

IDENTITY CRISIS

by Debbi Mack

CHAPTER ONE

I've never been a morning person, and if there's one thing I don't need before my first cup of coffee, it's a visit from the cops. But at 8:45 on a Friday morning, two of them waited for me at my law office.

I shut the door on the steam heat—typical July weather in Maryland—and shook my sticky blouse loose. Seven years in practice had taught me many hard lessons. One of them should have been never to wear dry-clean-only blouses in the summer.

Sheila, the seventy-plus receptionist and secretary for the accounting firm where I sublet space, gave me a brief wave while answering the phone through her ever-present headset. Her long, bony fingers clacked away at the keyboard without skipping a beat.

Both men stood as I approached. I recognized Detective Martin Derry of the Prince George's County police. I wondered what the homicide investigator wanted with me.

"Good morning," I said.

"Morning, Ms. McRae." Derry had light blue eyes, the color of lake water in January. "I need to speak to you about one of your clients."

Derry's companion was tall and gangly, as if loosely constructed of mismatched bones. His frizzy reddish-blond hair was short, making his head seem too small and his nose and ears too big. He peered at me with his head cocked to one side, like a pigeon.

"Let me have five minutes, okay?"

Derry nodded, and I trudged up the steps to my office. I didn't have any clients charged with homicide. Since I'd left the public defender's office, most of my criminal clients were yuppies with first-time DWIs or habitual traffic offenders, so I was dying to find out what he wanted. Whatever it was, it could wait five more minutes.

I went through the daily routine of opening the Venetian blinds, turning down the thermostat on the ancient window unit, and booting my computer. I started a pot of dark roast coffee, placing my mug on the burner to catch it as it dripped out. When I felt ready, I invited them in.

They each did a cop's visual sweep of my office before they sat down. No doubt, they were impressed by the plush furnishings—a used desk, two guest chairs, a metal filing cabinet, a small hutch for my supplies, and tables for my fax,

copier, and Mr. Coffee, most of which I'd bought at a state surplus outlet. My one indulgence was a new high-backed desk chair.

"This is Special Agent Carl Jergins, FBI," Derry said.

"Sam McRae," I said, extending my hand. Jergins worked my arm like a pump. FBI? I wondered what was up.

Derry sat stiffly upright. Dark-haired and mustached, he had a solemn, squarish face. In a charcoal gray suit, starched white shirt, and red tie, Derry was one of those people who manage to look dapper, no matter what. We'd met years before when I'd defended the man accused of killing his fiancée. Derry treated me with complete, almost excessive, professionalism. I tried to ignore the charged feeling in the air when he was around.

"We understand you have a client named Melanie Hayes," Derry said.

I stared at him. "She's not . . ." I couldn't finish the thought.

"No. It's her ex, Tom Garvey. He was found shot to death."

"Oh, my God."

"We know you represented her in a domestic violence matter," Derry said, watching me closely as he spoke. "You understand why we need to talk to her."

I nodded. "When did this happen?"

"Over the weekend," Derry said.

"I'll be present when you question her." It was not a request.

Derry bobbed his head in brief acknowledgment. "When was the last time you spoke to Ms. Hayes?"

"Last Friday."

"On the phone or in person?"

"In person. She came to the office."

"And you haven't spoken to her since?"

"No. Why?"

Derry leaned back in his chair. He appeared to think about whether to answer the question.

"There's a problem," he said. "She seems to have disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"She hasn't been home and hasn't shown up for work all week."

An angry sizzle interrupted my thoughts. The odor of burnt coffee filled the room. My cup was overflowing onto the hot plate.

"Shit." I jumped up and exchanged the cup for a carafe. Coffee was everywhere. In haste, I ripped a couple of pages from a writing pad and daubed at the mess, grinning sheepishly at the cops.

Derry's mustache twitched into a brief grimace. Jergins stared.

"Well, I have no idea where she could be," I said, swiping at drops that had landed on my blouse.

Both cops studied me, maybe waiting for more. I hate that. I sat down and drank my coffee. The air conditioner clicked and roared in the background.

Jergins cleared his throat, leaning forward. "Ms. McRae," he said, in a gruff, rat-a-tat voice, "it's extremely important that we get in touch with Ms. Hayes as soon as possible. Her life may be at risk."

"Why? And what's the FBI's interest in this?" I looked directly at the bony fed.

Jergins' nostrils flared as if he detected a bad smell. From the look in his beady eyes, you'd have thought I was the source.

"Has your client ever mentioned the name Gregory Knudsen?"

"No. Who is he?"

"What about Christof Stavos?"

"What about him?" I asked, a little annoyed that he'd ignored my question.

"Have you heard that name? Ever?"

"Nope. Never ever."

Jergins did that pigeon move with his head again.

I resisted the urge to imitate him.

He said, "Mr. Stavos is a sick and dangerous man. It's absolutely essential that Ms. Hayes get in touch with us as soon as possible. For her own safety, if nothing else."

"Why?" I asked. "Who is he?"

"Wiseguy from New York."

The phone rang.

I decided to let the voice mail get it. "Mafia? What would someone like that want with my client?"

Jergins leaned back, allowing himself a dramatic pause. "Did your client leave anything with you? A CD, maybe?"

"No."

"And she never mentioned Knudsen?"

"Like I said, no."

He nodded, still not looking satisfied.

"So, who is this guy, Knudsen?" I said. "And what's on the CD?"

Jergins said nothing.

"Let's get back to your client," Derry said. "Did she ever mention anything about leaving town? Even a hint that she might?"

I spread my hands in a helpless gesture. "Not that I recall."

Derry appeared to ponder my response then said, "I guess we've taken enough of your time."

Jergins looked like he wanted to subpoena every piece of paper in the room.

"Wait a second," I said. "What's going on? Obviously, someone's been murdered, but is there more?"

Derry glanced at Jergins, who remained mute.

"There's got to be," I said, in answer to my own question. "Or why would the FBI be involved?"

Another look passed between the men.

Derry said, "Right now, I'm concerned about investigating a homicide."

As opposed to what? I wanted to ask.

"This mobster—what was his name? Stavos?—he's also a suspect?"

Silence.

Forget it, I thought. I might as well go outside and ask a fire hydrant.

As they stood up, Derry said, "You'll let us know if you hear from her."

"Of course."

Jergins pulled out a business card and thrust it toward me. It said he was with the field office in Baltimore.

"You hear anything about Knudsen, you let me know," he said, in his clipped monotone. Probably picked it up watching too many reruns of *Dragnet*.

After they left, I checked my voice mail. Someone named Christy from my credit card company had called. I was up to date on my bill, and the message didn't say anything about their "great new services." Curious, I dialed the number and connected directly with Christy, who sounded like a college student working the phones during her summer break.

"Stephanie Ann McRae?" she said. The credit card was in my full name rather than the acronym I use as a nickname. "I'm calling to confirm your recent application for a line of credit," she continued, sounding as if she were reading from cue cards.

"But I haven't applied for more credit."

A few seconds of silence. "You haven't? Oh, wow. Have you lost your card recently?"

"No, no. I would have reported that." I pulled my purse out of my desk, just to check. The card was still in my wallet.

"Well, it looks like someone has applied for a credit line in your name," Christy said. "I'm glad we were able to catch this. The amount is unusually large."

"How large would that be?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

CHAPTER TWO

“It’s one of those things you think will never happen to you,” I said. “I still can’t believe it. I’m just glad they caught the problem. Do you know how long it would’ve taken to clear my credit?”

“Mmm-mmm,” Jamila murmured, about the best she could manage with a spicy meatball hors d’oeuvre in her mouth.

I had a ginger ale in one hand and a small plate loaded with shrimp and little quiches in the other. This left me with no hands to eat either the shrimp or the quiches. I set my drink on a handy table, hoping that none of the waiters patrolling the banquet room would scoop it up when I wasn’t looking.

Close to a hundred people had shown for the mixer, which surprised the hell out of me. The bar association doesn’t usually schedule events during the summer. The theory, I guess, is that most people take summer vacations. It was a sad commentary on our profession that we were there.

“So I’m finally checking my credit history,” I said. “They say you should do it every year. I’ve always found a reason to put it off until now. Hopefully, the jerk hasn’t applied for ten more credit cards with my information.”

“Unbelievable.”

“I almost didn’t come. I don’t want to see any of these people. Present company excepted, of course.”

Jamila gestured with her diet Coke. “Roger’s trashed.” She referred to the partner she worked for at Haskins & O’Connell, one of the biggest firms in the county.

I looked across the room at Roger. He was smiling, talking amiably to some guy in a nine-hundred-dollar suit, and looking as dull as ever. “How the hell can you tell?”

“Cause he keeps licking his lips.” Jamila straightened and did another quick survey of the room. “You see any judges? There are supposed to be some judges at this damn thing.”

“I don’t know. I just came for the free food.”

Jamila smiled and continued to look around. As usual, she was dressed to the nines. Her dusky brown complexion was a perfect complement to her tan suit, and she’d applied her makeup with surgical precision. She aspired to partnership at H&O and, eventually, a judgeship with the Circuit Court for Prince George’s County. Maybe even the federal court in Greenbelt.

In P.G. County, a Washington, D.C., suburban area with a majority black population, her appointment to such a position was a distinct possibility if she kept her nose clean and went to the right parties. Jamila had been a good friend of mine since law school, but with any luck, nobody would hold that against her.

“I’m sorry about your problem,” she said. “Can you believe, the same thing happened to one of my clients? Only no one caught it, and he’s in the hole *twenty* thousand dollars.”

“Damn.”

“He was supposed to close on some property next month. Now the lender’s trying to back out. We’re hoping to fix things before the closing date, but you know what our chances are of doing that?”

“Pretty slim.”

“We may have to put off the closing,” Jamila said. “Or even cancel it. All because of some little shit who . . . I’m sorry. I don’t mean to go on about my problems. We were talking about you.”

“It’s okay.” I reached for my drink, but it had been spirited away. “What gets me is, I’m so careful. I tear up my junk mail. I never give out my social security number to strangers. I rarely buy anything on the Internet. But that’s not enough anymore.”

Jamila said something about recent criminal laws against identify theft that got drowned out by guffaws.

“Don’t you have to find people before you can prosecute them?” I asked, raising my voice above the din.

“That’s what I’m saying. We had to hire a private investigator. Reed Duvall. Ever hear of him?”

I shook my head. “Most of my clients can’t afford me, let alone a detective.”

“He’s supposed to be good. A little unconventional, but they say he gets the job done.”

“I wonder if he could find my missing client.”

“How’s that?”

“The police are looking for this woman I represented in a domestic violence hearing. We were going to go back to court to enforce the order. Now, her ex is dead and the police can’t find her.”

“Oh.” She raised an eyebrow.

“Hey, it’s innocent until proven guilty, remember?”

“That’s what they say.”

I filled Jamila in on what the cops told me, leaving Melanie’s name out of it.

“The FBI,” she said. “Shit.”

“The whole thing looks weird as hell, no question. Thing is, I have no duty to do anything. I don’t have to find her.”

“If she shows up, tell her to go to the cops,” Jamila said.

“Sure. But I keep wondering what the Mob has to do with this. And how is my client involved? If I don’t act, is she going to end up being another story on the eleven o’clock news?”

Jamila’s glance darted toward the door. “Judge Ridgway just came in. We should say hello.”

“Goody.”

She shot me a look. “You’ve got to learn to work these people, sweetie.”

I sighed. “I know. It’s such a friggin’ drag.”

“And another thing. You can’t take responsibility for everything that happens to a client and stay sane in this business.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I knew it all too well. Still, I was concerned about Melanie. For one thing, I simply couldn’t picture her as a killer.

I don’t like domestic violence cases, but for Melanie I made an exception. Maybe it helped that, like me, she was 36 and single. She was tall and slender with brown hair cut in a short bob. Her intelligence and forthrightness impressed me. She had an air of quiet resolve—no hysterics, no second-guessing about whether she was doing the right thing. That made it easier for me. She had everything you look for in a client—a rational and cooperative attitude plus the ability to pay. Not that the case brought in much money, but it never hurts when a client can pay.

Getting the order hadn’t been difficult. Tom had been drunk and abusive. When he’d hit Melanie, there’d been a minor scuffle. She’d called the police, and they’d arrested Tom.

Afterward, he’d moved in with a friend in Laurel. Things were fine for a while, then the phone calls started. He started coming by her apartment.

She refused to talk to him. She hoped he would give up, but he wouldn’t.

“I want him to leave me alone,” she said, staring out my office window at the brick storefronts of Laurel’s historic Main Street. She seemed anxious the last time I saw her. I tried to be reassuring. Unfortunately, getting the orders in these cases is one thing and getting the abusers to comply is something else.

Later that afternoon, I tried to reach Melanie at home, without success. I didn't have a cell phone number, so I tried First Bank of Laurel, where she worked as an assistant manager. Melanie wasn't there. I asked for Donna Thurman, her boss. I had done some work for Donna before, and she'd given Melanie my name.

Donna came on the line. "Yes?" she said, her vocal chords sounding as taut as piano wires.

"Donna, it's Sam McRae. Do you have a minute to talk?"

"Well . . ."

She sounded busy, so I got to the point. "Have you seen Melanie lately?"

I thought I heard her gasp at the other end. Maybe it was just the phone line.

"Sam," she said, "I'm . . . I'm in the middle of something. Can we meet at your office later?"

"Sure."

Around four-thirty, Donna came by. Somewhere in her sixties, she was a petite, silver-haired wonder with skin tanned to a carcinogenic brown from frequent sailing trips on the Chesapeake with her husband. Donna was the kind of person who, rather than soften with age, grew more angular. Instead of slowing down, she seemed to be picking up speed, as if her life were a game of *Beat the Clock*.

She wore a short-sleeved yellow suit and, normally, would have looked terrific. However, when she came into the office, I could tell something was wrong. I'd never seen her so subdued and drawn. I wondered if she was sick.

"Thank heaven it's Friday," she said, collapsing into a chair with a muted grunt. "Sam, I'm so worried about Melanie. She hasn't been at work all week. She hasn't called. It's not like her. I even thought about filing a missing person's report. Then the police came."

"I guess you don't have any idea where she might be."

She shook her head.

"When was the last time you saw her?" I asked.

"Last Friday, at work."

"Did you talk to her over the weekend?"

"No."

"It's frustrating, but there's not much we can do at this point. I hope she shows up."

Donna hunched forward, her expression suggesting there was more on her mind. "That FBI agent. He said something about the Mob being involved. The whole thing is so bizarre—and scary. I've been trying to figure how to tell her parents."

"Her parents?"

“I’ve known them for years. They moved to Arizona a while ago, but I keep in touch with them. I remember when Melanie was born.”

“I wonder, could there have been a family emergency?”

“I suppose it’s possible,” she said, “but Melanie hasn’t spoken to her parents in years. Besides, I think I would have heard about it.”

“What about brothers and sisters?”

“Melanie’s an only child.”

I shrugged. “Maybe she decided to take a vacation or something.”

“She wouldn’t do that without telling us.”

“Well, you know her better than I do. I didn’t realize you were so close.”

“I helped her get this job.” Donna looked sheepish. “To be honest, it’s a little embarrassing for me at work, what with her disappearing like this.”

“I take it Melanie never mentioned any of the stuff the police asked about?”

“Heavens, no.”

“Did she ever talk about Tom?”

“Not much, though I could tell they were having problems. You know, how it is. Sometimes, you can just tell. Now and then, she’d mention his drinking and his building debt. Tell you the truth,” she said, arching a knowing eyebrow, “I wasn’t all that surprised. The better I got to know him, the more I realized he was all surface, all charm.”

I let her vent for a bit about Tom. She hadn’t approved of his moving in with Melanie, and the fact that it hadn’t worked out didn’t help matters. I still wasn’t sure why she’d wanted to meet me, but Donna was a good client—a friend—so I let her take her time getting to the real reason for her visit.

Donna shifted restlessly. “I’d like to ask a favor.”

“Yes?”

“I ran by Melanie’s apartment yesterday. Her car was there, but she didn’t answer my knock. After what the police said, I started wondering . . . what if she couldn’t get to the door? What if she was passed out . . . or worse?”

I’d also wondered if Melanie might be dead, but I hadn’t wanted to bring it up. “I guess we can’t rule that out, but don’t jump to conclusions. It’s possible she wasn’t home.”

“But what about her car?”

“She could have taken a cab or a bus.”

“Maybe she saw me through the peephole and didn’t answer the door.”

“Why would she do that?”

She hesitated. “Probably ashamed to talk to me. Since things fell apart with Tom . . . well, we haven’t spoken to each other much.” She paused, then asked, “Could you run by her place and check on her? It’s not far from here.”

I nodded. “Sure. I don’t know if I’ll have any more luck, but at least I can say I tried.”

“I appreciate that, Sam.” Donna smiled, looking abashed. “I guess I must seem like a silly old woman. I know she’s grown and able to take care of herself. Maybe it’s because I never had kids of my own. She’s all alone, and I do almost consider her like a daughter . . .”

“Don’t worry about it. She’s probably fine.” I hoped I was right.

After work, I stopped at my place to feed Oscar, my fifteen-pound, black and white cat, and grab something to eat. Dinner was two pieces of toast with peanut butter and salad-in-a-bag. I’m not much of a cook, and it hardly seems worth it to dirty dishes just to feed myself. I finished the meal with chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream straight from the carton. I rinsed the knife, the spoon, and the plate and headed for Melanie’s place.

My ’67 Mustang sputtered on the first turn of the ignition key and the second, then finally roared to life. It was an old relic, painted a Welch’s Grape purple and in need of a tune-up and a patch job on the muffler, which made noises that attracted curious glances from five hundred yards. It could probably have used a trip through the car wash, too. But it ran—noise, dirt, and all.

Melanie lived in the Whiskey Bottom neighborhood of North Laurel, a collection of *très* suburban brick townhouses and apartments just across the county line. Maybe there’d been a lot of moonshining in that area at one time because the booze theme could be found on most of the street signs, which had names like Moonshine Hollow, Bourbon Street, Brandy Lane, and Barrelhouse Road.

I found a space near the attractive three-story apartment building swathed in greenery and accented with beds of bright red begonias. Donna said Melanie had a red Geo with a crystal hanging from the rear view mirror. It was still there. The heat of the day radiated from the blacktop as I crossed the lot. The air was heavy with humidity, but four young teens—two girls and two boys—were outside, engaged in a bit of friendly

competition, shooting hoops at a freestanding basket. Watching them made me sweat.

Melanie had mail in her box. Not a lot, but maybe a couple of days' worth. The building had an open foyer, and her apartment was one of four located on the second floor.

I climbed the steps. No newspaper lay on the mat before her door. I heard a TV set, but couldn't tell from where. I knocked and waited, then knocked again. No one answered.

Just for kicks, I checked under the mat for a spare key and found one. What a lousy place for it. They aren't many options for apartment dwellers, but I wouldn't put my key under the mat.

I picked it up, feeling a little odd about walking into someone's apartment uninvited. But Melanie would thank me later if she was in there, dying on the floor. I used the key in the deadbolt, which unlocked with no problem. It also fit the knob. Turning it, I stepped inside.

The door opened into a combined living room/dining area. Closed curtains made the place gloomy. Even so, I could see a chair turned onto its side and things strewn over the floor. Someone had ransacked the place.

CHAPTER THREE

I stood at the door, looking and listening. The neighbor's television continued to buzz in the background, but I didn't hear anything else. Finally, I took a few tentative steps inside.

At first, I thought it was the work of vandals. Her stereo and VCR lay on the floor, the housing on each ripped off. Same for the TV set.

At the same time, everything looked too neat. The stuff on the floor wasn't thrown about, but arranged in piles. A few videos here, books there—as if someone had cleared everything off to dust, then didn't bother to put it back.

I wondered if the cops could have done this. Assuming they'd gotten a search warrant, this seemed like overkill for them. Then I saw her CD collection.

Someone had opened all the jewel cases and tossed them aside in a heap. I thought about what Agent Jergins said about Christof Stavos looking for a CD. The thought that the Mob could have been there made my stomach clench.

I did a quick survey of the apartment. Every room was much the same. Dishes, pots, and pans were stacked on any available surface in the kitchen. The dressers and closet in the bedroom

had been emptied, their contents heaped on the floor. Thankfully, I didn't find Melanie dead or disabled. Of course, that wasn't proof positive that she wasn't.

I checked each room again, more methodically this time, looking for something like a travel brochure, a credit card receipt, anything. In the kitchen, I picked through some stuff that looked like it came from a "junk" drawer—take-out menus, scissors, a bar napkin, rubber bands, and a small ball of string.

I took a closer look at the napkin. It was from Aces High, a strip joint a few miles up Route 1. The logo was an Ace of Spades with a half-naked woman, eyes closed and lips parted in the throes of ecstasy, sprawled across it. Someone had written "Connie" and a phone number on it. A friend of Tom's, I supposed. Apparently, drinking and debt weren't his only vices. I wrote the name and number in a small notebook I carry.

The bathroom didn't offer much. The bedroom was a mess. I decided to assume for the sake of not taking all night that what I was looking for wasn't in her clothing. Chances were it was on her dresser or in the wastepaper basket. I checked both and came up empty.

A small, dark blue address book, with an envelope tucked inside like a bookmark, lay on the bedside table next to the phone. The envelope was unsealed. Inside was a receipt for a post office box and a key. The stamp indicated a College Park zip code. According to the paper, the renter was Stephanie A. McRae.

I stared at the receipt, not quite believing what I saw. An ugly thought occurred—what if Melanie, pretending to be me, had rented the box. What if she'd applied for that credit line? How would she have gotten access to my personal information? Why would she do it?

I knew one thing—I had to see what was in that box. This didn't look good, but I didn't want to draw any conclusions until then.

The phone rang. Faintly, I heard the answering machine's recorded message, a pause, and then tones. Realizing it must be Melanie, checking for messages, I snatched the phone up.

"Hello? Hello?" I said. No response. Only charged silence, then the mechanical clicks and pops of disconnection.

"Damn it," I said. I hung up and tried *69, but it wouldn't go through. So much for that.

The phone was a cordless with caller ID built in. The last caller was *Unknown*. Helpful. I fiddled with the buttons and managed to find out that someone named Bruce Schaeffer called a couple of days ago. The name sounded familiar, and I made a note of it.

I examined the address book again. It had occurred to me that Melanie might be staying with a friend or had told someone else where she was going. I flipped through it quickly. None of the names in it meant anything to me except Donna's.

If I took the address book, was I disturbing a crime scene? I didn't know for sure that this was a crime scene. Finding Melanie might be as easy as making a few phone calls. And if I found her, I'd advise her to go to the police. So I was doing the police a favor by taking it. That's what I told myself. I stowed the book in my purse, along with the envelope.

I locked up behind me when I left and replaced the key under the mat. The early evening sky was a light bluish-gray haze. The humid air felt like warm Jell-O against my skin.

It was after hours at the post office so first thing in the morning, I'd check the box. As I headed home, I remembered who Bruce Schaeffer was—Tom Garvey had moved in with him after Melanie kicked him out. He called a few days ago, after Tom died. Why would he call Melanie? Could they have started a relationship? Maybe after she broke up with Tom. Maybe before. Stranger things have happened.

I pulled over and looked up Schaeffer's address in Melanie's file. He was a few minutes away. It was a long shot, but I could at least ask if he knew where Melanie was.

Schaeffer lived in what was euphemistically known as "affordable" apartments, literally on the other side of the tracks. The look-alike buildings were brick boxes—16 units to a box—with shutterless windows as stark as lidless eyes. The lot was full, but I managed to find a space at the far end, near a dumpster that smelled like something died in it. I parked, walked to his building, and clanked up the metal stairs.

I heard the banging long before I reached the third floor—someone pounding on a door. The chances it was Schaeffer's were only one in sixteen, but sure enough that's where she was. With odds like those, I should have been playing the horses at Laurel Racetrack instead of looking for leads on a missing client.

The woman was taking a break when I got there, leaning against Schaeffer's door, her face twisted into a scowl. She was about my age, short and rail thin, wearing a halter top, cutoffs, and red plastic flip-flops with butterflies on them. Her light brown hair was pulled back, held loosely with one of those hair clips that look like something you'd use to seal a bag of potato chips. She glared at me, as if I were to blame for her problems.

“No one home?” I asked.

“Oh, probably there is,” she said, in a dull voice. “Bastard isn’t answering.” She pounded the door again, several times. I was surprised her fist didn’t leave dents. Finally, she swore and flipped the bird at whoever might be inside.

“I wouldn’t waste my time,” she said, and flounced off before I could think of a reply. After a few moments, I knocked on the door, more softly. Schaeffer might have been there, but not answering. In the mood the woman before me had been in, I wasn’t sure I blamed him.

As I waited, the door to the adjoining apartment opened a crack. A red-faced, balding man in boxers and one of those ribbed tank tops reserved for guys over seventy peered at me with impassive, bloodshot eyes.

“Hi,” he said. He had a breathy voice. The smell of alcohol and garlic wafted toward me.

“Hello.”

“Quite a scene.”

“You noticed, huh?”

“Been noticing lots of stuff. This place is turning into Grand Central Station. Dangerous, too. You know, just this week, they found a man shot to death in there.”

So Tom died in the apartment. “How awful,” I said.

He belched loudly. “You bet it is.”

More alcohol and garlic. I tried not to breathe too deeply.

He rambled on about our horrible society, and how no one is safe anymore. I smiled and nodded politely, and was about to excuse myself when he said, “You looking for Bruce? He’s probably working out.”

“Oh, right,” I said. “Now, what was the name of that gym?”

“Kent’s Gym. Right down 197.”

I snapped my fingers. “Of course. Kent’s Gym. Thanks.”

Creepy guy. I could feel him staring after me as I walked downstairs.

The Mustang coughed to life with some encouraging gas pedal footwork on my part. I couldn’t make a left when I hit the main road, so I went right and maneuvered over quickly to pull a U-turn at the next median break.

Behind me, someone honked his horn, long and loud. I looked back and saw a big, black car with dark windows trying to move to the left lane, holding up traffic in the process. I could picture a blue-haired lady or an old man in a hat hunched behind the wheel. I made the U-turn and noticed the black car did the same.

Out of idle curiosity, I kept my eye on the car. It was a Lincoln, gleaming like it had just been driven from the dealer’s. I

turned in at the entrance to the parking lot, watching to see if the Lincoln followed. It did.

Could it be following me? Why? Nerves, I thought. The heat must be getting to me.

Kent's Gym was in an old shopping center on Route 197 with a discount grocery and a place that sold 99-cent greeting cards. I wove through the lot and found a space near the gym. As I was putting the car's roof up, I saw the Lincoln again. It came down the aisle, at a leisurely pace and with a slight bobbing motion, as if it were floating. Maybe it was my imagination, but it seemed to slow a little as it neared me. The big car had a gaudy, chrome hood ornament and chrome trim. Something about the design suggested a rolling, black casket. I shivered and my skin popped goose bumps, despite the evening's warmth.

I also noticed it had New York tags. The car glided away, never stopping, back to the street, where it merged into traffic and disappeared into the evening haze.