

**ROME IS
BURNING**

A Novel

Roy A. Teel Jr.

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Roy A. Teel Jr.

The Iron Eagle Series: Book Three



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*“Every civilization creates its own
destiny with disaster.”*

Roy A. Teel Jr.

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*“This is the sorrowful state of souls unsure,
Whose lives earned neither honor nor bad fame.
And they are mingled with angels of the base sort
Who, neither rebellious to God nor faithful to Him,
Chose neither side, but kept themselves apart—
Now Heaven expels them, not to mar its splendor,
And Hell rejects them, lest the wicked of heart
Take glory over them.”*

*The Inferno of Dante: Canto III-30
(Translation by Robert Pinsky)*



MARK OF THE IRON EAGLE

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CHAPTER ONE

“Fine. I’ll have Sam for dinner tomorrow night.”

“**H**ands in prayer!” Ron Marcus was quoted as saying after finding the disembodied hands rising from the ground in front of the Griffith Park Observatory during his regular morning run. The media jumped all over the quote, and it was the day’s headline even as investigators were arriving on scene trying to understand where the rest of the body was. Jim was called upon as the Sheriff of Los Angeles County to reassure a nervous public that everything that could be done was being done to find the killer. While the hands were a new touch, this was the fourth gruesome crime scene in three months and all were in Griffith Park. The media had nicknamed the killer the Griffith Grinder, and the notes left by the killer were as cryptic as the crime scenes themselves. Always a note written in blood on linen paper sealed with a maroon and black wax seal of the fleur-de-lis. If you were a football fan, you would recognize the symbol on the helmets of the New Orleans Saints. It was an ancient French symbol, and legend had it that it was displayed on the flags and armor of Joan of Arc’s army in the battles against Britain; a beloved heroine who helped to free France, and in an ironic twist of fate was burned at the stake as a heretic.

When Jim arrived on scene, he was besieged by reporters all asking the same question, “What does the killer want?” If there was one thing Jim O’Brian was not, he was not a soft-spoken shoe tapping politician. “What does the killer want?” he bellowed to several reporters, “what you’re giving the killer right now. Media attention.

Stop running articles and crazy ass news stories, and the killer won't get the prestige or attention." But that wasn't all. He knew the darker side of the story and the killer – that there was a woman in LA killing men. Her notes, while cryptic, always closed with the same message to law enforcement: *"To change the world, the blood of the innocent must be shed, the blood of all mankind."*

John arrived on scene within minutes of Jim, and the two met out of the public eye to discuss this new killing and note. John had traded his pickup for a sedan. He wasn't a fan of the new digs, but it was what his new position as the head of the Behavioral Science Unit of the Los Angeles FBI headquarters required. He was promoted to Steve Hoffman's position after what the news media had dubbed the 'Barstow Feedings,' a headline both literal and factual. All of the people he worked with had advanced in their careers, leaving him as the head of a division he sometimes felt ill at ease overseeing. On top of everything else, his wife, Dr. Sara Swenson, had inherited a multibillion dollar estate from the late Walter Cruthers, who was, himself, a serial killer of young women. Sara had taken on the role of wealthy heiress reluctantly but had adapted quite well over the past several months. Money was no longer an issue for them but both insisted on continuing their careers despite their newfound wealth.

Jim was standing outside of a crime scene tent set up by the coroner where the latest victim's body parts had been found. His dress uniform and the five stars on his collar in the morning sunlight made him look like a decorated general. He ran for Sheriff after the Barstow case on the platform of changing the department; he was also both inspired and instructed to shut up or run after his wife, Barbara, had had enough of his bitching about the department. John walked up to him as he stood looking out over a knoll onto downtown Los Angeles, smoking a cigarette, and cursing under his breath. He saw John approaching. "Please tell me that this is now your fucking crime scene." He shook his head. "Oh, come the fuck on, John. Does Steve have his head up his ass now that he's running things at Quantico? All we have are parts, just fucking ground meat of, now, a fourth person. All victims are male and all killed to send us a message." "I agree with you a hundred percent, Jim. I called Steve on my way over, but he says it's still your baby. This has not crossed into our jurisdiction."

"Are you two idiots? The letters from this psycho bitch are threatening to kill the citizens of Los Angeles. That doesn't rise to the federal level?" "She has made no direct threats against civilian targets. Veiled threats are not going to get the federal cavalry sent in." Jim took a drag of his cigarette and threw it on the ground. "Oh, go fuck yourself! Did you read the notes she left?" John nodded. "John, this is domestic terrorism. This chick isn't working alone; she's part of something way bigger than we can imagine, and the people of Los Angeles are in jeopardy." John nodded in agreement. Jim looked out over the skyline and asked,

“Where’s The Eagle in all of this?” “I don’t know, Jim.” “Oh, fuck me. If anyone knows who The Eagle is and what he’s thinking, it’s you.” John said nothing.

“Is Jade in the tent?” John asked. “Yea...she’s lifting prints from the poor bastard’s fingers to try and get an ID on him.” John walked over to the tent entrance. Jade was in her coroner’s jumpsuit placing fingerprint samples into a baggie when he walked in. “So,” he said. She looked up from her kneeling position and smiled. “Well, if it isn’t Special Agent John Swenson, as I live and breathe. Have you come to save me from this wretched place?” He laughed at her poorly executed southern accent and Scarlett O’Hara impression with a response of, “Frankly, Jade, I don’t give a damn.” She got to her feet and handed the samples off to one of her assistants. “What do we have?” he asked. “The same as the other three. He was put through a meat grinder.” John shook his head. “What a way to die!” “He felt it all, John. Every inch of his body being ground into hamburger just like the other three victims.” “Jim wants us to take over,” he said. “I’ve only read some of the reports about the killer’s notes, but I have to agree with him; you guys should be in the middle of this.” “I agree, Jade, but my hands are tied by Washington.” “You mean Steve Hoffman. If he were here in your position, he would be all over this, but he’s not the one calling the shots here, is he?” John shook his head. “Well, based on this victim’s placement and the contents of the note, I figure there’s about to be an escalation in the body count.” John’s face sunk. “Based on what?” he asked. “A gut feeling I have. These killings are foreplay, John. This gal is part of something much bigger and much more ominous.” He thanked her for her candor and walked back out of the tent where Jim was giving a news conference.

“Four killings do not a citywide panic make.” He was doing his best to placate the media while at the same time poking the beast. John called for his team to come in and to get copies of everything that LA County had on the killings. He also ordered the notes be sent to the FBI crime lab in LA, so he could look them over. Jim heard him making calls and giving orders as he was finishing up his news conference. “Ladies and gentleman, I’ve just been informed that the FBI will be joining my office in investigating these killings. Allow me to introduce Special Agent John Swenson, the head of the Los Angeles Field Office of Behavioral Science.” John shot him a look. Jim knew he was bringing the wrath of Steve Hoffman and others down on John, but he needed a scapegoat. John muttered a few things into the microphone and handed it off to the public relations officer for the sheriff’s department. He got over to Jim and said, “That was dirty pool, Jim. I’m going to catch hell for that.” Jim smiled and said, “I know...welcome to the big league, kid!”



Sajahd Rasmush called out “number seventy nine” as he stood behind the counter at the California Department of Motor Vehicles in Canoga Park where he had been employed for ten years. He called the number again, but there was no reply, so he called out “number eighty,” and a voice came calling from the back of the DMV office. Seth Markowitz was running full bore to the window, yelling, “I’m seventy nine; I’m number seventy nine.” Saj wasn’t in a forgiving mood. “You had your chance. Take another ticket.” Seth was out of breath as Saj called for number eighty again with no response. “Please, sir. I’ve been here all day. I had an appointment but was late, and this is my second round with the numbers. I got a call while I was waiting earlier.” Saj hadn’t been paying attention, but Seth was dressed in an LA County Fire Department uniform. He took the ticket and the paperwork and started reading it over. “You didn’t fill out the back of form 2225-55-3-T-Y-A.” Seth looked at the form closely and said, “I don’t have to. That form is only if I’m declaring the vehicle as non-operational to avoid registration. The truck is running. I need a new registration.”

Saj looked over the paperwork and grabbed a stamp off his counter, hit the forms, walked to the back of his cage, and grabbed a set of license plates and registration tags. He typed in the data as Seth spoke, “Oh, thank you. I have had a hell of a day, and I’m still on duty. If this radio goes off again, I’m going to scream.” Saj didn’t react; he just kept typing. “Not the conversational type, huh?” Saj gave him a cold look and pressed the print button. He pulled off the report, handed Seth the plates and registration, and called out for number eighty again. Seth shook his head, grabbed the plates and the paperwork and said, “Fuckin’ towel-headed termite asshole,” and walked out. Saj didn’t react; he just called out for number eighty again before moving on.



Colleen Bolton was finishing up paperwork at the LA County Assessor’s office when Samuel Provost walked in. He had been her supervisor for just over three months, and he was a pig. She was leaning over the copy machine putting in paper as he walked by and slapped her on the ass. “You’re hot stuff, babe. You give me what I want, and I will give you what you want.” She walked back to her desk and pulled the reports she had done for him that were supposed to have been done by him and took them to his office. She laid them on his desk, and he asked if she had done them correctly. She nodded. “You better not have fucked them up. I have to present these to the board of supervisors tonight and practically every city office will be present.” “These are the risk assessment forms you requested, Sam. I know you’re new to this office and our procedures, but I assure you that these reports break down each disaster scenario

the city and county could face. Fire, earthquakes, tsunamis, even terrorist scenarios, which are most unlikely. It's all there. You won't be embarrassed. I have been doing this for years. You'll be just fine." She was cold and indifferent to his attitude. "Well, hot damn. You're beautiful, sexy, and smart." She rolled her eyes as she turned to walk out of his office. He was only the county assessor because his brother was the Assistant Mayor of Los Angeles. He was huffing and puffing when he moved to block her from leaving. "I know what you're thinking, Colleen; I'm too sexy for you! I have a lot of influential friends in this city. I could make your life a lot easier not to mention a lot more profitable if you would play ball with me, or, more accurately, play with my balls." She drew in close to him and said, "Not if you were the last man on earth. If you touch me again, I promise you that it will be the last time you ever touch any woman including your wife." He didn't move. He laughed and said, "Women have been using that tired old line on me my whole life." She asked him to move. "I need you to work late tonight. I have the meeting at eight, and I need you to work with me on my speech and on the presentation maps before I go over there." She nodded, and he moved out of the way.

It was ten to five, and the office was starting to thin out. She knew that this was going to be another night of fighting him off as he made crude advances and rude sexual innuendoes. She sat down with the county maps for Los Angeles, as well as Riverside, Orange, San Bernardino, San Diego, and Ventura, rolled them up, and placed them in her bag to take home. It was five thirty, and the office was empty when Sam called her in. They spent the next hour going over the disaster preparedness report, and he never once made any crude or improper statements, gestures, or movements. "Okay," he said, "so, this gives us all the possible scenarios in the event of a major fire, earthquake, tsunami, or other natural disaster, as well as terrorist scenarios?" "Yes." "Outstanding! Great work, Colleen." He looked at his watch. "Shit! It's six forty-five; we don't have much time." She looked at him with confusion. "Time for what?" He stood up and started to unbutton his pants. "What the hell are you doing, Sam?" "You're going to give me head." "The hell I am. You have gone way too far this time, Mr. Provost. I'm reporting you for sexual harassment."

She got up to leave his office, and he cleared his throat. "You can do that, Colleen. You can file that complaint first thing in the morning after you have cleaned out your desk tonight and signed your letter of termination." She didn't flinch. "You have no standing here, Sam, and I will clean your clock; you will have no future in politics when this gets out." "And you won't have a future in government work or any other types of work either, Ms. Bolton. You see, I know you've been removing city and state-owned property from this building for over a year now. I also know and can prove that you lied to the board of supervisors three times in the past year about fire

and water zoning reports, and I can only guess that the reason you did it was to advance someone's political agenda. I don't care who you're banging or who's banging you to get inside information from this office, that's your deal; however, you will fall to your knees and start sucking my cock, and you will swallow every drop of my cum, or I will terminate you with cause and turn over my discovery to the board of supervisors and the district attorney's office and let them decide what should be done with you."

She froze as the words came out of his mouth. A smile grew across his face. "Your ass is literally mine now, Ms. Bolton, so if you want to keep your job in this office as well as your reputation, and protect whomever you have been stealing detailed plotting and plan maps for all of this time, you will do I as I instruct." She looked over at the clock. It was five to seven, and he would be the first presenter, which she knew meant he had only twenty minutes before he had to be in his car to make it to the meeting on time. "I don't know where you get off, Mr. Provost." He smiled and said, "For the moment, in your throat. Take off your clothes!" "I have no idea what you are talking about and such allegations are unfounded and without merit." She could see that he was both watching the clock and her and was getting angry. "Okay, let me put it another way, Ms. Bolton. You have two choices. If there's nothing to my allegations, turn and walk out of my office. I will have your termination letter on my desk for your signature before you leave this evening, and you can adjudicate your allegations against me, and I will turn over the evidence I have against you. Or ... you can do the smart thing and strip and suck my cock, and tomorrow we will work out our new private sexual agreement that keeps your secret safe and gives me what I want. You have thirty seconds to decide."

The look on her face said it all as she began to remove her clothing and knelt down before taking him in her mouth. His head went back in sheer pleasure. When she had finished him, he pushed her back and pulled his pants up. "Wear a skirt tomorrow. No panties, so I have easy access when I want it." He straightened his tie as he walked out the office door. She quietly picked up her clothing and went to the ladies' room to dress. "He has no idea what he's done!" she mumbled under her breath as the bathroom door closed behind her.



Saj and Seth were sitting in the living room of their secure apartment when Colleen arrived. She put her purse and bag down and pulled out the maps. Seth met her in the foyer and took the maps from her. "You look less than happy this evening, Colonel." She put her suit coat on the back of a chair in the living room and sat down. "Well,

that's because I have a throat coated in Sam Provost's semen." "What happened?" Saj heard Seth ask the question, but he already knew the answer. "How much does he know?" "Enough that I'm going to be getting fucked by him for a while...and I do mean that literally." "Know what?" asked Seth. "That he's going to fuck me. Tomorrow, he wants me in a skirt for 'ease of access.'" "No, Colonel. How much does he know about what you've been doing?" "Oh...he only knows that I misled the supervisors, and that I've been removing maps and reports for more than a year. Don't worry; he thinks that I'm giving sex to another bozo in power. He has no idea what our real plan is." Saj got a grave look on his face. "How can you be sure?" "Saj...they could tie all the maps and falsified reports I've made over the past year to me, and they would have no idea what we're planning." "If this guy decides to throw you under the bus, we don't need the attention." "So ... what do you want me to do?" she asked, taking off her blouse and bra while walking to the bathroom.

"What the hell are you doing?" asked Saj. "I'm going to brush my teeth, take a shower, and then eat something to get the taste of dick out of my mouth. What do you suggest I do, Saj?" She had slipped off her skirt and panties and was stepping into the shower as he and Seth walked to the bathroom door. "Is this apartment still a safe zone?" Saj asked. "Yes!" she said from the shower while spitting water out of her mouth. "We need to call a meeting with the rest of the group," Saj said in a serious tone. "Don't tell me you're afraid for my virginity?" She peeked out around the shower curtain with a smile on her face. "Hardly!" Saj said laughing. "Your body hasn't seen virgin in a lot of years!" She shut the shower off, opened the curtain, and asked Seth for a towel. After drying off, she headed toward the small kitchen and stood nude in front of the refrigerator, grabbing a beer. She sat down on the living room couch with her feet on the ottoman and said, "I'm forty seven years old, Saj. I was a virgin once." He sat down on the couch next to her with a beer, and Seth sat down in a chair.

"Did you two get the registration on the last truck done today?" They nodded. Saj said with a worried tone, "We need to have a meeting of the council tonight about this new development." She swigged back the beer and said, "I can take a pounding and swallow some cum for a few more weeks until we have the rest of our plan in place." Saj dialed a number and put his cell phone on speaker. A man with a thick Mexican accent answered the phone. "Mr. Santiago? This is Saj. Is Valente there?" "Si." There were a few moments of silence, and Valente came on the line. "Hello, Saj. What's going on?" "I want to get Cathy on the line, too, before we talk." "So, get her on the line." He got Cathy Gutaree on the line as well. "This is a secure line, folks," said Raj. "Is this a formal council meeting?" asked Cathy. "Yes," responded Saj. "Go," Valente said, and Saj and Colleen explained the situation and Saj's concern. When they were finished, Valente spoke first. "Colleen, while I know you like sucking dick and getting

fucked, literally, even by guys like Sam, you can't take this one for the fun of taking it. I know exactly what you want to do to Sam, and you get to do it, but I think you should do it now not later. He's already a loose cannon, and you can give him everything he wants sexually, but sooner rather than later he's going to say something, and he could destroy years of planning."

Colleen threw her hands in the air. "Fine. I'll have Sam for dinner tomorrow night. You're all invited. Be at my house at nine, so I have time to prepare the meal. I don't want to go fancy, so how about burgers?" Valente laughed. "That's fine." "I can let him fuck me, right?" Cathy sighed on the other end of the line. "Colleen, I know this is all a big game to you, and I know you're a sex freak, but don't get us into trouble here. Too much has gone into this." Colleen started laughing. "I just want a little ... juice ... for the fire tomorrow night, that's all." Saj grabbed her tit and twisted her nipple. She spread her legs and mouthed, "Do me, big boy!" He just laughed as Valente cleared his throat. "Okay. Colleen has dinner planned for tomorrow night. Do we have the last of the Southern California county maps?" "Yea. I brought them home tonight." "Great, Colonel. To keep things safe, if it's okay with you, I recommend that you call in sick tomorrow. You can invite Sam over and fuck his brains out all day; I don't care. I just want him taken care of by the time you put dinner on the table." "Oh, don't you worry about that. I'll let him grind me good all day, and then I will grind him good for the night. Dinner will be on the table tomorrow, and it will be on time and tasty."

"Seth and Saj, you two finished up with the last truck?" Saj spoke up. "Yea. We did it today, so we have the lot full." "Cathy, have you gotten the last of the fuel that we need?" "I have one more delivery, but that will come in next week, so we will be ready no later than next Friday." There was a moment of silence. "Seth, how are you doing with the fire equipment?" He had taken a sip of his beer and said, "I have rerouted all 911 traffic and air support as well as call centers going into all Southern California stations to our own center. I just need to input the override code, and every county from Ventura to San Diego will be routed to us. No one will know anything is happening until it's too late." "How many people do we have for staging when we're ready to burn?" Colleen spoke up. "We have three teams of four in each county; they already have their orders and are ready to go at a moment's notice." There was a pause before Seth spoke up. "And The Eagle?" "Nothing...not a word," Colleen said with a great deal of disappointment. "When you're done with Sam tomorrow night, you need to make a direct plea to him. This taunting isn't getting it done. He's either too stupid to get the hint or too smart to fall for it." "It's the latter," said Valente, "I've heard a lot of chatter from friends of mine who are cops and on the coroner's cleanup staff, and he's getting the messages. He's just not biting." "Then, as I said, Colleen needs to be more direct in her approach." "If we knew who the fuck he was, it would help," Seth

heaved. "I know someone who might know who the Eagle is," said Valente. Angrily, and while swigging her beer, Colleen asked why the hell he hadn't said something about it before. "I just got the information the other night at the bar." "A name, please, sir!" "LA County Sheriff Jim O'Brian has said he thinks he knows who the Eagle is." Colleen said, "Well then, Valente, that's your job. It's your bar. It's police HQ when they're not working." There was a pause, and Valente said, "Yea. I'll talk to him. He should be in in the next day or so."

Colleen spoke back up, "According to the National Weather Service, there is a Santa Ana wind event expected in the next week. I think we push up our timeline to coincide with that event. All those in favor?" There was a resounding round of ayes. "Okay, we will discuss this in more detail tomorrow night at my house. Agreed?" The way she said it, it wasn't a request; it was an order. "Is the apartment still a secure location?" Seth asked. Colleen said, "Yes. No one in the world knows what we're doing here. The place is a fortress of security, and we have all incoming and outgoing communications encrypted. You could be standing at the front door with a mega-bugging device, and you wouldn't hear anything." "Your house is a safe zone, too?" asked Valente. "You bet. My dad set up the countersurveillance equipment there when I was a kid, and I have added to it and enhanced it since he passed away. I also worked out a deal with one of the privates at Pendleton PX; he felt really bad about what the Corps did to me, so I have a ton of upgraded military equipment at my home. We are fine there." Seth asked Colleen if she had spoken to Washington. There was a tense moment of silence.

"Yes. I have spoken to the supreme commander, and he will move as soon as we make ours." There was no response. Colleen said, "Okay, since there are no more comments or questions, good night to you all, and I will see you at dinner tomorrow." "What are you calling dinner tomorrow, Colleen?" Valente asked. "It's not what, Valente; it's who. Tomorrow, we're having Provost burgers and sausage!" There were laughs all around. "No trophies or murder scenes, Colleen. We need a clean kill and a missing person," Valente said. "I understand." The lines went dead. "Well, I don't know about you two, but I'm horny!" Saj looked at Seth and said, "No crossing swords!" They laughed as they followed Colleen into the bedroom undressing as they went. Seth said, "She really needs help with the sex compulsion she has." Saj had just taken off his underwear and was looking at Colleen on her knees on the bed waiting for them. "You want to bring that up now? Really?" The bedroom door closed behind Saj as Colleen was calling him to get the taste of Provost out of her mouth.



CHAPTER TWO

“I think Jim knows the identity of The Eagle.”

John got home at half past nine. Sara was sitting in the solarium of their new home on the beach in Malibu. She called out to him when she heard the door. He walked in and sat down. “How are you doing, Sara?” She was reading a medical journal and put it down and walked over and gave him a big kiss. “I’m doing better now that you’re home!” Sara called out to Maria and asked about dinner. After the windfall inheritance, Sara modified their lifestyle to make them more comfortable. Maria Espino had been Sara’s housekeeper for nearly five years, and she trusted her with her life, so she hired Maria as her full-time maid and hired household staff to work under her direction. The accommodations for Maria and the rest of the staff were extravagant to say the least. Each employee had a four thousand square foot home with a private yard, pool, and Jacuzzi. The houses would eventually be connected by an elaborate set of breezeways to twelve employee housing units for full time staff.

The mansion sprawled over two acres and boasted every amenity known to man. The house was self supporting and relied on no outside services. It was an architectural wonder, and a litany of magazines had been vying to get access to the home; however, Sara refused them all. The whole of the property was connected to the Pacific Coast Highway by a main gated street entrance and a series of underground tunnels, and while the majority of the house and grounds were still under construction, there was a two mile tunnel that

connected the Eagle's private section of the mansion to PCH. Two other underground roadways were in different stages of construction or development.

John had taken the extreme step of having the Parson's Trail home in Chatsworth destroyed. He had no need for it any longer now that The Eagle could do his work in their new home. He had the land cleared except for some storage containers that he kept there with extra vehicles and equipment. They purchased nearly ten thousand acres around it and set it up as a nature preserve. John designed, and had constructed, his own 'justice chamber,' as he called it, in a remote section of the Malibu house, and had it stocked for any needs that The Eagle might have in meting out justice when necessary.

Maria announced that dinner was ready in the small dining room overlooking the ocean. Sara and John adjourned for dinner and light conversation, but Sara could see that John was distracted. She left it alone until after the meal, and they went out onto the deck off the master bedroom to relax with a glass of wine. John had one, too. It took some doing on his part; he had given up drinking after his wife, Amber, had been murdered. They had both been huge wine fans and collected and tasted every chance they got. After her death, he went on a drinking binge that nearly killed him. He swore off all alcohol for over a decade. Sara brought not only love back into his life but the love of wine, and he allowed himself to enjoy a glass now and again but only with Sara, and he limited himself to two glasses.

When they were settled, Sara asked, "You're not here with me tonight. Where are you?" He took a sip of his wine and said, "I'm thinking of leaving the Bureau." He said it so calmly and so matter-of-factly that she was taken very much by surprise. "Oh... and what inspired this idea?" She sipped her wine and listened to the sea crashing out in the darkness off the deck. "I'm tired; I'm not enjoying what I do anymore." She didn't respond right away and sat quiet, lounging in a terrycloth robe and slippers. "Well," she said, "it's your life and your career, John. Money is not an issue for us. What would you do if you left the Bureau?" There was a long and awkward silence. "I'm thinking about making the work of The Eagle my full-time vocation." "What? Like Batman? This will be your cave, and you will fight for justice on the streets of Los Angeles. Superheroes are the things of fiction, John." He put his glass down and walked to the edge of the deck, staring out into the darkness of the Pacific Ocean as the surf crashed below his feet. "No. Nothing like that. I just feel that The Eagle could do a lot more good if he was stopping the evil before it started." She walked over to stand next to him on the balcony. "That's great in theory, honey, but without your work, you would not have the drop on the evil that's happening in this fine city or anywhere else for that matter. Have you considered that?" He looked over at her pretty face. "Yes. I know it's a foolish idea. I just needed to hear myself say it out loud."

She leaned her head against him and took a sip of her wine. “Life has changed a lot and fast; don’t think that I haven’t had thoughts of leaving the practice of medicine and just becoming an administrator or retiring altogether and traveling the world with you. I really think that we should set a firm retirement plan for the two of us, so we can quit the race and enjoy the money that we have received. But I also know, for me, I’m not ready to throw away years of education and the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of my fellow man even with the vast wealth we inherited. I feel that we are doing everything opposite of the monster who left this money to me. To us. We are a team, and I think together in our current jobs we can make a difference in the world.” He leaned down and kissed her gently on the lips. “That’s why I talk to you. You make sense to me. For me. You’re a great sounding board, and you are a hundred percent right; however, I feel a change in the air, Sara. An ominous feeling that I have never felt before.” She looked him in the eye. “Are you afraid?” He shook his head. “No... not at all. I don’t know or understand fear, at least for myself. I worry about you, but I don’t fear for you. There is something going on with these recent murders.” “The Grinder murders?” He nodded. “This is a different breed of killer, not some nut job randomly killing people for the fun of it. I spent all afternoon in the office reading the notes left behind by the killer. She writes in riddles.”

Sara pulled back, looking at John with astonishment. “She?” “Yea...it’s a female killer, but she’s not a serial killer.” “If she’s not a serial killer, then what is she?” He walked back over to the chair and sat down. “Well, the best I can glean from the letters, literally written in blood, she’s a sadist and an anarchist.” “Is she working alone?” “In the killings? Yes. In the big scheme of things, no way. Her letters have been goading The Eagle. She wants The Eagle to reveal himself to her.” Sara sat back down in her chair and took another drink of her wine. “That’s bold!” He nodded. “Why do you think she wants to flush The Eagle out?” He shrugged. “At first, I thought it was for some type of serial killer showdown, but I don’t think so anymore. I think that she, and those that she’s working with, view The Eagle as not just a vigilante but as a possible contact to help them further their cause or even assist in their plan.” “Well, we know that they have The Eagle all wrong if that’s what they think! Have you told Steve what you’re thinking?” “No. Steve has become a politician. He’s working with Ryan Skillen in Washington; he’s of no use to me. In fact, he could be a hindrance.” “You don’t mean in need of elimination by The Eagle?” “No!” he replied quickly and empathically then took a sip of his wine. “At least I hope not.” Sara got a scared look on her face. “You’re on a slippery slope here, John. What’s Jim’s take on all of this?” He put his empty glass on the table. “I think Jim knows the identity of The Eagle, or I should say he has a pretty good handle on who it might be.” She was both surprised and perplexed. “I don’t recall you ever telling me that you thought Jim knew you were

The Eagle.” “I know, but he does. He hasn’t come right out and said it, but I know he has me pegged as The Eagle.” “If he knew for sure, would he out you? Would you have to kill him?” “Neither. I believe that he would be relieved and would work his ass off to help me find the bad guys, and then, once I had them, he would forget my name... until the next case.”

Sara sat quiet for a long time as the surf crashed on the beach. “If you’re wrong, and Jim or anyone other than your victims discovers your alter ego, it would mean prison and the death penalty. I spent too many years without you to lose you again.” He smiled. “I’m not going to prison, and you’re not going to lose me again. I need to feel out this situation with this new killer. Jim thinks that it’s a huge conspiracy of national importance; he thinks it’s a domestic terrorism issue, and Steve won’t listen.” “And what do you think?” He walked over to the wet bar and grabbed a bottle of water. “I think he’s right. I think that this killer has been giving us warning signs of impending doom for innocents. I also think that The Eagle needs to hunt her not communicate with her.” “Well, how are you going to do that?” He was staring out toward the sea when he responded. “I’ve already started. If you think life has changed since you and I learned of what Cruthers was doing, and what he did to Amber and all those other girls, just wait. Things are going to get a lot freakier.” She stood up and took off her robe and dropped it to the floor. She stood nude before him and said, “I suppose just when you think you’ve seen everything something new comes along. We will just take it one day at a time. Why don’t you come, and we will get freaky in the bedroom together!” He smiled big. “You know how to end a conversation with a start!” She took his hand and started leading him to the bed. “Oh, honey,” she said as they disappeared into the darkness, “you haven’t seen anything yet.”



It was ten p.m. when Jim showed up at Santiago’s and yelled out as he walked through the door, “Bucket of beer, please, Valente!” He sat at one of the tables that he and Steve shared just before the Barstow case changed their lives and heard Valente crack the cap of a cold one for him. “Javier, I want to speak to Valente. Okay?” “Si,” was the only response. He invited Valente to join him, and Valente didn’t try to decline, which was out of character for him. He just sat right down. “Grab a beer,” Jim told him as he took a drink of his beer. He did as he was asked and cracked one open and asked, “How are you doing, Detective O’Brian?” “Jim...goddamn it, Valente, call me Jim...I’ve known you since the day you were born. You’re part of the family.” Valente smiled and said, “I’m sorry. How are you doing, Jim?” “I feel like dog shit that’s

been boiled and poured onto hot pavement, Valente. How the fuck are you?” “Better than you, I think!” They both laughed, and Jim took out a cigarette, “Can I smoke in here, Javier?” He didn’t even respond; he just threw his wrist in Jim’s direction as he read the paper he had clenched in his old hands. “I’m telling you, Valente, the liberal fuckers in California have fucked this state and city up. What the fuck is the world coming to when a man can’t smoke in a bar?” “An end?”

Jim looked at him with one eye half-opened and the cigarette between his teeth. “Yea...I’m beginning to feel that way.” Valente smiled and said, “Shit, Jim. You’ve felt that way for a long time...you’re just starting to see it?” He swigged his beer. “Why aren’t you working for me or John? I know we have discussed it before, but you would make a great cop.” “I don’t think so, Jim. With all the shit going on in the world, I don’t have the patience for it. I’m afraid I would take matters into my own hands like The Eagle, only I would get caught.” Jim looked at him for a long time before answering him. “What the fuck do you know about The Eagle?” “Only what I’ve heard you say and read in the papers, which isn’t much. Steve and John talked about him. Rumor has it that you know who The Eagle is or you know who does.” Jim started laughing hysterically. “You’re fuckin’ kidding me, right? You think I know The Eagle or have an idea who The Eagle is? Well, if you were listening to me and Steve talk before the Barstow situation, you got it all wrong because everything I thought I knew about The Eagle or who he is went out the window on that one.”

Valente’s looked dejected. “Why do you care about The Eagle?” Jim asked, opening another beer. “I don’t per se. I happen to admire what he has done, that’s all. I take it you don’t feel the same?” Jim swigged his beer and flipped his Zippo open and closed nervously. “I didn’t used to, but the Barstow case changed my view of The Eagle. I wish I did know who he was or could talk to him because I’d like to shake his hand.” “He did do a lot of good for your career,” Valente said, taking a sip of his beer. “Fuck my career. He saved four little girls and who knows how many more. He also saved the city and the state from cannibalism. The man’s a fuckin’ hero to me.” He paused and then whispered to Valente, “That’s off the record. On the record, he’s a cold-blooded killer that needs to be caught.” He put his fingers to his lips then took another drink of his beer.

Valente took another sip of his beer and said, “I saw you on the news tonight. What’s the deal with this new killer?” Jim had opened another beer and was finishing it off and said, “I can’t comment on that. You know the rules.” “Any idea who the killer is?” Jim laughed. “Ideas and theories are all we ever have, my boy ... until we get rock solid leads. I can tell you, just between us, the killer’s a chick!” That did take Valente by surprise. “A female serial killer? Now, you don’t need a PhD in psychology to know that’s unusual,” said Valente. “Yea...and it appears she’s trying

to contact The Eagle.” Valente again looked genuinely shocked. “Is it working?” Jim shook his head. “Nope. Nothing from The Eagle in months ... poof ... he just disappeared.” “Do you think something happened to him?” “Who knows. I need to get home. Javier, Valente, thank you for the beers, and, Valente, thank you for the stimulating conversation. I’m going home to fuck my wife!” He started for the door when he noticed a look of disappointment on Valente’s face. “Hey kid, relax. I’m certain that The Eagle is out there, and he’s looking at this whole situation. He will make his move when he’s ready.”

Valente had a half-hearted smile on his face as Jim walked out of the bar. Cathy came out from the back and put her hand on Valente’s shoulder and asked, “So?” “So...I have a feeling that the hunter is going to become the hunted,” he said in a soft voice. “You think The Eagle is on to us?” He could hear the stress in Cathy’s voice. “I hope the hell not...I would hate to have to kill an up and coming legend.”



Sam learned that Colleen had called in sick when he arrived at the office at 10 a.m. There was a moment of panic when he listened to the voicemail she left for him, but then a smile grew across his face as she ended the message with, “I’m feeling ill, but I am here to play if you want. You know my address.” He erased the message and pulled a flash drive out of his desk drawer. He downloaded all of the files related to Colleen and her misdeeds and put the flash drive back in the drawer. He didn’t like keeping blackmail files on his government computer. He called Colleen back and got her voicemail. “I have received your message, Ms. Bolton. How about I drop by around eleven? If I don’t hear back by ten thirty, I will take that as a yes and will see you at your house.” He went to hang up but stopped and said, “Oh, when I arrive, I don’t want you in a stitch of clothing.” He hung up, called his secretary, and told her that he was feeling a bit under the weather, so he was going to finish up some work and then leave around ten thirty. His phone must have rang ten times in the half hour that passed. Each time it did, he cringed, thinking it would be Colleen, and that she was calling his bluff, but it was all business. Mostly congratulations for the very detailed and compelling talk he gave the night before to the board of supervisors. Even his brother in-law and the mayor called him. He was finally free of the calls, and it was close to eleven when he was able to make a break for it.

He grabbed his suit coat and briefcase and was pulling the flash drive out of his desk drawer when his secretary advised him he had a visitor. He told her, “I’m sick. I want to go home. Send whoever it is away. I will see them tomorrow.” She told

him he wanted to see this visitor. He hung up the phone and waited as the door to his office opened and Geoffrey Gillian, Assistant State Auditor, walked in, making an unannounced office visit. Sam invited him into his office, and the two men sat down. Sam closed the desk drawer with the flash drive inside and chatted nervously with Geoffrey. The meeting took only three minutes but the implications were huge for his office. Geoffrey had stopped by to let him know as a favor to the mayor that the governor's office had called for a site audit of all assessors in the state, and his office was to be audited starting the following morning.

“Sam, I’m here as a friend of your brother’s and the mayor. Los Angeles County, as you know, and its taxpayers, is one of the largest sources of tax revenue for the state. The governor wants these audits, and he wants them now. I’m sending in auditors who are friendly to the mayor, but they won’t cover up major discrepancies, so I’m just here to give you a friendly heads up that this is coming, and you better have your ducks in a row.” That was the extent of his dialogue. Sam knew that that was the first and only time he would see Geoffrey; he was out of the picture. He did his duty to the mayor, whatever favor he may have owed him. He also knew that the friendship line about Geoffrey and the mayor was bullshit. The two men didn’t like each other, which meant his office was fucked. He slammed his fist on his desk and yelled, “I’m gone for the day,” and stormed out.



Sam pulled up at Colleen’s house just before noon. She had a security gate at the entrance to her home and walls that surrounded the house. He pulled up to the gate, and before he could press the call button the gate opened. He pulled into the driveway. He looked up at a camera looking down at him and his car as he pulled his car next to the side of the house. The walls around the compound-style home were at least ten feet high and covered with ivy and red and pink bougainvillea. He walked around to the front door and went to knock, but the door opened. There, standing in front of him, was Colleen Bolton wearing nothing but a smile and holding a small tray with two drinks on it. She invited him in, and he walked in with a look of amazement on his face. “I had no idea you lived like this.” She smiled and sat the drinks down and invited him to sit, which he did. She walked in front of him and bent over, her bare ass in his face. “This was my childhood home; I inherited it from my folks several years ago after they were killed in a car accident.” He was startled and distracted by Colleen’s sudden openness to his desires, her incredible home, and the impending audit. She sat down next to him and put her thigh over his and said, “So, where do you want to do me

first?” Her voice was sultry and sexy; he was seeing a side of her he had never seen before. “You know where I want to do you, but first we have a problem.”

She kept her leg over his and lay back on the sofa sipping her drink. “Oh...what problem would that be, Sammy?” He hated being called Sammy; he had made that clear, and she knew it, but he was distracted and didn’t respond to the name. “Geoffrey Gillian showed up unannounced in my office an hour ago to tell me that we are going to be audited starting tomorrow.” She slid her foot into his groin and moved her toes gently on his pants. She felt the rise of his penis. “So...we get audited all the time. Relax, baby. Let’s play.” He put the drink down and stood up abruptly. “What the fuck’s going on here?” She sipped her drink lounging on her back, bare breasted, her hairless pubic region tan and slightly shiny in the sunlight. “What are you talking about Sammy? You wanted me. You now have me over a barrel. I’m just doing what you asked of me.” “You hate me, Colleen!” She nodded. “You have always hated me, even before I became your boss. You’re in on the audit, aren’t you?” She lay back, her arms spread out with the drink in her right hand and said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Sammy. I just want to have some fun!” The anger in his face was obvious. He grabbed her right arm, flinging the glass with its contents across the room, pulling her off the couch, landing her on her back on the floor. He smacked her hard across the face and asked, “What the fuck are you up to, you manipulative little bitch? You know more than you’re telling!”

She got up off the floor holding the side of her face where he had hit her and walked over to a small mirror. “I don’t know anything about the visit you received this morning, Sammy, and you’re right; I hate your fucking guts. I had hoped to get a good fucking from you this afternoon before dispatching you, but I see the sex is not going to happen.” He looked confused. “Dispatch me?” “Too subtle? Too complicated a term for a little mind and an even littler pecker? I’m going to kill you, asshole.” His face took on one of humor, and he started laughing. “Little tiny you is going to kill me? Oh, that’s rich, that’s just rich.” She spoke as she opened the door to the closet and reached in, “Yes, Sammy, I’m going to kill you. You annoy me, have insulted me, and made me suck your little dick and taste your horrible semen. Of course, in order to get the upper hand on you I will need an equalizer, but you understand that a little girl like me couldn’t physically overpower you.” She thought for a moment with her back to him. “Well, actually, I could take you down in hand to hand, but I don’t want to break any of my things. There’re a lot of rare vases and glass that would be knocked over if I dropped you with my skills, so I’ll just use this!”

She turned quickly and before he could move or even see what she had in her hands, he felt a sharp pain in his groin. He looked down to see a dart sticking out of his pants. He looked at her with shock as the drug started to make him dizzy.

She smiled and said, “Oh, heavens. Did I do that?” She pushed him in the chest, and Sam fell to the floor. She stood over him as he became more and more sedated by the tranquilizer dart. “You’re goddamn right I did, you miserable son of a bitch. Oh...Sammy. I’m looking forward to having some fun with you.” She put the gun back into the closet and pulled his body off the white carpet onto the wood floor. She grabbed a towel that she had planned to use after sex and put it under his head. “Shit...I got to you just in time. You almost bled on my rug.” She put a plastic trash bag over his head, pulled the dart out of his groin, and dragged him into the kitchen. She put plastic underneath his body and stripped him then took the bag off his head. He was breathing heavily, which made her smile. She opened the walk-in cooler in her gourmet kitchen, dragged Sam’s body in, then shut the door and went to dress. When she came back, he was sitting up in the middle of the locker, his breath a vapor as he breathed. He was shivering; his nipples were hard from the cold, and his clothes were piled in a corner of the meat locker.

“What’s going on? Where am I?” He was too dazed to resist as Colleen placed rope wraps on his wrists and put a steel hook in the middle of the restraints. She stood in front of him dressed in a red parka and cold weather pants and boots. She had a wired control in her hands, and she pushed a button, and he felt his body moving and rising off the floor into the air. In a few seconds, the pain in his wrists and shoulders was incredible, and he shrieked in agony. “Oh, Sammy. I have good news and bad news for you. The good news is you won’t have to worry about the audit; I’ll take care of it when I go into the office tomorrow since you won’t be up to it.” He shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs. “You look here, bitch, your job is to suck my cock and get fucked by me anyway I want to give it to you. What the hell do you think you’re doing? If you think that I’m keeping your felonious workings to myself now, you can kiss my ass.” She started laughing. “The other good news is that I’m serving a wonderful meal to several of my friends this evening, as well as your wife and children, who are going to be receiving a box of fresh burgers and sausage to consume tonight. The bad news is that you are on the dinner menu for all of us.”

He started screaming as the blades of the meat grinder began running. He could see the large stainless steel hopper of the grinder ahead of him as the pulley system pushed his body toward it. He stopped moving just above the rotating blades of the grinder. “You sick twisted bitch! It’s you who’s been killing all those men. You’re the Griffith Grinder.” Colleen just looked on and set the grinder to auto and left the meat locker. There was a large stainless steel bowl to catch the meat, and she had had the unit modified years ago, so it deboned the meat as it ground it. Most people had heard of the type of meat the unit made, which was nicknamed ‘Pink Slime.’ The knives started cutting into Sam’s flesh as his feet went into the hopper. His screams

went unheard as she was preparing her sausage seasoning. She had all of her herbs and spices ready when she went back into the locker a half hour later. It was quiet and cold. The unit had run its automatic cycle and had deboned and ground up Sam. All that was left was a pile of ground meat and a container of bones with his skinned and empty skull to the right of the unit where it kicked them out as it ground him up. She put on gloves and began to make burger patties. She separated out a large quantity of the meat for sausage. The unit had cleaned and separated his intestines, so she could use them for casings. She looked at the clock as she started her work. It was one fifteen, and it was half past four when she was done. “Damn...I really thought I would be finished by four.”

She rolled two trays of meat out of the unit, burgers ready for the grill and sausage as well. She put together a care package for Sam’s family. She prepared the meats in pretty packaging using a famous meat house’s name on the label. She prepared it and then took the boxes to a drop location where a courier would ship the meats. She took the rest and started the grill in the backyard. She had made fresh potato salad, pasta salad, and even the buns were homemade. Her doorbell rang, and the smell of the cooking meat on the grill wafted through the house. Seth said, “I don’t know what kind of boss he was, but he smells awesome.” All five in her command came in and started fixing plates for themselves.



It was half past seven p.m. when the doorbell rang at the Provost home. Lisa Provost answered the door and was greeted by a delivery man with fresh meats. “WOW!” she exclaimed when she started opening the packaging. There was a typed note from Sam inside,

“Lisa, I won’t be able to make it for dinner tonight; I have an audit to work on here at the office. I thought it would be a nice treat for you and the neighbors to have a little barbeque on ME! We have been planning it for months, but I just don’t have the time. I will see you later this evening. I hope everyone will toast me in my absence.

Love, Your Sam

P.S. Save a burger and some sausage for me!”

She called the kids to show them how thoughtful their father was. “Kids, call

your friends and see who can come over. I will call a few of the neighbors. Daddy can't be here, but he sent this great meat, and it's fresh. I really don't want to freeze it." Within an hour, Lisa Provost had nearly thirty people at the house. Bob Andrews, their next door neighbor, did the grilling, and the neighbors threw together a little potluck and had a feast. Bob lifted a glass to the crowded backyard full of friends and neighbors and said, "A toast to Sam and Lisa, all around great friends and neighbors. And to Sam ... for being so giving of himself." They all cheered as the meat slid down their throats filling their bellies.



Sam never made it home that night, and Lisa was worried, so she called the police. She filed a missing persons report the next morning. Sam was not at the office and had left early ill the day before, so it had been nearly twenty four hours, and an investigation was opened into his whereabouts. Jim O'Brian's new office was in the same building as Sam's. He received a call from the mayor's office asking him to put some resources into the missing person case, which pissed him off. He was on the phone with Tracy Bastian, an assistant to the mayor, who had called at his request. "You know what? This is bullshit. I don't have the time or resources to look for Sam Provost. He's an asshole, who is more than likely shacked up with some bimbo and will show up in a few days with some elaborate story as he has in the past." "You're probably right, Jim, but I just need this favor. The mayor needs this favor. The guy's wife is worried sick." Tracy pleaded with him. Jim shook his head and yelled into the phone, "Alright. I'll put someone on it...the best thing to happen to this asshole's family would be him disappearing. It would be good for the city of Los Angeles, too!" He slammed down the phone, enraged that they would waste his time and his office's time on a lowlife like Provost.

He was glad he didn't have to go far from his office to investigate. He called two of his lieutenants who were on desk duty and instructed them to follow him. He called down to Sam's office and asked to speak to Melanie Wilson, the assistant county assessor. He got her on the phone, and she was frazzled. "Hi, Mel. It's Jim." "Hi, Jim! What has you calling my little slice of hell?" "I've been asked to look into Sam's whereabouts." There was a sigh on the other end of the line. "Well, if you find him tell him to get his ass into the office. We're under audit by Sacramento, and I'm taking the heat along with his assistant." "Can I drop by and take a look around his office with a couple of my people? Nothing formal. I just want to nose around." She was curt. "Yea, sure, whatever you need to do, Jim. He's probably hooked up with some slut!"

“Yea, I already had that conversation with the mayor’s office.” “Okay...well, come down whenever you like. I will call Colleen Bolton, his assistant, and let her know you will be stopping in and to accommodate you with anything you need.” “Thanks,” Jim said as he hung up and called his secretary. “Do I have anything on my calendar this morning?” “No, sir. You have a pretty clear day.” “Shit. Why is it when I want to do something I’m hammered into the ground with work, and when I don’t want to do something there’s not a damn thing going on?” “Karma?” she said laughing. “Yea, yea, very funny. I’m going down to the assessor’s office; Sam Provost vanished again.” There was a sigh on the other end of the line, “When will his wife get a clue and stop worrying about that dirtball?” “I don’t know...she reported him missing, and you know who his relatives are.” She sighed and told him that she would page him if there was anything that needed his attention. He was dressed in street clothes; he only wore the dress uniform when he had to make formal public appearances.

He walked into the assessor’s office and was greeted by the office receptionist. “May I help you, sir?” “Yea. I’m Sheriff Jim O’Brian, here to see Colleen Bolton.” She looked him up and down, “Do you have any ID, sir?” “You don’t know me by my face?” She shook her head. “Huh.” He flashed the badge clipped on his belt and the forty five millimeter handgun on his hip, but she wasn’t impressed. He pulled out his ID and showed it to her. She got red-faced and said, “I’m sorry, Sheriff. Let me get Ms. Bolton for you.” She dialed the phone and said, “Sheriff Jim O’Brian is here to see you.” She hung up and told Jim she would be right out.

When Colleen Bolton entered the reception area Jim looked at her in awe. “You can’t possibly be Sam Provost’s assistant!” She smiled. Her green eyes sparkled, and her red lips and tan skin caught him off guard. She was dressed in a short black skirt and a low cut pink blouse. “I don’t like to admit it, but, alas, I am, Sheriff. Ms. Wilson told me that you would be coming in. How can I assist you?” He knew he was staring, but he couldn’t help himself. She had a great deal of perfect cleavage showing and that had his full attention. “Sheriff O’Brian? My eyes are up here, sir.” He caught himself and looked into her eyes which were almost as distracting as her cleavage. “I’m sorry. How long have you worked for Sam?” “He became my boss about three months ago. Why?” “Oh, nothing. I’ve known Sam for a lot of years. I’m a little surprised that you’re still working for him.” She laughed as she invited him back to her office and said, “You mean because Mr. Provost is a male chauvinist pig and misogynist?” “Well, I don’t think he hates women, so misogynist seems a bit strong... but yea!” “He hates women, Sheriff. I can assure you of that. How can I help you?”

He sat down in one of two office chairs in front of her desk. “I don’t know if you are aware, but Sam’s wife reported him missing this morning.” She laughed as she sat down at her desk. “He’s probably shacked up with one of his bimbos. I don’t

know why his wife puts up with him. I'm certain he will show up any time with some outlandish story about where he's been." Jim laughed. "You know, Ms. Bolton, you've only worked for him for three months, and you just quoted me verbatim." She smiled and batted her eyes and said, "His reputation preceded him. When he became the county assessor, I was warned." "And?" Jim asked. "He's hit on me all day every day since he took over the office." "And that doesn't bother you?" She smiled at Jim and said, "We just met, Sheriff O'Brian, and you were staring at my tits. It's the burden of being an attractive woman. Being almost middle age, beautiful, and having a sexy figure has its drawbacks." Jim laughed. "Well, I see that you're not shy about your looks!" Colleen laughed as well and said, "I don't apologize for my looks, if that's what you mean. I'm not a slut, Sheriff. I'm a well-educated and hard-working woman. I am in the position that I am in because of what's between my ears not who's been between my legs." He laughed once more. "Well, you are damn secure. Can you take me to Sam's office? I just need to do a little looking around." She rose from her chair and said, "Of course, but he's going to be pissed when he finds out you were in his office without a search warrant."

Jim looked at her strangely. "That's an odd statement, Ms. Bolton. There's no need for a search warrant. I've been asked to check on his whereabouts. This is an informal matter at this point." She walked him to Sam's office and opened his door. "Is there anything else I can do for you, Sheriff?" "No." She started to walk away. "Ms. Bolton?" She turned to look at him. "When was the last time you saw, Sam?" She got a thoughtful look on her face. "The night before last. He asked me to work late as he was giving a talk on public safety to the city and county board of supervisors. I had prepared his reports for him, and he asked that I stick around after the office closed to go over them with him." "I see. And which one of you left the office first?" "Sam did. Why?" "Do you remember what time he left the office?" "Um...about seven thirty. If my memory serves me correctly, he had to get downtown and was running late." "And that's the last time you saw him?" "Yes...I was out sick yesterday. I was having terrible cramps; it's that time of the month." Jim made a face. "Okay, thank you." "If you need anything else, please don't hesitate to come to my office. However, I wouldn't be surprised if Sam comes walking in while you're in there." Jim laughed under his breath and said loud enough for her to hear, "Nothing would make me happier. I've got better things to do with my time." She walked off, and he watched as she went. He hadn't seen a body like hers ever in his life. The black skirt clung to her hips and showed every curve, and they were all nice curves. "Well, I can see that Sam wouldn't get far with her. She might be gorgeous, but she's a stone-cold bitch."

Jim looked around the office. Sam had obviously just taken the job because he hadn't put up all the ornate shit people in Sam's position do when they get an