

Bottom Deal

by Robert Gregory Browne, 1955–

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The author of the exceptional novel *Kiss Her Goodbye*, Robert Gregory Browne has an artist's gift for creating other worlds so believable one would swear they exist. And they do—just begin reading *Bottom Deal*, and you'll be gripped by the gritty, colorful world of Jennings, ex-cop, ex-husband. He's one of those archetypal figures for whom all of us root while admiring their bold insouciance, feeling the depths of their pain, and waiting breathlessly to see how they're going to get themselves—and those they're trying to save—out of the current mess. A short story, when as beautifully executed as this one, is an abbreviated, luminous moment of life. Settle into your favorite chair and enjoy.

—Gayle Lynds

Three months after he was kicked out of the Tally-Ho Casino for copping cards, Jennings called in a marker and snagged a matinee gig in their second-floor

lounge. The contract, such as it was, had a special stipulation that he never set foot on the casino floor.

That included the private rooms.

Cockney Carl Baldwin, the casino owner, whom Jennings had once helped out of a pretty large jam, warned him that he'd better not go back on his promise.

"As it is," Carl told him, "you're lucky to be alive."

The Tally-Ho was a dump several blocks west of Fremont, populated by locals and a healthy dose of low-income tourists. The gig didn't pay much, but then the show Jennings gave them in return wasn't worth a whole helluva lot either. Mostly card tricks, a few coin gags, and a mentalism routine he'd ripped off, patter and all, from Max Maven. He'd go table to table as a couple of cheap ceiling-mounted video cams followed him, projecting his "amazing feats of sleight-of-hand" onto a large-screen TV for all the tourists to see.

They seemed to like it, the tourists, giving him rousing rounds of applause between sips of watery piña coladas. He made cards disappear, dealt perfect hands of poker, and changed a blue deck into red right before their startled Midwestern eyes.

Jennings didn't really hear the applause. It wasn't much more than a buzz in his head, a cue for the next bit of canned patter, while his mind retreated into that dark cave it seemed to find so comforting these days. Either that, or he was strapped into his Time Machine, reminiscing about those long-ago days before God, or whoever, decided—as Cockney Carl would say—to take a giant two-bob bit on his head.

It was all pretty pathetic, when you thought about it. But that's the way it was for Jennings. He was on autopilot, headed nowhere fast.

Until Holly Addison's murder changed everything.

"I say we go for all three," Scully said. "Bing-bang-boom, all in one night."

It was about 7:00 P.M. on a warm Thursday. They were sitting in the snack shop of the Golden Sands Bowling Center, the thunder of league night protecting them from prying ears.

Scully had a printout in front of him, three of the entries highlighted in yellow. The header read, STATELINE SECURITY SYSTEMS.

"Bing-bang-boom, huh?"

Scully nodded. "One right after the other."

"You realize," Jennings said, "we take down one, it seems like a random act that maybe nobody but the homeowner cares about. We go for all three, we'll make Stateline Security and the boys at Metro Patrol Division look pretty bad."

Scully shrugged. "Boo-friggin'-hoo."

"Come on, Scully, think. When cops look bad, they work harder. That's more heat than we can afford."

"Isn't that an oxymoron?" Scully asked.

"What?"

"Hardworking cops."

Jennings looked at him. There was a time when he might have thought this was funny, might even have made the joke himself. There was also a time he would've smacked Scully upside the head and told him to watch his mouth.

Instead, he said, "Don't let greed get in the way of your common sense."

"You're one to talk."

Jennings ignored the comment. "Just pick one and give me the particulars."

Scully did, choosing the house that he thought offered them the highest return for their labor. They discussed strategy for a moment, then Jennings said, "That's the one we hit, then. Tomorrow night."

Scully raised his eyebrows. "What's your rush?"

"I'm starting to get the itch again."

The itch.

Everybody knows it—has felt it at one time or another. Whether it's booze, smack, sex, smokes, coffee, or a late-night snack when you're already tipping the scale past buffalo butt.

For some, it's a crawling sensation that starts in the gut and travels up toward the brain. And if it isn't stopped somewhere along the way, all rational thought is abandoned. The only thing that matters is scratching that itch before it pulls you under.

For Jennings it wasn't booze or drugs or sex or cigarettes or even steak and eggs at midnight.

It was the game. Texas Hold 'Em, Omaha High, Seven-Card Stud. He'd played them all and played them well.

"Tomorrow night," he said again.

Scully shrugged. "I got nothin' better to do."

Jennings decided to drive awhile before heading back to his apartment. The Vegas air was hot and dry and he enjoyed the feel of the warm wind streaming in through his open window. He considered looking for a game, then decided against it. The more you scratch, the more it itches, right? Start now, and he was likely to be at it all night.

He was just turning on Carson when his cell phone rang. Probably Scully, concerned about some overlooked detail. Flipping the phone open, he said, "Yeah?"

"Nick?"

Not Scully. The voice was female. Familiar.

"Nick, it's me. Holly."

Talk about your blast from the past.

Jennings hadn't seen or spoken to Holly Addison in three long years. All at once the Time Machine kicked into high gear and a boatload of memories flooded his brain.

"Nick, you there?"

"I'm here," he said. "How you been, Holly?"

"Not so good." Her voice was shaky. She was quiet a moment, except for her breathing, which sounded labored, upset.

Then she said, "I think someone's trying to kill me."

Her real name wasn't Holly.

She was born Rebecca Jane Addison, a corn-fed kid from Nebraska who one day filled a ratty suitcase with clothes, kissed her drunken mother good-bye, and hitched a ride to the nearest Greyhound station.

Ever since Rebecca had watched *Showgirls*—one of Mom’s DVD rentals—she’d dreamed of going to Vegas to seek her fame and fortune. Her face and body, she had decided, were a heckuva lot easier on the eyes than that Nomi chick from the movie, and there were very few men who were likely to disagree. Especially the ones who paid for the privilege of her company.

It was a familiar story with all the usual props and scenery, and Rebecca, now Holly—short for Hollywood, because she was always blathering on about movie stars—would be the first to admit that she was a walking cliché.

But she had no regrets. Making a living as a professional escort wasn’t all that bad.

“It’s just a different kind of show,” she’d once told Jennings. “And I’m very good at it.”

Jennings had always believed that people should play to their strengths, but the words sounded hollow. He sensed a kind of sadness in Holly. Twenty-three years old and she already carried that battle-worn resignation that hits all of us when we finally realize the future isn’t as bright as we once thought it would be.

He’d known her for a couple years by then, back before the world caved in on him. He’d met her while working a homicide downtown.

Sergeant Nick Jennings, Detective First Grade.

You wouldn’t know it by looking at him now, but he’d spent seven years on the homicide squad, and six prior to that in uniform. And in those years he’d managed to cultivate quite a list of informants.

Holly was at the top of that list.

But just as his life started its nosedive, Holly’s was on the rise. She met and married a real estate developer from California who pretended not to know what she did for a living. Jennings figured it gave the guy a secret thrill, thinking he’d tamed a wildcat.

“Who woulda believed it,” she said to Jennings. “Just like Richard Gere and Julia Roberts.”

He was happy for Holly. Her future was bright after all. The night she left Vegas, he bought her a cup of coffee and gave her a good-bye peck on the cheek. Told her if she ever needed him for anything, just call.

That seemed like an eternity ago. To say he’d never thought he’d hear from her again was a bit of an understatement. Yet here she was, all these years later, taking him up on his offer.

“Nick?”

There was a flash of static on his cell line. Vegas was full of dead zones. Pulling to the side of the road, he said, “Where you calling from, kid? You in town?”

“At the Diamond.”

A little upscale for the Holly he knew. Then again, maybe not. “What about Mr. Real Estate?”

“Chuck and I split up.”

That was a surprise. “Then what’s going on? What do you mean you think somebody’s trying to kill you?”

She let out a long, shaky breath. "I don't want to do this on the phone," she said. "Buy me a cup of coffee. One hour, the usual place."

Then she hung up. Jennings popped a U, his eight-year-old Crown Vic groaning in protest, and caught a red light at the intersection. Red lights in Vegas are notoriously long, and he found himself half-wishing he had a good book or a magazine to pass the time.

I think someone's trying to kill me.

This wasn't the first time he'd heard something like that come out of Holly's mouth. She'd always had a flair for the dramatic. She wasn't exactly the Girl Who Cried Wolf, but it would be just like her to follow up three years of silence with a proclamation that her life was in danger.

He stared out at the red light, willing it to change. Three or four days seemed to pass before it turned green again. Then, just as he took his foot off the brake, he heard a screech of tires behind him and—

—*wham!* Someone hit him.

The impact sent a jolt through his spine as the Vic lurched forward toward the intersection. Jennings hit the brakes, brought the car to an abrupt halt, then checked his rearview mirror.

All he could see were two blazing headlights that sat above the bumper of what looked like a big black Humvee.

He leaned out the window and craned his neck. The Humvee, of course, didn't have a scratch on it, and he could just imagine what the rear end of the Vic looked like.

Before he could let loose the string of profanities waiting at the tip of his tongue, the Humvee's driver and passenger doors flew open and two fullbacks in Hawaiian shirts climbed out.

This couldn't be good.

He shifted his foot to the gas pedal, ready to bag out, but the driver pulled a Smith & Wesson nine millimeter from the small of his back and leveled it at him. "Stay right there, Houdini. Hands on the wheel."

Jennings watched the driver approach his window and cursed himself for leaving his piece back at his apartment.

"Let me guess," he said, putting his hands at ten and two o'clock. "You don't have insurance."

No reaction. The driver was all business and Jennings wondered what that business was. The face was impassive, eyes as black as a shark's. Hired muscle, no doubt. Had called him Houdini, which meant he knew who Jennings was.

Hawaiian Shirt Number Two came around the passenger side and folded his arms across a chest that, to Jennings, looked like a wall of nicely tanned cement. The driver reached in through the window, popped the door open, then swung it wide and stepped back. "Get out."

Jennings did what he was told, faint strains of a funeral dirge streaming through his brain.

"Get in the Hummer," the driver said.

A few steps later, Jennings was climbing into the back of the Humvee wondering when or if he should make a move. Another time and place, he would've been all over these guys. Uh-huh. Sure.

Being a cop gave you a kind of arrogant self-confidence that tended to make you feel invincible. Being an ex-cop didn't do diddly-squat.

Hawaiian Shirt Number Two brought out his own Smith and shoved in next to Jennings as the driver got behind the wheel. Doors slammed shut.

"FYI," the driver said, turning in his seat to look at Jennings. "We work for Garlin Enterprises. You heard of it?"

There weren't too many people in Vegas who hadn't. Emile Garlin was the biggest adult entertainment mogul in the city, responsible for a chain of gentleman's clubs and cathouses throughout the state. His most popular enterprise was an upscale exotic dance outfit just off the Strip called Garlin's Girls. All the stars went there. So did a few ex-cops.

"Sounds familiar," Jennings said, staring out at the rear of his car, which was crumpled in a way that almost looked painful.

"Last Saturday," the driver said, "you played a private game in Whitehead Springs. That sound familiar, too?"

It did. He'd taken about twenty large off some punk who thought he was the next Bob Tyner—Tyner being one of the greatest card mechanics on the planet. Two days later, Jennings lost that twenty and ten more to a guy who really was the next Tyner.

"What's your point?" he said.

"The kid you played was Emile Garlin's stepson. Says you screwed him out of eighty grand."

"Eighty grand?" Jennings said. "Do I look like I've got that kind of cash? The kid's lying."

"Be that as it may, it wasn't his money to lose. Mr. Garlin comes back from a business trip, finds out he's eighty light, and the kid points the finger at you. Given a choice, who do you think Mr. Garlin's gonna believe—his poor misguided stepson or a brain-fried cardsharp like you?"

"I take it that's a rhetorical question?"

The shark eyes just stared at him. "He wants his money back. With interest."

Jennings took another look at his wounded car, managing to muster up some of the old cop swagger, then told the driver exactly what Garlin could do to himself and how.

The driver stared at him a moment longer, then faced front and backed the Humvee up. Shifting into gear, he hit the gas and slammed into the rear of the Crown Vic, the impact swerving his car to the right, knocking it into a utility pole.

Ouch.

"Mr. Garlin anticipated you might put up a protest." He reversed the Hummer again, then rammed the Vic a third time. The bumper fell off.

"Hey!" Jennings said. "I'm still making payments on that thing."

The driver backed up several yards now, then stomped the gas and angled the nose of the Humvee into the side of the Vic. It crumpled with a horrific groan.

Jennings started to rise out of his seat, but Hawaiian Shirt Number Two planted a hand on his chest and shoved him back. It felt like he'd been hit with a brick.

The driver set the brake, climbed out, then went around to Jennings's side and pulled the door open, pointing the Smith at him. "Get out."

Get in, get out. Make up your mind.

Jennings glanced at his mangled vehicle, thinking the only way it would ever move again was chained to a tow bed. Making a mental note to always carry his piece, he stepped back onto the street.

“A hundred large,” the driver told him. “Two days. And next time it won’t be the car.”

He had the Vic towed to the nearest junkyard, then caught a cab to Abe’s Diner, a dingy cafe off Charleston that catered to the lost and lonely. Back in his days on the force, he’d spent a lot of time there loading up on coffee and pie. It was also the place where he and Holly would regularly rendezvous to discuss business.

He was a good forty minutes late by the time he got there and Holly was nowhere to be found. Figuring he may have gone through a couple more dead zones on the ride over, he checked his phone and, sure enough, there was a voice message waiting for him. He dialed his number, punched in the code.

After a beep, Holly’s voice came on the line, shakier than ever. “Nick, where are you?” She paused, her breathing uneven, sounding as if she was on the edge of panic. “Okay, I’m gonna go to your apartment. I just hope you haven’t moved.”

He hadn’t. And this was no cry of wolf, he was sure of that now. The fear in her voice was all too real. He immediately punched a button, dialing her back.

A moment later, a pay phone at the far end of the diner started to ring.

She wasn’t carrying a phone.

Feeling a sudden sense of urgency, Jennings did a 180, went outside and flagged the cab, which hadn’t yet left the parking lot.

In all the years he’d known Holly, he’d never heard her sounding so desperate. And as the cab took him back across town, he thought about how happy she’d been when Mr. Real Estate proposed. Almost giddy.

He wondered what had happened between them. And who had she hooked up with that made her so scared?

Twenty long minutes later, the cab dropped him off in front of his building. It was decades old and looked it, a fifteen-unit, U-shaped pile of stucco overlooking a small courtyard and an even smaller pool. Jennings quickly pushed through the front gate and climbed the stairs toward the second floor, hoping that Holly still had a key and had let herself in.

In the past, it wasn’t unusual to come home and find her parked on his couch, watching TV. This was at the beginning of his infamous fall from grace and he had to admit that he’d found her presence comforting. In those days, she was the only one he could talk to. And the only one who would talk to him.

He was nearing the top of the steps when a teenage girl in a Megadeth T-shirt came flying out of the darkness and nearly collided with him as she ran down the stairs, her long blond hair trailing behind her. A split-second later, Jennings heard a splash from below and wondered if she’d fallen into the pool.

As he reached the second-floor landing he glanced down at it, a bright rectangle of blue, and his gut immediately clinched up. Silhouetted against the light was a body. Not the kid—but a woman’s body. Floating.

Scrambling back down the stairs, Jennings took a flying leap into the water and swam toward the deep end, where the body undulated on the surface. Grabbing

hold of her, he turned her over, but one touch and he knew he was too late. There was no sign of life there. No pulse. Nothing. A neat round bullet hole adorned the dimple of her throat.

And while the face was older, there was no mistaking who it was. He recognized her immediately, his sudden dread morphing into an almost overwhelming sense of guilt.

Holly Addison had had every right to be frightened.

Holly Addison was dead.

He wasn't surprised when Cassandra walked in the door.

Detective First Grade Cassandra Jennings was a ranking shield on the homicide squad. The minute his name came over the wire, she had undoubtedly requested to take the lead.

Her reasons wouldn't be complicated. Jennings had made another mess and, as usual, Cassandra felt obligated to clean it up. He supposed somebody could have cried conflict of interest, considering their history, but without interest, there is no conflict, and Cassandra hadn't shown any in him in quite some time.

The moment he realized Holly was dead, he had shouted for a neighbor to call the cops. They converged on his apartment complex like a swarm of blue bees, roping off the crime scene, dragging her body out of the water, waking up everyone in the complex for questioning.

He'd known it was only a matter of time before another part of his past showed up, and here it was, in a neatly tailored suit and dark, short-cropped hair. As lovely as ever.

This was turning out to be one helluva night.

"You okay, Nick?" Cassandra's expression was somber. A look he'd seen at dozens of crime scenes. Professional, yet sympathetic. Jennings couldn't help feeling that familiar stirring of the soul when she spoke, or the sudden stab of pain that went with it.

"I've been worse," he said.

It was a pointed remark, not lost on her, but she recovered quickly and gestured to the guy in the doorway behind her. "This is Jerry Kravitz. He came on board after you left."

Left. That was a nice way of putting it.

Kravitz was tall, broad-shouldered, and hostile-looking. Jennings imagined the guy had heard quite a bit about Nick the burnout. They exchanged curt nods, then Jennings returned his gaze to Cassandra. "Any luck with the canvass?"

"Why don't we ask the questions," she said, leaving no doubt that the chasm between them was as deep as it was wide. "Mind if we sit down?"

He gestured to a sofa whose seat cushions held stacks of newspaper and an open cardboard box full of pilfered casino decks. "Just throw that stuff on the floor."

They made room for themselves and sat, Cassandra throwing a disapproving glance at the box, probably making a mental note to confiscate it.

Jennings stayed in the faded armchair he'd been warming for the past half hour, after he'd changed into a dry T-shirt and jeans. "Fire away," he said.

Cassandra brought out a small spiral notepad. “How long had Holly been in town?”

Jennings shrugged. “Tonight was the first time she’d called me in years. Said she was staying at the Diamond.”

“On somebody else’s dime, no doubt.” This from Kravitz.

Jennings looked at him. “What makes you say that?”

“She was a pro, right?”

“Ex,” Jennings said. He hadn’t known this guy two minutes and already he didn’t like him.

“I thought tonight was the first time she contacted you.”

“That’s right.”

“Then how do you know she wasn’t working?”

Truth was, Jennings didn’t, but he said, “She quit that life when she got married.” He looked at Cassandra. “You know all this.”

Cassandra nodded, but Kravitz said, “Once a party girl, always a party girl.”

Jennings knew the guy was baiting him, but said nothing.

“Did she tell you why she was back in town?” Cassandra asked.

“I talked to her for a total of about twenty seconds.” He gave them a quick rehash of the phone call and Kravitz’s eyebrows raised.

“She actually said that? Somebody wants to kill me?”

Jennings nodded.

“So why call you?”

“Maybe she trusted me.”

Kravitz snorted. “Lotta good it did her. She say who this alleged killer was?”

“She wouldn’t talk on the phone.”

“Of course not.” Kravitz was clearly skeptical.

“Where did she want to meet?” Cassandra asked. “Here at the apartment?”

“Over at Abe’s. But I was late, and she was gone before I got there. Used the pay phone to leave me a message.”

Cassandra jotted some notes on her pad. “Why were you late?”

“Getting my car towed. I had an accident.”

Another eyebrow raise from Kravitz. “What kind of accident?”

“A car accident,” Jennings said. Who was this dope? “I ran into a utility pole.”

“Oh? You been drinking?”

“No. I’m not big on booze.”

“What are you big on?”

“Minding my own business,” Jennings told him.

“Uh-huh,” Kravitz said. “What about firearms? You own any?” Jennings stared at him. “Nine mil. Drawer in the kitchen, next to the can opener—in case somebody sneaks up on me while I’m heating up the chili.” He paused, then said, “If you’re thinking I’m good for this, forget it. The weapon’s clean and I’ve got cell phone records, a tow-truck driver, and a cabbie to corroborate my story.”

“Oh, don’t you worry,” Kravitz said. “We’ll be checking into all of that. And once the ME’s report comes back, we’ll be taking a very close look at the timeline.”

Jennings wouldn’t expect anything less, but this guy was really starting to irritate. He glanced at Cassandra but she was still jotting notes. Then she said, “I don’t suppose you’ll have any objection to an ISID?”

An Instant Shooter Identification was an updated version of the old dermal nitrate or paraffin test. A tech brushes diphenylamine on your hand and if it turns blue, kiss your butt good-bye. Jennings couldn't believe she was even asking. "You're kidding, right?"

"I wish I was, Nick, but you know I don't have a choice, considering your history with Holly."

Jennings tried to keep his voice calm. "We were friends. That's not how I treat my friends."

"Friends with benefits," Kravitz said. "Depending on how much cash you had on hand."

All right, enough was enough. Jennings got out of his chair and Kravitz immediately rose to meet him.

Cassandra shot up between them. "Easy, boys, easy."

Kravitz relaxed his posture and smiled. "Sorry, Cassie, but you get something stuck to the bottom of your shoe, you just want to scrape it off. Know what I mean?" He held Jennings's gaze. "If I'd been on the force three years ago, I would've grieved for you and Cassie just like everybody else. But I didn't know you then. Don't know if you were a decent cop or a good husband or a loving father."

Cassandra frowned. "Cut it out, Jerry."

"Let me finish." Kravitz kept his gaze on Jennings. "But instead of taking a cue from Cassie here and handling your grief like an adult, you took all the goodwill the department offered you and turned it into mud."

"Jerry—"

"And that tells me all I need to know about what kind of man you are, Jennings. That's how you treat your friends. You hurt people. So why should we give you the benefit of the doubt now?"

Jennings felt as if the top of his head was about to explode. He glared at Kravitz, barely able to contain the urge to strangle him right then and there.

Thing is, Kravitz was right. Every word he'd said.

But Jennings didn't need this dredged up along with everything else tonight. And he could see from Cassandra's expression that she wasn't particularly happy about it, either. "Jerry, go outside."

"You telling me I'm wrong about this guy?"

"I'm telling you to go outside. We're in the middle of a murder investigation and I don't need you two standing here trying to prove who's got the most testosterone."

Kravitz smiled again. "Is it even a contest?" He shot a glance at Jennings, then swept past him and headed out the door.

After he was gone, Jennings said, "So how long have you been sleeping with that idiot?"

Cassandra's face went cold. "Are you gonna agree to the ISID or not?"

"I've got nothing to hide," Jennings said. "Get the tech in here, we can do it right now."

She turned and headed for the door. As she reached the threshold, she looked back at him, quiet contempt in her voice. "For the record, Nick, I know you'd never hurt anyone intentionally." Then she added, "You just can't help yourself."

His hand didn't turn blue.

The only one surprised by this was Kravitz, who, for whatever reason, seemed to have an emotional investment in Jennings's culpability.

Jennings told them about the girl who tore past him on the staircase right before Holly went into the pool. They noted it dutifully, asking if Jennings had recognized her.

"Just some kid," he said. "Looking scared."

"You happen to notice if she had a weapon?"

Jennings shook his head. "I don't make her for the shooter. I never heard a shot, and somehow I don't see a teenage girl packing a suppressor. But the speed she was moving, I'd lay odds she saw something. Or someone."

"We'll put it out there," Cassandra said. "But I'm not expecting much."

They left the apartment complex after the crime scene unit had done its damage and most of his neighbors were questioned. Jennings wasn't privy to the answers. Cassandra made it clear that his involvement in the investigation was not wanted, needed, or in any way condoned.

He was a witness. Nothing more. Which was fine with him.

But Cassandra wasn't convinced. "I know you were fond of her, Nick, but leave this to Jerry and me. There's nothing worse than an ex-cop on a mission."

"All I want is a nice hot shower," he said. "You two have fun."

He watched from the window as the caravan drove away, Cassandra at the wheel of her gray Infiniti, Kravitz riding shotgun. Beyond them, he could see the lights of the Strip bleeding into the darkness, a world that seemed to exist in an alternate universe.

He thought about Cassandra and what they'd once had and wondered how he'd let himself sink so low. He was a man who defined his life by putting "ex" in front of everything. Ex-cop, ex-husband...

Ex-father.

Foregoing the shower, he doused the lights and climbed into bed, jeans and all, letting the night drain away from him as he rolled onto his back and stared up at the moonlight that played across his ceiling.

Images of Holly crowded his head. The sweet smile. The perfect body. The sad eyes.

The bullet hole adorning her throat.

Why had she come back to Vegas? Had she come alone? Who was she afraid of? Was her assailant friend or foe?

It wasn't up to him to answer these questions, but there they were, accompanied by that unmistakable feeling of guilt he knew so well. True to form, Nick Jennings had once again failed someone he cared about.

Three and a half years ago, his daughter, Michelle, had been the object of that failure. Snatched out of her own bedroom while he and Cassandra slept just six feet and a wall of plaster away. They never heard a thing. And two weeks later, her body was found in a drainage ditch.

While Cassandra somehow managed to find the internal fortitude to continue on with her life, Jennings fell hard and still hadn't landed.

Now, he felt an itch rising inside him and for the first time in years it wasn't the thought of a game that got it going. It was a different kind of itch, the one he'd always felt at the beginning of a new case.

A sudden sense of resolve washed over him and, despite his ex-wife's admonitions and his own protests, he knew he wouldn't rest until he'd scratched that itch.

Cassandra was right. There's nothing worse than an ex-cop on a mission.

"I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

"Kravitz," Jennings said. "Detective Jerry Kravitz."

"And did you wish to speak to Mr. Hartley or Mr. Fine?"

"Mr. Hartley."

"I'm afraid he's out of the office. Can I have him call you back?"

After discovering that cell phones don't react well to pool water and cursing himself for never getting a landline, Jennings had found a battered pay phone about a block down from his apartment building. This was a long-distance call using an old phone card he'd managed to scrounge up, and there weren't too many minutes left.

"It can't really wait," he said. "Is there another number I can call? A cell phone maybe?"

"Actually, Mr. Hartley's on vacation and doesn't want to be disturbed. He does check in a couple times a day, but—"

"It's about his wife."

Up until now, the voice on the phone had been generic. A typically efficient female receptionist in tenor and tone, which, to Jennings, was practically a miracle at eight o'clock in the morning.

Now the voice faltered. "Is Mrs. Hartley in trouble?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"I just assumed that since you're with the police..."

"Do you know Mrs. Hartley?"

"Just in passing. They split up several months ago."

"That's right," Jennings said. "Any idea what caused the breakup?"

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know."

"Come on, now, you're right in the middle of rumor central."

"Sorry, Detective, I don't believe in speculating about people's private lives."

"Sure you do," Jennings said. "Otherwise why would you ask if Mrs. Hartley's in trouble when most people would've asked if she's okay?"

"Is there a difference?"

"You know there is."

Another pause. This one longer. "Las Vegas," she said, finally. "He's spending the week in Vegas."

"Isn't that a coincidence?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Never mind," Jennings said. "Where's he staying? The Diamond?"

"He usually stays at the corporate condo. His secretary should be here in a few minutes. Shall I have her call you?"

"Just give me the address," he said.

She hesitated again. After a few moments he heard the clacking of computer keys, then, "Do you have a pencil?"

"I'll manage."

He memorized the address and was in the middle of thanking her when the line suddenly went dead.

His minutes were up.

He managed to scrounge up enough change to call Scully for a ride and a new cell phone. An hour later, they pulled up in front of a cluster of town houses located about a half mile from the Strip.

Scully killed the engine. "You ready to tell me what's going on?"

"Surprise visit to an old friend," Jennings said. "You wait out here."

"You kidding me? It's already ninety degrees."

"I need you to keep an eye out. If my ex-wife and her new boyfriend show up, give me a jingle, then get your butt out of here."

Before Scully could protest, Jennings threw his door open and crossed the sidewalk to unit nineteen, the corporate getaway for Hartley-Fine Real Estate, of which Chuck Hartley, Holly's ex-husband, was CEO.

He leaned on the buzzer. No answer. He tried again. Still nothing. Moving to the window, he took a peek inside but saw only the usual trappings of corporate wealth: expensive but generic furniture, reproductions of famous paintings, a well-stocked wet bar. Everything looked neat and tidy.

Jennings stepped away from the window and pulled his wad of bump keys from his pocket. He had several makes, each with its key cuts trimmed down to maximum depth. When he found one that fit the door lock, he shoved it in, then took his pocket knife, held it by the blade and used it like a hammer, knocking the key deeper into the lock. He hit it several times until the cylinders finally fell into place. When he turned the key, the lock clicked open.

He'd been smart enough to bring his piece this time. Taking the nine mil from the small of his back, he carefully started inside. He was halfway through the door when he realized he wouldn't need it.

Things had just gotten complicated.

"Let me guess," Scully said. "He lost the argument."

Jennings turned. "I thought I told you to wait in the car?"

"I'm fryin' out there. I figured this place would be air-conditioned." He sniffed, made a face. "Not that it's doing this guy any good."

Beyond a small dining area was a doorway that led into the kitchen. A man of about forty-two lay faceup on the linoleum, staring lifelessly at the light fixture overhead. He was wearing only boxer shorts.

"Is this the old friend you were talking about?"

"Never seen him before," Jennings said. When he'd first spotted the body, he'd thought it was Chuck Hartley, Mr. Real Estate. But he remembered Hartley being much bigger and blonder than this guy.

He crossed to the kitchen for a closer look. There was a bullet hole, another neck shot. Stepping around the pool of blood, he crouched down and grabbed hold of one of victim's hands. Rigor had already set in. He'd been dead for a while.

“If you’re finished spreading your DNA,” Scully said, “we’d better get outta here.”

“Go work on your tan,” Jennings told him.

“Suit yourself. But you got five minutes before I bag out.”

When Scully was gone, Jennings crossed through the living room to a short hallway that led to a bedroom and bathroom. Stepping into the bathroom, he flicked on the light, checked the sink. Two toothbrushes in the holder.

Jennings popped open the medicine cabinet and found the usual assortment of bath products: a couple wrapped bars of soap, some dandruff shampoo, shaving cream and a razor, and a couple sticks of deodorant—his and hers.

Had Holly been staying here? If so, why lie about the Diamond?

Maybe the toothbrush and deodorant belonged to someone else. Some young fluff the dead man had picked up off the Strip. Some young fluff who had vacated the premises shortly after drilling a hole in the guy’s neck.

But if that was true, how did Holly fit in?

Jennings went into the bedroom and glanced around. The bed was unmade, clothing strewn on the floor: jeans wadded up in a corner, a pair of panties and a dark blue T-shirt at the foot of the bed.

Jennings picked up the shirt—size small—and stared at the words plastered across it: IRON MAIDEN. There were a couple long blond hairs stuck to the fabric.

The image of a scared kid in a Megadeth T-shirt and flowing blond hair tumbled through his brain. The girl on the staircase. She, not Holly, had been the houseguest here.

But who was she?

He moved to the corner, snatched up the jeans and patted the pockets. They were empty. Crossing to the dresser, he yanked open the drawers but found only boxer shorts and a few pairs of socks. He was about to turn away when he spotted something in the trash can next to the dresser. Reaching in, he pulled out a small, crumpled piece of pasteboard. It was an insert for a mini-DV video tape box.

He stared at it a moment, his mind clicking, then glanced at the bed and the clothing on the floor. Had someone been making a home video?

A home video with an underage kid?

He looked around for camera equipment, but found none. There was, however, a row of track lights facing the bed, and the bulb wattage was much too high for everyday use. This was a makeshift movie set, plain and simple.

Crossing to the nightstand now, he yanked the drawer open. Inside was a phone book, a clutch of keys and a wallet. Opening the wallet, he found a driver’s license inside, the face of the dead man staring up at him.

Joseph Edward Fine. Chuck Hartley’s partner.

“So who do you think did it? The kid?”

They were back in Scully’s Jaguar and headed across town. After listening to Scully whine for ten minutes, Jennings had finally given him the details.

Jennings shook his head. “They were both professional hits. No question about that now. But I’m still trying to figure out how Holly fit in.”

“Maybe she and this Fine guy were having an affair. Maybe that’s why she and Mr. Real Estate broke up.”

“So she and Fine start getting into underage porn? You don’t know Holly. That’s about as believable as the title on this car.”

A few minutes later they pulled into Abe’s, which had been owned and operated for the last thirty years by a guy named Carlo Pronzini. Scully was complaining of hunger pains, so they found a booth in back and ordered breakfast. A few minutes later, Carlo came out of the kitchen and greeted Jennings. “Heard you stopped by last night. You shoulda said hello.”

“Who’d you hear this from?”

“Your ex and her partner. They came in asking questions about you and Holly. Real shame what happened to her.”

“So what’d you tell them?”

“That she stopped by around ten. Which was a surprise. Figured I’d seen the last of her after she snagged the rich guy.”

“You talk to her?” Jennings asked.

“Just to say hello, say it was good to see her. She didn’t look all that thrilled to be here, though. Kept looking out the window like she was expecting the sky to fall.”

“She happen to mention what the problem was?”

Carlo shook his head. “She didn’t seem all that interested in conversation. Not with me, at least. She made a few phone calls, then a cab pulled in and she was gone.”

“A few calls? How do you know that?”

“Saw the coins drop, heard her talking. Your name was mentioned more than once.”

Jennings nodded. “She was leaving me a message.”

“No, this wasn’t to you. It was about you.”

“Oh? In what way?”

“Something about you being someone they could trust. That you’d be able to help them.”

Kravitz must’ve had a field day with that little tidbit of information. “Them?” Jennings said. “Any idea who she was talking to?”

“Not a clue. But, whoever it was, she was planning to meet up with him.”

“Yeah?”

Carlo nodded. “She gave him your address.”

Jennings considered heading to the Diamond to see if Holly had been shackled up with someone, but he was pretty sure that Cassie and Kravitz had already covered that ground. No point in giving hotel security a reason to start making phone calls.

As they pulled away from Abe’s, Jennings thought about Holly’s call. Not the one to him, but to whomever she’d given his address. It was obvious now that they’d done something to get them in nice and deep with a very nasty crowd—a professional crowd—and had expected Jennings to pull them out.

Could it have been Fine she was calling? Or what about Hartley? His receptionist said she thought he was staying at the corporate condo, but there’d been no sign of him. So where had he disappeared to?

Back in the old days Jennings would simply have gotten the pay phone records, but that wasn't possible now. There were no friends to call for favors, because the only friend he had was sitting next to him. Scully may have been a good R&D man when it came to home invasions and such, but his connections with the Metro Police Department were nonexistent. And the only decent informant Jennings had ever had was lying on a slab with a bullet in her neck.

He remembered how Holly had liked to play up the cloak and dagger when they worked together, offering to get him photos and other evidence, her flair for the dramatic often superseding her good sense. Everything was a movie to Holly. Always had been.

So what role had she been playing last night?

Scully, ever the deep thinker, said, "What does Carlo put in those eggs? They're starting to back up on me."

Jennings ignored him. A sudden thought had surfaced, an image straight from the Time Machine: Holly letting herself into his apartment to leave cryptic messages on his bathroom mirror.

He'd found no such message this time, but Jennings had assumed that Holly was headed toward his apartment when she was shot. What if she had kept her key and had already let herself inside? What if she had left some kind of message behind that he'd simply overlooked?

"Take a left," Jennings said.

Scully belched. "Where we headed?"

"Back to my place."

When they got there, his door was splintered and hanging open. The place had been ransacked. Every stick of furniture overturned, cabinets ajar, newspapers and a couple dozen casino decks scattered across the floor.

"Add a little water," Scully said, "and you'd have Hurricane Katrina."

Apparently Jennings wasn't the only one who thought Holly had left something behind.

But what?

He found it in the shower, pressed deep into a new bar of soap that lay in the tray above the spigot. If he had bothered to bathe last night, had bothered to wash off the chlorine that had soaked through to his bones, he would have found it then: a locker key.

Holly had once told him that after she first arrived in Vegas she'd lived out of a locker for nearly a month. A locker at the Greyhound bus station.

He turned to Scully. "Let's go downtown."

Twenty minutes later, they waded through a crowd of passengers heading for a departing bus, and worked their way to locker 223. Jennings slipped the key in, turned it.

There was a manila envelope inside. Dumping out its contents, he found a wallet-size photograph and a bright pink cell phone—which would explain why Holly had used the pay phone at Abe's.

Jennings stared at the photo. Two girls stared back at him with reticent smiles: a much younger Holly, about sixteen, and a smaller girl who couldn't have been more than six. There was something oddly familiar about the smaller girl's face.

His stomach clutched up when he realized what it was, and suddenly everything made sense. Holly wasn't the only member of her family to kiss her drunken mother good-bye.

The girl in the Megadeth T-shirt was Holly's sister.

Picking up the phone, he clicked it on, immediately noticing a symbol in the upper left corner that indicated there were photos waiting to be viewed.

He thumbed a button, flicking quickly through the photographs, feeling his heart pump faster with each new frame.

"Guess we know what they were after," Scully said, looking over Jennings's shoulder. "Is that who I think it is?"

Jennings nodded. "That B&E we were planning for tonight? We just found a new target."

He waited for them in the upstairs hallway. The alarm system had been sophisticated, but relatively easy to breach. A window overlooked the front drive.

Despite the size of the house, a fifteen-room Tudor in the heart of Red Rock, the support staff—according to Scully's contact at the security company—was minimal. The maid left at five every night, the gardeners were contracted, and the hired muscle, whom Jennings had no desire to tangle with, lived off premises. Wife and stepson were away for the weekend, so that left only the owner and the lone security man who accompanied him at all times.

Despite his wealth, the owner apparently believed in keeping his life as uncomplicated as possible. His house was tastefully furnished, but offered no overt signs of the man's considerable fortune. Even the car he drove was modest: a black Ford Expedition.

As it pulled into the driveway, Jennings receded into the shadows and watched as the headlights went dark and two men emerged. To his surprise, however, there was a third person in the car.

Yanking open the rear passenger door, the security man barked an order. A moment later, Holly's sister climbed out, her movements slow and clumsy as if she'd been drugged. She was wearing the same black T-shirt she'd worn the night before.

Jennings saw not only a younger version of Holly, but something in her that reminded him of his own daughter. His Michelle. And with that reminder came an even stronger sense of resolve.

The security man turned to his boss, his voice muffled through the windowpane. "I still say we should get rid of her. Cut our losses."

"Not until she tells us where it is. Get Tank and Brian over here to do a little work on her. I'm gonna go upstairs and take a hot one."

The security man nodded and grabbed the girl by the arm, pushing her toward the house. All three of them disappeared from view and Jennings heard the front door slam.

Crossing the hallway, he disappeared into the darkness of a bedroom.

The owner was stepping out of the shower, pulling on a neatly monogrammed terry cloth robe, when he realized Jennings was standing just

inside the bathroom doorway. Startled, he recovered quickly. "What is this? Who are you?"

"Just call me Houdini," Jennings said. "I owe you a hundred large, remember?"

Emile Garlin's eyes narrowed. He reached for a telephone on the wall.

"Don't bother. The line's been cut." With a quick flourish, Jennings produced Holly's cell phone and set it on the counter. "Why don't you try this one instead. It's what you've been looking for, right?"

Garlin eyed the phone, then slowly shifted his gaze to Jennings. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on, Emile. You've already killed two people to get it. Probably three."

"I think you're mistaking me for somebody else."

"Am I? You look remarkably like one of the guys in those photos."

"What photos?"

"Don't waste my time," Jennings said.

As if this was some kind of cue, Garlin suddenly moved toward him, but Jennings produced his nine mil. "Easy."

Garlin stopped in his tracks, his voice flat. "You're a dead man."

"I got the life sucked out of me a long time ago. Not much damage you can do now."

There was no sign of fear in Garlin's eyes. He just looked annoyed. "What do you want?"

"I'm curious," Jennings said. "Did you know that Holly and I were connected when you sent your goons after me?"

"Pure coincidence," Garlin said. "But those are the hazards of living in a small town." The guy wasn't even breaking a sweat.

"How do you sleep at night, Garlin?"

"Meaning?"

Jennings gestured to the cell phone. "Consenting adults is one thing, but fourteen-year-old girls?"

"I see you don't spend much time on the Internet," Garlin said. "Teens are all the rage. And I didn't create the market."

Jennings felt something tighten inside. Felt his finger against the trigger of the nine.

When he'd first played the photos back, he'd wondered what Garlin would have to say about them. Slimeballs can rationalize anything.

He and Scully had talked it through, and had a pretty good idea how the whole thing had played out. A lot of it was conjecture, sure, but he didn't think they were too far off the mark.

There had long been rumors of a Lolita Club in Vegas, an elite and very secretive group of businessmen who traded teenage girls like baseball cards and videotaped their adventures. Even as a cop, Jennings had assumed it was an urban myth, but the photos on that cell phone had dispelled any doubt that it really did exist.

Joseph Fine, of Hartley-Fine Real Estate, was a member of that club. Shortly after Chuck Hartley and Holly broke up, Fine had decided to let his old buddy in on his secret, showing him a few videotaped samples, hoping maybe to cheer his partner up.

But Hartley wasn't into jailbait. He was, in fact, appalled by what he saw. And one of the girls on the video looked remarkably like Holly. So much so that he went to his estranged wife and told her about it.

The rest played out like a bad spy movie, Holly and Hartley doing a whacked-out version of Nick and Nora Charles, using the Diamond hotel as their base of operations. Hartley had feigned interest in the club, had offered up a good deal of money to get a closer look, had even snagged a personal tour of Garlin's underage bunny ranch from the man himself.

And all the while, he'd had Holly's cell phone with him, snapping surreptitious, and very incriminating, photos.

Somewhere along the line he'd asked Fine to arrange a private rendezvous at the corporate condo. The choice of girls was obvious: Holly's sister.

Then something went wrong. Somehow Garlin had been tipped off about the photos—probably by Fine, or maybe even Hartley himself. Whatever the case, Holly had already stored the phone in the Greyhound locker. Then she'd gone to the condo, grabbed her sister, and called Jennings.

Fine had been a casualty of the cleanup crew. And Hartley had been the man at the other end of Holly's phone call from Abe's.

Jennings could see her standing there at the pay phone, looking out at the parking lot where her sister was waiting, giving his address to Hartley, not realizing that Hartley was already in Garlin's custody.

Later, as Holly and her sister left Jennings's apartment, they were confronted by Garlin and his security man. And Jennings, true to form, was a day late and a dollar short.

That was about to change.

There was a muffled sound of a door slamming. Jennings had no doubt that the Hawaiian-shirt boys had just arrived.

"Reinforcements," Garlin said. "You're one shout away from history."

"Doesn't matter," Jennings told him. "The great thing about cell phone photos is that you can send them instantly to anyone on your network. You'd be surprised how many newspapers and law enforcement agencies share the same service. Not that it makes much difference at this point."

Garlin studied him as those last words sunk in. Then his expression changed almost imperceptibly. There was fear in his eyes now. He nodded to the nine. "What do you plan on doing with that?"

Jennings smiled. A smile that hid the rage he felt. A rage that had been building for three long years and had finally reached the boiling point.

The answer, he thought, was fairly obvious.

The papers were still talking about it three days later. "The Garlin Mansion Massacre," they called it. Four dead at the hands of an unknown assailant. A young runaway, one Teresa Jean Addison, was found cowering in a closet.

The photos of the Lolita Club bunny ranch, its inhabitants, its owner, and a few of its better known members had made international headlines. Teresa Jean got her fifteen minutes of fame on the nightly news, talking about her ordeal.

On the afternoon of that third day, after Jennings had just finished up his show at the Tally-Ho lounge, he found Cassandra waiting for him in the parking lot.

“I suppose it’s too late for an ISID,” she said.

Jennings stole a line from Garlin: “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“My partner thinks you’re good for that thing in Red Rock.”

“When are you gonna stop sleeping with that idiot?”

“He’s coming after you, Nick. Consider yourself warned.” She started to turn away, but Jennings stopped her.

“Let’s pretend for a moment that I did do it,” he said. “What would be my motive?”

“We all know how you felt about Holly. Or maybe you just didn’t want to see another little girl wind up in a drainage ditch.”

They were silent a moment, thinking about that and what it meant, Cassie’s eyes showing a trace of tears.

“You’re forgetting who you’re talking to,” Jennings said. “I’m just a screwup, remember? A guy who can’t help himself.”

She studied him sadly a moment. “That’s the problem, Nick. It always has been.”

Then she turned and walked away.

Jennings watched her cross toward her car, feeling the tug of emotion that always accompanied her visits, as infrequent as they were.

Someday, he thought. Someday he’d make it right with her. And as he watched her drive away, he took his cell phone from his pocket and dialed.

Maybe Scully could find him a game.

