

# A Deadly Change of Power

by  
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A Deadly Change of Luck

# *Prologue*

*Los Angeles ~ 1967*

Heavy brown smog hung thick over Los Angeles as Melvin Oakhurst coasted down the freeway off-ramp and rolled to a stop behind a shiny new 1967 Ford Mustang. A web of electrical power lines littered the skyline. Melvin's sixteen-year-old son, Lance, sat in the passenger seat of the old pickup truck with his arm hanging out the window, holding on to the side mirror in case it decided to fall off, as it had a habit of doing whenever Melvin didn't shift just right. Lance gazed at the polished car and watched as the blonde in the driver's seat used the rear-view mirror to apply her lipstick, probably the same candy-apple red as her new car. Lance almost drooled.

"That's the car I want, right there," Lance said. "John's brother says they're faster than anything on the road."

Six-year-old Veronica sat in between her brother and father. She stretched as tall as she could to see the car through the crack in the windshield of the old pickup. The crack had been there for as long as she could remember, and as far as she knew, Ol' Blue came from the factory that way.

The light turned green and Melvin shoved the gearshift into low. All three Oakhursts winced at the grinding sound. The pickup bucked a half-dozen times before the big rectangular mirror dropped into Lance's waiting hand. He pulled it into the cab and dropped it on the floor at his feet.

Melvin shifted into second and squinted at the mirror. "I'll fix that tomorrow," he said.

Lance rolled his eyes. "Why don't we just sell this old dog and buy a new one?"

Veronica shook her finger at Lance. "Ol' Blue isn't a dog! Besides, new trucks cost too much money. It doesn't grow on trees, you know," she scolded.

Melvin and Lance exchanged glances. Melvin shrugged his shoulders. "Ronnie's right, you know," he said. "I've looked through every gardening book I can find, and not one money tree in any of 'em."

Lance chuckled and tousled Ronnie's hair. "Kid's always right. She sounds more like a forty-six-year-old than a six-year-old."

Ronnie knitted her eyebrows together, pushed Lance's hand away and tried to smooth her curly hair.

Melvin coaxed the old truck into the gravel driveway of Harold's Machine Shop. The brakes screeched and small pebbles rolled and bounced as he brought Ol' Blue to a halt in front of the roll-up door.

Lance's eyes caught sight of a motorcycle parked across the yard. He piled out of the truck and was halfway to it before Melvin even opened his door.

"Man! Look at that bike! It's a Triumph! I bet it's fast," Lance said, ignoring everything but the sparkling red-and-white racing machine at the end of his tunnel vision. He ran his hand along the polished gasoline tank and sized up the black leather seat. It would take every bit of self control he had to keep from swinging his leg over and gripping the handlebars, just to see what it felt like.

Melvin lifted Ronnie out of the truck and set her down. She adjusted the vinyl *Flying Nun* lunch-pail over her shoulder and pulled up her knee socks, then tagged along behind her father like a puppy into the machine shop.

Harold, the owner of the shop, paused briefly from barking into the telephone to acknowledge Melvin and Ronnie with a nod and a smile. "This ain't the doggone Bank of America, Orville! I won't turn one more piston till you bring me cash. Got it?"

Harold winked at Ronnie, then returned his attention to the man at the other end of the phone line. "Good! See ya later, Orville," he snapped. Ronnie jumped when he slammed the phone down on its cradle.

"Sorry 'bout that, kid. That Orville, he's a squirrely one. Don't ever trust nobody who won't look you square in the eye," Harold said as he pushed the big black safety glasses up on his nose. Wispy strands of gray hair shot out of his head in all directions. A metal shaving clung to a strand of hair over his left ear.

Ronnie looked up at Harold with large green eyes. Her red curls were still a little ruffled from Lance's tousling. "Okay, Harold. I won't. You got a piece of metal in your hair," she said, pointing to the curly object on his head.

Harold scratched his rough fingers through his hair until the object fell to the floor. "What've you got today, Mel?"

Melvin shoved his hands in his pockets. "I sprung a leak in my storage tank. I gotta use your welder, if you can spare it for a quick patch job."

Harold gave Ronnie another wink. "Sure thing, Mel. You know where it is. Just back 'er up over there and help yourself."

"Thanks, Harold. I sure appreciate this. I gotta demo the engine for some bigwigs tomorrow. This could be the one."

Ronnie gazed around the crowded building and studied the complicated machines. Some had wheels with handles and big screws and blades. Some looked like they could bend a car in half, and one looked like it could squash a bowling ball.

Her eyes stopped on Larry, one of the machinists, as he worked at a huge vertical turntable that spun so fast it made her dizzy to watch. There was a large piece of Styrofoam mounted to the spinning plate, and he used a sharp blade to cut away pieces until it looked like half of a flat basketball, only a lot bigger. Larry noticed her watching and cut the power to the machine.

"Hey there, Ronnie. What are you up to?" Larry asked.

"Hi Larry. Dad had to weld something for the magic car. What's that?" she asked, pointing toward the big Styrofoam blob.

"That's Mayor McCheese," he answered. "And over there's Big Mac," he continued, pointing toward a large Styrofoam replica of a hamburger. "A little man is going to wear it in a TV commercial."

Ronnie studied the unpainted work-in-progress. "Where's the sesame seeds?" she asked.

Harold strolled over to check on the progress of the hamburger.

"Sesame seeds?" Larry asked.

"Yeah. You know. Two all beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions, on a sesame seed bun. You gotta have sesame seeds on Big Mac," Ronnie explained.

Larry's eyes met Harold's. They both frowned. Harold checked his watch. "What time are we supposed to have it over to the paint shop?" Harold asked.

"Three."

Ronnie slipped the blue lunch pail off her shoulder. She unzipped the top and reached inside. "Will these work?" she asked, holding two acorns out to Larry.

Larry took the acorns from her and studied them closely. "Where'd you get these?" he asked, pulling the cap off the end of one.

"We had a field trip to the park today. I got a bunch of them," she replied, holding out her lunch-pail to show it was half full of the nuts.

Larry hurried over to a band saw and cut the acorns in half. He grabbed a bottle of glue from a shelf and stuck the newly acquired "sesame seeds" to the huge burger. "Kid, you're a genius."

Ronnie beamed as Harold patted her on the back. "You just saved the day, kid. I got a Popsicle in the office with your name on it."

Ronnie found a roll-around seat and positioned it so she could watch her father work on the big metal tank he'd hauled from home in the back of Ol' Blue. Harold returned from his office with a grape Popsicle. "Here you go, kid." He pulled a welding mask from a hook on the wall. "If you're gonna watch your pop weld that thing, you gotta wear this," he said, slipping the big mask over her little head. "Don't want to hurt your eyes."

Ronnie used one hand to push the mask out just far enough to allow the grape Popsicle inside so she could suck on it. A trickle of sticky purple juice made its way down the stick and over her pudgy little fingers.

Larry walked over to get another handful of acorns from Ronnie's lunch pail. "What's that you're welding?" he asked Melvin.

"It's the storage tank for the hydrogen fuel cell I'm working on. Sprung a leak. I gotta patch it so I don't lose any more," Melvin answered as he pulled a mask down over his face and fired up the welding torch.

Larry gaped at him. "Hydrogen? Jeez Louise!" he gasped as he scooped Ronnie up from her seat and ran for the door. The Popsicle flew out of her hand and splattered on the concrete floor. "Come on, kid, before he blows us all to smithereens!"

Melvin, oblivious to Larry's panic, put the torch to the tank and began the task of patching the hole. Harold followed Larry out the door.

"Relax, Lar. It's metal hydride. He does it all the time," Harold assured him.

"Metal hydride?"

"Yeah. Non-explosive."

Larry set Ronnie down. The too-big welding mask slipped down over her eyes so she couldn't see a thing. She reached her arms out and felt for Larry's legs. "I lost my Popsicle," she said.

Larry raised the mask so she could see. "You know where Harold keeps them?"

Ronnie nodded her head.

"Go get yourself another one."

Ronnie scurried back into the shop and disappeared into Harold's office. Larry followed Harold back inside to get a closer look at Melvin's project.

"What's this hydrogen fuel cell?" Larry asked.

Melvin cut the torch and lifted the welding helmet off. "I built a car that's powered by a hydrogen fuel cell. With this tank, it can run for a month before it needs to be recharged," Melvin explained.

Larry gawked at him. "Why?"

Melvin pointed out the door at the layer of brown smog that hung in the air like a cloud of smoke, choking the city and everyone who lived there. "See that air?" Melvin asked.

Larry nodded. "Yeah?"

"You're not supposed to. Clean air is invisible. You and I are breathing that brown crud into our lungs twenty-four hours a day."

Larry frowned. "So, this car—it's electric?"

Melvin nodded. "No pollution."

"How many tons of batteries does it need?"

"No batteries. Uses this metal-hydride tank instead," Melvin explained.

Larry eyed the tank suspiciously. "What kind of horsepower?"

"Well, nothing to write home about, but good enough to get from point A to point B in a reasonable amount of time," Melvin admitted.

Larry shook his head. "You're dreamin', Mel. Nothing's ever gonna take the place of the internal combustion engine."

"You don't think people will get fed up with brown air?"

"Sure. They're already screamin' about pollution," Larry admitted.

"And what about oil supplies. It can't last forever," Melvin added.

Larry chuckled. "There's enough oil on this planet to keep us going for a heck of a long time. People aren't gonna putt around in little wind-up cars they have to get out and push whenever they come to a hill."

"That's not the case with my car," Melvin defended.

"Besides, gas is cheap and there's plenty of it. Even if the air turns black as ink, people aren't gonna give up their big-blocks and their V-eights," Larry insisted.

"And why is that?" Melvin asked.

Larry raised the thick safety glasses from his face and squinted at Melvin. "Because, Melvin, everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die."

Melvin backed the old blue pickup through the back yard to the workshop he kept behind the house. He'd unload the storage tank later, after dinner.

Jane Oakhurst stood at the kitchen sink, her hands feeling around the soapy water for another spoon to wash. Her apron hung loosely from her shoulders and hadn't been tied in the perfect little bow behind her back as usual. Melvin eased up behind her and slipped his arms around her waist. He gave her a kiss on the side of her neck and pushed her thick red hair away from her ear so he could whisper some sweet nonsense into it. She didn't respond except to drop her chin lower to her chest, allowing the red hair to fall back in her face. Melvin pulled her hands out of the soapy water and turned her around to face him. Her eyes were swollen and red with tears.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Lance and Ronnie came racing into the kitchen from outside. They stopped in their tracks at the sight of their mother's face. Both stood, gaping at their parents. They'd never seen her cry before. She couldn't cry. It wasn't something she was capable of, they thought. Even when her favorite cat got so sick and died last Christmas, she didn't cry. They could tell she was sad, but never a tear. Never. This must be really bad.

Melvin let go of her hands and allowed her to turn away. "You kids go play outside."

"But—" Lance started.

"Go outside," Melvin insisted.

“Yes sir,” the pair replied in unison. They exchanged concerned glances and trudged out of the kitchen.

Melvin wrapped his arms around her and asked, again, “What’s wrong?”

Jane searched her apron for a dry patch and wiped her tears. “I went back to see Doctor Hess this morning. All the test results came back.” She broke into uncontrollable sobs.

Melvin turned her around to face him. “What is it? Please tell me,” he begged. She raised her chin to look up into his eyes. “Oh Mel, it’s cancer.”

He squeezed his eyes shut and she buried her face in his chest. He held her tighter. “Are they sure? It could be a mistake. We should get another—”

“It’s no mistake.”

Melvin rocked her slowly back and forth and stared at the ceiling. “It’s nineteen sixty-seven for God’s sake. We’ve poured so much money into research. We should be able to cure cancer by now. What’s wrong with this world?”

Jane sniffed. “Money is hardly ever the answer. Aren’t you the one who keeps telling me that?”

He kissed the top of her head. “Yeah, but it can buy a lot of distraction. You know what I’m gonna do? That fella from Standard Oil’s been hounding me to sell my patent. I’m gonna call him tomorrow and see just how rich he can make us. Then you and me and Lance and Ronnie are gonna take off. You always wanted to go to Europe. Well, honey, pack your bags. Anything you want, anywhere you want to go, we’re there.”

Jane backed away so she could see his face. “But you know what they’ll do. They’ll bury it. They don’t want your idea to go anywhere.”

“I don’t care. All that matters is you. Someday, someone will have the courage to change things, it just won’t be me.”

It was nearly ten and Melvin was still putting tools away in the shop. He’d replaced the hydride storage tank and bolted it down in the back of the small car he used to demonstrate his fuel-cell technology. The little car was barely big enough to comfortably sit two people. Most of the area behind the seats was reserved for the large storage tank. The car had to be very lightweight to make up for the minimum horsepower generated from the fuel-cell engine.

The shop door squeaked and he looked up to see Ronnie standing in the doorway. Her flannel nightgown hung down to her ankles with ruffles at the collar, sleeves, and all around the hem. She wore the pink slippers Jane had knitted for her last Christmas—the ones with the big fluffy pom-poms on the top. Jane made slippers for nearly the whole neighborhood that year. She said it took her mind off losing Snowball, the cat she’d had for nearly twenty years.

“Hey, Ronnie. What are you still doing up? You should be in bed,” Melvin said.

"I couldn't sleep." She padded into the shop and let the door swing closed behind her. "What's wrong with Mommy?"

Melvin didn't know what to say. He continued rearranging tools in the big red toolbox.

"Daddy?"

He pushed the drawer closed, turned and picked up the tiny six-year-old. He sat her on the edge of a workbench and pushed a strand of curly red hair from her face. "Mommy's sick, Ronnie."

Ronnie studied his face. It took every ounce of strength he could muster to keep the tears away. He had to stay strong for her. She depended on him. He couldn't fall apart. He'd have to hold the family together.

"But she's going to get better. Right?"

Melvin found a stray wrench that hadn't been properly stored. He busied himself with the task.

"Right, Daddy?" Ronnie repeated.

Melvin clenched his fist around the wrench. He had to keep it together. He couldn't let her down. He would do whatever it took. He'd lie if he had to. "Yes, honey. Mommy's going to get better."

Ronnie let out a sigh of relief. "Good. I was a little scared."

"Don't be scared. Everything's going to be okay. I'll make sure of it. I promise," Melvin assured her. "Now you better go to bed. It's way past your bedtime."

"Can I have ice cream?"

Melvin smiled. "Tell you what. You go in and get a couple bowls and spoons. I'll be right in and we can both have a scoop."

Ronnie beamed. "Okay!"

Ronnie scurried out the door and ran for the back porch. Melvin smiled at the sight of her long curls bouncing as she happily skipped across the concrete driveway.

A hundred moths flitted around the back-porch light. Ronnie swatted at them as she pulled the screen door open to let herself into the house. She turned to see if Melvin was on his way yet. She caught his image through the big window. He smiled and waved to her. She raised her hand to wave back, then jumped at the flash of light. A thunderous boom immediately followed. Shattered glass flew in all directions. Splintered wood and bits and pieces of metal shot through the air. The shop was engulfed in a ball of flames. Ronnie felt the heat on her face. Staring at the fire, she stepped away from the screen door and let it swing closed.

"Daddy!" she screamed. "Daddy!"

## Chapter One

Our plane touched down in San Diego at 10:30 PM on New Year's Eve, 2001. Craig and I wandered down the half-lit corridors of the airport, barely noticing the fact that only one out of every four lights was on. Threats of rolling blackouts prompted officials for the airport to conserve energy wherever they could. We'd read about the California power crisis in the Auckland newspaper, but it didn't become a reality for us until we stepped off the plane.

After three fun-filled weeks of exploring nearly every square inch of New Zealand, followed by twelve hours in the air, neither Craig nor I felt compelled to attend any of the New Year's Eve parties we'd been invited to. We were both too exhausted. We stood at the baggage carousel holding hands and gazing at the passing bags. My own suitcase went around twice before my brain kicked into gear and recognized it.

"Isn't that yours, Dev?" Craig asked me.

I shook the fog out of my head. "Huh? Oh, yeah."

Craig dragged the heavy American Tourister off the belt and set it down next to our other bag.

"Thanks, sweetie," I said, leaning in to kiss his stubbled cheek.

New Zealand was our belated honeymoon trip. Now it was time to think about returning to the reality of everyday life in San Diego. Craig would return to his duties as Dr. Matthews and I would pick up where I'd left off as Devonie Lace, treasure hunter. Oh yeah, Devonie Lace-Matthews. That's going to take some getting used to.

Craig wrapped his arms around me. "I know you're exhausted and you can slug me if you want, but would you mind if we stop by the hospital on the way home? I need to pick something up."

My forehead fell against his chest. "Will you carry me?" I moaned.

"Yes," he replied and proceeded to heave my hundred and twenty pounds over his shoulder.

“No. No. You’ll hurt yourself,” I insisted, giggling uncontrollably from pure exhaustion.

He set me down and straitened my shirt collar. “I’ll only be five minutes. I promise.”

I smiled up at him. “Okay,” I surrendered. I seem incapable of telling him no when he looks at me with those beautiful green eyes—and that dimple—Mother Nature’s equivalent to a perfectly-cut diamond in a human face.

I tried to convince him before we left for our trip that we should get someone to drop us off at the airport to save the huge parking fee. Uncle Doug had offered, but Craig insisted he wouldn’t ask anyone to play taxi driver that late, especially on New Year’s Eve. I did the math for him and calculated the parking fee, but he just scoffed. It will take some time to teach him the fine art of conservatism, but I have a lifetime to work on it.

We pulled into the hospital lot and parked in one of the spaces reserved for the doctors. Craig cut the engine but left the radio on. “You want to wait here? I’ll be right back.”

It was a tempting offer, but I know Craig, and when he says five minutes, he really means twenty-five. I’d fall asleep and miss yet another ringing in of a new year. For once, I’d like to at least be conscious for the event. “No. I’ll go in. I think Tammy’s working tonight. I’ll go wish her a happy new year.”

Craig led the way into the hospital. A security guard sat on a bench with his back against the wall. At first glance, I thought he was asleep, but when he heard our footsteps, he raised his head to acknowledge our presence.

“How ya doin’, Danno?” Craig asked.

The guard gave him a confused look, then cupped his hand around his left ear. “What’s that?” he replied.

“I said, how ya doin’? Craig repeated, only twice as loud.

The guard smiled. This time he heard the question. “Doin’ okay, considerin’,” he replied.

Craig patted him on the shoulder. “Your hip givin’ you trouble?”

Again, the guard cupped his ear.

“I said, your hip givin’ you trouble?”

Finally, the guard nodded. “Naw. But my hip is sure actin’ up tonight. Must be rain comin’.”

Craig and I exchanged grins.

“Danno, this is my wife, Devonie,” Craig said.

Danno smiled at me. “Debbie?”

“Devonie,” I corrected.

“Nice to meet you, Debbie,” Danno said.

I smiled and shook his hand. “Nice to meet you too, Danno.”

Craig took my hand and led me down the hall. "See ya later, Danno," he said over his shoulder. Danno waved.

"He's got to be three hundred and twelve years old, if he's a day," I whispered in Craig's ear.

Craig laughed. "You might be right. Nice guy, though."

Craig and I parted ways at the elevator, he toward his office, and I toward the nurse's station.

The place seemed like a ghost town as I strolled down the corridor. I didn't pass a single nurse or orderly as I made my way to the nerve center of this section of the hospital. Televisions lit several of the dim rooms I passed. Most were tuned to the New Year's festivities going on all around the country. I paused briefly to listen.

The nurse's station was deserted—no one in sight. I checked my watch. It was almost midnight. Everyone was probably gathering for an informal celebration in the break room. If I could remember where the break room was, I'd join them. I headed off in the direction I thought it might be, when the silence was broken by a shrill cry.

"Help me! Help me!" a woman's voice cried out from one of the rooms behind me. I turned to see where the sound came from.

"Help me, please! Help me!" she continued yelling.

I scanned the area for anyone who might be able to help her. No one seemed to respond to her pleas. I wasn't sure which room the cries were coming from, but I headed in the general direction, peeking into each room on the way in case I could find a nurse busy with another patient.

As I got closer to the source of the noise, a second voice joined in. "Use your call light, Delores!" another patient yelled out.

"I can't! Help me, Jesus! Help me!"

"Jesus doesn't work here, Delores! Use your call light! We're all trying to get some sleep!"

I pushed open a door, hoping to find a nurse busy taking someone's temperature or blood pressure. I stood in the doorway for a moment to let my eyes adjust to the darkness. The light from the bathroom was on and lit the room enough that I could make out the figure of a tall man standing next to the hospital bed. I blinked a couple times. He wore surgical scrubs, as many of the hospital staff did.

Relieved, I requested his assistance. "Excuse me, but can someone come help this woman? She seems—"

I had obviously startled him. My eyes moved from his head down his arms to his hands. He gripped a pillow tightly against the face of whoever was in the bed. "Hey! What are you doing?" I demanded. I felt the adrenaline rush through my system. My hand shook as I groped to find a light switch. He panicked and nearly

knocked a tray over as he scrambled to escape. "Stop!" I screamed as he headed my direction. I tried to back out of the room, but he beat me to the door, knocking me down as he bolted past. I hit my head on the floor and was dazed for a few moments.

I looked up to see the silhouette of a man standing in the doorway with his hands firmly planted on his hips. "What's going on in here?" he demanded. He hit a switch that brought light to the entire room. A stethoscope hung around his neck and one end was tucked into the pocket of his scrubs.

"Did you stop him?" I asked, rubbing my head as I struggled to get to my feet.

"Stop who?" he asked.

"That guy who just ran out of here. He was trying to kill that patient," I explained, pointing toward the unconscious woman in the bed. "Oh my God. Is she breathing?" I asked, rushing to her side.

The young man hurried to the other side of the bed and checked her vital signs. "She's fine. She's just asleep. Are you sure you saw someone?" he asked.

I rolled my eyes. "Of course I saw someone. He had this pillow stuffed against her face," I insisted, picking up the pillow from the floor. "If I hadn't stopped him, she'd be dead now." I read the nameplate pinned to his shirt—Paul Michaels, RN.

"Well I didn't see anyone. I think I would have seen him if he was really here."

"Really here? Listen, he was here. I didn't just fall down all by myself. He knocked me down trying to get away."

Nurse Michaels crossed his muscular arms over his chest. "What are you doing here, anyway? Visiting hours were over a long time ago."

"I was looking for someone to help that poor woman in the room down the hall. She'd been calling for help and nobody was answering her," I said.

"Delores?"

"Yes. Delores. She needs help."

"What Delores needs is a good sedative," he said, shaking his head.

I scowled at him. "If that's the case, then why doesn't someone give it to her?"

"Because we have to have a doctor's order, and we can't find her doctor. He's probably off at some New Year's Eve party while we're here listening to a delirious old woman scream all night long."

I turned my attention back to the woman sleeping in the bed. She looked to be in her late thirties, maybe forty. She had a bandage on her head and bruises on her arms and face. I noted the name on the blue wristband. Jane Doe. "What about her? Shouldn't you call the police? Someone tried to kill her," I said.

"Police? No. We have our own security," Michaels replied.

I pictured Danno in hot pursuit of the attacker. "I've seen your security. I really think—"

“She’ll be fine. Now, the question is, who are you and what are you doing here?”

His non-concern over this patient irritated me. “I’m Devonie Lace—uh, Matthews—Lace-Matthews, Doctor Matthews’ wife. We stopped by on our way home from the airport. I was looking for a friend who works here, but when I heard Delores crying, I started looking for help,” I explained. I watched his expression, hoping I’d gained some credibility with my explanation.

His eyes lit up. “Doctor Matthews is here? Maybe he can write an order for Delores.”

“What about her?” I pressed, nodding toward Jane Doe.

“She doesn’t need a sedative. She’s sound asleep,” he said with just enough sarcasm to irritate me even more.

“I don’t mean a sedative. Someone tried to kill her. She’s obviously in danger,” I said.

“Obviously?”

“Yes. Obviously. Why is she here? You don’t even know her name? How’d she get so banged up?” I pressed.

Nurse Michaels took me by the arm, led me around the bed and out of the room. “I can’t give out that information. You should know that, being married to Doctor Matthews.” He caught the attention of a woman sitting at the nurse’s station and called out to her. “Marge, can you page Doctor Matthews? He’s somewhere in the hospital. Find out if he’ll write an order for Delores so we can have a peaceful night.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Are you going to call the police or do I have to do it?”

“I told you, we have security. I’ll have someone call the guard right now,” he said as he turned his back on me and walked away.

I scowled at the back of his head.

Delores started up again. “I don’t want a baby!” she hollered.

“You’re not having a baby, Delores,” Michaels called back to her as he headed for her room.

Just as he disappeared around the corner, Tammy came from the other direction. She’d been working the night shift for the past month and looked as tired as I felt. “Devonie? What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Hi. Craig and I just stopped so he could pick something up from his office.” I took her by the arm and led her toward Jane Doe’s room. “What do you know about this patient?”

Tammy and I had been friends for a long time and I knew she’d tell me whatever she knew. She peeked in the room. “Oh, Jane Doe. Yeah, she came in a few days ago. A couple of sailors fished her out of the water somewhere between here and

Ensenada. She was unconscious for several days, so we couldn't get her real name. No one knows how she got hurt and ended up in the water."

"Was she in a coma?" I asked.

"Yeah, but she's been in and out of it most of today. She's okay physically, except for a little bump on her head and a few bruises. We haven't been able to get her to tell us who she is. She's pretty shaken up about what happened. We can't discharge her until we can find a relative to take her in."

"That'll be pretty hard if she won't tell you who she is," I said.

"Believe me. Two more days of hospital food, she'll be begging to get out of here."

Marge called out from the nurse's station desk. "Tammy, can you check that one? Her call light's on," she said, pointing toward Jane Doe's room.

"Sure," Tammy replied.

I followed Tammy into the room. The mystery woman sat up in her bed, staring at the bruises on her arms.

"What do you need?" Tammy asked.

The woman raised her head and looked at me, then at Tammy. "I'm sorry, but when they brought my dinner, I wasn't hungry. Now I'm starving. Can I get something to eat?"

Tammy checked her watch and frowned. "I'll see if I can scrounge something up for you. How are you feeling?"

Jane Doe gave her a weak smile. "Fine, except for being hungry."

"We'll try to take care of that right now," Tammy said as she turned and headed for the door.

I stayed behind and found a chair in the corner. "Hi," I said. "I'm Devonie."

She gave me a wary look and nodded, but didn't offer her name.

"My husband's a doctor here. The staff is the best. You're in good hands," I assured her.

She gave me a weak smile, then turned her head to stare at the closed curtains.

"Everyone here is pretty concerned about you," I continued, hoping to get her to warm up to me.

"Everyone?" she questioned, still not looking at me.

"Well, I know I am," I said.

She finally looked at me. "Why? You don't even know me."

I hesitated for a moment. "Do you remember how you got hurt? Were you on a boat?"

She remained silent. I decided to be direct. She obviously didn't trust me, so there was no point in dancing around the issue.

"When I came in your room tonight, there was a man trying to suffocate you with a pillow."

"What?" she gasped.

"I walked in just in time to scare him off. Do you recall any of this?" I asked.

"There was a man in here tonight?" she asked, almost dazed.

"Yes, just a few minutes ago. No one saw him but me. He knocked me down trying to get away," I explained, rubbing the bump on my head. It occurred to me that the blow to my head might have knocked me out for a minute or two. That could explain why Michaels didn't see him when it seemed to me they should have crossed paths.

Nurse Michaels burst into the room with Craig on his heels. "I knew I'd find you in here. What have you done? Did you wake her up?" he demanded, pointing an accusing finger at me.

Craig put an arm on Michaels' shoulder. "Calm down, Paul."

"Did he tell you what happened?" I asked.

"He said you thought you saw someone in here." Craig scrutinized me closer, noticing the bump on my forehead. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"The guy knocked me down on his way out. Would you tell this person I'm not some lunatic," I said, pointing at Michaels.

Craig brushed my bangs back and took a closer look at my injury. "Hmm. Not too bad. I've seen bigger lumps in the oatmeal you fix me for breakfast."

"Very funny. Can you get someone to guard her room? Someone besides Danno? I'm afraid that guy might come back," I said.

Craig checked his watch. It was past midnight by now. Everyone was so concerned with the time. "I'll see what I can do, but it'll be tough tonight. Paul says he'll keep an eye on her. I'm sure she'll be okay," Craig assured me.

"But can you try? I'm worried."

"I know you're worried. I'll call a few people. Wait here and I'll be back in about fifteen minutes so we can go home," he said as he started to leave.

I put a hand on his arm. "That's okay. I'll meet you in the car in fifteen minutes," I said.

He stopped, looked into my eyes and nodded his head. "Okay, fifteen minutes," he repeated, slowly. He flashed me that "I know you're up to something" look, immediately followed by the "but I'm afraid to ask" one.

Jane Doe seemed to retreat to some other world during my conversation with Craig. She knitted her eyebrows together and rubbed her temples as if she had a pounding headache.

Michaels followed Craig out of the room and Tammy made an entrance immediately after they were gone. She placed a banana, a blueberry yogurt, and three packs of crackers on the tray next to Jane Doe. "Hope this'll do. It's all I could come up with."

Jane didn't seem to hear her. She continued rubbing her temples and had her eyes squeezed closed.

"Are you feeling okay?" Tammy asked.

"What? Oh, yes. I'm fine. Just a little headache."

"You want me to get you something for it?"

"No. I'll be fine after I eat. Thanks."

Tammy left to attend to other duties. I watched the mystery woman peel the banana. She took a bite, then slid the yogurt toward me. "I don't like yogurt. You want this?"

I shook my head. "Isn't there someone I can call for you?" I asked.

She stared down at her hands and mumbled, "Jake."

"Jake?" I asked.

She seemed to snap out of some kind of trance, peered at the half-opened door, leaned forward and whispered, "Do you think they'll find someone to watch my room?"

I frowned. "I don't know. Craig will try, but—"

She cut me off. "I'd kill for a double cheeseburger. Think you can arrange that?"

I smiled and nodded.

I watched through the windshield as Craig walked across the parking lot toward the car. He had something of significant size stuffed inside his jacket and seemed to be holding it with extra care. He squinted to see me clearer through the glass, then stopped and shook his head. He came around to the driver side and opened the door. He looked at me, then at our new passenger, Jane Doe, in the back seat. "Hi," he said, giving her a warm smile. He looked back at me. "Why am I not surprised?"

I took his hand and tried to pull him into the car. "Come on. Let's go."

That's when I noticed the large black nose poke out of the opened collar of his jacket. Two brown eyes blinked at me. "What's that?" I asked.

"It's a puppy. He hasn't got a name yet. I thought we'd name him after we get to know him a little better. John picked him up for me today. That's why we had to stop here tonight. Happy six-month anniversary, honey."

Craig opened his jacket and pulled the puppy out. It was the biggest puppy I'd ever seen.

"Puppy? He looks full grown," I said.

"He's a Great Dane," Craig explained.

"Great Dane? My God, Craig, he'll be huge."

"I know. Isn't he cute? Tomorrow I'll build a kennel for him in the back yard."

"Kennel? You mean barn. He's going to be as big as a horse."

Craig put the puppy in my lap. He must have weighed twenty pounds. "Don't you like him?" Craig asked.

I immediately received a wet kiss across my face and caught the strong whiff of puppy breath. I stroked his head and held one of his enormous paws in my hand. He was the color of a fawn, and his velvet ears felt like silk in my fingers. "He's adorable. Of course I like him. Thank you, but I didn't know we were exchanging six-month anniversary gifts. I didn't get you anything."

Craig smiled. "That's okay. How about we share him? Sort of like a son?"

I took the puppy's face in my hands and looked him in the eye. The loose skin around his jowls formed a comical sort of doggy smile. "Hear that? You're our son. We'll have to come up with a name for you."

Jane Doe reached over the seat and patted the soft brown hair on the puppy's back. "He's too cute," she said.

Craig slid into the driver's seat, started the engine, then turned and offered his hand to our passenger. "I'm Craig Matthews. You've already met my wife, Devonie, and our yet-to-be-named son."

She reached out and shook his hand. "Hi. I'm Veronica, but everyone calls me Ronnie. Ronnie Oakhurst."