri stood up and walked over to Ray and put her hand on his shoulder. “You’re a mess and no good to anyone. Go into the forward berth and get some sleep. Let Mad Dog and I bang at this for a while and when you wake, maybe we’ll have something for you.”

Ray looked up at Cheri and shook his head and I could see her apply more pressure to his shoulder, “Go to sleep, Jones. That’s an order.” Her voice was harsh, but her face soft. I could tell that she was as worried about Ray as the two missing girls.

Ray stood and disappeared down the stairs to the forward “V” berth without any further complaint and Cheri quietly closed the hatchway, so we were alone.

“He’s shot.” I said.

Cheri gave me a soft smile, "His heart is about as big as his ego. I think he'd work till he dropped dead if someone didn't stop him."

"Yep." I said, reaching up and rubbing Cheri's arm "So, what now?"

Cheri picked up the phone and said, "I call in some markers and get the V.I.P.D. off their dead asses."

For the next few minutes Cheri called contacts she had in the law enforcement community and I went out on the back deck and made a phone call.

After my call was completed, I came back into the settee. "I'm out of here. Keep that lion in the den till I get back."

"Where you going?" she asked.

"Following a hunch." I said, "I'll be back in an hour or I'll give you a call."

"I talked to Max Romaro at the VIPD," she said, "and he promised to follow up and talk to Susan's parents and start a missing person file on both girls. While you follow your hunch, I'll get on Facebook and see if I can tie into one of the girls. They may be telling all their friends where they are as we speak."

"Good start." I said impressed by the idea.

"Good luck on your hunch." She said.

I put my right thumb up and she moved toward me, kissed me goodbye, and said, "Be careful," as she pulled away.

## CHAPTER 2

Willard school is on the east end of Christiansted and only about ten minutes from Green Cay Marina. I didn't go to the school but instead pulled into the dirt parking lot across from the school, where my friend Peter the Greek was waiting for me.

Peter is a local legend, he is about five foot six and may weigh a hundred and twenty pounds but that small package packs a boundless amount of energy and a giant lust for life. His dark brown eyes, curly short cut black hair, dark complexion and boundless energy all contributed to the Island people dubbing him the Greek. In his presence Cheri and I had been introduced to the joys of shots of Ouzo, rousing Greek music and rowdy Greek dances.

When I pulled up, Peter was sitting in one of his lawn chairs in front of his restaurant with his feet propped up on a second chair. As I climbed out of my truck, Peter stood up, gave me a large smile, and embraced me with a hug. "Mad Dog, how can I help you?" he said with a mild Greek accent.

I turned my gaze from Peter to the small blue cinderblock building that is his restaurant. With a flick of my hand I pointed at the left corner of the building. "Last time Cheri and I came for dinner you were bragging about your new video surveillance system." I said.

“Damn right!” He said following my gaze moved up to a camera mounted in the corner of the building. “Those thugs robbed me and shot my friend. They may do it again, but this time they will be on camera and I will hunt them like dogs.”

I smiled at the serious look on his face and had no doubt that he would hunt them down.

“What you need, my friend?” he said moving toward the door of the restaurant and pulling it open.

“Will you still have the video from last Monday?” I asked.

“Damn right I will. This system is the best money can buy.” As he spoke, he stepped back out into the parking lot and gestured at two large surveillance cameras mounted on the front corners of his building. From where he stood, he a sweeping motion with his arm that I took to be the area the cameras would record. I looked at the area he had indicated it went around his entire parking lot. I smiled to myself, after only an hour on Ray’s case, I might be able to give him a lead.

Peter’s restaurant was closed till six in the evening so the teachers and parents picking up kids used his dirt parking lot during the day. It was still early so none of the parents were parked in the dirt parking lot, but I knew from experience in the morning before school, at noon and after school the lot would be full of parents picking up their kids from school. I was certain that Peter’s cameras would capture the movement of kids coming out of and going into the school across the street and with a little luck we could get a clue as to where Susan had disappeared to.

“Those cameras on twenty-four hours a day?” I asked

“Damn right!” He said proudly. “Seven days a week, those thugs so much as spit in this parking lot, I see them. Come, Mad Dog. I show you good video of Monday. You watch and I get you a beer on me.”

Peter took me through the dark dining room. In the gloom I could see the small tables were already covered with Peter’s signature red and white checkered tablecloths. In the background I could hear the slight beat of Greek music and as I took breath I sensed the enticing smells of oregano, cloves and roasting lamb.

I followed Peter into the kitchen where a small black woman was chopping onions. "Hi, Mi Mi." I said as I followed Peter into a small room behind the kitchen that acted as Peter's office. "There," he said flipping on an overhead light and pointing at a chair, "you sit, and I will start the computer and show you Monday. What time you want? I'll push the buttons and you will see any time on Monday you want. This is best money can buy. The Greek is done with thugs. Now they can fear the Greek."

I had to smile at Peter's ranting he was clearly proud of his new toy.

I knew thou that this elaborate security system wasn't really a toy, Peter was deadly serious. The state-of-the-art security system was the response to a very real tragedy. Only a month ago, three men had entered his restaurant and, in a botched robbery, killed a customer that had been sitting with Peter having a drink. Peter's answer to the horror was to close for two days; hold a no holds barred memorial; put up a reward for the capture of the bad guys and put in a state-of-the-art video system. You had to admire his spunk.

"Can you bring up around eleven fifteen in the morning on Monday?"

"Done." he said and typed 11:15 on the screen." Now you watch. Push here to go forward, here to stop, and here to go back." Peter then showed me how to zoom the camera in and out. I was amazed by the camera's clarity.

"Jesus! Peter, this is cool." I said eyeing the screen.

"Damn right, Mad Dog. the Greek, he takes the best video in town. Now you look and I get us both a beer."

"Great," I said settling in front of the computer. With that he closed the door and disappeared.

To make the screen easier to see I reached up and flicked off the over head light.

As I looked at the two camera views of the parking lot, cars with parents began to pull into the dirt parking lot and park. About 11:30 according to the screen, kids began to appear on the monitor. I slowed the video to one quarter time and focused on the screen. It dawned on me that I had never seen Tracy and it had been a year since I had seen Susan. In the blocky motion of a video on one quarter speed, children appeared in

the monitor, climbed into cars, and left the parking lot. At 11:45, older kids began to appear. At first, there were just a few and then they came in a stream. I stopped both cameras and studied the faces of the dozens of kids that covered the parking lot. The video was situated so it showed across the street and the bottom of the school.

I inched the video forward one frame at a time trying to study every face and praying I would recognize the little girl I had met only once nearly a year ago.

Peter came into the dark room like a ghost, sat a cold beer by my hand, and disappeared without a word.

When the monitor's timer read 11:52 and my beer was about half gone, a slender girl with long black hair appeared at the top of the screen. I froze the frame and zoomed in like Peter had showed me. The girl was older, more mature, more woman now than child, but there was no doubt this was Susan. She wore a simple white uniform shirt and a blue skirt. She was carrying a yellow backpack. I took a long look. Susan was a petite girl, maybe five foot six inches with shining straight black hair that hung well below her shoulders. As I zoomed in, Peter's video system paid off with amazing focus and color. I could see her clear tawny skin. The freeze frame caught her in a girl like full laugh, but she held her body in a mature controlled way. Child becoming a woman, I thought.

I looked at the girl beside Susan. "Tracy?" I said to myself "How are you." Tracy, although I knew she was only thirteen or fourteen, carried herself like a fully mature woman. She had an erect stance as she walked and stood a full head taller than Susan. Like Susan, she wore the standard public-school uniform. Unlike Susan, her hair was a raining coil of braids that stopped just above her shoulders. As they walked the girls were deep in an animated conversation and bumping and pushing each other with a joy that you only see between the best of friends.

As I framed forward, the girls stepped down onto the sidewalk in front of the school and turned right. It dawned on me that although I knew Susan lived in downtown Christiansted, I didn't know where Tracy lived. I made a mental note to find out if she lived to the right of the school. It would make sense the girls might go to Tracy's house for lunch.



With each frame I moved forward, the girls moved closer to the edge of the camera's view. I began to feel a sense of doom. I sensed that, even with all this great video, I would learn nothing. When the girls had worked their way off the western camera and were three quarters across the eastern camera's view, a red car appeared on the screen. In the next frame, it slowed and in the next frame, it stopped so the front of the car was outside the view of the camera. At the edge of the camera's view in the next frame, a large man appeared from the passenger side of the front seat of the car. His open door blocked the two girls.

My hands began to sweat on the computer mouse as I moved the frame ahead. In that frame, both girls appeared to have lost their smiles and were staring intently at the man that was now directly in front of them. I took a deep breath and zoomed in on the man. His face was buried in long black hair and a full beard. He was very tall, heavily built, and towered over the two girls.

In the next frame, both girls stared blankly at the man's waist. I could not see it because of the car, but, at that moment, I knew he had a gun or a knife or something.

In the next few frames, Susan stood still transfixed, but Tracy was spinning and moving like a frightened deer, beginning to flee. In the next frames, the big man reached out and caught the back of Tracy's backpack and slammed her against the car.

For the next seconds, a nightmare played out frame by frame. Tracy, dazed, was forced toward the car, where a hand reached out from the back seat and grabbed her, pulling her into the car. Susan, coming out of her stupor, but not running; instead, she attacked the bearded giant with her fingers extended at his face like claws. Finally, in the last frightening frames, Susan and the huge black bear of a man disappeared into the car and the car disappeared out of the camera's view.

In a matter of seconds, the two girls had been abducted in broad daylight in front of a school and not a word had been said.

The beer that Peter had left me was warm. I still took a long pull before I got my phone out of my pocket and dialed Cheri.

She answered on the first ring, "Hello."

"It's me."

"Still working on that hunch?"

"No, I'm done. Wake up Ray and get down to the Greek's. I know what happened to the girls."

While I waited for Cheri and Ray, I had Peter show me how to print frames from the video and copied a disk of the abduction. I copied the horror of the kidnap onto two CDs. When I was done copying the CDs, I took one of the copies into the restaurant. Peter was sitting in the empty bar drinking a beer and listening to a slow rhythmic Greek song.

"Need a favor."

"You name it.," the Greek said turning to me.

I handed him the disk. "Two things: First put this somewhere safe, maybe your house or something, and, if anything happens to me, take it to the Federal Marshal over in St. Thomas. Don't give it to anyone here on the island. Second, let Cheri and Ray and I use your computer and office for a few more hours."

Peter looked at the disk and looked me straight in the eye, "You in trouble?" he asked.

"No, I just need to know a copy of this is safe."

"OK."

"Oh, one more thing," I said as I saw Ray's truck pull up at the side of the building, "get me three Heinekens."

Peter popped off the chair and had three frosty beers on the bar when Ray and Cheri walked in.

Ray looked his old self, after only a few hours of sleep the swagger was back. He was first through the door and I met him as he crossed the small dimly lit restaurant. "You got something?" he said.

I nodded and handed him one of the cold beers Peter had opened, "Yeah, let's wait for Cheri and I'll show you."

The small bell on the door jingled a second time and Cheri came through the door. She had changed into her working uniform, a black Pearl Jam tee shirt and a pair of faded blue jeans. She had her hair covered by a light blue baseball cap decorated by a design of Micky Mouse and covered with diamond-like sequins. When her eyes had adjusted to the light of the room, she locked her attention on Ray and me. "You serious?" she said in a disapproving tone as I held out the beer Peter had opened for her.

I nodded and she shook her head and looked to the back of the room at Peter. "Got coffee, Peter?" she asked.

Peter nodded and disappeared, and Ray took her beer out of my hand, "Waste not, want not," he said.

"Follow me." I said to them as I was moving back to the small office. I heard the clink of glass and the footsteps behind me.

When all three of us were crowded into the small office I handed each of them a copy of the photos from the video. I then sat on Peter's desk and waited. The room was silent while they looked at the photos. I sipped my beer and watched Ray and Cheri. They each reviewed the photos without emotion.

Halfway through my beer, Cheri set down her photos and said, "This goes to the authorities now."

"No." Ray said a slow firm voice.

"We can't, Cheri" I said softly looking at Ray to confirm my suspicion.

"You two can't be serious. Are you both out of your minds? This is a fucking kidnap!" Cheri snapped, the anger at what she had just seen rising and overflowing toward Ray and me.

Ray raised his hand and Cheri froze. Slowly he pulled one of the photos out and turned it so Cheri could see it.

In confusion she looked at me and then at Ray. “He’s a fucking child molesting, kidnapping, son of a bitch, and we need to go to the authorities now!” she said the intensity of her voice an angry rasp.

Ray looked for a long second at Cheri and then a sadness came into his green flecked eyes. “Lady, he is the authorities.”

Cheri looked at me with more horror than rage and all I could do was nod my head. She moved the pictures and sat heavily on the edge of Peter’s desk. “Why can’t it ever be simple?” she said.

Without saying any more, I moved to the computer keyboard and keyed up the last video I had watched.

As Ray and Cheri watched the small room became tense with emotion. When the large bearded man stuffed Susan into the car I heard a low moan from Ray and an inhalation of breath from Cheri. In the gloom of the video screen I could see a sheen of sweat on Ray’s forehead and the clear lines on his cheeks, the evidence of his clenched teeth. Cheri looked like she was ready to jump into the video screen as she leaned forward her fist clenched in tight balls as the video moved forward.

Finally, the car disappeared off the screen and I closed the video program out.

With the computer screen black, the only light in the room was sun light fighting its way through the thin towel Peter hung over the small window at the back to the office.

Ray had sat down on two cases of food stacked at the back of the room. The black mirrors of his sunglasses staring at the empty computer screen. I turned the chair I was in to face him and felt Cheri move over to me and lightly touch my shoulder.

Ray reached up slowly and pulled his wraparound sunglasses away from his face. He carefully folded them and hung them on the collar of his black tee shirt. For a moment, his movements stopped, and his hands perched on his chest as if in prayer.

In the half-light Ray’s face was painted in deep grays and blacks. He sat, his big shoulders hunched, his head down, and his eyes closed. Finally, his hands dropped to his lap.

I saw his chest move in a heave and heard him pull in a deep breath before his head rose and his eyes opened fixing me with a shark like stare. The fierce glow of those eyes seemed suspended in the dark lines and shadows that were his face. His face was an etched portrait of pure hate and determination.

In that dark silent room, I felt a chill, an empty understanding poured into me. We silently made a pact, a pact of vengeance, a pact of what the law calls murder.

He started to speak, and I raised my hand.

In my heart I knew that Jose Carlson was a dead man but those aren't words you speak.

Ray understood and just stared at me

Cheri dug her fingers into my shoulder as she spoke in a low dangerous voice, "First, we bring those girls home, then...." Her voice trailed off into the words each of us knew you never speak.

The gloomy office seemed to be shrinking on me. I cleared my throat and said, "No one is going to be in the restaurant for a couple of hours. Let's take this little meeting out where we can have a nice beer and talk this out."

We went into the small restaurant and sat at the table in the far west corner. Ray circled his finger and the Greek brought us two more beers and a freshly brewed cup of coffee. We sat at the white plastic table, with it's red and white checkered table cloth for a long while in silence. Finally, Ray spoke, "The big bearded dude is Jose Carlson. He is a Sergeant at VIPD."

Cheri looked at me, "He's a cop?"

"Yeah," Ray said, and Cheri finally understood.

"Ok," Cheri said pulling out her cell phone. "We call Mike Farmer over at the FBI."

Mike Farmer had worked with Cheri when as a Federal Deputy Marshal. She had worked on the High-Density Drug Task Force, better known as HIDTA. The few times I had met him, he had seemed like a good guy. I looked at Ray and he gave a slight nod and Cheri began to dial.

“Hi, this is Cheri Cotton. Is Agent Farmer in?” Cheri said into the phone. After a short wait, Cheri was talking to Agent Farmer. “Hi Mike, I need a favor. Have you got sometime today when you could sit down with Mad Dog and me?” There was a silence and then Cheri went on, “Right now we’re at the Greek’s. Can you meet us here?”

Cheri snapped the phone shut and smiled at Ray. “He’s on his way. He should be here in a few minutes.”

“That mean no more beer?” Ray asked.

“I’m sure he’ll love having beer for lunch,” I said wishing I’d chosen coffee instead of beer for breakfast. “Ray, you’re a bad influence on me. Look at us in the middle of an investigation and slopping down beer before noon.”

“I’m ashamed of you two,” Cheri said finishing her coffee.

“Peter,” I said as I motioned him over. “We better switch to coffee.” He smiled and walked back to his kitchen.

Ray stood up and walked around the table looking out the front window at the school across the street. “I don’t like just turning this over to the Fed’s.” he said. Cheri stood up and walked over to the window.

“It’s the right call, Ray.” She said.

I thought about the girls and how the VIPD sergeant had forced them into the car. I realized I wasn’t just helping Ray anymore, it had become personal. “No reason we can’t do a little snooping, Ray, but the Fed’s need to be in on this,” I said.

Cheri nodded in agreement.

At that moment Agent Farmer pulled up in a black SUV. When he climbed out of the vehicle, he stopped for a long second and viewed the parking lot. He viewed the school across the street and then turned back to the Greek’s front door and walked in quick steps across the dirt parking lot.

Before he got to the door, Ray opened it. “Agent.” Ray said looking down at him and motioning him into the dimly lit room with his left hand while he pushed the door open with his right.

“Mr. Jones.” Farmer said, looking up at Ray and extending his hand. In the light of the door I could see Ray hesitate and then he closed the door and shook the agents hand. “Thanks for coming down so quick.” Ray said..

The restaurant was still poorly lit, and Farmer took a few seconds to let his eyes adjust before he noticed Cheri and me at the table. With a nod toward us, he said “Cheri, Mad Dog, what’s this problem you got?”

Cheri moved over to Mike and gave him a hug and then stood back and said, “We need to show you something.” Without another word, she turned and walked toward Peter’s office. Mike followed her and Ray and I trailed behind.

By the time Ray and I got to the office, Cheri had Mike sat down in the chair in front of the computer and the screen was coming to life.

Ray and I stopped at the door of the small office and Ray leaned against the jam and said, “The smaller girl in this video is my goddaughter, Susan Miller, and the girl with the braids is Tracy Troy. I think it’s best you watch the surveillance tapes and then we can talk.” Mike looked at Cheri and she nodded her head in agreement.

Cheri reached in front of Mike and pushed the start button on the screen with a click of the mouse. On the screen, a car pulled up to two young laughing girls.

As the car sped off the computer screen, Cheri reached in front of Mike and turned off the video.

“Both girls have been missing since Monday.” Ray said in a soft flat voice.

“Monday?” Mike said staring at the empty screen.

“You recognize anyone? Agent.” Ray said.

Mike looked up at Ray and then back at the screen. “Those two girls have been missing for three days. Have you called VIPD?”

“Yeah,” Ray said, a touch of anger now in his deep voice. “Not my best move.”

“VIPD do anything?” Mike asked.

“Nope, until Mad Dog found this surveillance tape, we were not sure there was a real problem and the VIPD didn’t seem interested.”

“You recognized Carlson?” Mike asked still staring at the screen.

“Yep.” Ray said.

“I know you don’t want to hear this, but I may not have any jurisdiction.” Mike said finally, looking up at Ray.

“Jurisdiction?” Ray said his voice beginning to growl.

“Mr. Jones, I am a federal agent. To have jurisdiction, I must have some sort of federal law being violated. This is all territorial crimes. The VIPD is the proper agency, not the FBI or any of the federal agencies.”

“That ass hole that forced those girls into the car was VIPD.” Ray said, venom now beginning to appear into his voice.

“Cheri?” Mike said looking at her for help.

“Ray, to a degree, Mike is right.” Cheri said as she laid a restraining hand on Ray’s shoulder.

After a short pause Mike continued, “I have an ongoing corruption case I think I can dove tail this into, but I don’t think I’ll be able to get any warrants on this and I don’t think my chief in Puerto Rico will delegate any manpower.”

“Meaning?” I said.

“Meaning I’ll do what I can, but I don’t know how much I can help. My office is a three-man office. We have a full plate of cases that are clearly federal jurisdiction.”

Ray interrupted, “We’re on our own?”

When Ray is truly pissed, he radiates energy most brave men would run from. At that moment, the room hummed with Ray’s frustration and raw anger. To his credit, Mike looked Ray straight in the face and said. “I do and will do what I can, Mr. Jones, but those two girls best hope are you three.”



“That’s fucked.” Ray said in an even tone, his eyes bearing down on the federal agent.

“Yes sir, I agree,” Mike said staring grimly at the frozen picture of a car driving off the screen.

“Assets?” Cheri said breaking the tension between Ray and Mike.

We all turned our attention to her. “What assets can you give us, Mike?”

He lowered his head and placed both of his hands together as though he were praying and then spoke very slowly. “One, I’ll work with you myself. If you need a body, you got it. Two, I’ll do a background on Carlson and supply you with it. If you get other names or information, let me know. Three, I’ll do a report on this meeting so when I can open a case, all the groundwork is done. For that I’ll need a copy of this video.”

“Done,” I said handing him a copy of the video, “and when we get information that ensures you have jurisdiction, you promise to come with the calvary.”

“What you mean by: we need a body, you’ll be there?” Ray asked, anger still radiating from him.

“I’m a federal agent, Mr. Jones. But I’m also a citizen. You need someone for surveillance or to do background, I’ll help. I will have to draw the line at making personal contacts or using my position as an agent.”

“We understand.” Cheri said and Ray gave her a sharp look.

Mike tucked the CD in his coat pocket and stood up. He was a foot shorter than Ray when he stood, and a hundred pounds lighter, but he looked Ray right in the eye. “Sometimes I hate this fucking job, but I got rules. You’re right being pissed, but that’s the way it is.”

Ray made a fist and pushed it out slow. Mike made a fist and his fist met Ray’s. “What you can.” Ray rasped.

Mike left his fist on Ray’s and lowered his head. His shoulders seemed to slump for a second and then his cocky square stance reappeared. He raised his head and in a stern voice said, “What I can.”

Ray gave a small smile and the tension in the room vanished.

Mike turned to Cheri and handed her a card. "My personal number, please let me know what you're finding. I have a corruption case we are building with the VIPD and if you can somehow give me a good link to that case, I can push this a lot harder and get assets that will help."

Again, Cheri said, "I understand."

Mike stepped between Cheri and I and without another word, left the room and headed for the front of the building. In a moment, we heard the front door slam.

"That was fucked" Ray said when the door slammed.

"Being a Fed is fucked." Cheri said, "At this point his hands are tied."

At that moment I remembered all the times that Cheri had come home from the job fuming over the pure frustration of her job and wondered if Mike was feeling that same rage right now.

"He's in a corner, big man." I said to Ray, "I got a feeling if we can get him out of the corner, he'll come out swinging."

"I would." Cheri said.

"Fuck it, we just wasted two hours. What now?" Ray said a big smile on his face.

The smile threw me off and I asked, "What you smiling about?"

"That fucking Fed, he says I got no rules and you know what? He's right, no rules, just results." Ray said his eyes bright.

Cheri and I both looked at Ray for a long second and then she looked at me and a large smile creased her face.