

# **MONDAY GIRL'S REVENGE**

**David A. Thyfault**

Episode two (of four) in the series:  
The Making of Detective Neal "Stump" Randolph

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ISBN 978-1-943650-33-0

Library of Congress Control Number 2016951332

This book was published by BookCrafters,  
Parker, Colorado.

This book may be ordered from  
[www.bookcrafters.net](http://www.bookcrafters.net)  
and other online bookstores.



## DEDICATION

*To all victims of other people's  
choices, especially my patient wife,  
Patty, for enduring my countless  
questions ever since I decided to  
write a fiction series.*



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks to these folks for their assistance.

George Andrews  
BookCrafters  
Rickey Fitzsimmons  
Lori Freyta  
Deb McLeod  
Liz Netzel  
Abigail Rhode  
Patty Thyfault  
Lisa Wiencek



# CHAPTER 1

LIKE A MOTHER WHO RUNS WILDLY through the flames of a burning building to save her baby, Detective Delores Sanchez was driven to the most dangerous undercover role of her brief career because she had no choice: She knew from first-hand experience what the rapist's victims felt like and she'd do anything to save them from his hellfire.

A little taller than most Latinas, Delores tucked a small beat-up table under the bare window that overlooked the kidney-shaped pool and a dozen swaying palm trees of the Cal-Vista apartments.

To gather evidence against Dixon Browne, the resident manager, and a man whom she thought of as a serial rapist, Delores was going to have to let him get uncomfortably close.

Uncomfortable because when Delores was a youngster she was fondled repeatedly and had grown to become distrustful of any kind of typical intimacy. The simple thought of somebody's hands, even those of somebody whom she liked, grabbing at her body usually reminded her of her childhood and nearly always freaked her out.

The single difference between this situation and her own experience was that Dixon Browne's victims, who flowed to him with the frequency of waves flopping on the beach at high-tide, weren't children. They were full-grown undocumented

immigrants. Regardless of the distinction, Delores knew how helpless Dixon's victims felt and she was the only person who was in a position to do anything about it.

Thus, a few days earlier Delores adopted the role of a naïve and poor immigrant, whom she called Lorraine Martinez, and made up a story about a missing brother. Posing as a financially challenged prospective tenant, she confessed to Dixon that she lacked the full month's rent that was usually required to move in. As expected, Dixon made an allowance and let her move the few bedraggled props she'd brought with her into one of the vacant apartments.

With but a few more minutes until she expected him to drop by for the remainder of the rent, Delores set her recorder pen on top of the fridge and plopped a small black and white TV on the rickety table by the window.

Next, if the very worst thing were to happen, Dixon would probably try to force her into the bedroom, therefore, the best place to stash her hand-sized Diamondback gun was under the matted-down couch pillow she'd already placed on the exercise-mat-turned-mattress that she planned to use for a bed.

After moving a few remaining pieces of beat-up furniture around, about all that was left to do was take a seat at the window and think about how Lorraine might interact with Dixon Browne as she watched for his arrival.

Now, as both the bait and the hunter, Delores was not the least bit confident that both she and Dixon could survive their relationship long enough to slap her magic bracelets on his wrists.

\* \* \*

Freshly showered, Dixon Browne squeezed a glob of paste onto his dentures and jiggled them into place. He ran a brush through his thinning brown hair and moved into his bedroom-turned-office. He passed a shelf full of gambling trophies and

opened the desk drawer where he kept two special checkbooks, each holding over twenty thousand dollars.

One account was for a new car. The other held a college fund for his secret daughter, Maria, who lived with her mama, Inez, at the other end of the complex. Proud of his accounts, Dixon pressed his tongue against his uppers, grinned and returned his checkbooks to their proper place.

He crossed the hall to the bigger bedroom and put on his best Bermudas along with a red polo shirt and sandals. That done, he ventured into the kitchen where his current wife, Francisca, was making tortillas. "I'll be back in an hour," he said.

Francisca's English was a little rough, but Spanish was forbidden when Dixon was around. She flipped a tortilla. "What if somebody comes?"

"Dumb question," he said, grabbing the doorknob. "Tell 'em to come back later."

Outside, in the well-maintained courtyard, seven identical buildings, each with twelve apartments, encircled the fenced-in pool. As the resident manager, Dixon lived and worked in building one, which was next to the parking lot where he could keep an eye on the entire complex, including a bicycle rack and a trash area. To his right, the primary cleaning lady had just thrown a large bag into the dumpster. "Juanita," Dixon yelled, while hooking a finger. As usual, Juanita came quickly.

"Yes?" she said, as she pushed her black-rimmed glasses up the bridge of her nose.

"I've got two vacant apartments that need to be painted by tomorrow night."

"But it's my daughter's birthday tomorrow. Can we do them on the next day?"

Dixon's poker skills had taught him how to deal with signs of weakness. He flapped a small piece of paper at her. "There are two apartment numbers on here and somebody's going to paint them by tomorrow. Should I give the money to somebody else?"

Like most everybody around there, Juanita and her husband, Manuel, were always in need of extra money. She bowed her head, indicating that Dixon's bluff had worked. "No, no. We'll do it for you," she said.

It was too easy. "Good. If you hurry you'll have time for cake." Dixon handed Juanita the slip of paper and the standard deal was in place. After the apartments were painted, Dixon would bill the unknowing owner one hundred forty dollars for each apartment and give Juanita and Manuel two hundred, total. Dixon considered the extra eighty bucks to be his finder's fee—half for his car, half for Maria's college fund. His next stop was building three.

As he walked down the sidewalk he glanced across the courtyard to building four, where Maria lived with her mother. Almost sixteen, Maria had no idea that she was the byproduct of a careless fling between Dixon and her mama. Instead, Maria's mama had told Maria that her father was a brave Mexican hero who died while fighting drug lords.

Dixon liked the ruse because his original family didn't know he had fathered Maria and he was able to watch her grow up without the complications of an unwanted marriage or mandatory child support.

But none of that meant Dixon ignored his responsibility or his heart. Quite the opposite. When Inez was pregnant, he regularly slipped her enough cleaning work to pay the bulk of her bills, but he mostly cared about the baby, so he made sure Inez never overworked. Now, all these years later, he had other people do most of the work and only called on Inez once in a while, on Fridays. Thus, he thought of Inez as his Friday Girl and as long as she took care of the only person Dixon loved, he was satisfied. He smiled and kept going.

Upon entering building three, Dixon's nostrils flared at a whiff of refried beans. His saliva glands kicked in as he ascended the half-flight of stairs to Apartment 202. The lease said Juan Hernandez lived there with his wife and their baby girl, which was the maximum number of people allowed in

a one-bedroom unit. But Juan and Dixon had a “wink-wink” deal and Dixon was there to collect.

When Juan’s wife inched open the door, Dixon could see another woman nursing a baby on an old dark brown sofa. After a brief discussion, the sitting woman passed a sealed white envelope along to Dixon.

The under-the-table price for the three extra people who lived in Juan’s apartment was a hundred and fifty bucks per month, in cash, a bargain compared to what they’d have to pay to rent their own place. “Gracias,” Dixon said as he stuffed the envelope into his Bermudas. He had one final stop, the one he’d most been looking forward to.

Lorraine Martinez had just moved into building five. He knew her type: humble, poor, intimidated by authority figures. But most importantly, he knew she was afraid she’d get deported.

At Lorraine’s door, his first knock yielded no reply, but that wouldn’t stop a manager with a master key. He let himself in. The lights were off. There was no music. Two unmatched chairs were backed against the living room wall with a small end-table tucked between them. Two additional chairs were gathered at a wobbly kitchen table, with the little TV he’d loaned her pushed toward the window. “Hello?” he said into the otherwise empty room. “Señorita?”

Nothing.

He closed the door and wiggled his jaw. “Manager,” he said, louder this time.

Still nothing.

He placed his hand on top of the TV. It was warm. He moved toward the hall where he looked through the crack by the hinges of the bedroom door. Lorraine was standing behind the open door, undoubtedly scared. “Señorita?” he said again, as he tugged gently on the knob and stood before her. “Come on out. You don’t have to be afraid.” The tips of her dark brown hair draped delicately across her shoulders as she cautiously stepped forward. Her dark eyes shone in a

beautiful, unblemished face. He took her hand and led her back to the living room.

Saliva oozed off the back of Dixon's tongue as he and Lorraine sat face to face. He leaned in. "I looked closer at your application. It says that you're twenty-six. How old are you really?"

"Twenty-six," she said sheepishly.

Dixon shook his head and pointed a thumb toward the center of the complex. "There are only six white families and two black families who live here. The rest are Hispanic. I've been doing this for a long time. If you want my help you have to be honest with me." He smiled. "I'd say you're about nineteen. That's closer, isn't it?"

Lorraine scooted back in her chair, then looked up and nodded.

"Good." He placed his hand on her knee, shifted his teeth with his jaw. "You just tell me the truth and I'll keep you safe."

"Gracias," she said as softly as before.

"You said that you got a job at the restaurant a couple miles up. If they're still paying forty dollars a day for a five-day week you won't have enough money to pay your rent and other bills. Can somebody else help you?"

Her gaze fell toward the floor. "My brother had to go away."

Just as he often did when playing poker, Dixon stared at her until she blinked. Then he said, "Let me guess. He got picked up. Now you're all alone and don't know who to trust." He lifted her chin and bobbed his head up and down the way salesmen do when they want people to agree with them. "That's it, isn't it?"

It took a moment but eventually Lorraine mirrored his head-bob.

Dixon sucked at the air and scooted his chair closer. "Alright. Since you were honest with me, I'm going to help you out. First off, Immigration won't deport you if you make enough income to support yourself, so we have to get you a little more money."

She lifted her head and looked him in the eye.

“I want you to tell the owner of the restaurant to shift your schedule around so that you can have Mondays off. That way you can work for me, just on Mondays. Then, I’ll pay three hundred-and-fifty dollars a month of your rent.”

She smiled. “You will?”

“Sure. Other women do the same thing for me, only on different days.” He laid his hand on her shoulder. “But let me make something perfectly clear. You’ll have to do whatever I want. That might mean you’ll rake leaves or pick up trash along the fences or cook some food for my police friends.” Dixon leaned in close. “And that’s not all. When I say you have to do *anything*, I mean *anything*.” He placed his hand under her chin and leaned in to kiss her innocent lips.

She crinkled her nose, pushed him away. “No,” she yelled as she bolted to her feet, ran into the bedroom and slammed the door.

Dixon smiled. He could have gone after her but there was no need. He’d seen her kind before. Her full rent would be due soon and if she didn’t miraculously find the money, she’d be out of options. It was as if she were drawing to an inside straight. “Think it over Señorita,” he said as he moved toward the door. Let me know if you change your mind.”

Dixon left and hurried back to Francisca. She wasn’t allowed to say no.

## CHAPTER 2

OUT OF NOWHERE, SCORCHING FLAMES flashed high and wide. Then Stump felt the heat. The guilt was back. His stomach felt as if a bunch of boots were kicking him around. Another flare made him gasp for fresh air. “No. No. Not again,” he yelped. “Oh my God. Mom! Please! Please!” He tried to run for help but his legs wouldn’t move. “Mom!” He thrashed his head wildly from side to side. “Gimme another chance, Mom! Please! Please don’t die. MOM. MOM!”

“Stump. Wake up,” somebody said from afar. “You’re dreaming again.” Then Stump felt a hand on his head.

“Huh? What?” Stump paused, opened his eyes and sucked in several quick breaths. Safely in bed, he raised his sweaty head off the pillow. “Oh. Myles. Thank God.”

“Same thing, huh?”

Relieved to be back in the present, Stump nodded. It had been three years since his mother’s death but he still had nightmares about his role in her passing. If only he’d done what she asked. He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. “I killed her, Myles.”

Myles shook his head. “We go over this every time, Stump. You didn’t put the paint thinner in the laundry room nor the bars on the windows.”

“I know, but if I didn’t—”

“You’ve got to stop beating yourself up over it. You’ll have your chance to do something about it in a couple days. In the meantime, you’d better get a shower. I’ll wait.”

A short hour later Stump and Myles were in Myles’s truck at the local shopping center and embroiled in their most frequent topic. “But what good does it do to have three million bucks if I can’t spend any of it?” Stump asked.

“You just worry about what you’re doing.” Myles pointed out the windshield. “If you wreck my truck, you won’t get your license for at least another year.”

As adoptive fathers go, Myles’s was sorta cool most of the time, but at moments like this the dude was a giant buzz kill. First off, nothing could go wrong on the outskirts of an empty mall parking lot this early on a Sunday morning. Secondly, the driving conditions had nothing to do with what he wanted to talk about. “But, you keep ignoring—”

“I’m not ignoring anything. Young people don’t respect money. As long as I’m in charge of your trust, I’m not going to let you piss it away.”

“Dammit, Myles,” Stump said, smacking the steering wheel. “I don’t want to piss it away. I just want enough to buy one stupid car.” He pulled up to a stop sign, turned right and swung into the second lane.

Myles smirked. “No way. You may have aced the online driving exam, but you’re still not responsible enough. You forgot to signal and you can’t even hit the correct lane when you turn a corner.”

“For crying out loud, Dude. Nobody’s around.”

“Don’t care. You don’t get to change the laws when they’re inconvenient.”

“Alright, alright. I get it, but I bet there are lots of people who—”

“You might as well get used to it. You’re not going to use your trust money for a car, and based on what I’m seeing today, it could be a long time before you get a license. Now, circle around and do it correctly this time.”

Stump squeezed the steering wheel as hard as he could. The only way to get Myles to take his request seriously was to complete the two-mile loop around the mall precisely the way Myles wanted it. Below 10 MPH. Proper signals. Correct lanes. Watch the mirrors. No friggin' radio.

Several minutes of silence accompanied them around the parking lot, perfectly this time, then back to the starting point. Stump pulled into a parking spot on the outskirts of the lot and turned off the engine. "Now can we talk about that car?"

Myles tilted his head. "Do it again, going the other direction."

Stump sighed. No use fighting it. Myles had all the power. Foot on brake. Check mirrors. Put in gear. Look over shoulder. Roll eyes.

They were on the fifth perfect trip in a row when Stump detected motion in his left side mirror. A Palmdale squad car was racing across the lot in his direction. He frowned and swerved slightly.

"What the hell are you doing?" Myles asked.

Stump checked again, just as the red lights flashed in his mirror. "Oh, shit." At least Myles was indifferent to Stump's sometimes-colorful language.

Myles spun around, then back. "Interesting. What are you going to do now?"

"I dunno," Stump said, pressing the brake pedal so hard that the truck stopped more abruptly than he intended. He wide-eyed the mirror again just as the cop car pulled to his bumper. There were two officers inside. "What now?"

Myles shrugged. "You got yourself into this mess."

In the left mirror, a tall middle-aged lady cop approached. Stump didn't usually fear cops, but he hated being on the defensive. He rolled down his window.

"Hands on the wheel, where I can see them, please," the officer said from over Stump's shoulder.

Stump turned his head toward Myles for some guidance.

Myles pointed his chin in the officer's direction. "Better do as she says."

The blue-shirted cop reached the window, bent slightly and glanced across at Myles, then back to Stump. "What's going on here?"

"My dad's teaching me to drive."

"Oh, I see. Do you have a permit?"

"Yes, ma'am." He reached in his back pocket, produced a crumpled paper and handed it to the officer. It was the first time he realized Myles was correct about that other matter. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I don't have a wallet."

She shook her head, looked at Myles again and moved toward the fender where she laid out the wrinkled wad and tried to hand-iron some of the creases away. She finally studied the paper and returned to the window. "Neal Joseph Randolph?"

"Yes, ma'am. But they call me Stump."

She nodded. "An alias, huh? How'd you get that name?"

"My Aunt Gerry said it when I was learning to walk."

"I see." She looked back at his permit. "You don't look sixteen."

Stump swallowed. "I just had my birthday. Honest. I'm just a little short. Just ask my dad, he's a detective."

The officer bent over, looked at Myles once more. "That correct?"

Myles reached in his pocket, flashed his badge. "Myles Cooper. Sergeant. L.A."

She nodded, smiled slightly and turned back to Stump. "I watched you go around the lot a few times. Most people don't do that unless they're staking the place out."

"My dad said this was the safest place to practice."

"Do you have your registration and proof of insurance?"

Stump hadn't thought about those things. Fortunately, Myles had already mined the glove compartment. Stump's fingers shook as he took the papers from Myles and passed them on.

“You wait here.” The officer said before returning to her squad car. She slid in and closed the door. The officer sitting in the rider’s seat was talking into a corded cop microphone. “What are they doing?” Stump whispered to Myles.

Myles shrugged. “Probably checking to see if you have any outstanding violations.”

“Are you going to take away my permit?”

Myles tilted his head. “You did make that *lame* lane-change. Remember?”

“This sucks,” Stump said just as a new set of cop lights flashed in the other mirror. His eyes widened, “Oh no. There’s another one.”

Myles looked over his shoulder but said nothing.

As the second squad car parked behind the first, a third one, from the front this time, blasted around one of the buildings, it too with flashing red.

Within mere seconds the third car pulled right to Myles’s front bumper, making it impossible to get away. Doors swung open. More blue-shirted uniforms jumped out. Scary officers glared at Stump before walking past him and joining their peers in a cop-cluster behind Myles’s truck. Stump’s armpits oozed sweat into his clean T-shirt.

The lady cop’s arms flailed, as she explained Stump’s orbits around the mall. Then the cop who came in the second car said something back to her and just like a football team breaking a huddle, the whole group of officers came to the front of Myles’s truck, with the woman now holding a clipboard.

She bent again. “Okay, Mr. Randolph. We talked it over. I’m afraid we’re going to have to give you an SDC.”

Stump couldn’t see the paper, but the oldest officer looked pissed off. “A ticket?”

She waited a few seconds, then, “We don’t usually see dads and their sons working together like this, but we like it.” She handed Stump the paper. “We’re giving you a Safe Driving Certificate. Congratulations.”

Stump's eyes widened. He looked at the certificate and back at the officer. "Really?"

"Sure thing. I watched closely and you were doing everything just the way you're supposed to. Good job."

"Wow. Thanks." Stump quickly scanned the now grinning faces of the officers then handed his award to Myles.

The lady cop tapped the bottom of Stump's window frame. "You keep driving safely, Neal." She nodded respectfully at Myles and turned away. Within moments the cops were back in their vehicles, and had turned off their lights and driven away.

Apparently stunned, Myles scanned the certificate and shook his head. "I don't know what to say, but I think that's enough for today. Let's trade seats, and I'll take you to breakfast."

If Stump's grin were any bigger, it might have broken his face.

## CHAPTER 3

HOW COULD COFFEE SMELL SO GOOD and taste so gross? After taking their initial order, the waitress, who was about Myles's age, with lots of jewelry, brought their drinks. "Juice for you," she said to Stump, "and coffee for you," she said to Myles as she slid his cup before him.

Stump paused a long moment, then stared right at Myles.

"What's up?" Myles asked.

"Her rings."

"The waitress? What about them?"

"They were all scratched up." Stump pointed out the window. "Just like that lady cop who gave me that award. They've both been married a long time."

"So?" Myles lifted his cup to his lips.

"That officer kept smiling at you. She was way too friendly for a married person." Stump leaned to the side to see around Myles's cup. "And you've got a big ol' grin on your face. Admit it, Dude. You put them all up to it."

Myles set his cup down, beamed. "You think you're pretty smart, don't you? Alright. You caught me. I wanted to teach you a lesson about taking driving seriously. As far as I could tell, you seemed to get the point."

Stump shook his head. "I can't believe you."

“Speaking of not being stupid,” Myles said. “Your mid-term grades came in the mail.”

Stump felt like a balloon that had just lost its air. “Probably not straight A’s, huh?”

“Hardly.” Myles unfolded the paper, slid it across the table. “An A in math, but everything else is a disaster.”

“I don’t like school this year. It’s a waste of time. I don’t need to know most of that shit.”

“Can’t help that, but I do know one thing. If you don’t get your act together, you might have to repeat the tenth grade.”

Stump looked out the window. “That’d suck.”

“Glad you see it that way ‘cause I expect you to fix this on your own.” He picked up a napkin. “Or I’m going to have to take your license away before you even get it.”

“Okay. Okay. You’ve made your point. Now can we talk about my car?”

“That depends. You got anything new to say?”

“Just that it would be a lot easier on both of us. You won’t have to take me to so many places.”

“That’s not new and you know the answer. Not unless you’ve got your own money and can pay for insurance and gas.”

“But I do have my own money. Three million dollars. Remember?”

“You know what I mean. Your trust money doesn’t count. You’ve got to get a job and earn the money you need. All I’m willing to do right now is loan you the money to buy new tires for Ol’ Ug’.”

Stump snorted. “That piece of crap bicycle in the storage room? You’ve got to be kidding me. The last time that clunker saw any action was before cavemen tamed fire.”

“It was good enough for my paper route and it still has lots of miles left in it.”

“Dude. There’s a reason you gave it that stupid name.”

“Maybe so, but it’s cheap and reliable.”

“The handlebars look like goal posts.”

“And with a little practice you’ll be able to ride your girlfriends around on them like I used to do.”

Stump rolled his eyes. “Great, if I happen to see a grandma waddling along the side of the road, I can offer her a ride down memory lane. It’s dorky, Dude. If you want me to use a bike we should get a cool racing bike like Lance Armstrong.”

“If you want a cool bike, get a job and save your money.”

Stump paused. Then, “Knowing you, you’ll make me install seatbelts.”

“Don’t tempt me, but I’d like you to wear a helmet. I’ll loan you the money for that too.”

Stump banged his elbows on the table, dropping his shaking head in his hands. “Why not get me George Washington’s leather football helmet?”

Myles grinned. “If we’re done arguing, I got a call from that commercial real estate broker I spoke with last week. He found a building we should drive by when we’re done here.”

Stump pursed his lips. “An investment for my trust? Those buildings are in the millions.”

“Seven million. If we put two million down, we can get a loan for the rest and the rents will pay for it.”

“I can’t believe this crap.” Stump took a swig of his O.J., then plopped his glass on the table. “I’m the only person I know who is both filthy rich and dirt poor at the same time.”

“I’m not saying we should buy it, but the right investment might provide some income.”

“Income? Who cares about income if Daddy won’t let me spend any of it?”

Myles let out a deep breath and sat back. His eyes were vacant. It meant he was thinking something over. Looks went back and forth. Finally, Myles shifted. “I’ve got a compromise for you. You get a job and save as much as you can. Then, when you have enough money for a decent car, I’ll match however much you save, and just to give you an extra incentive, I’ll authorize the trust to match it too. That way for

every dollar you save, you'll have three dollars to spend on that car. How's that sound?"

"Not bad. But there ain't no jobs. The economy. Remember?"

"I didn't say it would be easy, but a smart fellow, who can triple his money, would probably try a lot harder than somebody else. And I can guarantee you there's an employer out there somewhere who will appreciate that type of enthusiasm. You just have to find him."

Stump shrugged. "Okay, I gotta admit that's a pretty good deal, but I'm telling ya, there's no decent jobs around."

"Now that we've got that out of the way, I've been meaning to tell you that I won't be able to go to that City Council meeting with you Tuesday evening. I've got an obligation at work, so it's okay if you want to wait until next month when I can go along."

Stump bit his lip. He didn't like the idea of facing the whole gang of authority figures by himself.

## CHAPTER 4

THE EARLY MORNING AROMA of chorizo made Dixon's mouth water. The fifth of the month was the last day the tenants could pay their rent without a late fee—and at least half of them waited as long as possible. The avalanche of activity that was to follow would be a royal pain in the ass, but afterwards, the only tenants left to deal with were the late-payers, and they were the ones who were most willing to play "Let's Make a Deal."

A significant percentage of the renters were still getting accustomed to America. Some had not yet landed steady jobs, nor established relationships with banks, nor learned how to deal with regular rent payments. A few others simply couldn't resist the liquor-store-on-every-corner temptation.

Whatever their reasons, Dixon had developed several furtive techniques to fatten his checkbooks at their expense. To keep track of it all, he kept coded records in a green spiral notebook in his desk.

The bulk of this secret activity began when Rodger Kraft, the building's owner, was diagnosed with cancer. Prior to that, Rodger had kept track of the day-to-day operations, but his disease led to fatigue and sloppiness. Bottom line was, Rodger wasn't going to live a lot longer and he already had all the money he'd ever need.

There was no reason for Dixon to ignore the window of opportunity that would surely close after Rodger was out of the picture. Besides, Dixon deserved a little extra juice. He was the one who had to be there around the clock, while Rodger Kraft just dropped by for a few hours each day. Dixon had to deal with the squabbles among tenants, and evicting drunks, and making sure the apartments got painted. For that alone he and Maria deserved a bigger slice of the pie, and today the Last Minute Gang would fill his plate. He barely got his teeth tucked into his jaw before Francisca knocked on the bathroom door. "Somebody to see you," she said. "They're looking for an apartment."

Dixon sucked at his teeth. It happened every month at this time. Struggling renters from other buildings had fallen behind on their rent the previous month and now that a new month had arrived, they didn't have enough money to both catch up on the old debt and pay for the new month. Instead, they'd look for someplace else to start all over. Fortunately for Dixon, struggling renters were walking bags of cash.

After a little friendly negotiating, they would be allowed to move into one of the vacant apartments at a big discount for the first month, but they had to pay in cash and they had to take the apartment "as is" even though it had not yet been cleaned or painted. Later, Rodger Kraft would be told that Dixon had to give them some free rent as an incentive to move in. "Tell them I'll be right there."

Dixon considered the exercise to be a win/win for everybody: The tenants beat their former landlord out of the previous month's rent and paid only half-price for their first month at Cal-Vista; as for Rodger, if the new tenants lasted for a few additional months, he'd pocket some cash he wouldn't have otherwise gotten; and best of all, the Dixon-Maria matching checkbooks would be enlarged by several hundred bucks.

As the day unfolded, Dixon collected most of the outstanding rents and made several special arrangements

with people who were naïve enough to think their financial problems were temporary. “Just pay half of the rent in cash,” he said. “If you can’t get the rest, I’ll let you stay until the end of the month for free.” Of course Dixon pocketed the bulk of the cash and told Rodger Kraft they were going to get caught up on payday.

That night, Dixon slipped into his office to count his rewards. Like bananas, they came in bunches. A half-dozen mini-scams netted him and Maria nearly two grand to split. What father wouldn’t do the same thing?

After he updated his notebook there remained a handful of people who still hadn’t checked in, including young Lorraine Martinez, whom he hoped to make into his Monday Girl. She and some others would be more desperate the next day when late fees would be added to their debt.

Just then, one of Francisca’s gentle knocks interrupted Dixon’s thoughts. “The lady from building five is here to see you,” she said.

Monday Girl! “Tell her to wait.” Dixon hurried across the hall to the bathroom and sucked in some mouthwash and swished it around before he inserted his teeth. Then a comb found his hair and he dabbed his face with Old Spice. Lastly, he popped into the bedroom and threw on some clean clothes.

A minute later Francisca escorted Lorraine into the office and Dixon closed the door. Lorraine’s slender body was hidden behind a faded tan blouse that was loose for her frame and hid breasts that were undoubtedly too young to have been affected by gravity. Her thick hair and golden skin were alluring enough, but whenever she spoke, perfect white teeth peeked from behind full innocent lips that were just begging to be kissed. He swallowed the excess saliva that had already accumulated behind his teeth. “Did you bring your rent?”

The slow head-nod answered his question. “Most of it,” she said, reaffirming his suspicions. He thought about candy and babies, and taking one from the other. “How much do

you have?" he asked, knowing nearly every word that would follow.

Lorraine reached in her blouse pocket and pulled out a wad of crinkled-up bills, including ones. She laid it on Dixon's desk. "Four hundred. I can get the rest in a few days. The restaurant is going to let me wait tables on the weekends."

Her words were simple enough, but he knew she was bluffing. They all had stories like that. He also knew that the best way to beat a bluffer was to come right back at her with an enormous raise. "I doubt your tips are all that good," he said while he stuffed her cash in his desk drawer. "You still won't have enough to avoid eviction. You understand that, don't you?"

Lorraine's eyes confirmed that Dixon had essentially won the pot as he always did. He immediately dealt the next hand. "What about next month?" he asked.

She wrinkled her brow. "What about it?"

"Even if you get this month figured out, you're going to come up against the same situation in a few weeks. You also have to pay for utilities and groceries and bus fare. Correct?" He waited until she nodded. "I guess you could take on a roommate, but you only have one bedroom. Do you know anybody else who'd want to live with you?"

Her brown eyes sought the floor. "What about the job you mentioned?" she asked.

He hid his grin, but his chest throbbed like a beginner with four of a kind. "On Mondays?" he said. "I suppose we could still work something out."

"What would I have to do?"

He shrugged. "Easy things, mostly. Clean vacant apartments, run errands, cook meals. Anything I need."

She looked off to the side. "What about what you tried to do last time? I don't want to do that."

Dixon rose, took her hand and urged her to stand. He gently touched her chin and lifted her head. "You've kissed a boy before, haven't you?"

“Just Ricardo. In Mexico.”

“Well, Ricardo’s not here to help you pay your rent.” Dixon leaned forward to taste her luscious lips. This time she didn’t run away.

## CHAPTER 5

PLAYING HER ROLE AND DRESSED IN second-hand clothes, Detective Delores Sanchez, AKA Lorraine Martinez, caught the 9:15 bus toward her bogus job. From the rear of the bus she verified that she wasn't being followed before she pulled the overhead cord.

Two blocks later she departed, walked one block down the side street, made a right, then walked another half-block back toward Cal-Vista. A final look over her shoulder confirmed she was all clear. She grabbed a key from her purse and slithered behind the wheel of a near-new, grey Audi. Ten minutes later she pulled into the driveway of psychiatrist Jeanine Moreno.

Delores had been a cop a few years, and she'd already experienced more than her fair share of stress, but it wasn't until Dixon Browne dumped a baleful of last straws on her shoulders that she actually sought professional therapy. This would be her first meeting with her shrink.

She was escorted into a private office where Dr. Moreno stood behind a beautiful, but cluttered, antique desk. "Come in, Detective," the doctor said, brushing aside a few strands of her streaked blonde hair. "I'm so happy to meet you." About ten years Delores's senior, the doctor pointed with long, multi-colored fingernails toward a sitting area, near a large window. "Please take a seat."

Delores nodded and curled her own boring fingernails deep into her palms.

At the sitting area, two high-backed leather chairs, each containing a large purple velvet pillow, sat face-to-face. The tidy area looked like a well-planned island of sanity amid a sea of madness. Delores snatched the pillow from the left chair for no particular reason and eased into the soft leather. "I've never been to a psychiatrist before," she said. "You're going to think I'm screwed up."

"First off, Detective," the doctor said as she kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet up under her rear end, "you can call me Jeanine. It's usually a lot easier to talk with a friend," she said, making air-quotes.

Whew! The feeling was mutual. "And you can call me Delores."

"Alright then, Delores, now that we've got all the yucky stuff out of the way—"

Delores grinned and set her pillow aside. She uncurled her fingers and gestured toward a framed picture next to a bottle of hand lotion on Jeanine's desk. "Is that your family?"

"Yep. Two daughters. One husband, but sometimes he can be more challenging than both the girls combined. How about you? Married? Children?"

"I've met a few guys, but nothing has worked out."

"I see. Do you mind if I ask how you heard of me?"

"Oh, sure. I'm from a little two-person department, out in Palmdale. We don't have many resources so when I decided I wanted to talk with somebody I called the L.A. office. They had a couple people on contract. I picked you because, well—"

"I'm a woman."

"Well, yeah, but I hate to admit it, considering all the crap I give men about being sexist."

Jeanine waved a dismissive hand in the air. "I get that quite a bit. Who else knows you're here?"

"Nobody. I don't want anybody to know I'm a head case."

"A head case, huh? The reason I asked is, the county might pay my fee if your supervisor recommends the meeting."