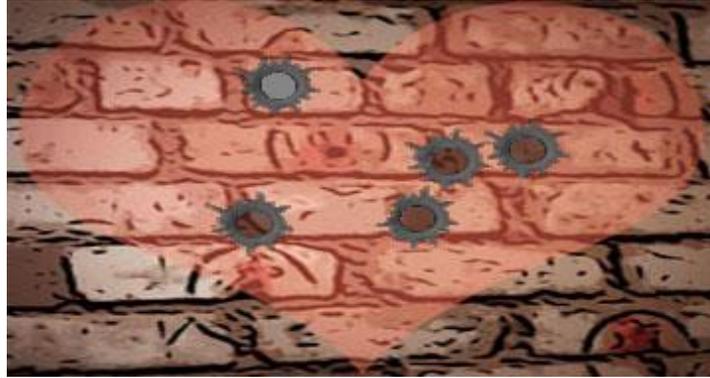




Valentine's Day

The Death of Penelope's Suitors

By Helene Baron-Murdock



It was something Mary Fisher, the crime scene tech, had said. “Old Gus has got more barks than a three headed dog.” She was right. The mastiff, part Rhodesian ridgeback by the looks, had a head the size of a backhoe shovel and bit off its yaps as regular and precise as a stamping mill. That had been five months ago. The case now belonged to the Feds, at their insistence, and was no longer the County Sheriff’s problem. Except that it was.

Jim Donovan, detective with the Weston County Sheriff’s Violent Crimes Unit, watched from the break room window as a rare June rain wet the parking lot and those scrambling to and from their cars who still couldn’t believe that it rained at this time of year. He was avoiding the paperwork that awaited him at his desk. The report was due by eight the following morning for a news conference to be held shortly thereafter.

Weston County Sheriff Phil Collins would be meeting the press to explain to the public, and the County Board of Supervisors, why there had not been any progress in the multiple execution style murders at a remote farmhouse up on the tribal lands. And that he was not part of the cover-up. The fact that his Department been shut out of the case by the FBI had been really hard to swallow. And now the blowback over the cover-up was threatening to call into question his carefully erected reputation as a straight shooter. The “lands,” as the Sage Valley Rancheria was called, sat in his jurisdiction. However, it was also a section in the northeast of the county administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and that meant that his authority was trumped by Washington. Sheriff Collins was a politician as well and he knew when to shift the blame. He hated the FBI and so was not the least averse to showing them in a bad light. Lawyers with guns, he called them.

Donovan sat in his chair and set the coffee cup on the stained notepad as the phone rang. "Donovan." He stared at the ceiling. The big boss. "Yeah, Phil, I'm working on it now. I have your notes right here." He lifted the coffee cup as if he were unveiling them. "I fit everything onto the timeline. Right up to when we were pulled off the investigation."

He'd asked it before and he knew the answer, but he asked again anyway, reflexively, as a dig or complaint about the constraint on doing their job, however broadly that was defined. "I thought we signed a Joint Powers Agreement that gave us jurisdiction over the lands within the county. What good is it if the State or Feds can muscle us out of the way any time they want?"

Anything to get Phil going. But apparently not today. The Sheriff was focused and went over in detail once again the points he wanted emphasized.

"Jesus, Phil, think this is my first rodeo? What are you going to do when I retire?" Donovan listened and scoffed. "Good luck with that." And "Are we done? I have to put the final touches to this report." He stared at the screen and the document page that was titled *Timeline for MCI on Feb 14th Sage Valley Weston County* and the blank space below it. "You'll have it by the start of work tomorrow. Have I ever failed you?" He took exception to the reply. "That was different."

Hanging up, he focused on the blank screen, the pulsing cursor, again. He knew what he had to do. Fill in the blanks. Easy enough. He had his pocket notebook. Most of the younger guys used their smart phones or digital recorders. He was old school, admittedly, but writing something down was that extra step that would help trigger a chain of associations.

Shooting, possibly drug related, way out on the lands, at the far eastern end of Weston County, multiple victims, the way it was called in. The big man had wanted him out there for an overview, and to help the new guy, Nelson, who would be the lead investigator. Seemed like more and more the Department was using him to train the rookies. The brass liked to use the word 'mentor.' Well, he could have just as easily been driving a desk after the 'incident,' so he had to consider himself lucky to be out in the field even if it was just hand-holding and nose-wiping.

He remembered the day well, Valentine's Day. He was on a domestic violence call on the west side of Santa Lena, in an

unincorporated neighborhood on High Creek Rd. A rundown two story Queen Anne knockoff in need of some TLC fronted the High Creek address. Just inside the door a shaggy white haired unshaven older gent lay in a heap at the bottom of a flight of stairs. Accident, at first glance, yet the man was naked below the waist, his pants and briefs wrapped around his ankles. That appeared to have been the cause of his fall. At the top of the stairs sat a woman in a wheelchair, close in age to the dead man. With her was a social worker from Adult Protective Services or Apes, as they were sometimes called, a young woman in her thirties with shiny caramel colored hair and a bright green overcoat. She had a pretty face, but it was marred by a frown and severe expression. She was the one who had found the body and called it in. First responders had arrived about the same time as the deputy. They'd both agreed, a coroner's case. Something the Ape said to the deputy had made him request a detective from Violent Crimes.

The social worker, her id badge hanging from a blue lanyard around her neck displaying a none too flattering photo and her name, Shirley Holmes, explained that there had been previous incidents of domestic violence at this address. When Donovan suggested that maybe the woman had fought back this time, he was informed that the old woman, Ida Karanov, had been the instigator of the previous incidents.

He was just about to begin with some preliminary questions of the woman when Phil called to have him head out to the MCI on the lands. At the suggestion of the social worker, he arranged to have the woman taken to General and placed in one of the holding rooms at the hospital where she could be cared for by the medical staff if need be. She wasn't going anywhere in that wheelchair.

On the forty minute drive to the Rancheria he'd had a chance to mull over the potential crime scene. Older guy, Jay Karanov, the woman's husband, falls down a flight of stairs, about fifteen feet, breaks his neck. He has his trousers and briefs wrapped around his ankles. Well, it was Valentine's Day, after all, maybe he got a little frisky and the old woman didn't appreciate it. So she pushes him away. He loses his balance and takes the tumble. But why at the head of the stairs? Head at the head, he thought but dismissed it as cynical, the result of his experience over the years with the finer specimens of humanity.

Weston County in February was awash in yellow mustard and acacia blooms. A political compromise in the early 20th Century had created Weston County as a trapezoidal wedge between the conservatives of the Anderson County timberlands to the north, and the well to-do liberals in the agri-burbs of Tolay County to the south. Weston was a sampler of both of those ideologies and equally representative in its topography. To the West, Weston was bound by the rugged coast and the wide blue yonder of the Pacific. Consisting mostly of sparsely inhabited timberland vacation destinations and upscale enclaves notched into and around sheer granite oceanside cliffs, it stretched north to the county line as a continuation of the coastal range. The south and east of the county were taken up by arable lands, home to vineyards, orchards, and truck farms encroached on, steadily and year after year, by housing developments and the attendant paving.

Almost equidistant from the wave tumbled coast and the rolling grass and oak foothills at the Harbin County line to the east sat Santa Lena, the largest population center and the county seat. The heavily traveled north-south State four lane thoroughfare bisected the town and the main east-west artery, known as the Santa Lena Highway, cut across the northeast corner at the city limits.

At one point dispatch had requested his 10-20 and his ETA to the shooting scene. He informed the dispatcher that he'd just cleared the outskirts and was heading east on the Santa Lena Highway, figuring to arrive in about half an hour. He imagined Phil Collins listening to his answer in his office over the monitor speaker because it was his question that had prompted the radio traffic. Sometime later he'd heard the Crime Scene van check in as having arrived at the site.

The arrival had been acknowledged by dispatch, and he noted it on the timeline.

The tributary road off the highway was designated by a government number and had been freshly graded down to granite hard pack. He followed it until he came upon a pale green Forest Service pickup and the Ranger in the driver's seat who pointed him through the cattle gate and the deeply rutted dirt road beyond. His Crown Vic was just not built for that kind of terrain and he banged his head not a few times as the vehicle jolted, bounced, and balked at the

rough going. Things got a little better as he approached a large two story white farmhouse and outbuildings set in among a grove of ancient valley oaks. There were a handful of patrol units and Forest Service pick-ups gathered at the entrance to the fenced-in property. He parked off to the side of the road and checked in with dispatch. Overhead the leaden slab of clouds that stretched without end to the west threatened to mist as a fine drizzle.

The dispatch log put him there at 10 AM.

He walked into the yard noting the battered blue Explorer and rust red lightweight pick-up astride a set of extra-large wheels parked in front of the farmhouse. Nelson strode out to meet him, explaining "We're still waiting on the medical examiner." The Crime Scene van was parked off to one side and the tech had deployed the field lab from the side compartment. A large dog penned in near the outbuildings punctuated the air with its aggressive barks.

"All dead?"

"Yeah, five of them, male, non-white. We can go in as soon as the tech gives us the nod. I did a prelim walk through. I've never seen anything like that."

"Bloody mess?"

"No, that's not it. All head shots. They never knew what hit them."

"No witnesses?"

Nelson indicated the Crime Scene van and the elderly woman seated on the passenger's side with the door open. "Mrs. Elma Snyder. Lives in the granny unit out back. Didn't hear a thing. She found the bodies." And as an afterthought, "The tech, Fisher, knows her."

Almost on cue, Mary Fisher, in her blue crime scene coveralls, strode up and handed them each a pair of baby blue rubber gloves and booties to match. "We can go in and do the video walk through any time you're ready." She nodded acknowledging Donovan and smiled self-effacingly that was the way of her people.

"You know the old woman? Who is she?"

"That's Grandmother Snyder though everyone calls her Grandmother Spider. She's related to just about all the families here on the lands. My great aunt's cousin. She comes with the place. We

can talk to her once you're done inside. I don't think she knows anything, you know, about where Penny might have got off to."

"Penny, who is Penny?"

Penny Dessy was Oliver Dessy's wife, and she was missing. The ranch was her home, and her husband's, when Chief Warrant Officer Oliver Dessy wasn't off with the Army somewhere in the world. Afghanistan, Iraq, The Horn of Africa, he'd been to them all. He was regarded a hero to the people of the lands, his decorations and tales of his exploits, though ostensibly classified, were known to all and relished with the pride of kinship. Penny, his wife was not among the carnage inside the house. That Penny Dessy was missing made her a person of interest.

Donovan walked up the steps carefully appraising what he saw, impressed by the order and cleanliness of the front porch with its well-watered potted plants, white-painted wicker chairs and bright cushions, the worn boards of the deck swept clean of yard sand or tree debris, it could have given a pin lessons in neatness. Someone had devoted a lot of time to presenting a welcoming, thoughtful approach.

Mary Fisher had related the backstory on Penny Dessy, an outsider brought home from Oliver Dessy's tour as a combat field instructor at West Point. She was the adopted daughter of Brigadier General Otto Likhaus, a native woman from the lands of upstate New York. Her ways were different, and her forthrightness struck some of the Sage Valley residents as snooty and rude. She was a tall woman as well, and slender. Her looks attracted many of the men's eyes and desires which further alienated the close families on the lands. They had one son, Markus, who ran a telemarketing company based in Tolay County.

The sitting room immediately inside the front door was just as immaculate and well cared for as the verandah. Had it not been for the bodies. The tech had placed yellow A-frame number placards by each of the corpses. Donovan stood in the middle of the room and observed the position of each of the dead men. Number one and two, caught sitting, right between the eyes, mouths still open in surprise. Number three, not quite a center shot and may have been standing by the way he had fallen over the arm of the chair. Four looked like he had a defensive wound on his right hand, but the bullet tore right through it and entered just below the right eye. Number

five caught a slug just below the laryngeal prominence and then another at the hairline. The efficiency of the killing was chilling.

Appeared to be the work of a professional he noted on the timeline.

The on-scene deputies had searched the grounds but there was no sign of Penny.

“The only place we haven’t looked is in the shed.” Nelson pointed to the weathered outbuilding inside the enclosure guarded by the dog. “We can’t get past the dog.” He shrugged. “Might have to shoot it.”

Mary Fisher overheard them and shook her head. “No need to do that. Old Gus has got more barks than a three headed dog, but there’s no call to kill him for being who he is and what he does. Besides, I put in a call to Woody over at Animal Control. He’s on his way. And I’ve got ID’s on the victims if you’re interested.”

She led them down to the field lab where she had placed the wallets and various photo identifications laid out to be photographed. Donovan looked over her shoulder as she pointed to each. “Number one and two, Jacob Wiley and Jason Wiley, same Harbin County addresses, probably related, brothers.”

“You know them, don’t you,” he interjected.

With a slight movement of her chin down she caught a breath. “Yes, I have heard of them. Wild, into bad things, associated with white men. They were distant cousins of the Dessy’s, too”

He understood what she was saying. “What about number three?”

“Aaron Wiley, an older cousin of these two, played high school football with Oliver Dessy. Drugs, gambling, extortion. Number four, Thomas Bull.” She pointed to the driver license photo of a man whose head filled the square of photo. “A mean drunk. He’s my husband’s third cousin and we’ve seen his antics at family gatherings. My husband calls him a ‘wannabe badass’.”

Donovan picked up the photo id of number five. “I know this guy, Eric Badger, we had him for a gang related murder, but the witness conveniently disappeared.”

Animal Control arrived at the scene and checked in. He noted the time on the timeline.

Woodrow Ames, also known as Woody, was an animal behavior vet who deprecatingly called himself a glorified dog-catcher. A green County issue mesh ballcap held down the explosion of curly red hair that topped his skinny frame. And anyone one who knew Woody would agree with the assessment that he was fastidious about his uniform attire. A neat freak as the not-so polite would say. His new assistant, a young woman, retrieved the wire lasso at the end of a length of pole and he directed her to walk parallel to the fence in plain view of the large mastiff, attracting its attention. In the meantime, he retrieved a long dark case, the kind a pool shark might carry his professional cue in and extracted two long hollow tubes that he fit together to form an even longer tube. One end was fitted with a round rubber mouthpiece. He propped the blowgun on the open window of the driver's side door of his truck, inserted the dart in the opening of the tube, and positioned himself to aim. His assistant, glancing back over her shoulder once, moved closer to the fence and the dog on the other side that had by then worked itself into a froth of rage.

The dog gave a little yelp and then tried to bite its own neck before its back legs buckled followed by its head and front paws, it's heaving ribs slowly breathing shallower.

As soon as Woody gave the nod that it was safe to go in, they entered the shed to learn that it also served as a workshop of some kind though the saws and various other tools hung on the backboard over the bench appeared not to have been used in a while. Dust and cobwebs had taken over the corners and surfaces.

Shining his flashlight in a corner of the shed taken up by rusted farm equipment, Donovan noticed where the ground had been displaced, a mound of dirt next to an olive green wooden military footlocker. He scanned the faded black stenciling of the name *O. Dessy US Army* on the dust free surface. He lifted the lid. Empty, but he recognized the faint scent of gun oil.

"Somebody's been in here, working at this bench, recently," Nelson proclaimed as if he'd just had a Goldilocks moment. A deputy stepped into the shed. "Sheriff's on the radio for you, Donovan."

Donovan found the time in the radio log Sheriff Collins had contacted him and noted it. That was when they shut the investigation down or were shut down by the Feds.

“Go to channel 12!” Collins wanted to talk to him on his cell phone, but the reception was minimal this far out on the lands. “Channel 12” was code for channel 6, the scrambled channel, meant to confuse the scanner heads who hung on every word transmitted over various law enforcement frequencies. Of course any self-respecting scanner head had a descrambler and going to channel 12 would only fake them out for so long. “Shut it down! I want you to put everything back where you found it, every hair, every shell casing, every fingerprint, all of it, every bit of forensic evidence. I don’t want a trace that would show we’d ever been there.” At his protest, Collins replied, “Just do as I said. The Feds will be out there shortly, hand it over to them and leave. I’ll explain when you get back to the office.”

He heard it first, and the black chattering shape grew larger coming in from the southwest. The chopper swept low over the farmhouse and then back toward the access road where he’d been waiting by his sedan. There was a wide spot in the stubble field beyond the gnarly giant live oak near the entrance to the front yard. A tornado of fine beige dust and sand engulfed the chopper as it set down. The rear passenger door opened once the dust settled and two figures stepped out.

He could tell by the bouncing confident stride that the taller one was a woman. The man was wide shouldered built close to the ground and moved like a perfectly oiled killing machine. Not your likely Fed duo.

She held out her hand and introduced herself. “Special Agent Sharon Eckes. You must be Donovan.”

He shook her hand, a firm grip, not a perfunctory formality. She was dressed for the field, dark work slacks and the standard issue FBI windbreaker, black lanyard with badge ID, and a standard issue ballcap gathering her sandy blonde hair. Her partner was a little more fastidious in a brown leather jacket over a cranberry polo shirt that detailed a well-defined six-pack. His slacks were knife edge creased and a few shades lighter than his brown desert boots. On closer appraisal, he was an older man by the leathery bulldog jowls of his sun darkened features. The close cropped pate said ex-military, a squared off hand grenade with an aggressive hard stare.

“This is Wayne Tanner, DOD consultant with DHS. We'll be taking over the investigation from here on out. Thanks for securing the scene for us.”

Tanner deigned to speak, and at almost an octave higher than he'd expected. “Is this all exactly how you found it?” He motioned toward the farmhouse.

Donovan nodded, taking an instant dislike to the man. “Yep, exactly as it was found by the first officers on scene. So except for their footprints in the sand, it's a pristine crime scene.” He said the last with a hint of a smile.

“We heard you had a crime scene van out here. And animal control?”

Of course they would have monitored the local LE radio traffic. “Standard Operating Procedure on multi-casualty incidents. Out here, we thought we might need a tracking dog, and the Animal Control vet is also the head of Search and Rescue Team. They were canceled before they could deploy.”

“What agencies and personnel were at the scene? I'll need names, ranks, of anyone who was here.”

Donovan shrugged. Now he was certain that he detested the short stack of muscle and spleen. “County Sheriff's dispatch can probably fill you in on who the responding officers were. You'll have to contact HQ at High Point on what Florist Service personnel were out here.” He'd used a common nickname for the men in the green trucks out on the lands, known also as “greenies,” but it failed to get a reaction. He didn't mention that by the time the forensics van had packed up he saw Grandma Spider hightail it on her ATV over the rise in back of the ranch house.

On his way out to the main road just passed the fork in the rutted dirt track he met up with a black Mercedes mini motor home with a couple of bewildered techs in FBI ballcaps. He'd pulled off as far as possible to one side without getting wedged in the drainage ditch to let them pass.

The driver's side window floated down. “We on the right track to the scene?”

“Right you are. Keep following the ruts and bear left when you come to the fork.” How he loved the Feds. The driver didn't even give a thank you. And if they followed directions they would soon find themselves down pasture where the road played out amidst nothing but cattle.

With the time he'd vacated the scene and turned the incident over to the Feds so noted, and with a few, very few, comments appended, the report was done. The Sheriff could embellish his timeline however he wanted to frame the narrative he would spin to the Board of Supervisors and exculpate himself. Except that wasn't the end of the story.

Donovan knew enough to avoid swinging by the office to report in just yet, given the state of mind the Sheriff would be in, best to let the man have a chance to count to ten a few million times. At Santa Lena General, he was informed by the nurse at emergency receiving that the Apes social worker had left a number for him to call. The old gal, who might have pushed her husband down the stairs on Valentine's Day, a love story yet to be told, appeared to be sleeping in her wheelchair in the holding room, a sure sign of guilt according to the experts. Let sleeping dogs lie, he thought to himself.

Patients might gripe about hospital food, but the cafeteria always had a great entrée. He'd learned that as a young deputy. The servings were ample and the coffee always hot. And it was cheap. He'd skipped breakfast and hadn't even had a chance for his mid-morning power ring, cop talk for "doughnut." The rigatoni was tempting, and he pointed to it when the server questioned with her dark eyes. The phone to his ear rang twice before it was answered. "Shirley Holmes," a husky professional voice spoke.

"Detective Jim Donovan here, I'm at the hospital." He slid the tray with the heaping plate of rigatoni toward the register, pausing to lift a large paper coffee cup from the stack.

"She's as much as admitted that she pushed her husband down the stairs."

He grunted an acknowledgement as he fished a twenty from his billfold and handed it to the woman behind the register. "I'm in the cafeteria. If you meet me here I'll buy you lunch, and we can talk about it. Unless you recorded what she said, it's really your word against hers. And they've got a terrific rigatoni on the menu today."

"I'm Vegan."

As always when he encountered that assertion he wanted to ask, "Is that a planet in this solar system?" But he didn't.

“And I’m slammed with clients, plus my boss wants a prelim report on the quote unquote accident. I could maybe make some time around three-ish?”

“Ok, here’s what we’re going to do. I’ll set you up with Detective Nelson. He’ll give you a call seeing as how his last case just mysteriously vanished and arrange a meet up to take your statement and the Valentine Day killer’s.”

“What’s his name again?”

“Nelson.”

“Does he have a first name or is it just ‘detective’?”

“Uh,” Donovan paused at the coffee carafe and gave it a few hearty pumps, “You know, I’m not quite sure. Robert? Richard? I’m guessing. He’s Nelly to everyone in the squad room.”

“I’ll remember that.”

Donovan parked the sedan on the concrete apron taking up most of his backyard. There was an unwritten rule in law enforcement that a work vehicle should never be parked at the curb of one’s domicile, official language designating place of residence. Too easy and too tempting to break in and or vandalize. The previous owner had poured the slab that covered ninety percent of the small backyard crowded with a detached garage probably built in the early fifties. It was a sturdy two hundred plus square feet that housed his personal vehicle, a Mustang convertible boy toy, a midlife crisis gift to himself. Maybe the original owner didn’t like mowing the lawn although the piebald patch of turf in the front yard had been well maintained when he bought the place almost twelve years ago. He was the one responsible for its current shabby overgrown neglect. So what was he hiding under the slab? Bodies? Something that had occurred to him more than once. Cop thinking, he called it.

The neighbor’s cat came loping into the yard from a hole in the fence and rubbed against his pant leg as he unlocked the door to the covered porch that housed the washer dryer. The cat raced ahead as the door opened and stood next to the bowl by the washer and gave an imploring mew. Donovan reached into the box of kitten treats on the shelf with the laundry detergent and dribbled a handful into the bowl. It had been more than a few years, he’d lost track, since he’d announced “Honey, I’m home,” to give the bride a chance to stash her stash and straighten herself up, tuck a stray lock behind an ear, pretend she’d fallen asleep while reading the same book

she'd been reading for the last couple of months. It was a familiar cop story. So was the divorce.

The house was cold, and he set the thermostat up a notch as he headed for the front door and the few items of mail scattered on the rubber welcome mat under the mail slot. He stooped to pick them up and the way he grunted they were apparently heavier than they looked. Nothing, nothing, nothing, bill, and more nothing. He set the bill on the table in the entrance way with the other bills and tossed the rest into the circular file that had once been an umbrella stand.

The day caught up with him as he climbed the stairs to the bedroom, a weariness that had been building over his last shift and the one before that. He was old, no "getting" about it, and retirement, once playfully lobbed around the squad room when the job got too demented or absurd and the endless hoop filled bureaucracy just making it worse, was a serious consideration, especially after the reprimand.

He tossed his jacket on the bed, placed the hip holster and firearm in the top drawer of the dresser, whipped off the tie, unbuttoned his shirt, dropped his trousers, slipped off his sock, and stepped out of his briefs. The tile floor in the bathroom was cool against his wearied dogs. He didn't hesitate stepping into the shower and turning it on full blast. First there was the shriveling cold water pelting his bare back and then slowly as the warm water worked its way up the plumbing a warm soothing wash before the scald of hot that made him jump back and adjust the mix. By then he was wet and the tension, the dust from the lands, the weary knotted road muscles were just washed away.

He replayed his conversation with the boss as the stinging spray washed across his face. Actually it was less of a conversation, more like a reluctant audience to Phil's rant against the Feds. "Can you believe it, they want to cover this up, like it never happened!" Homeland Security had declared the murder scene a classified black site because the killings were obviously a terrorist act. Everyone present at the scene was advised that any disclosure of classified information regarding the terrorist incident would result in hefty fines and or prison time. "Bullshit!" Phil shouted in frustration, and there was no arguing with that.

Drying himself off he turned on the TV and sat on the edge of the bed to catch the early news. He could have predicted it. A throng of reporters swarmed Sheriff Phil Collins in his gold starred

uniform finery as he was leaving Headquarters. The questions were of the "is there any truth" variety and specifically referenced the multiple shooting out on the lands. So much for secrecy. He felt like saying "Houston, we have a problem" but he didn't talk to the TV. That was his ex-wife's routine.

He dressed checking the time and messages on his phone. Royanne from the coroner's office wished him a Happy Valentine's Day, and Judy from the DA's office sent him a picture of candy hearts that said things like "You Rock," "Got Luv?," and "Hanky Panky."

He urged the cat out the back door with a light nudge of the toe of a dress loafer. Latching it shut he strode across the yard in the encroaching twilight in a pair of stone washed jeans, a pale blue collared shirt under a sturdy beige canvas windbreaker. He backed the Mustang out of the garage and let it idle a while to warm up the interior, the winter evenings still a little brisk in February. He tuned out the radio news and slipped a favorite Etta James CD into the dashboard slot. Once on the street, he steered east toward Old Town Santa Lena.

Only two hotels in Santa Lena guaranteed government rates. One was a dive with a big heated pool. The other was almost a dive with a big heated pool and a cocktail lounge. He parked in the lot, no valet service, and walked up the steps into the lobby. He'd been to the Santa Lena Hilton a number of times, probably as many times as the establishment had changed hands so it might not have been part of the Hilton chain anymore, but that's what everyone called it. The entrance to the lounge was to the left of the reception desk. He stood in the doorway letting his eyes adjust to the dusky light.

She was sitting by herself at the end of the bar poking at the ice in her tall cocktail with a slender crimson straw. She sensed his approach and turned as he asked, "Buy you a drink?" Special Agent Eckes gave him a weary smile. "Sunshine Superman. I was wondering if you'd show up."

No one had called him Sunshine Superman since his rookie patrol days so that made him feel young as well as in love.

Donovan made a mental note to renew his health club membership. He stared at the ceiling, one of the myriad shades of gray in the darkened hotel room. His heart rate was dropping back to normal and he was no longer breathing as heavily. All in all, he felt like a

wrung out dishrag. She wasn't a big woman, but she was fit, a runner. That would account for the stamina. She'd held him tight and forced her tongue down his throat. One thing led to another.

He heard water running through the half open bathroom door. He thought back to their preliminary banter in the lounge over drinks. She'd said, "I know you think we're just a bunch of overeducated desk bound dummies."

"With guns."

"What is it with cops? Can't they accept anyone outside their exclusive blue fraternity to be an armed sworn officer?"

"Too many guns as it is. It's a safety issue."

And then they got into a back and forth about the classification of the murder scene. He called it a cover-up.

"You mean a broom and rug operation?"

"Exactly."

"You'll never hear me admitting that."

"And your partner, the DOD DHS universal soldier. . . ."

"He's not my partner."

"Who is he then?"

"I'd tell you but I'd. . . ."

"Yeah I know, 'have to shoot me.' I think I know the backstory, and if I figured it out, you can bet some investigative snoop will tumble to it."

"No comment."

"Ok, I'm going to tell you what I think the scenario is and you're going to blink your big beautiful eyes, one blink is yes, and two is no."

"Who am I, Paula Revere? But alright, try me."

"Major Jowls is a military gunslinger bounty hunter cleanup man and he had a very specific target. Someone he's been tracking for quite some time."

"What's the code again? Sorry, that third cocktail went to my head. One yes, two no?"

"Was that a yes?"

"No, I think my contact lens is slipping."

"I'll take that as a yes. The person he is hunting, to likely kill, with the help of the FBI I might add, is the mysterious and legendary Oliver Dessy, US Army."

“Chief Warrant Officer Dessy was on an operation in Northern Afghanistan and got caught in an ambush. He is presumed missing in action.”

He knew that. Mary Fisher had brought him up to speed on the Dessys as they were packing up to leave. The Army had notified Penny Dessy that her husband was missing in action almost two years previous. That's when the protectors showed up, men distantly related to the family to provide security for the widow of their hero out in the middle of nowhere all by herself. She'd said it with a hint of ridicule in her voice and he'd wondered how Mrs. Dessy had held off those thugs. The answer was Grandmother Spider, the men were afraid of her power, something she was well known for among all the families. As long as they behaved themselves, they had nothing to fear. And Penny Dessy, always a gracious woman, kept to herself, and her blanket loom, away from the men who were taking advantage of her hospitality by claiming kinship to her late husband. He wasn't going to attribute the efficiency of the killing to either Penelope Dessy or Grandmother Spider. The men had obviously been caught by surprise. No warning. If it had been a stranger or strangers, old Gus would have raised the alarm. And he hadn't. Poor old Gus. According to the FBI, old Gus had come out of his stupor just as the bounty hunter was rooting around in the shed. He'd managed maul the man's thigh before Tanner shot him defending himself.

The FBI stood at the foot of the bed wearing the complimentary white bathrobe but open in front and leaving nothing to the imagination. She smiled at his smile. “A penny for your thoughts.”

“I was just thinking about old Gus.”

“You're such a romantic. And you never said anything about a dog.”

“It slipped my mind. I think I was distracted.”

“If it makes you feel any better, Tanner needed a hundred stitches.” She crawled toward him across the rumpled sheets and put her chin on his chest so she could look into his eyes. “Were you thinking about anything else?”

“As a matter of fact,” he said snagging the lanyard with her government identification hanging from the back of the chair next to the bed, “I was just looking at your ID here. . . .”

“I hate that picture,” she said turning her head to look at it.

“Did you know that if you used just your first initial with your name it would say ‘sex’?”

Special Agent Sharon Eckes' elbows dug into his chest as she got squarely in his face. “Did you know that if I had a dollar for every time some horndog told me that, I could pay off my student loan and still buy a condo on Miami Beach?”

Donovan stared at the blinking cursor at the bottom of the page. He saved the document, attached it to the email addressed to Sheriff Phil Collins and was about to hit send when he looked up to see Nelly standing in front of his desk with a big friendly grin on his face.

“How's it going, old man?”

“I could complain but why be predictable. How's the love life on planet of the Apes?”

“You know she calls you ‘Cupid’ now.”

“That's gonna be a hard one to live down. I might have to retire.”

Donovan hit send and watched the document disappear from his screen. Nothing in it said anything about his hunch as to who the killer might be. He'd done a little off the books research on his own. A few months before Dessy was reported missing in action, a drone strike in Northern Afghanistan had targeted and killed a wedding party of non-combatants. It was in an area that Chief Dessy was operating, training a local militia fighting the Taliban. Then there was the report of a top ISS official being assassinated in Karachi. Not long afterward at a clandestine CIA airfield in Pakistan numerous explosions had destroyed or disabled the drone fleet housed there. An attaché to the US Embassy was gunned down in the streets of Lahore. More recently a top Special Operations Command Colonel was found strangled in his home in North Carolina. And around the holidays, the CEO of a government contractor providing mercenaries in Afghanistan was found with his throat cut in a Denver hotel room. Although it was just a guess, the sequence of actions reeked of payback. He'd received a cryptic text from sexy Sharon a week or so past that said, “Picked up the trail in Ithaca.” He assumed upstate New York as he wasn't aware of any other place with that name. He also assumed that Chief Warrant Officer Oliver Dessy was armed, extremely dangerous, out for revenge, and so far had managed to elude the government gunslinger.