



DOWN & OUT
BOOKS

JACK GETZE

An Austin Carr Mystery

**BIG
NUMBERS**

"Darkly comic, with an engaging protagonist."

T. J. MacGregor, Edgar Winner

BIG NUMBERS
An Austin Carr Mystery

Jack Getze

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For Barbara

PROLOGUE

The stench of my own vomit fills my nose. Breath comes in short, shallow gasps. Why doesn't blabbermouth just shut the hell up and get this over with?

"You said you've never been deep-sea fishing, Austin, so I'm guessing you don't know dick about giant bluefin. But when you were a kid, jigging off that pier in California, did you ever hook up with a two or three-pound bonito?"

A muddy green Atlantic Ocean surrounds us, the expanse of gentle swells empty but for the fifty-two-foot Hatteras under our feet and a dozen chum-sucking seagulls screaming overhead.

"Remember how hard those bonito fought, the way they bent the rod near double?" Mr. Blabbermouth says. "Well, imagine one of those bonito's big cousins, one that weighs...oh, say five or six hundred pounds. I'm talking brute force. Hooking up with a giant bluefin is like playing tug-of-war with a Harley-Davidson."

Endless waves of dirty wet jade slap against the drifting hull. Clouds shaped like tombstones regularly block the morning sun.

"Those shoulder straps okay?" Mr. Blabbermouth says. "Not too tight, I hope."

Bastard. I am bridled by what is known as a stand-up fishing belt and harness. Tough leather straps encircle my waist and chest as well as my shoulders. Belts, buckles, and locking brass clips anchor me inside the harness, to the pole, even to the rod-mounted Penn 130 International reel.

"You're in luck," he says. "A school's headed this way."

Think I'm out for an afternoon of fun? Sport fishing with a buddy? What if I mention nobody but nobody fishes for giant bluefin in a stand-up harness? If you have balls—big balls—you let them strap you into a fighting chair bolted to the deck, hope Big Tuna doesn't rip that out. It's happened many times.

Mr. Blabbermouth saying, "Here they come."

Did I mention my wrists are bound together with duct tape?

Mr. Blabbermouth leans close to nudge the chrome drag lever on the Penn 130. "This will be the second time I've seen this happen," he says. "Like you, a friend of mine had this drag on full when a giant bluefin hit. One second the guy's beside me on deck, the next he's flying over the transom, a splash in the water. You know, we never found a trace of him."

I should have seen this coming. That's why I can't stand to mention Mr. Blabbermouth's real name. It's too damn embarrassing. Of the several wackos who tried killing me this month, only blabbermouth here applied both planning, logic, and persistence. Used allies. Oh, man, I definitely should have seen this coming.

Something heavy bumps the half-pound metal lure to which I am fatally attached. The line draws taut, digging deeper into the green rolling swells. Eternity tugs on my shoulder straps.

"Looks like a hook-up," Mr. Blabbermouth says.

And I thought my life was shitty two weeks ago.

ONE

Two Weeks Earlier...

The big thing about living in a truck-mounted camper, you bump your head a lot. So when Luis's chef Cruz wakes me up with repeated loud knocks, I crack my skull against the tin headliner for the third time in two days. Maybe I need a crash helmet.

"You cannot do the sleep in our parking lot, Austin."

I rub my sore head and peek through the camper's wallet-size plastic rear window. Either it's still dark outside or my brain is beginning to swell.

"I say this a hundred times." Cruz shouts now. "You do not listen. So now I say this...if you use our parking spaces for the bedroom again, I will rat you to the *federales*."

Cruz has an edge on him this morning. Central New Jersey being so much colder than his former home near Vera Cruz, Mexico, I suspect it's the fall weather. Most cool days he doesn't even bother coming outside, let alone threaten federal police action. Wait until New Jersey sees some snow.

I open the back door and give Cruz the famous, full-boat Carr grin. "Speaking of rats, *amigo*, can I shower in the employee dressing room?"

Cruz's eyes shine like black lacquered furniture. He doesn't want to, but he can't help liking me. It's the famous Carr smile. Plus, it helps that every dollar my ex-wife doesn't garnish from my paycheck is spent at Luis's restaurant eating Cruz's delightfully gut-burning Mexican cuisine.

"Use by non-employees is non-allowed," he says. "And you force me to declare that one *bueno* stock tip does not make me your bitch forever. Perhaps if you provided another sure thing. A stock with listed options so I can leverage my asses."

Wow. Despite the obvious language problems, Cruz is wasting no time learning the secrets of American capitalism. Maybe I should make a pitch for his account. I nod and maintain the grin. "Sure things are hard to come by, *compadre*. But something's coming soon. Maybe next week."

He grunts. "You have been suggesting such events since Easter. And now summer is gone. For official."

I notice the plastic lid on the cup of coffee he carries has an unbroken seal. "Is that coffee for me?"

"No way ho-zay."

Ha. Cruz never learns. He has no defense against the famous Carr charm. Over the next five minutes, repeated smiles and a lengthy account of my daughter Beth's all-star performance at last night's swim meet, rescue Cruz from the Dark Side. He especially likes the story of how I snuck into the beach club wearing only my Speedos.

I take my time drinking his coffee. When every drop is savored, I shower in the employee dressing room, put on a clean shirt and tie, and comb my hair with Hollywood gel. My new Monday through Friday transformation routine now complete—homeless bum to ace salesman—I'm almost ready to point my camper toward Branchtown.

Almost.

My name's Austin Carr. I'm a stockbroker. The slick expensive business cards in my wallet say I'm a Senior Financial Consultant for Shore Securities, Inc., Members of the American Association of Securities Dealers, but I'm really just a salesman and I work for myself. Straight commission. If I don't sell, I don't eat.

"Another margarita, Luis."

A lot of people in my line of work call themselves investment counselors. They wear two thousand dollar Italian suits, carry alligator attaché cases, think and talk about themselves as professionals like doctors and lawyers. In truth, we're closer akin to used car dealers, only more dangerous because losing your life savings is a tad worse than getting stuck with a leaky transmission.

It's hard to sport illusions about yourself when you live in a camper. And I've always treated my clients with honesty, to the point of aggravating every sales manager I've ever had. Even so, keeping my self-respect, I have not been thinking about this job in a favorable light. In fact, in the years since the market crashed, ruining my sales numbers, my finances, and more recently, any chance of being with my two children, Ryan and Beth, I've been wracking my brain, trying desperately to figure another way to earn a living.

"Another double?" Luis says.

"*Por favor.*"

Although no solution to my dilemma has yet presented itself, I've discovered it helps to ruminate in a positive setting: Luis's Mexican Grill on Broad Street in Branchtown. The decor reminds me of home, Los Angeles, and Luis has an *authentic* Mexican chef, Cruz. Best of all, Luis works the bar himself every day.

"You are not going to work today?" Luis says.

"Careful, Luis. Your query borders on insult. In fact, I have already called work, only to discover that my monster client delayed our scheduled discourse until this afternoon. I stayed here this morning to spend some quality time with you and Cruz."

"I recommend this be your final cocktail," Luis says.

Dealing with numbers all the time is an ache in the ass, definitely, but my biggest problem with being a stockbroker is having to spend all day on the money machine, dialing for dollars, calling busy people at the wrong time, apologizing because the back office screwed up a check, downplaying the risks of an investment to exaggerate the benefits, dancing investors from one asset to another so I can take part of their principal as commission. To be a successful stockbroker, you have to be slightly larcenous.

I lick the wet salt from the rim of my still empty margarita glass. Of course I never worried about little things like morality while I was netting eight to ten thousand dollars a month. It's only been since my income dropped by more than half, and mainly since I lost physical contact with my children that I search for the social significance of securities sales.

Luis discovers the bar bottle of Herradura Gold is empty. He slides left and reaches underneath the counter, moving with a prizefighter's cat-like quickness, sureness of step.

Today and every day, Luis shows off his Popeye muscles in a white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up. A vest and tight-fitting black slacks accentuate his narrow hips and punching-bag shoulders. His high forehead and aquiline nose speak of European ancestry, but the black piercing eyes give him a distinct First American quality as well.

Luis cracks open a new bottle. In short, my favorite bartender is a *hombre*. And while I know this sounds girlish, you feel safe sitting at his bar. It's like being ten years old again and having

your sixteen-year-old brother on the playground with you. It's unlikely the other ten year olds will pick on you, but if they do, it won't be a problem long.

Luis deposits my new margarita on a clean paper napkin. "Are you hungry? Cruz made albondigas soup this morning."

The other thing I'd like to say about Luis might be racist, a stereotype, but here it is anyway. I grew up in the eastern, Mexican-American section of Los Angeles. Ever since grammar school I've admired the code of honor and fierce pride with which so many Hispanics are raised. Call me a jerk for saying it, but that's been my experience.

"Bring me a breakfast plate with Cruz's chili Colorado when you get a chance," I tell Luis. "And get ready to make me another margarita. These doubles are tasty."

Luis walks away shaking his head. I wonder if he's disappointed I didn't order the albondigas soup. Then I wonder why I respect his opinion so much, why his thoughts are so important to me. Is it because Luis stands as an island of sincerity in my world of lies, deception, and bullshit? Gotta be. I bet Luis never told a fib in his life.

TWO

Through my '93 Chevy pickup's bug-stained windshield, I watch Branchtown's odd-shaped line of store-fronts pass, architecture from fifteen different decades, every building mean and dirty despite last night's rain. As they have across centuries, Branchtown's sidewalks bustle with generations of immigrants and the displaced. First the African-Americans, then the Irish and Italians and Germans, now Latinos and Chinese. A mini third world, chasing the American Dream along Central New Jersey's Atlantic coastline.

I think of a story my ex-wife Susan's grandmother told me about prohibition, how two rival smuggling gangs dueled one winter night on the Navasquan River, their ice boats circling and firing shots at each other until dawn. The gun battle kept half of Branchtown awake all night, yet no one called the cops, not even when daylight revealed three dead bodies on the ice.

"Faccia rosso," Susan's Italian grandmother said when I first moved here from California and she told me the ice boat story. "Branch-a-town is a hard face, Austin. You be the hard face, too."

Later, a cup of fresh coffee in my hand, I try to remember Grandma's words when I spy my monster in the glass conference room. Gerry's back is to me as I stride across the main sales floor; his sexy wife gives me the full-on frontal.

Standing or sitting at neatly rowed desks, pleading or lecturing into sleek black telephones and headsets, three dozen off-Wall Street brokers fill the barn-size room with birdlike chatter, some loud and incessant, others soft and rhythmical.

It's good to hear the phones busy for a change—times are not good for stockbrokers—but I don't have time to find out why there is so much activity. I have to focus on this monster client waiting for me in the conference room. Gerry's old. He takes my advice. He keeps half a million in his checking account.

Do I sound crass? Less than totally interested in my client's welfare? Let me explain. My alimony and child support payments were established by New Jersey's family court during more lucrative times, and for the last eighteen months I have failed to earn my monthly nut. I've had my Maxima repossessed, my salary attached, and my visiting rights temporarily suspended. I bought that twelve-year-old Chevy pick-up with the rusty camper for eight hundred bucks last month because another landlord tossed my ass in the street.

I glide into Shore's glass conference room and pull the door closed behind me. The warm friendly smile on my face is a product of seven years training and experience, plus the heart-twisting desire to earn my way back into the lives of my children, Beth and Ryan.

"What a pleasure it is to see you two," I say.

"Good to see you, too," the monster says. "I think you've met my wife Kelly."

Once. I'll never forget. "Yes. Last year."

My client Gerry Burns thinks he's a Mexican cowboy, although I doubt the old geezer spends much time on horseback. He's about five and a half feet tall and carries over two hundred fifty pounds. I get a kick out of his lizard-skin boots, the Mexican silver and turquoise belt buckle, the pearl-gray Stetson, but it's the young wife who makes my heart beat faster. Kelly has more curves than the racetrack at Le Mans, shoulder-length candy red hair, and green eyes as bright as a "go" signal in downtown traffic. I met her when she dropped off a check. Something clicked

with her, too, but I never followed up. Not with my monster's wife. Although I still have the hard-on.

"Either of you care for coffee?" I say.

Gerry and Kelly both decline my invitation, so I situate myself behind the conference room's primary piece of furniture, an eight-foot-long mahogany desk it took four brutes to move in here five years ago. An imposing throne I doubt will ever be moved again. Kelly's eyeing me like she knows about my arousal. I'm telling you, something clicked with her, too.

"Business still slow?" Gerry says.

Slow ain't the word for it. Every investor in my book is sitting on their assets. Why? Because the Dow Jones Industrial Average hasn't recovered from the one-two-three-four punch of a collapsed tech bubble, September Eleventh, a decade of slow growth, and a housing market collapse that ruined all mortgages and most other paper investments. Wall Street pretends things are getting better, but the smart money's buying guns and canned food.

"Business is picking up," I say.

Gerry nods. "Glad to hear it, because the reason for my visit today is not going to do your sales production any good."

You know that loosey-goosey feeling you get when a TV station logo interrupts your show and a serious voice says, "Stay tuned for an important news bulletin." That queasiness in your stomach? The tingling at the back of your neck because you don't know if you're going to hear about a snow storm or thermonuclear war?

"This isn't easy for me to say," Gerry says.

Oh, come on, Gerry. Spit it out. Sweet Jesus. Seconds ago I'm tickled because I think my monster is about to spend some of his half a million in cash, and now I'm in a panic, terrified by words no one wants to speak.

"I'm dying of pancreatic cancer," he says.

THREE

Sweet Lord. Gerry Burns is about to die? Gerry Burns, whose buying and selling of stock options generates half my already depleted monthly income?

My monster is terminal?

I'm speechless. A ball of frozen numbness grips my feet and rises throughout my entire body. Like once when I was kid and ate a twenty-four-count box of grape Popsicles in two hours. Must be a full minute before the air-conditioning pops back on, jarring my icy brain back into activity.

"Sorry," Gerry says. "I didn't mean to upset you."

My monster and his trophy wife Kelly look worried, and I realize the color must have left my face. Indeed, I notice my breathing is shallow and I feel wobbly just sitting. "I'm so sorry...I don't know what to say."

Gerry holds up his left hand like he's directing traffic. "There's nothing you can say. And Kelly and I didn't come here for sympathy. I wanted to let you know so you can begin cleaning up my trading positions...turn the options and speculative stuff into cash. And I wanted Kelly to meet you so it'll be easier for her later dealing with my estate. As you know, Austin, it's a lot of money."

Boy, is it ever. I close my eyes and imagine Gerry's pages in my client book. Five million in tax-free bonds. Another five million in blue chip stocks. Maybe half a million in stock option trading positions, half a million in cash.

"I should tell you I'm seriously thinking about cashing in everything, transferring the funds to my bank," Gerry says. "Let their trust department manage the money for Kelly. She doesn't know a stock from a bond."

I'm not often at a loss for words. Salesmen without a bent toward blab do not survive. But staring at my round and friendly New Jersey-based cowboy, those bushy eyebrows underneath the Stetson, I can't conjure a single word of advice. All my brain sees is numbers. Twenty thousand shares of this, five hundred contracts of that. The thousands in back child support and alimony I owe my ex-wife Susan.

"Austin?"

Some career being a broker. I push numbers to get people on the telephone. To sell them stuff, I tell my clients about all kinds of numbers—earnings, yields, and price-to-book ratios. And when I do make a sale, I write numbers on the trade ticket, enter commission numbers in my book. Pretty much the whole damn business is numbers, numbers, numbers.

And Gerry's account is big numbers. My very biggest. My monster.

I stand up behind the desk, walk around to the front edge, and lean my butt against the mahogany. The measured smile is a standard technique to convey intimacy, straight talk. I have no idea what I'm going to say yet, but a little silent reflection is okay. It warns people that my words will be important.

"Are you okay, Austin?"

I stare through the conference room's glass at my associate Walter Osgood. Walter sold pots and pans door-to-door before his wife convinced him to try stocks and bonds. Now he lives in a forty-room mansion on the Navasquan River, owns three Mercedes. What would Walter say?

"Austin?"

“Maybe you’re about to make the same mistake a lot of husbands make,” I say. “You’re trying to protect your wife from the responsibilities associated with handling her finances.”

I’m not totally sure where I’m going with this, so I pause to assess. Gerry is shaking his head negatively. Kelly on the other hand seems to like what she’s just heard. Her breasts are smiling at me. No, I mean her lips are smiling at me. Vulnerable. That Marilyn Monroe “help me” look. Stockbroker instinct tells me to keep pressing. Maybe even pour it on.

“The truth is, Gerry, Kelly is still a young woman. She’s going to be rich for a long time. Is it really your belief she doesn’t have the desire or the intellect to handle her own money?”

Of course I’ve gone too far. I made it sound like he thinks his wife is stupid. Not only that, I’ve reminded him the pretty redhead is going to be around doing damage to men’s heads long after he’s playing ghost riders in the sky.

“If Kelly were my wife,” I say, “I’d want and expect her to take care of herself. I’d want her to know how to handle money. How to talk to accountants, lawyers, and stockbrokers. Heck, Gerry, I’d teach her what she needs to know.”

Gerry’s bushy eyebrows are now a single line of disapproving fur. I suspect he’s angry at the way I’m playing to his wife. Screw him. I now fully understand what my instincts whispered a few seconds ago; Gerry has terminal cancer. Barring a miracle cure, or black magic, Kelly’s going to end up with all the loot.

“What do you think, Kelly?” I say. “Do you think Gerry should turn control of your money to a bank trust department? A group of strangers?”

“They’re no more strangers than you are,” Gerry says. More of a bark, actually.

I ignore my monster’s snide remark and watch the redhead. I love the way Kelly takes her time, glancing sideways at Gerry, staring at me, slowly twisting the seven-carat diamond on her ring finger. Checking her hole cards one more time.

“I think the best thing would be for us to stop worrying about money and concentrate on beating the cancer,” she says. “The doctors say some people survive pancreatic cancer.”

Sure, Kelly. And somebody wins the Irish Sweepstakes every year, too.

The pretty redhead reaches for Gerry’s hand. “Let’s forget about money, Gerry. I want to go home.”

The tender voice, those glistening green eyes...it all seems a bit much. I swear Mrs. Gerry Burns even threw a little sex into that “I want to go home” line. I’ll bet my monster cowboy’s working up a hard-on right now, ready to go home and ride the happy trail between Kelly’s legs.

I know I am.

Gerry pushes up from his chair and offers his hand, mumbles a few words about thinking things over, that I’ve made some sense. I don’t pay that much attention because Kelly is giving me a much friendlier farewell. Standing close. Staring into my eyes. Squeezing my hand. There was something electric between us last year, and now, me lost in her neon green eyes, that feeling rushes back. An inexplicable knowledge of mutual destiny. Some kind of bond, a spiritual matching.

Oh, my. My financial instincts were dead-on, too. I definitely played up to the right person in this duo, the one open to suggestions.

Walking them into the parking lot’s mid-September sunshine, opening the Cadillac Escalade’s passenger door for Kelly, I wonder what I should suggest next.

FOUR

Late that afternoon, Luis's Mexican Grill is empty but for me and my favorite bartender. I watch with a smile as Luis puts the bottle of Herradura Gold in front of me along with a salt shaker, a dish of lime wedges, and two shot glasses. He wants to drink with his favorite customer.

"Cruz says you again spent the night in our parking lot," he says.

Uh, oh. "Truth is, I haven't found another roost yet, or at least one where they don't call the cops."

Luis smiles at me. "Do not concern yourself. I will tell Cruz we have made an arrangement. But I am worried about your drinking, *amigo*. It is your business which still troubles you?"

I've never told Luis about my visitation rights being taken away. I'm afraid he'll think less of me for letting it happen. Bad enough I think less of myself.

"The hell with my business, Luis." I lick salt from the back of my hand, down the shot of fermented cactus juice. "I'd rather talk about a woman who came to see me this morning."

His bottomless black eyes flicker with interest.

"She's a redhead, very attractive," I say. "And—oh, yes—she's married."

The flicker dies. Luis's forehead bunches with wrinkles. "Then why would you even desire to discuss her?"

I shrug. I know my favorite bartender is not going to like this. Hell, he's appalled already, might even throw me out. I decide to give him the full-boat Carr grin before I toss the punch line: "Because her husband is my richest client. And he's dying of cancer."

Luis's eyes roll. His square chin moves slowly side-to-side, my favorite bartender maybe thinking over the long list of potential indiscretions. Finally, he pours us another shot of Herradura. "So you think perhaps you will marry this woman when her husband dies? Then you will be rich, too?"

Wow. I am *mucho* impressed by Luis's working knowledge of my tequila-infected brain. Austin Carr's wildest fantasies lay before him.

"Oh, it's just something to dream about," I say. "Like humping Shania Twain."

Luis skips the salt this time, minimizing his shooter ritual to the tequila and a juicy wedge of lime. "I think your plan is bad."

I feel the skin around my eyes scrunch up in puzzlement. I called it a dream, didn't I? Not a plan.

"When this woman gets her husband's money, she will leave New Jersey," he says. "The rich ones always travel. It is what women like to do."

I am truly shocked Luis is taking this so seriously. The idea is ridiculous. A daydream. Like watching a two hundred fifty thousand dollar Italian sports car drive by. Sure it would be fun to drive one, but maintenance alone puts the thing out of reach. Forget about the initial outlay.

FIVE

That evening I put on a pair of super-sized aviator mirror sunglasses and my Dodgers baseball hat, found a thick tree for cover near the left field foul line of my son Ryan's fall league baseball game. The shade is cool, the bird calls soothing. Who cares if the court order the ex-wife obtained bars my attendance?

By the fifth inning Ryan has earned a walk and two singles, made three or four nice plays at shortstop. He's on deck, ready to come up again with men on base when I see a Branchtown patrol car slide quietly into the parking lot. Maybe a cop's son is playing, too.

Or maybe not. My ex-wife scurries out of the stands to greet the police cruiser. I desperately want to watch Ryan bat, but my ex-wife's past deeds dictate extreme caution. I turn my back on the field and make like a squirrel, darting through the park's thick stand of locust trees and pin oaks. I reach my car, key the engine, then glance over my right shoulder to back up. Damn. A beefy Branchtown cop stands directly behind my car, his left hand raised, telling me to stop. The big cop's right hand rests on his gun holster.

"Turn off your engine and step out of the car please," says a sharp voice in my ear. My head snaps back. A second cop has approached my driver's window while I was admiring his partner's artillery. My ex-wife stands behind this second cop, her face contorted with venom.

"Deadbeat," she says. More of a shout, really.

The cop motions for her to calm down. "Ma'am."

I douse my engine and climb out into the fading evening light. This second cop is younger than the first, about my age, and wears a kindly face with soft brown eyes. Friendly looking. Maybe he has children of his own.

I give him the famous, full-boat Carr grin. "I just wanted to see my kid play ball."

He nods, then spins me by the shoulders, slams my chest against the camper, begins to pat me down. The full-boat Carr grin doesn't work on everybody.

My ex-wife seizes the opportunity to deliver additional poison. "You can watch Ryan play ball when you pay me what you owe, you damn deadbeat."

The cop motions her away. "Step back, ma'am. We'll handle this."

Good thing the cops are here to protect me. Since the divorce, my ex-wife's chest and shoulders have grown to the size of an Olympic wrestler's. Worse, her hatred runs deep, even though I forgave her many years ago. Sometimes her court actions seem vindictive, but I figure she's just trying to provide for our children.

"Put your hands behind you, Mr. Carr," the young cop says. "You're under arrest for violating a restraining order."

I spend the night in jail with two drunks and a twenty-something pot dealer, but next morning a municipal judge lets me go with a warning.

Walking back to the baseball field from Branchtown's tiny courthouse, hoping some thief stole my camper, I consider robbing a local branch of the Navasquan National Bank. How else will I ever pay off my past-due alimony and child support?

SIX

Turns out my cowboy Gerry Burns lives in a captain's suite at the Navasquan River Boat Club, a swank twenty-story condo with a marina full of big yachts. Hatteras, Grand Banks, Chris-Craft. There's no horse stable—surprise—but I can say first hand that over the bar of the marina's public restaurant rests a fine pair of Brahma bull horns.

When I finish my Bombay martini, I drop some money on the bar, gobble a handful of breath mints, and pick up my props. I'm headed for the fancy condo across the street and the opening salvos of my War to Keep the Burns Account. Not quite shock and awe, but I have manufactured a semi-reasonable excuse to drop in.

Today it's hot. Over eighty at eleven in the morning. New Jersey's weather is like its politicians. Whichever way the wind blows. Warm, humid, and Jersey Republican weather comes from the south, in this case a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico.

The drivers of two Mercedes sedans and a red Jaguar two-seater are dealing with valet parking in front of the condo. One of the Mercedes belongs to Kelly Burns. She's standing there in dark sun glasses and a black swimsuit under a short, yellow-flowered green beach wrap. Her red hair is lumped on one side, stiff like an old mop.

When I get closer, I see she's wearing little or no make-up, and there's a nervous element to her body language. In a hurry, maybe? Or worried?

"Austin?"

I approach and offer my self-serving gifts. "I just came by to drop off these books for you. Stuff on investing."

My reflection appears in her dark glasses. I feel probed by alien scanners, two maybe three beats. I have no clue what she's really looking at, let alone thinking, but the clumpy hair, the lack of make-up...I'm guessing Mrs. Gerry Burns isn't doing well as nurse to the terminal cancer patient. Call it a hunch.

"I was headed for the beach," she says. "And frankly, Austin, I don't have time to read books."

I sigh, letting my disappointment show. What happened to that chemistry, Kelly? Didn't you feel it, too?

She laughs. "I suppose that sounds strange, doesn't it? I have time for the beach, but not for reading—adding to my knowledge."

I show her the famous Carr half-smile. "Not strange, really. More like typically human, especially for pretty women. Let me stick them in the car for you. In case you change your mind."

She removes the dark glasses and studies my face. One beat, two beats. "Sure. Why not?"

I toss the books on the Mercedes' back seat, shut the door, then gaze at the redhead to make my goodbye. At least I tried, made an appearance. She's staring at the hazy September sky, not me. Maybe she's thinking about my smile.

She sighs and slips her glasses back on. "As long as you're here, maybe you can help me with something. I have a little money problem."

Oh, boy. I give her the full-boat Carr grin. "My specialty."

She motions toward the Mercedes. "Take a drive with me?"

Did I show up at the right time, or what? I force my eyes away from her trim, barely-covered ass as we both drop into the front bucket seats. Sexual thoughts are a no-no. Toward the goal of seeing my kids again, I have to concentrate on keeping the Burns' millions under management.

She zooms away from the condo. I notice Kelly's nine-year-old Mercedes has two hundred thousand miles on the odometer. Wonder why Gerry doesn't buy her something new?

Kelly turns left on Route 36, north toward Sandy Hook and the Highlands. Although the Atlantic Ocean is less than fifty feet away, I can't see the water or the sand on our right because of a twelve-foot retaining wall made of boulders and cement. Just about two years ago, Hurricane Becky pushed the ocean across this highway into the Navasquan River. The expensive beach homes on our left are new and built ten feet higher than the last crop.

"So what's the financial problem?" I ask.

"I have a pile of cash in the trunk," she says. "Over a hundred thousand."

Wow. What's happening here? I wait for more information but she doesn't provide any. She has the driver's window down and her golden red hair is blowing straight out behind her like a ripped flag. That lumpy patch is dancing to its own song.

"Sounds like a big happy to me," I say. "What's the problem part?"

"I want to hide it, not spend it."

I turn my gaze on the rock wall flying by. I can't believe she trusts me with this. Must be the Carr smile. Too bad I can't bottle that grin. Or get it to work over the telephone. I wouldn't have to keep entertaining larcenous ideas.

"Hide it from whom?" I ask. "Gerry?"

When we hit the fork at the Highlands Bridge, Kelly steers us toward the Sandy Hook beaches. Two weeks after Labor Day, every parking lot is a big empty.

Kelly shifts her gaze my way. "Does it matter who I'm hiding it from?"

"If you can tell Gerry about the money, we'll put the cash in his account. He can give you what you need whenever you want it."

"And if I don't want Gerry to know?"

I had a feeling. "We'll figure out something else. You have any I.D. in your maiden name?"

"An old driver's license and a U.S. passport. I never got around to changing it."

"That's an excellent start," I say. "Now, are you willing to break the law?"

SEVEN

I suppose it's common for the mind to conjure nasty thoughts while counting money, but here with Kelly in the back seat of her old Mercedes, sorting her cash into fourteen stacks of seventy-five one hundred dollar bills, and a fifteenth pile that's one Ben Franklin short, I want to throw her down on the cash, do the sex act like large-eared rodents.

One hundred and twelve thousand four hundred dollars. Wow. I don't know if it's greed, lust, or poor ventilation, but my neck, shoulders, and backside are sweating like warm cheese.

We're nestled into a secluded Sandy Hook parking lot for birders and hikers. Eight spaces. We're the only car. On the back seat, where we just counted the loot, Kelly's half-bare ass keeps inching closer.

"Now what?" she says.

"We visit fifteen to twenty banks and/or savings and loans, as many as it takes, exchange one of these stacks at each bank for a seventy-five hundred dollar bank check. Then I deposit the checks into a new account for you at one final institution, write a check on that new account to Shore Securities."

"That's against the law?"

"Avoiding record-keeping on cash transactions? Uh, yes. It's called laundering money. Not to mention the multitude of regulations and laws I have to break by opening an account in your maiden name. Maybe you never heard of the Patriot Act?"

Her hip touches mine. I blink when a bead of sweat slides down into my right eye.

"Don't they require identification when you get those bank checks?" she says.

I wipe my brow with the back of my hand. My heart rate feels a bit high. "As long as the amount's under ten thousand, usually not. But if they do, I'll just say I left my driver's license in the car and walk out. Go on to the next bank."

She lays her hand on my thigh. It burns like a hot iron. "How efficient."

Man, oh, man. The redhead is coming on hard and I'm not sure what to do about it. I mean, my dick's wanted to get naked with her for over a year, that chemistry thing, but my brain says I must focus on maintaining the account. I need the business. My kids need the business. Sex could louse things up.

"I should call my office," I say.

"Why?"

"To tell them I'll be busy all day with a client."

"Sounds like an excuse for sex to me. Do you use that one a lot?"

My heart ticks up another notch. "Only Tuesdays and Thursdays."

"Naughty boy."

Kelly leans her body against me. She smells like flowery soap. Lilacs, I think. Her hand on my thigh hums like an electric vibrator. Despite direct orders from the brain, my gaze won't leave the roundness of her breasts peeking above the swimsuit.

"Would you like your bonus in advance?" she asks.

Oh, my.

"Kelly, this isn't a good idea. Our relationship should be—"

Kelly presses hard against me, sticks her tongue in my ear. Blood rushes to my crotch.

“Sorry I’m acting like a whore. It’s just Gerry’s been sick a long time. I haven’t...you know...in six months. And I felt something for you a year ago. I thought you did, too.”

Damn. That’s it. I mean, how am I supposed to resist this? At least Luis can’t see me sleeping with another man’s wife. He would be shocked and appalled.

The redhead massages me between my legs. “Ooo. Looks like you’ve already got your bonus.”

That night, alone in my camper, another conjugal date with my married lover set for the day after tomorrow, even memories of my children Ryan and Beth become sleepy time second fiddle. I dream exclusively of the future widow, the natural and true redhead, Mrs. Kelly Rockland Burns.

And I feel like a heel doing it.

EIGHT

At the office next morning, I'm collecting various forms for Kelly's new account when our fixed-income desk uncovers bad-ass ugly news: an issue of tax-free St. Louis hospital bonds Shore helped underwrite is trading flat, or without interest.

"Crap," Walter says.

This is a major disaster. As opposed to your everyday so-what calamity we're all used to. Shore's principal owner, Straight Up Vic Bonacelli, received a personal and substantial bonus for every one of these St. Louis hospital bonds we sold during last year's public offering. Thus Mr. Vic made hawking them mandatory, and the object of a special sales contest. Thus we sold our little fannies off. Thus Shore customers own a boat-load.

I personally have three or four big clients in these St. Louis bonds, including one wild man who's already pissed at me for a previous and equally unfortunate investment recommendation. Can't wait to call Psycho Samson with this news. Psycho's just his old stage name, but Wacky, Nutso, or Crazy would work as well.

There'll be more information for us at a sales meeting in five minutes; the head bond trader shouts above the salesmen's groans and sighs, but bottom line, our customers won't be getting their semi-annual interest checks anymore. And oh yes, the bid on these now-defaulted puppies—if you can find a bidder—is nine cents on the dollar. Our customers paid par, or one hundred cents.

Just what I need. Another financial debacle. My limbs feel heavy, my eyes droopy. Is this stress? Or the result of banging my head regularly inside that camper?

I stagger back to the tile and stainless steel kitchen, make a fresh pot of strong coffee, and soothe myself with extra non-dairy creamer and double the non-sugar sugar. By the time I wander into Shore Securities' oak-paneled meeting room, sales manager Tom Ragsdale is already delivering another one of his infamous and insightful analyses.

"After a late escrow payment, the bank trustee issued a notice of technical default," Rags says. "The hospital was forced to file for bankruptcy, so it looks like our bondholders won't be receiving their interest payments for a while."

Looks like? For a while?

Rags being a genius is why Shore Securities' owner Straight Up Vic made him sales manager. Well, that and Rags' recent engagement to Vic's daughter Carmela.

"What do we tell our clients?" Walter says.

"Tell them the hospital filed for bankruptcy protection under Chapter Eleven," Rags says. "That's a voluntary reorganization. It could take a while, but our clients' principal is secured by a first mortgage on the hospital's land and property."

I see two or three inexperienced brokers sigh with relief. They believe Rags' implication that a first mortgage means our bondholder clients have the St. Louis hospital firmly by the short and curlies. Experience has taught me otherwise. If the hospital's land and property could pay off the bonds—as well as other similar lien holders in a yet-to-be-determined class of bankruptcy petitioners—the bid on our bonds would be a lot higher than nine cents. The market knows this stuff.

“That’s right, Rags,” I say. “Our bondholders have the right to foreclose on the hospital’s land and property. Maybe we can turn the facility into a drug rehab center. I hear that St. Louis neighborhood would provide an excellent base of potential clients.”

Rags stares, then scowls at me. My humor is slow-acting in his system. And extremely toxic. Too bad, boss. This isn’t my first Shore Securities’ bond default. I guarantee the hospital’s expensive medical equipment is one hundred percent leased, thus not attachable, and the buildings and land are worth virtually nothing. An inner city location puts nasty limits on financing and alternative construction opportunities.

I’ve had about enough of this day. Staying at my desk means calling clients to tell them their bonds defaulted. Psycho Samson, a former Notre Dame lineman and pro wrestler, now a fishing boat captain, will probably strangle me. I should probably give him another day of ignorant bliss.

What a world. What a world. I walk out of the meeting and out of the building. I hate to retire so early, but I couldn’t give investments away feeling like this. With rest and attitude adjustment, however, perhaps I can bounce back tomorrow.

Fifteen steps into the fresh air and sunlight, Shore’s open-air parking lot, I hear the door click behind me. Someone’s followed me outside.

It’s Rags. With narrowed eyes. Pinched lips. A twitching muscle near the bottom of his jaw. It ticks with every angry heartbeat.

Rags marches closer, but not too close. I’m standing beside my pick-up mounted camper now and Rags doesn’t want to chance rust on his two thousand dollar Canali suit. Or even dirty his shoes or tie.

“You’re close to getting fired, you know that? Your numbers suck, Carr, and that’s enough for me. But this attitude of yours lately...since I got promoted...it’s affecting the other salesmen.”

The sneer on his lips clenches my right hand into a fist. I’m sick of taking everybody’s shit. My ex-wife. The judge. The gouging divorce lawyer who no longer takes my calls. A daily dose of complaining clients. And now Rags, the new punk sales manager from Staten Island who screwed his way into boss-dom. My hand wants to explode on his nose.

“My attitude isn’t about you,” I say. “This is Shore’s third default in five years, Rags. Any idea how many clients I’ve lost?”

“You’re such a pussy,” he says. “Have you even tried to replace them? When was the last time you stayed late to make cold calls?”

I stare at Rags’ silk tie: baby blue with silver dots shaped like...what, anchors? Knowing Rags’ penchant for fine apparel and ass-kissing, the tie probably cost two or three hundred bucks and he picked the design because of Straight Up Vic’s interest in boating.

“You’ve lost the killer instinct,” Rags says.

“Not really. It’s just no longer directed at my clients.”

He steps back, maybe wondering if I’ve threatened him, and I seize the opportunity to scramble behind the wheel of my movable home. Rags shakes his head as I start the engine. The snotty, brown-nosed jerk would love to fire me, take my good accounts for himself and pass out the rest to suck-up brokers he wants to cultivate.

But getting rid of Austin Carr won’t be easy, Rags. Straight Up Vic has developed a fondness for my golf game. I regularly make him big money at his club.

Still, Rags could talk him into something stupid if my numbers don’t pick up.

NINE

It's ten minutes shy of eleven when I get to Luis's Mexican Grill. The old high-backed dark-wood booths sit idle, but two guys with shaved heads occupy the apex of the horseshoe bar, directly below Luis's hanging collection of authentic caballista sombreros.

I don't see Luis, the world's greatest bartender, but my nose and ears tell me he might be helping Chef Cruz simmer red and green chilies in the back. Somebody's yakking it up back there. Cooking stuff.

I pick a bar stool near the cash register, away from the Vin Diesel look-a-likes showing off their tattoos in wife-beaters. Both are drinking Buds in tall brown bottles and watching the Yankees replay on a grainy television stuck high against the far wall.

A minute later Luis strides out of the kitchen speaking fast Spanish with a short wiry Latino dressed in black. Black suit, black shirt, a black hat from the 1950s—one of those fedora things—and a black leather string tie.

The way this guy struts, holds his head back, he believes himself cool and tough. Personally, I don't like the over-confident sneer on his lips or the pencil-thin mustache above them.

Luis breaks off their conversation and ducks under the bar gate. He's wearing his usual white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, the dark slacks, plus a gray vest today. He unlocks the register, gives me a nod. Preoccupied. Or pissed. Don't know which because I've never seen either look on him before. Eyes like a windy night in the fall. Maybe Halloween.

The black-dressed stranger takes a seat two stools down from me. I can smell his cologne. Or perfume. Or the flowery-smelling white powder he sprinkles on his ass to keep his crack dry.

"*Que pasa?*" I say to Luis. Asking my favorite bartender "What's happening?" stretches the extended boundaries of my limited Spanish.

"Nada," he says. "A margarita?"

"A double shot sounds better."

I expect comment. Tequila shots are not my usual pre-lunch fare. Especially doubles. Maybe I'm looking for conversation, even sympathy. This bond default could be Austin Carr's final financial fiasco.

But Luis says nothing. He is uninterested in me today. He simply goes to work, stacking the dish of lime wedges and a salt shaker in front of me, pouring Herradura Gold into a rocks glass.

The man in black grunts like a barn animal. Gesturing with tiny hands; telling Luis he wants a shot, too. Not very polite, this man in black. Did I mention I don't like his manicured, polished fingernails? Wonder how he knows a *hombre* like Luis.

My favorite bartender caps the Herradura, sends the bottle sliding toward Branchtown Blackie, followed quickly down the slick bar by a clean shot glass and my dish of sliced limes. But Blackie isn't waiting on ceremony. He grabs the Herradura, unscrews the cap, and snatches the bottle to his lips. Gulp, gulp, gulp.

Un-freaking-believable. Even the Vin Diesel twins in wife beaters are shocked. It's the first time their eyes have left the TV.

Luis instantly concurs with the bar's general disapproval. He hops down the counter like a panther, yanks the Herradura out of Blackie's hand, and hits the rude jerk with a stream of hot Spanish. Nose to nose. I recognize a few choice curses. Lots of *chinga* this, *chinga* that.

Blackie's face darkens to a Hershey-chocolate brown. His ebony eyes set smooth and hard, like black marbles. A tiny wrinkle forms in the center of his brow.

Suddenly Blackie's hands flash from the bar to Luis' vest, bunching the material into tight balls. Me and the Vin Diesels suck air. Luis, too, is caught off guard, and Blackie takes advantage, dropping off his stool, using his weight and the leverage of the bar to yank Luis off his feet behind the counter.

My eyes can't believe what they're seeing. Luis is suspended above his rubber floor mat, feet kicking, searching for purchase.

My jaws must be wide enough to swallow one of Cruz's two-pound pork burritos.

Luis slaps his back pocket. That's when I wake-up, realize Branchtown Blackie has made a disastrous mistake—his hands are tied up. Luis's are free.

El hombre Luis' right palm, fingers and thumb are blurred locomotion, too fast for my eyes.

Luis's hand comes back up even faster. A snapping or clicking sound, heavy and metallic, fills the hushed and empty restaurant. Something blacker than Branchtown Blackie runs point for Luis's right hand.

Blackie freezes when he sees it. Me and the Vin Diesel twins gasp again, this time louder than the air conditioning.

Calm, relaxed, Luis touches the pointed tip of an eight-inch steel knife to Blackie's throat. It's one of those big Tijuana switchblades I used to covet as a kid, Black steer horn with chrome trim and a stainless steel blade.

Oh. My. God.

TEN

A blood-red flower blossoms where the double-edged point of Luis's switchblade presses Branchtown Blackie's Adams apple. Crimson drops become a trickle that runs beneath Blackie's shirt collar.

Sweet Jesus, Luis. Don't kill him.

On television, last night's Yankee crowd breaks into wild booing. Bad call at home, I'm guessing, but it sounds like the assembled masses want Blackie killed. A Coliseum full of Romans, thumbs down.

My heart is the creature from *Alien*, thumping to escape and run loose throughout the ship. I tell myself to breathe slowly. Remain calm.

Luis whispers something to Blackie's nose. Probably threatening surgery. But Blackie won't let go, his stony face set dry and hard. Unblinking. *Faccia rozzo*. The manicured little weasel has no fear. Or maybe he thinks Luis's eight-inch switchblade is made of rubber.

A crazy scream soars above the television booing. Luis and Blackie don't flinch, but the twins and I shift our attention toward the back ruckus.

Through the kitchen doorway runs Chef Cruz, his fingers clutching a microwave-sized butcher knife. Scary-looking thing is almost bigger than Cruz, but he's got it balanced high above his shoulder.

I prepare to duck.

Feet still off the ground, Luis waves off Cruz. The big switchblade stays about one-quarter inch under the skin of Branchtown Blackie's throat.

Cruz is already around the Vin Diesel twins, his knife tickling Luis's hanging sombrero collection, but he stops short of Blackie, following Luis's instructions. The butcher knife remains shoulder-high, ready to cleave.

Luis whispers to Blackie again. I can't tell in Spanish or English. Seconds go by. Five, ten? It's hard to tell time when the whole room is frozen, us customers staring wide-eyed like wax dummies.

Finally, Blackie lets loose of Luis's vest. The Vin Diesel twins and I sigh in unison as my favorite bartender's feet return softly to the rubber-matted floor.

Luis pulls the knife away, folds the blade, and sticks the weapon back in his pocket.

Blackie touches his Adams apple, checks his fingers to assess damage, the quantity of blood. It's more than a drop or two, but Blackie's reaction is nonchalant, as if such wounds were a daily occurrence. A shaving cut.

Luis and Blackie pin each other again. No heavy breathing. No more whispers. Just staring into each other's eyes like wild animals. Males with old, well-battled antlers.

Cruz spins and hurries back toward his kitchen. The twins and I throw money on the bar, head for the exit.

Waiting on my desk at Shore Securities the next day is a certified letter from a New York law firm, Bisker, Brasher & Bobkin. At least that's what I think the letterhead says. Helvetica compressed bold italic is a little tough to make out. I recognize the font because my ex-wife's

mother picked the same typeface for our wedding announcement fifteen years ago and forty-two people went to the wrong church.

Woeful marketing aside, the letter boils down to this: Unless we pay the ex-football player-slash-boat captain fifty grand he says he lost on the St. Louis hospital bonds I sold him, myself and Shore Securities will be sued for triple damages under the Federal racketeering laws, “said parties having displayed an organized pattern of criminal activity.”

I’m surprised my wackiest client found out about the default so fast, but a lawsuit doesn’t worry me much. In fact the letterhead on this fancy parchment must read Brisket, Basket & Brainless. They didn’t even bother reading Psycho Sam’s account agreement where it says all complaints must be argued before my industry association’s arbitration panel, not the courts.

I glance up to find Rags scowling at me. The level of animosity I sense astounds me. Honest-to-God malice, like he wishes I was dead. Wow, Rags. Sorry my camper shed rust on your Florsheims.

“Vic wants to see you,” Rags says. “Now.”

I fold up the letter to bring with me, head for the boss’s office. I’ll be all right. They’ve got insurance for these things. Besides, I won Straight Up Vic eight hundred dollars last weekend when I made a thirty-footer on the seventeenth.

Straight Up Vic is playing golf on the twenty-by-twenty antique Oriental rug that pretty much covers the maple floor of his private office. The owner of Shore Securities putts ball after ball into one of those plastic, hole-in-a-platform contraptions that flips the winners back at you.

So as not to interfere with his stroke, Vic’s solid lilac tie is tucked between the second and third buttons of his starched white shirt. He doesn’t look up at me until he’s made three in a row.

“What’s with this lawsuit, Austin?”

I turn palms up. “The St. Louis bond default. This client’s second with us. Claims I never told him this one was junk-rated. Says he never would have bought it.”

Vic rolls another Top Flight toward the green plastic toy. Bang. It’s a winner. A spring shoots the ball back within two inches of Vic’s tasseled black loafers. “Those puppies generated a confirmation that said they were double-B rated, right?”

“Absolutely. And this same guy’s bought nothing but junk for six or seven years. He’s a yield buyer, always has been.”

Vic lines up another putt. We call him Straight Up because he tried to get out of the forest one day with a three-wood, made solid contact, but struck a tree and lost sight of the ball. We waited for it to land. Five seconds, ten seconds. Nothing. Seemed like half a minute later, Vic shrugged, and started walking. Four steps, then *thunk*. A ball crashes from the sky like a missile, embedding itself so deeply, Vic needed a five-iron to dig it out, confirm the ball was his. That ricochet in the forest must have gone fifty stories straight up.

“You need to take this guy to the ’Splaining Department,” Vic says, “tell him I hate spending money on lawyers.”

I stare at the certified letter in my hand. Triple damages. Federal racketeering laws. “This boat captain is a psycho to start with, boss. Now he’s really pissed off. Maybe I should give him a day or two to calm down.”

Vic lifts from his putting crouch for first time since I’ve been in the room. He leans his new titanium, pro-balanced putter against his desk and glances at a color photograph on the wall. His fishing yacht, the “Triple-A.”

“Today, tomorrow, whenever. But talk to him,” Vic says. He stops me when I head for the door.

“Keep Rags informed, Austin. And remember I really hate lawyers. If I have to hire one for this, I’m taking half his fee out of your commissions.”

ELEVEN

Outside Vic's office, my ears go hot. I check the hallway mirror for escaping radioactive steam. Me, pay half? Is he kidding? I sell bonds that Vic and his Wall Street cronies underwrite, convince my clients they're safe, but when the bonds go south, thanks to poor research, or worse, maybe undiscovered fraud, Mr. Vic says I should be in control of my customers?

Straight Up my ass.

I must be giving off vibes of the wounded as I trudge across the sales floor because Rags takes one look at my body language and decides to take advantage. He's standing by my desk, but now he plops his ass on it, glances covetously at my coffee. He has my phone wedged between his neck and ear, too, talking to somebody.

When I get closer, he rips the plastic lid off my Starbucks and puts his mouth and tongue inside like he's performing oral sex. Carmela should be so lucky. Vic's unfortunate daughter has more hair on her face than a raccoon.

Rags swallows a gulp. "Nice speaking with you, Mrs. Burns. Remember what we talked about."

What the hell? I snatch the phone from his neatly manicured fingers.

"Kelly?" I say.

Rags jumps to his feet, spilling my coffee, trying to grab the phone back. But I'm too quick for him, so now he's leaning on my chest with his forearm. Blood flushes his face. I haven't been in a fist-fight since grammar school, but I'm ready for this skinny prick. The anger and frustration inside me want to pop. Mount St. Helens has nothing on this pent-up stockbroker.

Kelly's voice on the phone is a distant crack of thunder. Unintelligible.

"Give me the phone back," Rags says, "or you're fired. Right now."

"Screw you, you little weasel. Mr. Vic's not going to let you steal my clients."

I make sure my voice rises so the last part's loud enough for the whole sales room to hear. A new sales manager swiping clients could empty this place of big producers fast. Rags' job is to keep the big hitters happy, not push them out the door.

Rags realizes talk about stealing clients, just the confrontation, make him look bad on the floor. I can see in his weasel eyes he's going to back off. Smarter than I thought. Give the jerk some credit.

He takes a deep breath. "We'll talk later."

Rags strolls away like refrigerated honey, slow and sweet, the phony smile unlikely to win any Oscars, however. He mumbles an insult in a tone so low even I can't hear. His gaze slides off to my left somewhere, grinning at an invisible joke.

"Kelly?" I say.

"What happened? I heard shouting."

"What did that guy say to you?" I ask.

"Tom? Your boss?"

"Yes. What did Rags say to you?"

"Well...he suggested you were less than reliable, that as your superior, he would be happy to take over direction of Gerry's account personally."

Why am I not surprised? "He's a son-of-a-bitch."

“Don’t let him upset you, Austin. I have that nurse coming tonight, remember. We planned on meeting for dinner at that Mexican place you like.”

“I like? Don’t you like Luis’s, too?”

“It’s okay,” she says. “I’ve been there a lot with Gerry.”

“You want to go someplace else?”

“No, Luis’s is fine. I’ll have the shrimp enchiladas.”

“Great. So what time?”

“I can leave as soon as Gerry gets his morphine. Say nine?”

TWELVE

Monolithic and gray in the moonlight, the Navasquan River Boat Club looks like a cemetery monument tonight, not a swank condo. Across the street, the marina's big yachts heave and pitch on their tethers, lifeless and cold. Like floating corpses.

When Kelly called me twenty minutes ago on Luis's house phone, told me her nurse canceled and I should drive over for grilled steaks on her condo balcony, I didn't want to come. It just didn't seem right knowing Gerry would be there. Makes me nervous. But here I am, the reluctant but horny stockbroker.

The young lobby attendant finds my name on his guest list, points me to the elevator. My finger shakes slightly as I push PH and the button lights. I take a slow breath as the copper doors slide closed.

Why am I nervous about Gerry being in a nearby room? Am I worried my troubled conscience will affect my performance? Scared a drugged up Gerry's going to wander out of his bedroom with a pump-action shotgun? Or am I maybe suffering male anxiety over what kind of deviant sex Kelly has planned?

I've always been a plain vanilla kind of guy.

"Tie me down, Austin."

I'm standing beside Kelly's nude body. She's stretched out on Gerry's jungle green living room sofa, her arms and legs pointing in four directions. Her cherry gold hair is arranged on the padded arm of the sofa like a ball of sun fire. My skin tingles with desire.

"I'm fresh out of rope," I say.

Kelly's staring at my erection. I was just getting ready to hop on when she popped the "tie me down" line. I'm still ready.

"Use neckties," she says. "There should be some in the bedroom closet."

My love fountain droops. "You want me to go in Gerry's bedroom?"

She laughs. You have to love a woman who can laugh naked. Spread-eagle naked.

"Gerry's asleep in the back," she says. "His old clothes are in the spare room, first door on your right. Check the closet."

My erection is gone by the time I dig up two Mexican tooled belts and two Paisley ties. Makes me feel inadequate that she needs props, outside stimulation. What happened to that chemistry she was talking about?

I also wonder how she thought of neckties so quickly.

Think she's done this before?

"Tighter, Austin. So I can't move."

I oblige as best I can, although the slick neckties are difficult to cinch up. I make everything work by switching to a slip knot, looping the neckties around the feet of the sofa. It's taken a while and I stand beside her again to admire my work.

Kelly twists and writhes against her restraints, her breasts rolling like upturned bowls of pudding. Man oh man, what a rack. No implants that I can discern, and believe me, my eyes have gone over every centimeter.

I drop to the sofa and straddle her waist. Funny how this kind of stuff works on you. I would never suggest anything like this myself, but sitting on Kelly's naked body, feeling my dick pump back into full form, I can't deny an unusually strong sense of excitement and sexual power.

Does this mean I'm a sick puppy?

"Did you deposit my money?" Kelly asks later.

"Yup. I even brought the new account papers for you to sign. You're all set."

Her left hand rises to my cheek. Her fingertips trace the outline of my jaw. "Since you handled that problem so masterfully, perhaps you might care for another little challenge?"

I'm instantly curious. Every day with the redhead is a new lesson in Scheming 101. "Like what?"

"See that painting there?"

I turn my gaze from a wisp of red hair that lies across Kelly's perfect temple. Above a glass display case filled with turquoise and Mexican silver objects, I see a framed picture of well-dressed ladies and gentlemen from the nineteenth century. "All those rich happy people, strolling in the sunshine?"

"That's the one," she says. "Renoir's *Pont Neuf*."

Renoir? Gerry owns a Renoir? Hanging in his Branchtown condo? "That's not real?"

Kelly tugs my ear. "Of course not. The original's hanging in a private collection somewhere, worth fifty, a hundred million or something. No, it's what's behind the painting that interests me."

"The wall?"

She taps my cheek. "No, silly. Gerry's safe."

THIRTEEN

Oh, my. Right away I want to ask what's inside. Diamonds? Gold coins? More cash? What red-blooded American stockbroker wouldn't? Then a ray of sunshine dawns inside my dark and addled brain, a light that slowly becomes a question. Kelly and I both heard Gerry say his wife's going to inherit all his money. Why does the redhead need to steal it?

"Call a locksmith," I say, "preferably the guy who installed or serviced it, somebody who might have seen you around the house before."

"I don't remember who installed it."

"Maybe Gerry kept a receipt."

She nods. "I'll check. But you think this locksmith will just open it for me?"

"You live here. Why wouldn't he? Tell him Gerry's very sick, medicated, his attorneys need some important papers and investment documents for the will. Maybe you cry a little, tell him about Gerry's cancer."

Silence. One, two beats. "You're good, you know that?"

Right. That's why I live in a rusty camper.

There's a park on the Navasquan River where you can sit hidden and watch ducks land and take off. One day a Mallard, a green-headed male, swam within a few feet of my hiding spot in the tall grass. He didn't see me or sense my presence because his attention was focused on a nearby female.

It was a big lesson for me at the time. The dangers of being distracted by the opposite sex. And it's a lesson I remind myself of now as I walk across the marina parking lot, away from my all-nighter with Kelly. I have no idea what this sexy woman is up to, what her motives might be, so unlike that dizzy Mallard duck, I'd better keep a sharp eye on the tall grass.

"Listen, Susan. The kids need to see their father. This restraining order is hurting them, too."

I attracted my ex-wife to the telephone through deceit, but now that she hears my voice, and feels the deep respect I still have for her, the mother of my children, Susan figures she might as well negotiate.

"Baloney. Pay me what you owe."

"I'm giving you almost everything I take home. Some months, more."

"It's not enough. Get another job."

Sometimes her vicious attitude strikes me as personal. Wouldn't a reasonable person see the logic of what I'm saying? "I can't even afford rent, Susan. I'm living in a camper."

"So I heard. But that's not my fault. Or my problem. It's just another sign what a deadbeat you are."

Something clicks. Memories collide. Or maybe that snapping sound is my heart breaking. The mother of my children has no mercy left for me. None. "That's how you got the non-visitation order, isn't it? Telling the court I live in a camper?"

I hear her sniff and I can imagine her chin lifting, the same way her mother's does. "If you or your lawyer had shown up for family court, you'd wouldn't have to ask me, would you?"

Oh, hell, Susan. I know. “You told the judge I was homeless?”

“I will do whatever it takes to get my children what they need. So yes, a friend of mine took pictures of you getting tossed out of your apartment. He also got a few shots of you living in that wreck.”

“The pick-up runs fine, for your information. And the camper—”

“Give me a break.”

“Give *you* a break? This from the woman who called the cops on me for watching Ryan play baseball? I’m paying you everything I possibly can, Susan. More than I can, really. And I’m doing it—”

She hangs up.

I pull a slow deep breath, hold it for a while, then let the air sift out through down-turned lips.

“—doing it for our children.”

I’m anxious to visit Luis’s Mexican Grill, find out what happened to my favorite bartender, what’s going to happen next. But I’d better stop by the office, see who’s called. Heaven forbid I might stumble into a commission.

What’s that on my desk?

A package about the size of a carton of cigarettes awaits me. Gift-wrapped in white tissue and a red bow. A handful of nearby co-workers grins or sneaks glances my way. Must be some kind of gag.

“Open it,” Walter says. “We all chipped in.”

I rip at the tissue. Feels like a box of phony exploding golf balls, a derogatory reference to my ass-kissing golf kinship with Straight Up Vic. The boys kid me hard about playing with the boss.

“We thought you might be running low,” Walter says.

“We figured gold was the appropriate color,” another voice says.

What I have in my hand, beneath the paper and red adornment, is not golf balls, exploding or otherwise. No, what they’ve packaged for me in crimson bow and white tissue is at least a five-year supply of prophylactics—factory-lubricated, specially ribbed and scented for my partner’s pleasure. Tinted the color of a Malibu sunset.

“Bang the redhead with one of those,” Walter says, “and I guarantee you get discretion on the account.”

FOURTEEN

It's a tough crowd at Shore Securities. No manicured finger nails or Ivy League business school grads around here. Our New Jersey backgrounds, the kind of investments we sell, Wall Street wouldn't let us sort mail.

I mean, okay, the place looks nice. The best hardwood, paints, and wall paper. Expensive decorations. But you see and hear Jersey Shore every time you walk through the big sales room, listen to us speak or play a vulgar prank.

"Been going over her portfolio in the hot tub?" Walter asks.

I'd like to rip off at these crude, high-school-educated former car, shoe, pots-and-pans salesmen, but hostile language on my part would only produce increasingly disgusting personal insult. There is nothing to do now but show them the famous, full-boat Carr grin. Act impervious.

"Are those tits real?" another broker, Bobby G. says.

Rags isn't the only person who could have kicked off the rumor I'm providing special intimate services to Kelly Burns, but my sales manager has to be Suspect Number One.

Sure, everyone noticed her the other day with Gerry in the conference room. The red hair. That figure. But I'm guessing Rags used his brief but very public telephone conversation with Kelly to leverage his inside status, spread stories with the troops.

I cannot believe how that little scumbag is out to get me.

"She a real redhead?" Walter says.

I swear the only subjects of interest around here are money, sex, and sports, in that order. No great revelation, I suppose. Probably goes on at every male-dominated office in America. Maybe the world.

Civilization, I conclude, rests entirely on the shoulders of women.

Late that night, Luis's Mexican Grill is empty but for me, Luis, and three sixty-something guys with canvas fishing hats and gray stubble watching baseball highlights on ESPN. Luis walks into their viewing line, checks his watch, shuts off the TV.

"I must close," he says.

"Shit," one of the fishing-hat geezers says.

I push up from my stool, ready to stumble out to my camper, suck up some fresh night air.

"Ten more minutes, Lou," another fishing-hat says. "Till the end of the show."

Luis catches my eye, flashes me a palm. Telling me to stay. When I sit back down, Luis approaches the closest of the outdoor geezers. Also the biggest, the one who spoke.

Luis saying, "Leave now or I will dismember your friends."

Takes eight or nine seconds for the fishing hat guys to don windbreakers, throw money on the bar, and make their way outside. They no longer seem pissed they can't watch the end of *Baseball Tonight*.

Luis locks up on their heels, hits a switch for the Dos Equis neon in the window, and the restaurant's corners flood with shadow. Luis comes back to the bar in semi-darkness, slips under the gate, and pours us two shooters of Herradura Gold.

"What is that 'dismember' line?" I say. "Some old Aztec curse?"

"It is possible," Luis says. "But I think I made it up."

We do our shooters. All at once. Heads all the way back.

"Something on your mind?" I say.

"There is in fact something I feel I must say, but the subject is not honestly of my concern. Not my business, you would say."

"Luis, you can say or ask anything you want. Anything."

He pours us both another shot. "It is the *senora*," he says. "*Senora* Burns."

I try to stop him. "I know. I understand. She's another man's wife. But to me, Kelly's a big girl. She doesn't belong to any man, let alone a man who'll soon be worm food. If I wasn't painting her wagon, somebody else would be."

"I hear you say, 'She is a big girl,' but is this really how you feel? If you are deceiving yourself, if inside this thing does make you feel dishonor, than your spirit will be harmed. Such injuries can be irreparable."

I grasp Luis's spiritual approach to my mental and physical health, but I'm also pretty sure he's got the wrong guy. We stockbrokers pretty much hang our morals on the wall every morning when we come to work. Like a gunfighter hanging up his Colt when he visits a whore's bedroom.

"Also," Luis says, "beautiful women are expert deceivers of men. She may be using you for a purpose of which you are unaware."

Let's see. So far she's exploited me for kinky sex, laundering money, and planning the burglary of Gerry's private safe. What could possibly be left?

In the parking lot, my camper and Luis's red Jeep are fifty feet apart, both of our cars tucked up against the old chain-link fence that runs alongside a row of four-story white pines. The fence and pines mark the always-shady back border of the restaurant's property.

A gentle midnight breeze tastes of coming warm rain. A Gulf of Mexico hurricane landed west of New Orleans tonight, and trailing moisture is storming up the whole eastern half of America.

Our shoes kick up rocks in the gravel parking lot. A three-quarter moon blinks down between fluffy clouds, throwing slanted and exaggerated shadows as we walk.

"Consider what I have said tonight," Luis says. "The *senora* is married to a rich and powerful man."

Did something move near those pine trees?

"I'm not planning major moves," I say. "I just need to keep the account after her husband dies."

He offers his hand. "Cruz knows you can sleep here whenever you like."

My hand gets lost in his huge fingers. "You told me. Thanks, Luis. See you tomorrow."

A gust of hot wind rustles the tops of the pine trees as I reach my camper. A couple of days ago it was cold. Showing winter's coming, with snow and ice and frozen car seats. But right now New Jersey's balmy and summer moist again, Miami Beach tropical. Whichever way the wind blows.

I unlock my pick-up and notice Luis's interior light pop on with mine. I wonder how far he has to drive. Where he lives. I've never even asked him if he's married.

Luis's Popeye shoulders impose themselves against the Jeep's interior, then get sucked back out the open door by some invisible force. Whoa. What was that?

A shout startles my ears. Scuffling feet knock gravel against the fender of Luis's Jeep. The clatter sounds like hail. Men are grunting. Fighting. Adrenalin shoots into my blood stream.

I run toward Luis's Jeep. My shoes crunch on the parking lot rocks. Pain stings my stiff knees with each stride.

Shouts cut the warm night as I round the Jeep. Three men have Luis pinned to the ground, one guy on each arm, a third punching him in the face. The puncher is Branchtown Blackie. I'd recognize that fedora anywhere.

More adrenaline pumps into my blood. My pulse goes limit higher.

I goose my jogger's run into a sprint and leap on Blackie's narrow back. He doesn't set himself, react in any way, and we go rolling together in a tangle of arms and legs, sharp gravel poking our backs. Blackie's short bony fingers somehow get a grip on my throat, but at least Luis no longer has fists pummeling him.

A train whistle blows. The bell begins to clang at the crossing one block away. I tug at the fingers around my neck. Blackie's breath is hot on my face. He smells of that ass-crack flowery soap.

A blue flame sparks inside the pine trees. The windshield of Luis's Jeep explodes. A firecracker pops by where I saw the blue flame. Glass from Luis's windshield tumbles onto the asphalt beside me.

Gunshot.

I twist out of Blackie's grip and press my face low. Cheek against the ground. The asphalt tastes like automobile rubber.

FIFTEEN

Another blue flash sparks against the pine trees.

An invisible meteorite zips past overhead, the vibration poking me even before I hear the shot. Zip-bang. I wonder at the sequence, how the soft tissue in my belly senses the bullet's super-sonic flight before my ears.

A taste of burnt gun powder drifts in the wind. The train whistle blows again, closer this time. Louder, more menacing. Gusts of warm air push leaves and trash scuffling along the blacktop.

I punch Blackie's chin as he scrambles to stand. Pain skids from my knuckles to my wrist, but Blackie doesn't flinch. His stomach must have sensed that bullet, too. He's up and hauling ass toward the pine trees.

I roll into a squat and check Luis. He's freed himself from Blackie's pals. One guy with long stringy hair clutches a bloody shoulder. The other one, wearing a thick goatee and thicker gold chains around his neck, drags his friend toward the pines.

Luis touches my head. "Stay down."

A car engine fires. Doors open and shut, tires spin on wet leaves. Squealing rubber. A dark shape crosses in front of the pine trees. Light from the approaching train turns a fog of burnt tire dust pale blue.

The train crackles through the nearby crossing and I catch a deep breath. And another. Luis and I are alone. He touches his left arm.

"You're bleeding," I say.

"*Pocito*," he says. "We must find my knife."

I stand up for a closer look. "You're bleeding more than a little bit, Luis. You need stitches. An emergency room."

"I will be fine. Look for my knife."

Okay. Fine. I get back down on my hands and knees and peek beneath his Jeep. I catch a glimpse of shiny metal, a reflection off the street light, then slide my fingers around something smooth and cold. Ouch. And sharp.

"I found it," I say.

I bounce the switchblade in my hand, measuring its awesome weight. I stand up to close the blade, feel it lock with a click, then immediately press the chrome release button. Zing. The eight-inch blade snaps out with a mechanical jolt. An instant sword.

Eat your heart out Errol Flynn.

Don't know why I'm in such a goofy mood the next day. Maybe it was me and Luis telling jokes in the emergency room. But when I see Rags go into Vic's office for their regular weekly chit-chat, I get a stupid idea.

Okay, *another* stupid idea.

It's an old gag, and the play takes almost nothing to set up. I have to ask Walter for the number is all, then figure out how to bypass our controller's block on this type of telephone call. It's all doable, Walter assures me, although I will have to pay the price—*attribution*—if I want to watch this gag go off.

Screw it. I want to watch.

Walter hands me a camera phone. He wants to see Rags' face, too.

Mr. Vic's secretary tries to stop me, but it's a feeble effort. Determined as I am to screw myself, weapons of mass destruction couldn't keep me out of Mr. Vic's office.

Rags and Vic both give me blank faces when I burst into their private, closed-door meeting. It's never been done. I'm maybe the last one they would expect to have the balls, too. And I'm wearing the full-boat Carr grin. My two immediate superiors slip into serious shock.

"Sorry, Rags, Vic." I'm huffing with excitement. "But you'd better hear what this guy has to say. It's about the lawsuit. You won't believe it."

Vic's face is a frozen puzzlement, question marks in both brown eyes. Rags looks pissed, a red flush climbing his neck like an exotic reptilian pet.

I bend over, flip Vic's telephone to speaker, then run to the doorway and wave at Walter. He punches buttons on his desk, a grin painted on his face like some Sesame Street puppet.

Vic stands. "Austin..."

"What's going on?" Rags says.

Same thing that always goes on, Rags. Your ass is mine. A light flashes on Vic's phone. I punch up the line and jack the volume. I've left the door to Vic's office open so half the sales room can see inside. That half quickly fills up with faces. Walter's on his knees, his cheeks and forehead bright pink.

"Oh, Rags," a breathless female voice booms from Vic's speaker-phone. "I want your prick now. I want your giant cock deep inside me."

Vic's mouth opens.

"Hump me hard," the sex-phone lady says. "Oh, Rags. Hump me hard."

Rags glares at me, his eyes glazed and unfocused. Tight lips, grim jaw. I snap the bastard's picture with Walter's camera. Rags is going to want to kill me for this.

Rags tried to fire me, of course. He blew himself up like a balloon, screaming and yelling about the other pranks I'd pulled on him. Poor balloon-guy almost popped. Mr. Vic had to slap him on the cheek. Twice.

As for me, I got the full-boat Straight Up Vic Bonacelli glare, but as far as punishment, I counted on two factors. One, Mr. Vic enjoys anything pornographic, especially laughs, and two, Vic set up a big-money golf match for us at his country club next Sunday. He wouldn't want me sulky.

Austin Carr, strategic genius. Mr. Vic tells me to pay a fifty dollar telephone fine for calling a 900 number, and to take the day off to contemplate the inappropriateness of my disruptive actions.

Not bad, considering Raging Maniac Rags wanted to have me arrested.

And hey, a day off is fine by me. I'm a little worried about Luis anyway, not to mention thirsty from all that running between phones, signaling Walter.

Ha.

I visit a client, pick up a small commission from an addition to the customer's mutual fund account, then swing by Luis's Mexican Grill early that afternoon.

The carved front door's locked. So is the kitchen entrance. No sign of Luis. Cruz. Anyone. Odd.

SIXTEEN

Across Highway 35 from Shore Securities, at the Branchtown Family Pharmacy, I buy six packs of Topps baseball cards in their crisp waxy wrappers. I love opening packs of baseball cards. Pure treasure hunting.

On my way back to the office, I rip at the wrapper of the first pack and step off the curb. Yes, I know, I'm walking onto a two-lane highway between parked cars. But I checked both ways. Nobody's coming. Not a moving car in either direction.

I'm looking for Derek Jeter, New York Yankee shortstop. My son Ryan needs another Jeter card so he can trade his friend for a Mark—

What's that? Something's coming. Something big and frightening, and my body must be worried about it being a car because I jump straight up. It's instinctive, an involuntary response to the unexpected arrival of fast-moving steel.

It's a car, alright, trying to run me down. Thanks to my jump, I'm in the air when the Jaguar's curved nose collides with my ass. The blow stuns me from the toenails to the split tips of my hair. I sail and tumble through the air like a gunned-down duck.

I hear a woman crying for help. Was I unconscious? Nothing in particular hurts. I remember I was struck by a car, but the pain seems general, like a Monday morning depression.

"Austin?"

A hand slaps my cheek. It is the first sharp pain I feel. That crying woman is calling 9-1-1. A man's been hit by a car, she blubbers. She's definitely talking about me. I mean, how many guys just got spanked by a car in front of Shore Securities?

Some asshole slaps my face again. I open my eyes. The face above me is blurry. Familiar, but blurry. Huh? Am I dreaming?

"Where the hell did you come from, buddy?" Rags says. "I never saw you until you were sitting on my hood."

Rags? My sales manager? Man, I knew the guy was mad at me, but...

"You had your face buried in these stupid baseball cards," he says. Rags holds up a Derek Jeter. "Hope he's worth a trip to the emergency room."

While they're loading me in an ambulance, I hear Rags tell a cop he'd just pulled away from the curb when I scooted between cars ahead of him. No way to avoid me, he says. Couldn't even hit his brakes until my ass had already imprinted itself on his hood.

The cop believed him. I'm not sure I do. It was the way he slapped me. Called me buddy.

SEVENTEEN

Kelly's half-wearing a green nurse's uniform. I don't know where she swiped the outfit, or how she got hold of the hospital I.D. badge previously pinned above her now bare right breast, nor do I give a rat's ass.

Not now anyway. The redhead's nestled in beside me on the hospital bed, the weight of her on the mattress pulling me close, her back blocking the hallway's view of her exposed chest and my naked mid-section. She could have pulled the floor-to-ceiling curtain around us but said the risk of getting caught would provide extra excitement. Hard to argue with that, or anything else right this moment. See, Kelly's giving me the sponge bath of my life, and slowly, lovingly, and finally, Kelly has brought me to the Big Finish.

"I think you're ready," she says.

I can only groan.

"Yes...see? Oh, my...what a load. I'm no doctor, Austin, but I'd say the accident failed to damage your doodad."

Doodad? "Are you sure you're not a doctor?"

Ten minutes later Kelly's cleaned up and changed clothes in my hospital room's lavatory. She's wearing stone-washed jeans now and a lemon yellow sweater that makes her candy red hair and green eyes glow with that girl-next-door innocence it takes studio make-up artists whole careers to perfect.

"Want to know what I found in the safe?" she says.

The bed sheets rub against my skin like canvas. The pillow smells of cheap soap and starch. Outside in the hall, a gurney goes by, its wheels clickity-clacking like a tiny train. And though I'm interested in Kelly's safe-cracking tale, I can't get over the fact Rags tried to kill me. I didn't know the son-of-a-bitch was that crazy.

"Sure," I say. "Tell me what you found."

"I can do better than that," she says.

Kelly digs into her straw beach bag. She rummages through a cell phone, tissues, and a red wallet, finally pulls out an eight-by-eleven-inch manila envelope stuffed with...what? Papers?

She tosses the package on my chest. Ouch. It crashes onto my sternum with the force of a space shuttle returning from orbit.

I undo the clasp. The metal imprints white marks on my fingertips. Don't know whether it's the thick texture of the parchment, or my stockbroker's well-trained sense of smell for money, but I know without looking exactly what Kelly has dumped on me.

I pull out the three-pound wad of papers from the manila envelope. What I expected. Registered securities, mostly blue chip stocks and municipal bonds. A big chunk of Gerry's portfolio I knew nothing about.

"Using face value on the bonds, and the stock prices printed in the paper Saturday, it's about two and a half million," Kelly says.

I take a deep breath. I'm feeling better after a good night's sleep. The doctors say I'm lucky to have no broken bones, no internal injuries.

"I have to ask you something, Kelly."

She grins, a smile that covers her entire face. Like Julia Roberts, her happy mouth seems bigger than humanly possible. Guess Kelly got some kicks playing nurse. “Ask away,” she says. “But I bet I know what you’re going to say.”

“You do?”

“Uh, huh.”

“What?”

“You’re going to ask, if Gerry’s about to die, why am I hiding money from him. And why, if I’m going to inherit his money, am I acting now like I want to steal his stocks and bonds?”

This woman is not only pretty, she’s almost smart. “Well...yeah ...why? If you’re going to inherit his money anyway...”

Kelly adjusts the bathroom door and admires herself in the full-length mirror. She tugs on her sweater, stretching the yellow material tight over her chest. “Well, here’s the thing, Austin...I’m not going to inherit much of anything.”

I feel my neck stiffen. “But that day in the office? What Gerry said about his money...it was bullshit?”

“I guess Gerry wants to keep me happy until he dies.”

Can’t blame him for that.

“Only problem,” Kelly says, “Gerry’s dumb-ass lawyer Federal Expressed a copy of the will to our house last week while Gerry was sleeping. I not only read it, I made a copy, had my lawyer look at it.”

“And?”

“And basically I’m screwed. He leaves me a hundred grand—severance pay for my domestic labors. The cocksucker. But his grown children get the money, the property, the businesses. Everything.”

“He can’t do that in New Jersey,” I say. “It’s a community property state.”

She faces me. “Gerry and I were never married.”

I need Walter’s help checking out of the hospital that afternoon, but before I go, I use another patient’s cell phone to call a reporter friend of mine at the *Newark Herald-Examiner*. I want more information about Gerry Burns.

I’m not sure where Kelly and I are going, or even where we are right now, but I can feel the stakes advancing. And I’m tired of being surprised with new information. This pal at the *Herald* knows how and where to check public records Google doesn’t know exist.

“Think Rags hit you on purpose?” Walter says.

I shrug my shoulders. “I don’t know. I wasn’t looking.”

Walter’s wheeling me through the hospital’s huge revolving glass entrance. His four-door Mercedes is waiting just outside. I can’t wait to get “home,” start living again in my camper with my leg in a brace. I automatically rub my sore head.

“I think you’d better start looking,” Walter says. “Rags is a whack job, and you really pissed him off with that phone-sex gag. Embarrassed him in front of everyone. You’ve been on him good for months.”

“Really?”

“Really. Telling you straight.”

I slip easy into the soft leather of my friend’s new Mercedes. “Hey, Walter, when we get to Broad Street can you do me a favor and stop at that athletic goods place?”

“Sure. You gonna buy a gun?”

“Not a bad idea. But I was thinking more of a football helmet.”

EIGHTEEN

It's after six when Walter pulls into Shore Securities. Sunday evening, there's three cars in the lot besides my camper; Rags' Jaguar with the dented hood, Straight Up Vic's Beamer wagon, and a dirty white Lincoln Mariner SUV with fishing poles clamped to a chrome rack on the roof.

"Shit."

"What's the matter?" Walter says.

I nod toward the Mariner. "That fisherman is my client, Psycho Samson."

"The wrestler with two bond defaults?"

"That's him. He's suing."

"Maybe he's here negotiating a deal with Vic."

"Or maybe he's hiding," I say, "waiting to jump me."

Walter makes a fist. "So we'll kick his ass."

This puts a smile on my lips. In California, skinny un-muscled guys like me and Walter accept our fate. In New Jersey, everybody acts tough. *Faccia rozzo*. "I did better against Rags' Jaguar than you and I would against Psycho. Two years starting tackle at Notre Dame, ninety percent of all running plays went directly behind his block."

Walter makes a show out of checking the near-empty parking lot, stretching his long neck, creeping his Mercedes forward like a turtle. Takes us two or three minutes to check all sides of the Mariner and my camper.

"Why wasn't he an All-American, an NFL draft pick?" Walter says.

"Drug busts, sexual assaults, and worst of all, a bad attitude with the coaches. The school tossed him his senior year. Didn't graduate, although I don't think he cared too much. The World Wrestling Syndicate offered him a six-figure signing bonus."

"Get out."

"He'd probably be as famous as Hulk Hogan now if he hadn't strangled a guy in practice."

No sign of Psycho, and I can't even see a place where he could hide. I mean, the man is gigantic. Maybe Walter's right and Psycho's inside, threatening Vic into making full restitution on those St. Louis hospital bonds.

I crack open the passenger door. The evening is oppressive with heat and moisture. "Thanks for the ride, Walter. I'm going to miss your air-conditioning."

"I'll miss your hot air. See you tomorrow, pal."

Hobbling across the warm asphalt, my knee starts to throb. The temperature has to be over ninety. Bruise-blue thunderclouds build in a gray sticky sky.

Good thing I don't need a left knee to drive. What the hell would I do if I couldn't captain my camper?

I'm slipping the key into my lock when a vise clamps shut around the back of my neck. The pain is excruciating, then paralyzing, numbness radiating down my spine to the tip of my big toes. A second clamp grabs my belt, lifting me off the ground, my body weightless and disassociated. I feel nothing as I am slammed against my camper's window.

Under painless pressure, my face and neck are flattened against the glass. Never have I felt so helpless. Like a bug under some kid's thumb.

Thunder booms in the distance. Remnants of that hurricane. A dead fish smell permeates the tiny amount of warm humid air I'm able to breathe. A gagging fog of bait, blood, and fish guts. Just a hunch, but I think I'm in the grip of Psycho Sam.

"Hello, puke."

I can see his left shoulder, that skull and crossbones tat. Plus the voice is unique. Real high, like a nine-year-old. But hey, and even if I couldn't see the shoulder tattoo, even if I didn't recognize the smell of dead fish or the little league voice, who the hell else could lift and hold me up like this? There's no doubt I am in the clutches of Psycho Samson Attica, proud owner of fifty thousand dollars in St. Louis hospital bonds, current value forty-five hundred.

"Mr. Attica?"

"I want my money back. Every freaking penny."

"You're hurting me, Mr. Attica. And this isn't going to get your money back."

"I whip your ass a while, it might. You'll believe me when I promise to bust your freaking neck. And that's exactly what I'm going to do if I don't get back that fifty grand. Understand? I will twirl you by the head, snap your freaking neck like my Momma did her chickens."

Is that how they kill chickens on the farm? Yuk. I heard Psycho grew up between cornfields, inhaled too much of those chemical fertilizers. But breaking chicken necks?

"Mr. Attica?"

"Yes?"

"Listen. I understand you're pissed off. Heck I would be, too. It's a lot of money."

Ouch. My face is pressed so hard against the glass, my teeth cut into my cheek. That's the bad news. The good news, I feel pain again. The numbness is leaving. Little yellow lights pop on and off inside my flattened eyeball.

"It's difficult to talk like this, Mr. Attica. How about letting me down? Perhaps we can work something out, reach some satisfactory compromise."

Hey, if it'll save my life, even keep me out of a wheelchair, I'll sign a freaking IOU for a million dollars. Why the hell not add Psycho to my long and growing list of creditors?

"Okay, puke," he says. "But up first, then down."

Whoa. Suddenly I'm flying, soaring across Shore's parking lot, the blacktop zipping by beneath me like I was watching out the window of an airplane.

I break the fall with two hands and a body roll, but my crash landing still feels like I fell off a two-story roof. I start checking myself for broken bones, then change my mind. Think I'll hang quiet here a while on the warm, sun-drenched asphalt. Austin Carr, playing dead.

"Get up and take your beating like a man," Psycho says, "or I'll kick you like a dog."

Tough choice. In fact, I still haven't made up my mind ten seconds later when I hear another sharp crack of thunder. At least I think it's thunder. Close enough to rattle the marrow in my bones. Maybe it's time to say a prayer. Dear God...

"Get your ass out of my parking lot."

Hey. The new voice sounds like Straight Up Vic at Shore Securities' back door, but I can't twist far enough to confirm. Not yet anyway. The vertebrae in my neck have been welded into one piece of pain.

Psycho's feet turn on the new voice. I have a very clear picture of his black rubber fishing boots. "Who the hell are you?" he says to the guy I think is Vic.

"I'm the son-of-a-bitch who's going to shoot your ass you don't get off my property."

It's Mr. Vic alright. My prayers have been answered. I manage enough of a head twist to see his face. I also see his right hand holds a short-barreled revolver.

Boy am I glad I'm a good golfer.

NINETEEN

Twisted lines of blue smoke rise from Mr. Vic's revolver. Can't honestly say I recognize that puppy from way over here, but I remember now it's a Smith & Wesson snub-nosed .38.

The boss's shown the weapon to us more than once in my time, Mr. Vic firing off a blank or two in hopes of reviving what he considered a sleepy, non-productive sales staff. It definitely got our attention, put us all back on the money machine, although I'm a little less certain about any actual increase in sales. At least for an hour or two. I usually took the rest of the day off.

If that second clap of "thunder" was Straight Up playing deputy sheriff, I wonder if the boss is popping real bullets this go-round, Mr. Vic quickly improvising a plan to save Shore Securities time and money on Psycho's pending lawsuit? How many times did Mr. Vic say he hates paying attorney fees?

"You and that half-pint squirt gun don't scare me," Psycho says.

Sam Attica is maybe the only man in the whole world I could believe when he says that. To bring down Psycho Sam, that .38 round would have to be perfectly placed.

Mr. Vic saying, "Than you're even dumber than you sound, Samantha. How come you talk like a leprechaun? Was your daddy a fairy?"

I love my boss.

Psycho growls, a shrill gargle that rattles my chest, piercing, like an electronic fire alarm. I try to merge with the hot asphalt as Psycho Sam Attica takes off running toward Straight Up Vic Bonacelli.

Mr. Vic extends his arm, aiming the revolver at Psycho's head. I judge my position relative to the angle of Mr. Vic's potential shot, hoping to determine if any blood and/or brain matter will splash in my direction.

Hard to tell, but I duck anyway.

Mr. Vic saying, "I just called the police, told them Samson Attica was assaulting my employee, that my associate's life is being threatened. That call puts the Branchtown law on my side, Samantha, even should I now decide to put a hole in your face."

To illustrate the bullet's potential target, Mr. Vic uses his left hand to touch the tip of his classically prominent Italian nose. He's always showing people his profile, even total strangers, claiming family ties to one of the Caesars.

Thank God Notre Dame makes its athletes actually attend class. Psycho seems able to understand and believe what the boss is telling him. He stops his charge. The tensed muscles around his mouth and eyes begin to slacken. He even touches his nose.

A master salesman, Straight Up Vic understands the awesome power of suggestion. Mr. Vic waves his revolver. "Go on, get out of here."

Psycho stops beside me. "Don't think we're done, puke. I owe you a very physical warning."

His high-pitched voice stabs at the throbbing mass of pain that is my neck. "What the hell kind of warning was the one you just gave me?"

Seems like a reasonable question, obtuse grammar aside. I'm obviously headed straight back to the hospital emergency room where they ask for this kind of information on the insurance forms.

"That was no kind of warning, puke. I was just saying hello."

What a world. What a world.

While I'm at the emergency registration desk this time, waiting for a doctor, perhaps I should inquire about a monthly pass.

TWENTY

A humming sound wakes me up that night.

Light from a hallway filters onto the straight-back chair at the foot of my steel bed. Oh, yeah. I forgot. I'm in the hospital again.

On my left, an elderly roommate has kept the water-proof green curtain closed around his bed all night, even when I invited him to watch the Yankee-Dodger game with me, one of those inter-league games they play now. I think my geezer roommate might have been embarrassed by his chronic flatulence. Not that the curtain helps much with that. Whew. I have to remember not to eat the food here.

The humming gets louder. A strange gush of sadness hits me behind the eyes. Wow. What the heck is that? Being such a loser, back in the hospital again? The pain in my knee and neck? Or...that humming. It reminds of something unpleasant, doesn't it? Some ego-bruising event.

When the memory comes, it moves quickly, like a short film. We open inside a marriage counseling session with my wife Susan, a scene where the shrink suggests we purchase a vibrator as a potential cure for our sexual problem—there ain't any but more sex. Then cut to Susan's telephone voice days later, "I had four orgasms today." Seems while I was at work one afternoon, Susan drank a few glasses of wine, took a hot bath, and enjoyed incredible life-altering sex with our new Hitachi 3000. After that I was offered nothing but sloppy seconds. After six months of that, I needed an affair to repair.

I mean how can a guy compete with something that's fourteen inches long and vibrates?

I open my eyes. The hospital room is filled with gray morning light.

A dark human shape comes into focus at the foot of the steel bed and my head snaps off the pillow. Pain shoots down my neck. My blood pumps with adrenaline. Who is that?

"Hello, Carr. I'm Detective Mallory, Branchtown Police."

I sigh, take a breath. My heart begins to slow down. I wonder if cops do these things on purpose. And I know this guy, too, thought we were sort of friends. Mallory is one of only six detectives on the Branchtown force, a tall Irishman with graying red hair and hard blue eyes. We coached T-ball together three years ago.

"Hey, Jim. This an official visit?"

"It's official," he says. "I need to ask you a few questions about the incident at Shore Securities yesterday. First, tell me in your own words exactly what happened when you encountered your client Samuel Attica?"

"Samson, actually."

"Okay. Samson Attica."

I go through the whole episode ninety-nine-percent truthfully, using enough detail to make myself comfortable with the story. But in the end, it's a story. Of course I could see Mr. Vic had a gun. His famous Smith & Wesson. But I'm not ratting out the boss.

"You're telling me you didn't see a weapon in Vic Bonacelli's hand?"

"He could have had a gun," I say. "He could have had a box of candy, or flowers. I didn't look."

"You're lying."

“I am not.”

“Why? Scared you’ll lose your job? Vic already told us he was the shooter.”

A much younger Branchtown detective scurries into my hospital room. It’s Mallory’s partner, I guess. The kid looks like an eighteen-year-old Eagle Scout. “Jim. I need to talk to you,” he says.

Mallory and the Eagle Scout are only out of my sight and earshot maybe thirty seconds, but Detective Mallory is hot-wired when he saunters back to my bed. Flushed around the neck. Eyes brighter. Like a new user and current beneficiary of stimulant drugs.

“You own a pickup truck with a camper?” Mallory says.

“Yup.”

“A yellow 1993 Chevy with lots of rust?”

“Bought it three weeks ago.”

Mallory and his young partner exchange a glance. When my former T-ball coaching mate puts his gaze back on me, Detective James Mallory of the Branchtown Police Department thinks he’s holding a straight flush to my pair.

“Put your pants on, Carr. We’re going for a ride.”

TWENTY-ONE

I'm cold, shivering in the rear of Detective Jim Mallory's city-sponsored four-door Ford Crown Victoria. Fog shrouds a blinking red train crossing as we approach. Our tires squeal to a halt. The wooden gate drops inches from our headlights. Clanging bells poke my ears, and in the distance, the engineer blows his discordant horns.

Not sure whether to blame my shivering and shaking on another sudden shift in New Jersey's weather or the anticipation of additional calamities. Mallory and the Eagle Scout are driving me to Luis's Mexican Grill for unexplained reasons, and I've got a nasty chill worrying what we might find.

A misty drizzle keeps the wipers busy thumping across the windshield. Those hurricane remnants and warm humid air have given way to a storm front out of the Great Lakes. Much lower temperatures. In the closed Ford, I smell leather, gun oil, and from the back seat's stained rug, a faint stench of dried vomit.

A crime's been committed at Luis's, I was told. A bad one, I'm guessing. Across the tracks, through the glare of the flashing crossing lights, I can see into the restaurant's parking lot. Three squad cars, half a dozen cops, and a circle of yellow tape surround a lump on the asphalt. The lump's covered by a blue tarp.

The train arrives, shutting off my view. The yellow tape and blue tarp stay bright in my head. Neon color in a wet drab world.

"Somebody dead?" I ask.

Neither detective speaks. They keep looking straight ahead. Ignoring me.

"Come on, tell me," I say. "Or I'm not saying another word until I see a lawyer." Hey, I watch all the good cop shows. If everyone exercised their right to be silent, our prisons would be empty.

Mallory sighs. "Someone who works at the restaurant has been shot. A Hispanic male."

The train passes, the gate lifts, and we pull across the railroad tracks into Luis's parking lot. My heart's skipping rope, jogging and jumping at the same time. There's a double-granny knot in my stomach. Did Branchtown Blackie's friend take another, better aimed shot at my favorite bartender?

When we pull up, the Eagle Scout jumps out and yanks me from the Crown Victoria. None too gentle. Mallory's partner is stronger than he looks. The little dick.

The drizzling fog tastes like fish. The Catch of Yesterday.

I try walking toward the tarp, thinking they want me to have a peek at the body, but Mallory grabs my arm. "This way, pal."

Mallory's tug pulls me off balance. Stumbling backward, my ex-favorite T-ball coaching partner slams me against a squad car. Whoa. What's the hell's going on?

Mallory's Crown Victoria blinks high beams on me. My hand jumps up to cover my eyes. Somewhere in the darkness, a cop says, "Put your hand down, asshole."

I comply, but can't help squinting at the Crown Victoria's brights. My eyes sting with the glare.

"Stop making faces," the same cop-voice says.

Finally it dawns on me. I'm in a one-man line-up, scoped out by someone behind those lights. Am I a murder suspect? Oh Lord, I hope that dead body isn't Luis.

“That’s him,” a whiskey voice says. “That’s the guy what lives in the camper.”

Sweet Jesus. The uniformed cop who called me an asshole and Eagle Scout tug me over to Mallory’s Crown Victoria and stuff me in the back seat. I missed the smells.

Mallory’s grinning when he sticks his head inside to talk. “We have a witness says you were fighting with the victim. Lots of shouting, cursing.”

My skin turns clammy, my breathing shallow. Oh, please, not Luis. “Who’s the victim?”

“You wanna take a look?” Mallory says. “I mean, if you admit hanging out here a lot. Knowing everyone.”

Mallory walks me over. My legs are wobbly. Trickles of sweat run down my flanks. The foggy air closes in on me like heavy snow.

The Branchtown detective waves, and one of the uniformed cops pulls back the blue tarp. Another train’s coming. I hear the clanging bells. The distant horns.

Sweet Jesus. Not easy to tell who it is. The face is bashed, features smeared across a bloody hunk of meat. But I recognize my friend by the overall size of the head, the partial hairline, the shape of one good ear.

It’s Cruz, not Luis.

I throw up on Mallory’s shoe.

It takes the Branchtown cops all day to approximate the time of Cruz’s death, then three minutes to verify my alibi with the hospital nurses station. Those girls must have been able to recite the exact time of my every bowel movement.

During my wait at the police station, I tell Mallory and a tape recorder everything I know about Cruz, Luis, and the restaurant. But once I’m done with my two Branchtown Blackie stories, Luis’s switchblade, my info apparently isn’t that exciting. I’m sent home with a warning to stay available for further questioning.

I call Walter for a ride. He has a dozen questions, but my answers are one syllable or less. Poor Cruz. He probably got himself killed trying to defend the restaurant.

TWENTY-TWO

I wake up cold and worried. Night air leaks inside my camper, chilling my arms and chest, yet perspiration drips in the hollow of my neck. The first two fingertips of my right hand collect the moisture like evidence. What's wrong? Cruz's death? Anxious and restless about my shitty life? Or did a nightmare rouse me? A noise?

Knuckles rap tenderly on my camper door. "Austin? It's me."

I slide carefully off my bunk. Definitely a female voice, or Psycho Sam. Sounds like the redhead, actually, but why would Kelly show up here so late? I stoop-walk to the back and crack open the door. The Branchtown night greets me with a cold wet kiss.

It's Kelly alright. Her gaze shifts from my eyes to a place above my forehead. "I thought you were kidding about the helmet."

I remove my headgear, toss it on the bunk. "Obviously you've never lived in a camper. I was developing permanent contusions and lacerations. You want to come in, have a beer?"

"I..." She can't finish, and her green eyes thicken with sudden unshed tears. What's wrong? Same old problem about too many nursing responsibilities? Or a new drama? Maybe she knew Cruz.

"Gerry's gone," she says.

Oh, my. I wasn't ready for that so soon. My monster looked almost well the last time I saw him. "Did he die peacefully?"

"No, no," she says. "I mean he's gone, not dead. He left the condo in an ambulance."

I push aside the rusty camper door and hop down beside my goofy redheaded lover, place my hand on her shoulder. Kelly must be treated with love and kindness. She can't help it she's a ding-bat.

A three-quarter moon throws our shadows on the asphalt and puts a frightened glare in Kelly's moist eyes. Some kind of night bird squawks in the oak tree across from Shore Securities' parking lot. I pull a blanket off the camper floor and wrap it around our shoulders.

"What happened?" I say.

She spreads her fingers on my chest. "Last night after dinner he lost consciousness. I called 9-1-1 and went with him to the emergency room. The doctor there got Gerry's Sloan Kettering doctor out of bed, and they decided to transfer him to a hospice. They don't think Gerry will live more than a few days."

I reach for her hands. "I'm so sorry."

"I'll be all right." She sniffs. "Gerry and I've known this was coming." She digs in her purse for a tissue. "It's just that...even if we weren't married...well...we've been together a long time."

My arms slip around her waist. The redhead presses her hips against me.

"I don't need all of it," Kelly says an hour later. We've moved to the penthouse condo. "Just a little. We'll go to Mexico, you and me. Live in the sunshine like the people in that fancy painting."

I kiss her neck, then gaze up at Renoir's *Pont Neuf*, the centerpiece of Gerry's collection of Impressionist reproductions. "I don't care if you take a slice of Gerry's assets," I say. "And I'd

love to run away with you. But in a few days, a week, a month...eventually I'd miss my kids, miss them so bad I'd have to come back."

"You told me you don't see your kids now."

"Not officially. But I'm pretty successful at being sneaky. More important, I have to maintain residence here to reacquire visitation rights, eventually joint custody. With my ex-wife, it's strictly a matter of cash. But I'm not giving her any wiggle room. I'll get the money, then I'll get my kids."

"How much?"

"Money you mean?"

"Yes. How much?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes it does. How much?"

"A lot."

"Come on. How much?"

"I'm not going to say."

"Yes you are. How much?"

"Fifty-eight thousand."

TWENTY-THREE

Kelly leans close and nibbles the bottom of my ear. A cold shiver slides down my back. What happened to Gerry's teary eyed house mate? The grieving future ex?

"Okay, I've got it," she says. "You help me slip off to Mexico with two million of Gerry's bonds, I'll give you the fifty-eight thousand as commission for whatever shenanigans you have to go through. I wish you'd come with me, but I guess the money will have to keep me warm."

"Two million? I thought you said 'a little?'"

She laughs, crinkling her nose like she does. "Stealing is stealing, right?"

I shrug. "Not if you get caught. Prosecutors tend to use big numbers against you."

Hours later, while Kelly sleeps, I go on Gerry's computer, locate the State of New Jersey internet site my reporter friend in Newark mentioned. I type Gerald Burns into the search bar, click go.

The site shows Gerry owns many different businesses, including a construction firm, an importing outfit, pieces of three restaurants, and a land development company. Gerry Burns' estate must top twenty million. Not much info I didn't already know or suspect, but confirming the considerable size of Gerry's estate helps me think maybe his children won't miss a few million in bonds.

Later, lying in bed beside the redhead, I imagine exactly how I would steal Gerry's money for her. It's so simple it's scary. Forget about those registered securities Kelly found in the safe. All I have to do is forge Gerry's signature on a few transfer forms, vouch for their authenticity with my friendly back office. Hell, maybe Kelly can even get the sick geezer to sign them. Presto. The securities in Gerry's account will be transferred into Kelly Rockland's account. In whatever value and amount I write on those transfer forms.

And wait. If I made a list of the bonds she found in Gerry's safe, then swap two million worth of them for new bonds just as the transfer between accounts is taking place, the paper trail would get extremely complicated. Not untraceable, but complicated.

It could take a good accountant weeks to put together what happened. A bad one might never figure it out.

I roll over and hug Kelly's lilac-scented pillow. What am I thinking? What the hell's come over me? Am I really thinking of running away with the redhead?

No way. I'd never leave my kids.

Stealing money from Gerry's kids and giving it to his mistress?

I guess I am thinking about that. A little.

Risking my career, maybe jail time for the fifty-eight grand?

Oh, yeah, I'm definitely considering that.

Too many blows to the head, Austin old boy. You must be nuts, wacko, and desperate.

Out of recently developed habit, I cinch up the chin strap on my blue New York Giant football helmet.

Desperate? Who, me?

Ridiculous.

TWENTY-FOUR

My daughter Beth tucks perfectly for the final underwater turn, coiling her ankles, knees, and hips against the pool, launching herself backward in flawless form, a human bullet slicing through the water.

When I see her surface forty meters from the finish, her competitors still engaged in the final turn, I realize my teenager has won another race. Only the most outrageous disaster could prevent her from winning now...and it's not going to happen.

"Yay, Beth!"

When my vertical leaping concludes, I turn to the quiet woman standing beside me. Her sandals and sunglasses are the same shade of bright red, both embedded with rhinestones.

"That's three wins for my daughter," I say. "The freestyle, the medley, and now the breast."

Her lips barely move. Her gaze never leaves the water. "I don't talk to men wearing Speedos."

After the ribbons, awards, and trophies are handed out, Beth gives me a kiss of recognition as I crowd in close with other well-wishers. I'm safe because although today is Beth's biggest athletic day yet, her mother is not in attendance.

"Three gold medals and one silver," I say. "Team MVP. Individual Meet Champion. Summer League Swimmer of the Year. Not bad for a pimple-faced teenager with no boyfriends."

"Daddy!"

"Oh, you can't count that skinny kid Michael who calls the house every night."

"Daddy!"

"I am so proud of you, honey. You've worked so hard for this. And you know I was kidding about the pimples, right? I mean, I don't see one."

"How did you know Mom couldn't come?" Beth says.

"I didn't know. I just got lucky. When are the state regionals?"

"Next Sunday. At Brookdale. Are you coming?"

"Wouldn't miss it for a million dollars."

"Mom already warned the school. She told them she's hiring a private detective to keep you out."

"I'll figure out something. I always do."

Beth glances at my bare chest, then leans in close to whisper. "Please don't wear the Speedos."

I stroll along the beach a few minutes later, basking in the glow of Beth's achievements. Wow. It doesn't get better than this. My daughter wins almost everything. Three out of four final races. Team MVP. Individual Meet Champion. Swimmer of the Year.

A seagull squawks in agreement. I loved sports as a kid, baseball and golf especially, but playing the game is nothing compared to the excitement of watching your children play. It's crazy. Your spirit is engaged as if you were running and jumping out there yourself, sure. But your mind watches, too, torn with angst over the potential positive and negative outcomes. The fear doesn't go away like it does when you're playing. And more fear equals more excitement.

A wave crashes and rolls in, splashing my ankles with cold, foam-topped sea water. The Speedos worked again, despite that rhinestone bitch's haughtiness and my daughter's teenage embarrassment. I just strolled in from the beach, then walked out afterward like I belong. No one pays any attention to a guy in Speedos. In fact, everybody's afraid to pay attention to a guy in Speedos.

My camper's in the municipal lot, up here another fifty yards. Past these rocks. I can see my fender now, between the Corvette and the SUV with those...oh, shit...fishing poles.

"Hello, puke."

Psycho Samson's hand snatches my neck before I can run, duck, or borrow an Uzi. I am thrown face first into the wet sand, frozen again by the crushing vise around my neck. Without lessening his monster grip, Psycho Sam somehow throws a leg over me and puts his sweaty ass on my back. God, how humiliating. How painful. He could at least buy me dinner first.

I hear two kids on skateboards in the parking lot.

But I can't shout to them. Hell, I can't even breathe.

The edges of my vision turn dark, then black.

TWENTY-FIVE

Cool, white foamy seawater splashes my lips.

I taste salt, dead fish, and sudden shocking, coming-awake fear. Why can't I turn from the water? Everything feels frozen—my feet, my legs, my hands, my arms. Is my neck broken? All I can do, twist my chin in a range of three or four inches, open my eyes.

Oh. My. God. I struggle madly and ineffectively at continental-size restraints. My distant thumping heart becomes the epicenter of an eight-point-five earthquake. Psycho Sam Attica has buried me in the sand, up to my chin just feet from the surf.

I cry out as more seawater splashes my face.

Waves break just yards away. An army of incoming ocean swells gathers on my limited horizon, preparing to attack. The cloudless sky is an end-of-the-world steely blue.

The next breaker sends a rush of foam that covers my mouth and fills my nose. I'm forced to hold my breath.

I don't know how much time has passed. Ten minutes. Half an hour. I've survived this long by holding my breath as the waves come in, letting the air out underwater so there's time to grab a new breath when each foamy rush recedes.

This last wave may have done me in. I managed to suck in half a chest full of air, but the other half was water, and it went down the wrong pipe. I'm choking.

Sweet Jesus.

What's this? A sideways face? Lips kissing me? Blowing warm air into my oxygen-starved lungs.

Is that Kelly's red hair lashing my cheeks?

An oxygen mask covers my nose and mouth. I'm flat on my back, inside an ambulance, strapped to a gurney. The siren wails.

Kelly's kneeling beside me. Her bright green eyes twinkle with delight as my gaze focuses on her.

"I know, I know," she says. "Three unrelated trips to the emergency room in four days. I've already called Ripley's."

"You mentioned your daughter's swim meet, so I was looking for you at the club, figured maybe we could grab some dinner," Kelly says later. "I waited by your camper for a long time, then I got worried. Two young boys with skateboards remembered seeing you with a giant. A giant man and his shovel."

I have no idea what time it is. I know it's dark outside the emergency-room window. Feels like I've watched the trees and bushes grow up.

"But I was mostly underwater when you found me." I say. "How did you know where to look?"

“Your screams attracted me to the rocks. I heard a sucking sound, and I saw something strange in the surf.”

“My head?”

“Yes, well, the top. And your ears sticking out.”

TWENTY-SIX

The redhead and I do a late dinner. Then I do the redhead. Not exactly a lengthy and energetic display of affection, but it seems I get the job done.

After, at her condo in front of Jay Leno and the *Tonight Show*, Kelly tells me again how she wants a piece of Gerry's multi-million dollar estate. How she wants it before Gerry dies, too, before the lawyers and Gerry's children start pecking and clawing at every scrap of meat.

I'm bored with her schemes tonight. Pecked and clawed a bit too much myself perhaps. Choked and shot at, that's for sure. Hit by a car. Thrown onto the asphalt like an empty beer can. Mugged into a lineup by the police. Buried alive in the sand, left to drown.

I'm pissed is what I am. Pissed and ready for a fight. And I know exactly where I'm going, too. Don't give a crap who gets hurt, myself included. The bastards can pick on somebody else next time.

When Leno's over and Kelly disappears into the marble bathroom to take a bedtime shower, I dress and walk past the fake Renoir with a salute, then out the door.

I am compelled to action, not by boredom with Kelly, but by a strange, unsupportable certainty that my psyche must fight back to survive.

Nothing makes sense. Rags, Psycho, and my nasty ex-wife can have no relation to Branchtown Blackie and his minions. But something powerful tells me my place in a bigger battle is next to Luis.

The yellow police tape is down, but Luis's Mexican Grill is still closed, the parking lot empty. I drive around back. Tucked in beside the semi-permanent, tent-sized green garbage bin, Luis's Jeep Cherokee rests neatly hidden from the street.

I need to play my hunches more often.

Parking beside the Jeep, I hop down onto loose gravel. My shoes scuffle loudly in the silence of the late hour. The traffic on Broad Street is a trickle. Two birds haggle for roosting space inside a patch of pine near Luis's back fence. The breeze against my skin blows cool and dry.

The hood of Luis's Jeep toasts my fingers. He hasn't been here more than a few minutes.

I try the kitchen entrance, the one I use when I take a shower. The door's open so I slip inside.

The kitchen is long and narrow with an even narrower oak table extending down the middle. The table's surface is covered with pots and pans, stacks of dishes, baskets of onions, peppers, garlic, and cilantro left out to rot. There are three bare bulbs for light. Only one is on, at the opposite end of the room.

Carefully making my way along the table, I hear voices. Distant and muffled. I move slower, softening my steps in the dim light, making sure I don't kick anything loose, knock stuff off the table. The vegetables smell like garbage.

Under the lighted bare bulb at the far end of the oak table, an open stairway leads down into a cellar. Light filters up a wooden stairway. So do those voices—one loud and strong, the other not. I check the darkness behind me and take a deep breath.

The door to the shower and dressing room are at the other end of the kitchen. I've never been in this part of the restaurant before. Never seen these shelves, loaded with paper towels and toilet tissue. Never seen this old, hand-painted sign, "Maria's," leaning against the kitchen wall.

Something about the sign or the name seems vaguely familiar, but it can't be. Everything over here is new, strange.

A wounded groan slithers up from the basement.

This is what I came for, right? To do battle beside Luis? To find out what the hell's going on with this Blackie character, settle the problem?

I grab another breath and start down the stairs.

After three steps, I see a prone and disabled Branchtown Blackie. Another four steps and my eyes capture the complete picture: Luis stands on a plastic tarp, his right hand holding his switchblade to Blackie's throat. Only Luis's tight grip keeps Blackie's head off the plastic. Blood and purple bruises color Blackie's face. If he's breathing, he doesn't know it.

Luis's gaze finds me on the stairs. I expect the tenseness to leave his gaze when he recognizes me, but it doesn't. His body reminds me of a lion crouched over its captured prey. Staring at me, another adversary, ready to kill again to protect his food.

"What happening?" I say.

Luis blinks and the lion fades from his face. I feel my own level of tenseness subside. Luis is a scary guy to have mad at you. Acting like a wild animal.

"It is not your concern what happens here," he says. "You must go."

Luis's words are a command, not a request. He struggles with the harsh language, his eyes sad while the tone is more like the lion I saw seconds ago.

But my brain has been working subconsciously, and it now tells me why Luis and Blackie are both situated on a plastic tarp. If I stick around, I will see Blackie get carved up like a Thanksgiving turkey.

"Did this man kill Cruz?" I ask.

"Leave now," Luis says. "You have no business here."

"What are they after, Luis? Tell me and I'll leave. What do they want from you?"

Luis drops Blackie's collar. The man's head bounces once off the tarp-covered cement floor like a juicy apple.

My lips part in surprise as the tip of Luis's switchblade turns slowly from Branchtown Blackie to point directly at me.

"Leave now, Austin Carr. Leave now or you will be rolled up in plastic and buried with this *pachuko*."

Guess Luis has had enough of my questions.

Maybe he'll tell me about all this later. Or not. Maybe Luis is actually doing me a big favor by not telling me. Do I really want to be a witness to Blackie being murdered, wrapped up and thrown away like a bad enchilada? I don't think so.

I head back up the stairs.

Sweet Jesus. But I'm on his side. And Luis threatens me?

And what the heck's a *pachuko*?

TWENTY-SEVEN

Back in Kelly's condo, I'm ruminating over Luis's threat to kill me. This from the *hombre* I thought was my pal, the man I share life's little secrets with? I distinctly heard him say he would wrap me up like a chicken burrito, bury me with the *pachuko*.

I'm wondering if *pachuko* could mean a guy who wears black. Or who wears a pencil thin mustache. Probably not. Or maybe—and this is just a hunch—maybe a *pachuko* is an asshole who acts tough.

Dressing for work, I consider what's next. That's the scary question, isn't it? What the heck could possibly come along now and top the long list of crap already happening to me? I know it's a jinx to even pose the question, but damn, I have to wonder. I mean it's a question a man has to ask himself when the doo-doo stops falling on his head long enough for contemplation.

What the hell did I do to deserve all this?

Ah, that's a baby's question. Bad stuff happens to people every damn day. Really bad stuff. Look at Gerry. One day he's fine, the next a cancer diagnosis. The question isn't why me, it's why not me? Do I imagine I'm so special that bad luck can't befall me?

You know what. That's not the real question either. Nope. The real question is, if a way out has presented itself, why haven't I chosen that path? Why won't I do what has to be done?

Fifty-eight thousand dollars would disassemble the really bad part of my previously listed complaints. And once I reacquired a face-to-face relationship with Beth and Ryan, I could deal with Rags, Psycho, and all the St. Louis hospital bonds of this world by finding another job.

I understand Kelly's desire for Gerry's money will require crime. It's a major drawback to the design. If Gerry's kids are only half smart, they'll check pop's statements after he dies and find out about any and all large transfers. Once they dig up the paperwork on my little swap and switch, and once they figure out who Kelly Rockwell is, I become a forger who belongs in jail, or at least Kelly's criminal accomplice.

That NJ State internet site showed Gerry's estate probably tops twenty million. Would his kids really miss two million in bonds? Did they even know about the stuff in Gerry's safe?

Outside, walking toward my camper, I consider the moxie it took for Gerry to accumulate that kind of net worth. Think Gerry was scared of a little crime now and then? Doing the old white collar shuffle when he had to? Makes me wonder what kind of illegal crap he was into.

On my way to meet Kelly that afternoon, the late September storm turns Seaside County, New Jersey into a gloomy and rainy landscape. Thirty-year-old elms and roadside plantings of fifteen-foot rhododendrons don't improve my navigation skills either. Heck, I can hardly see the road, let alone 299 West Ridge Avenue.

Truth is, I should be able to find the place by sticking my nose out the window and breathing deeply. Stockbrokers are experienced at smelling fear, and since the place I'm looking for is a hospice, a care center for the terminally ill, the stench of dread should be formidable.

I'm here to see my monster, hopefully acquire his signature on some transfer papers.

"Looks bad, doesn't he?"

Kelly understates Gerry's ghastly appearance. Bad is way too kind. The poor guy is a freaking cadaver. Pasty gray skin, hair gone, sticky yellow goo oozing from his nose and eyes. Tubes in every orifice.

The room doesn't help. The smelly flowers. Drawings and photographs of clouds. Indian spirit signs and religious symbols on the yellow walls. Everything pale and eternal.

"I don't think he's capable of signing those forms," Kelly says.

The woman is sharp. "Yes, unconscious is hard to overcome. You want to sign for him or should I?"

"You'd do that?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"I don't know. I figured you'd want me to do the signing part. So you could claim you thought the signature was real."

"Nobody's going to believe I wasn't part of the scheme, Kelly. There are too many witnesses to our...friendship. Plus there'll be the fifty-eight grand I came up with on such short notice."

"Then why are you doing it?"

"The plan is, don't get caught," I say. "You're going to Mexico, right?"

"*Si, señor.*"

"Then there are things you'll need to do when you get there. I'll explain and write them down later if you like. But basically you'll be covering your tracks, making it harder—hopefully impossible—for Gerry's kids to find you and get the money back."

"But what about you?"

"I won't have anything those kids want. They won't come after me unless you're involved, unless there's a way they can get Gerry's missing money. I'm broke."

"You don't have to be," she says.

TWENTY-EIGHT

My hasty retreat from the hospice's premises is delayed by slow or broken elevators. Six guests and visitors wait for the non-functioning technology, others immediately go for the stairs. I'm trying to figure the odds when Kelly slides her arm into mine, stands on her tiptoes to whisper in my ear. "Come with me, baby."

Her breath is warm, moist, and fragrant. Goosebumps form on my neck. Blood gathers in my crotch. Yes, girls, it's that easy. "Are you talking about Mexico?" I say. "Or do you know another way out of this roach motel?"

Kelly's nose wrinkles. Her smile lights up the dim hallway. "Mexico. Vera Cruz, actually." She kisses my cheek. "But I do know where there's a freight elevator."

I resist an urge to press her against the wall, give her a quick hump, and one minute later, after a brisk walk and two right turns, I'm pushing a big red button with my forefinger. Another two minutes go by before the squeaky steel doors slide open.

Kelly and I push inside a work elevator. It's twice the size of the building's regular lifts, and the walls are covered with heavy brown padding. This elevator already has two young men inside, each protecting an apparently empty sheet-draped gurney. What's that smell?

I'm no expert, but my eyeballs and an accidental bump of the hip tell me these gurneys are unusually large and heavy. Are the patients inside instead of on top?

This is a hospice.

"Are we riding with what I think we're riding?" I ask one of the white-uniformed young men, a Latin guy with thick forearms—the kind of health-aid you do not want giving you a sponge bath.

The two aids glance at each other. It's not the Latin guy who's going to answer me. It's his taller buddy. More of a twinkle in his eye.

"At least they have each other," the buddy says. "This is a ride they usually take alone."

Kelly talks me into an early dinner at Clooney's. The place is always crowded, but I say yes because every single bartender makes a good martini. It must be a Clooney's secret training tradition. This evening I'm going to have two Bombay-with-olives; up I think, one for each stiff I rode with on the freight elevator.

Kelly points to a table at beach level, says she wants to watch the stormy sky through those floor-to-ceiling windows. Stormy sky, my ass. She wants to parade all the way through Rick Clooney's main dining room, see who's having dinner in town tonight.

Rick's a local celebrity, a skinny bald Harvard grad who got mixed up with the wrong Italians, got arrested, but kept his mouth shut and went to prison for five years to keep his new friends clear. The beachfront restaurant was his coming home present, and some of his old friends like to drop by now and then for a free lobster. Once a place gets a rep like that in New Jersey, you can't keep the crowds away. There's always the possibility of a shooting or other free entertainment.

Gusty wind greets our arrival at beach level. Beyond the surf, white caps toss the gray water.

Kelly has something on her mind. I hope it's not Mexico again. Can this woman really expect me to run away with her? I've known her less than two weeks. Sure, I like her. The sex is

awesome. But the truth is, I wouldn't leave my kids for Shania Twain, the fantasy love of my life. I mean what the hell is Kelly thinking?

We're waiting for our drinks, Kelly saying, "You'd love Vera Cruz. Gerry took me there on a business trip last year. I just loved the restaurants and beaches, this one nightclub. We went every night for the music. I could have danced my way down to a hundred and fifteen pounds."

"Feel that Latin beat, do you?" I say.

Her eyes spark. "I like a strong steady rhythm, yes."

Whew. Sex is like salt and pepper to this woman. She sprinkles it on everything.

The drinks arrive and I take a big gulp of my martini. The alcohol stings my mouth and burns my throat on the way down, churns my stomach when it hits bottom. I take a second gulp and everything hurts a little less.

"I know what you're worried about," Kelly says.

"Worried?"

"You're concerned about the money. Would I dole it out in Mexico, put you on an allowance."

I look up from my martini. "Kelly, I am not worried about money or Mexico or anything like that. It's about my children."

Her eyes shift from me to the storm outside. "Whatever. But just so you know, I would be totally dependent on you as far as the money goes. You know what to do with it, how to hide it, keep it safe. You'd be in charge. It would be like your money, really."

I finish the martini and decide to try a new approach. I give her the full-boat Carr grin. "Are you sure you trust me? I mean we've only been lovers for what, ten, eleven days? I've been a conniving stockbroker more than seven years."

She smiles. The redhead does think I'm amusing. It's a quality in women I like very much.

"In my house that night, I loved the way you looked at the Renoir," she says. "It's the same way I stare at it sometimes when I'm alone. Wanting to be like those people. Happy in the sunshine."

I wave at the waiter for another martini. Kelly hasn't touched her cosmo. She's tougher than me, getting used to all these doctors, hospices, stiffes, and the smell of antiseptic. The trappings of death. That little visit to the hospice today was gruesome. I need medication.

Kelly saying, "That Renoir was what I thought my life would be like when I hooked up with Gerry. But I was wrong. I had money enough, just no one to enjoy it with. Gerry was always working."

I pick up the menu.

"Oh, I'll admit I would have stayed with Gerry forever. I like being pampered, living well. But the man never talked to me, Austin."

I look up from Clooney's list of steaks. I haven't had a Porterhouse in six months. Lot of mac and cheese, but no Porterhouse. "And in one week, you know me?"

She shrugs. "We enjoy a lot of the same things—good food, champagne, art, sex. I think we would enjoy Gerry's money together. You share your feelings with me. That's what I want most."

My second martini arrives. I enjoy a long, slow, two-swallow guzzle.

"I'm not saying we'd be together forever," she says. "I'm saying it would be good while it lasted."

Okay, let's see. On the plus side of this "Do I? Or don't I?" ledger is the good sex. The big money. Living in Mexico. The end of dialing for dollars. No more Rags, Psycho, or end-of-the-month shit swaps.

Wow. That's a long and strong list of positives.

On the minus side, I would no longer see my kids.

"Sorry, Kelly. There's just no way."

TWENTY-NINE

“ACCIDENT KILLS SHIP’S MATE”

I’m waiting for Rags to follow me inside his office and approve Gerry’s transfer papers when my eyes find the above newspaper headline on Rags’ desk. Hard to miss actually because the story and the bold, all-caps headline are circled in bright red ink.

I hear Rags coming. There’s only time for a quick peek. Seems a Branchtown charter boat’s first mate was lost at sea yesterday while attempting to land a two to three-hundred pound Mako shark. Neither the man, the malfunctioning equipment—a flying gaff—or the shark were recovered during an extensive search.

“How’d you like to go fishing next weekend, Carr?”

It’s Rags, swaggering into his office. The sales manager has been all smiles, humming Sousa marches since he ran me down in his Jaguar.

“You, me, Mr. Vic and one or two of his cronies,” he says. “We’ll take the Triple-A out, have some fun.”

I stare at Rags, a little confused, not only by the juxtaposition of this lost-mate story and the fishing offer, but by the strange workings of my sales manager’s mind. Why would I want to do anything with him? My gaze moves from Rags’ happy face to the newspaper story.

“Oh, yeah. Can you believe that?” Rags says. “What a way to go, huh?”

“I don’t understand what happened,” I say.

Rags slides behind his desk-slash-breakfast counter. He puts a hand on his necktie to keep the silk out of the bagel with cream cheese he’s ready to consume. “Vic says it happens once and a while with flying gaffs—this big hook they stick in the fish to bring him on board?”

“I know what a gaff is.”

“Well, with flying gaffs Vic says you stick the hook in, then the handle part comes off and you have the fish on a thick rope. The mate’s arm must have gotten tangled, or the damn shark just caught him by surprise.”

My stomach turns sick and sour thinking about that ship’s mate. Imagine being yanked overboard and towed to your death by a fish?

Rags points his finger at me. “I get it. You see this story, then I walk in saying let’s go fishing.”

I must look pale. “Pure coincidence no doubt.”

Rags shakes his head. “Sit down, Carr, we need to talk.”

Rags pushes his poppy seed bagel to one side, then plops into his swivel chair and props his feet up. He’s got on a charcoal gray suit, white shirt, a black and gold regimental striped tie. He looks good, but the man is evil.

I sit in one of two upholstered, high-back chairs that face his modestly worn desk. He’s Mr. Vic’s fourth sales manager in seven years. I find myself staring at the barely scuffed soles of Rags’ new Florsheims.

“Oh, yeah. I forgot,” Rags says. “You’ve got that form you want me to sign, right?”

“Right here.”

I hand him Gerry’s “Third Party Authorization to Transfer Funds or Securities Between Accounts” but Rags puts it down without looking, says, “Let’s get this other thing straightened out first.”

He leans back, makes a tiny A-frame house out of his hands and fingertips. “Okay, just so you know, here’s what happened: I read the paper this morning and was curious about that story, so I circled it, took the paper to Vic, asked him about the flying gaff. When he’s done telling me, Vic asks how you and I are doing, if we’d made peace yet. I told him yes and no—I’m being honest here, Austin—and so Vic suggests we all go fishing together, have some fun.”

I stare back unconvinced. Rags and I have disliked each other from the second we were introduced. A strong, instinctively mutual distaste in the exchanged gaze. A male challenge or something. It’s a hard thing to put in words because the emotion feels so primal, as deep as our lizard-brain core.

“So, yeah, you’re right. It’s no coincidence,” Rags says. He shakes his head. Smiling. “The story and the fishing invitation are connected, but not because I’m planning to kill you with a flying gaff, okay?”

THIRTY

The grin on Rags' face makes my teeth grind. I don't know why he thinks this is so goddamn funny. The bastard ran me down. Could have killed me. Why shouldn't I believe he'd try to murder me again?

"Okay," I say.

"That was an accident with the car, Austin." Bastard reads minds.

"I know."

"Good. So are you up for a fishing adventure with Mr. Vic and me?"

"Sure."

"Probably next Saturday. I'll let you know."

He reaches for my papers. "Now, let's see what you have here. A transfer form?"

"Just need your signature at the bottom."

"Two million going out of the Burns' account, huh?"

"Yup."

On the wall behind Rags are three Currier & Ives prints. Bloodhounds, foxes, English riders in long red coats and black leather boots. I've heard Rags say his British ancestors were landed gentry. I think that means his great-great-grandfather was a stable boy who'd earned dibs on a corner of the horse barn.

"I see the assets are staying with us," Rags says. "Who's this Kelly Rockland?"

"Kelly's the redhead Gerry came in with, the one you talked to on the telephone."

"I thought that was his wife?"

"He always told me she was his wife, but she's not."

Rags sticks out his lower lip. "Odd. And now that he's dying, he wants to give his little sweetie a present of two million in bonds?"

"That's what he wants," I say.

Rags wouldn't be going through this if it was any other salesman. He would have signed it, passed it back. But no. It's me, Austin Carr, and he's going to study the names, addresses, and account numbers like he's eying naked girls in Playboy.

"What does his real wife think?" Rags asks.

"Doesn't have one."

His eyes are still on the form. Maybe he's trying to memorize it. "How about his kids?"

"He's leaving the bulk of his estate to them—a boy and a girl I think. Both doctors. They're not going to be upset about two million."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Rags says.

"Gerry's probably worth twenty million, all the businesses he owns. The legal fees on his estate will be a million."

"People are funny about money," Rags says. "At the very least, the kids are going to be curious."

"Let them be curious. This is what the client wants, Rags. And it's his damned money."

I shouldn't have cursed. Rags doesn't like it when I curse. Maybe it's that English aristocratic blood. A muscle in his jaw begins to flutter.

"This form isn't complete," he says. "You didn't fill out this one part properly...the reason for the transfer."

My own jaw tenses. My back teeth rub. My ass and backbone are still sore from the pounding his Jaguar gave me. I could take a swing real easy, bust up that neat little Brad Pitt jaw.

"There's a reason listed," I say.

Rags shakes his head, no. "'Estate planning' is not a complete enough reason, Carr. What's required here is for the client to tell us exactly why he wants these assets transferred."

"Estate planning is exactly enough. Ask compliance."

"I have to sign this thing, put my name and career on the line for it. Go back to Burns, get a reason, bring the new form and signature to me."

I stand up. "I'm not going to do that, Rags. There's no reason in hell to do that. This form is complete, signed, and legal. Estate planning is a lawful reason. Again I ask you to check with compliance. It's the way we've done it for seven years."

"Sit down, Carr. And you will get a new form signed, or there's no transfer."

I remain standing. "You are the world's biggest asshole, Rags. The biggest and the dumbest."

A red cloud forms beneath the skin of his neck and climbs to Rags' ears. It's so cartoonish, so vibrant a red, I expect steam to geyser from his ears.

"I've had it with you, Carr. You're fired. Right now. This fucking minute. Clean out your desk."

"Clean out your ass," I say.

I rip the transfer form from his hand and stride out of Rags' office.

My golfing buddy Mr. Vic will straighten this turkey out pronto.

THIRTY-ONE

“What the hell is it with you two?”

Straight Up Vic Bonacelli is not happy. I’ve burst into his private office waving my transfer form like it’s a winning lottery ticket. Rags right behind me, screaming, face crimson, wings flapping like a chicken.

“I’m trying to do what my client wants, this asshole won’t let me,” I say to Vic.

“He refused my direct order,” Rags says.

Vic throws his hands in the air, waving like he’s trying to stop the horses pulling a runaway stagecoach. “Stop it, both of you. Not another fucking word.”

Rags and I take simultaneous deep breaths, competing now to numb down in front of the boss. We sneak glances at each other. Jesus. We’re like nine year olds.

“Okay, one story at a time,” Vic says. “But I gotta say first, I am fucking livid. This personal thing you two have is costing me money. And I will not...stand for it one...more...fucking...day!”

Rags and I are both reluctant to answer the charges. We both nod our heads like pimply school kids before the hard-ass men’s vice principal-slash-football coach. In high school, I was in that office a lot. I have the pimply school kid look down pat.

Vic picks up his pro-balanced titanium putter, carefully examines the sleek mallet-style head and the graphite shaft. He wraps his fingers one at a time around the padded Argentine-leather grip. There’s an electric tension coming off him, like his putter’s some kind of lightning rod.

Suddenly Mr. Vic’s shoulders snap-twist, cocking the putter behind him like a baseball slugger. Then zoom, he swings. The club head misses our noses by six or eight inches, then disappears into the fiberboard wall behind Mr. Vic’s desk.

A loud crack means the club hit a two-by-four stud behind the plaster.

Ten minutes later Rags and I have both explained, depicted, and reported our individual versions. My story started out with exaggeration, then slipped into fabrication and total invention. Result being my whole chronicle was pretty much bullshit. On the other hand, Rags’ tale showed he’s pretty much figured out exactly what Kelly and I are up to: thievery. The sneaky bastard.

Vic coughs before he speaks. “Okay. First thing I gotta say. Rags, I don’t see we have much risk with this transfer. The client was in here last week, healthy and fit. This is his money, and this is what he wants us to do with it. If his children have a problem with this transfer after he dies, let them sue Kelly Rockland. Seems to me we’re covered.”

Rags shakes his head. “We’re not covered if our salesman is sleeping with Kelly Rockland. Two million is a lot to move just before a man dies. The relationship between Carr and this woman, the transfer, together they’re suggestive of a scheme. The children’s lawyers will have us by the balls. We could end up having to reimburse his children the two million dollars.”

That’s punching below the belt, Rags. Threatening Mr. Vic’s wallet.

Rags saying, “Who knows what shape this Gerry Burns character is in now? Or if he even knew what the hell he was signing?”

I shake my head. Rags has it all wrong. I signed that transfer form, not Gerry.

Rags reads my mind. “We don’t even know this signature’s legit,” he says. “It could be forged.”

I let my gaze find Vic’s. Man to man, Mr. Vic, my eyes are saying Rags’ suggestions are utter and pure bullshit.

Mr. Vic breaks off our eye contact, leans back in his red leather chair. His gaze slides to Rags, then the mahogany-trimmed ceiling, and finally to a gold-framed snapshot of his wife and children, including Carmela, Rags’ new fiancée.

Ten seconds go by and his hands slip beneath his solid black tie. Slowly, the fingers begin to scratch his belly. I’ve seen him do this a lot on the golf course, deciding which club to hit. Tough choices make Vic itchy.

The boss finally rests his forearms on the desk and stares at my nose. I give it right back because I know what’s coming, what I’ve got to say. My little speech has been carefully written and rewritten.

Vic asking me, “You sleeping with her?”

I stare at his nose. Like he taught us. Don’t blink. “No freaking way, Vic. This is my biggest account. Would I risk it over pussy? Especially the way my business is now, my situation?”

“You were in the room when Gerry Burns signed this form? You witnessed his signing?”

“The form doesn’t require or ask for a witness, but yes, I was there. I saw Gerry sign. He asked me to prepare the form last week. Also, for our files, I have a document coming in the mail that acclaims to Gerry’s soundness of mind. Signed by doctors and a judge. Gerry wants to protect Ms. Rockland from questions later. I thought a copy might protect us, too.”

“You never told me that,” Rags says. “You would have told me that.”

“Shut up,” Vic says.

I feel confident, not because I’m such a great liar—there’s no document coming—but because Mr. Vic knows better than anyone how we all make our money. By pleasing clients. At the beginning of the twentieth century, stockbrokers were called “customer’s men” with very good reason. The point being, I’m betting Vic understands that if Shore Securities refuses to carry out Gerry’s requested transfer, Vic can pretty much count on Gerry moving his money to a firm that will.

“All right,” Vic says. “Here’s my decision.”

Rags and I inch forward. I hear the tick-tick-tick of Mr. Vic’s little desk clock. My stomach’s growling for Cruz and a plate chili Colorado.

“First off, the transfer goes through. You’re suspicious, Rags, but where’s the proof? I’ve known Austin seven years. With no evidence, how can the firm refuse a client’s legitimate request?”

I sigh. Rags glares at his Florsheims.

Mr. Vic turns to me. “But Austin, you asshole, you are officially on one-month probation. Rags is your boss. You can’t talk to him, defy him like you have been. I’m not making you clean out your desk today, but if you disregard Rags’ direct orders in the next thirty days, I will physically throw you out of this office myself, got it?”

Guess I can follow orders for a month. “Can I tell him to go screw himself after thirty days?”

Vic growls. “Don’t get smart. I could change my mind about your ass having a seat here today.” He yanks on the putter but it’s still stuck in the wall. “Both of you get the hell out of my office. Make me some money.”

THIRTY-TWO

A full September moon and fast-moving clouds cast Shore Securities' parking lot alternately in shade and heatless gray light. Night birds twitter nervously. A steady wind rakes my face with the claw of winter.

I'm dressed in black slacks and a black T-shirt, black sneakers. It's three o'clock in the morning. Think I might be up to no good? Ha. That's right spy fans, meet Stockbroker Special Ops, Austin Carr. Now that some of Gerry's money is on its way to Kelly, I need to destroy the evidence—that forged transfer form.

The security code and a key to my place of business, Shore Securities, are in my possession. But to unlock the back door, walk in, and punch the code means a permanent record of someone being here. For all I know, there's a camera working.

No, my plan involves the little bathroom window that opens on the alley. The bathroom window has those slatted louvered windows our security guy told Mr. Vic are impossible to protect. Doesn't take an expert to slide the panes out one at a time without tripping the alarm. I know for a fact Mr. Vic was supposed to replace that window, call the security guy back in.

I cross Shore's never-empty parking area. Some of the guys go out drinking after work and inevitably a couple of them can't drive later, take cabs or bum a ride. I recognize Bobby G's green Lexus, and on the other side of that, Mr. Vic's Beamer wagon. Odd. The boss doesn't drink with the salesmen much, except maybe Christmas.

A stranger thing hooks my interest. Shore's back entrance is cracked open. My heart-rate climbs a notch. Dim blue light shines from inside through a narrow, seven-foot-tall drop line of unclosed door.

When I step closer, a telephone begins to ring.

The night birds halt their squawking. Maybe that phone is Shore's security company checking in, what with the back door being open like this. Alarms should be blazing.

If Mr. Vic is in there, why doesn't he answer the phone?

The steel surface of Shore's back door cools my fingertips as I pull it toward me. Inside, I make my eyes unfocused to scan for movement. The light inside comes from Shore's big sales room down the hallway.

Should I answer the phone? Or do what I came to do?

Shore's kitchen is darker than the back entry way. Takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust. When they do, I tip-toe across the eight-by-twelve-foot room and open a drawer, second one from the left.

The phone stops ringing.

A popping noise freezes my hands and my breathing. Sounded like somebody dropped something. Or maybe a light bulb snapped. The noise wasn't loud, but it was definitely human. Something man-made.

I try to finish my mission—find Shore's packet of documents being sent to storage tomorrow. In the packet, I can locate Gerry's transfer package, which should be close to the top of the stack, then pick out the Third Party Authorization to Transfer Assets form I signed Gerry's name to. I need to stick that piece of nasty evidence into the shredder.

It's too late to change my mind about helping Kelly, agreeing to accept that fifty-eight thousand dollar commission. I've done the deed. And since I'm past the point of no return, why

not add burglary to grand theft, fraud, and forgery? I'll feel a whole lot safer when that fake signature no longer exists.

Could be a copy or two around, sure, but legally copies are a different story.

I have the forged signature in my hand when a floor-shaking crash thunders in the hallway. No light bulb, this explosion. Could have come from Vic's office.

Slipping the transfer form into the shredder, I press the red button. It whirs two seconds. Gonzo forgery.

I resume tip-toes, this time to the kitchen door and peak around the corner, down the hall toward the front entrance. My heart's already out-thumping most rock n' roll tunes, but what I see on the hall floor turns the beat to double-time.

The carved oak door to Vic's suite has been knocked off its hinges, the replica of a Florentine masterpiece now lying flat across the hallway. Dragging Mr. Vic's motionless form across the fallen door is Psycho Sam Attica.

I fight the urge to vomit. Mr. Vic's broken-looking body sinks me like a lead fishing weight, holding me down. Think. I'm going to be Psycho's next victim unless I run and keep running, but Mr. Vic's always been square with me. He just saved me from Psycho. Mr. Vic could need help badly.

I step back from the doorway and pick up the telephone. The numbers glow. I press 9-1-1. When the operator asks who's calling, I give her Vic Bonacelli's name and address. In case I decide later I don't want to be here.

Describing Vic's twisted face and torso, the crash of breaking glass and pounding footsteps interrupts my conversation. What the hell's going on now?

The operator saying, "Sir?"

"Hang on a minute."

THIRTY-THREE

I peek around Shore's door jam. The pounding feet belong to Psycho Sam. He's barreling down Shore Securities' long center hallway, dragging Mr. Vic's limp body behind him like a super-sized trash bag. Beyond Sam, Mr. Vic, and the lighted sales floor, I make out two uniformed Branchtown policemen knocking down the front entrance.

Thank you, ringing telephone. My 9-1-1 call hasn't had time to register. Shore's security company must have phoned the cops when no one answered.

My heart doesn't stop hammering the inside of my ribcage, but the associated chest pain eases. My lungs suck a gasping breath.

Sam's huge feet springboard him down the hall. A police cruiser parked out front somewhere flashes red and blue lights behind Sam's super-size head and shoulders, fantasizing his appearance into a creature out of Marvel Comics.

Jesus, he's scary big and athletic. Psycho Sam, the Captain of Crazy. At first my gut told me to run. Now it says hide, fall back and let the cops try to prevent Psycho from fleeing with his captive. But damn. If there's a chance Mr. Vic's in urgent need of care, I have to stop this disappointed investor right here.

What I need is on the kitchen sideboard, and I trade the telephone in my hand for a jar of Hazelnut-flavored coffee creamer. The glass container feels full, heavy as a two-pound hammer.

Sam's too close to glance around the corner again. But judging his approach by the sound of his footsteps, the tremble of wood beneath Shore's waterproof kitchen carpet, I mentally picture whacking a falling oak tree with coffee additive, then prepare to repeat the suicidal move for real. Mr. Vic and I desperately need this glass jar inserted hard into Sam's path. Preferably about chin high.

I gasp for air like a vacuum cleaner. My heart rate's already at maximum, but now the associated chest pain returns. My timing better be optimal, my aim perfect. For additional incentive, I quickly list the numerous injuries suffered under Psycho's hands: Compacted spinal disks, flayed skin on hands and knees, a newly acquired psychological fear of wet sand.

I swing the jar of coffee additive around the kitchen corner. The collision shatters the glass, rips at my shoulder, throws up a cloud of white powder, and slams me against the opposite side of the door jam. Did I hit Psycho Sam? Or a twelve-car commuter train?

I sink to my haunches, stunned, seeing double through a snowy mist of Hazelnut dust.

THIRTY-FOUR

Psycho Sam is all the way down, face and belly turned skyward on Shore's carpet. His glassy eyes reflect the flashlight beams of the Branchtown police officers. Blood flows from multiple cuts around Sam's mouth and chin.

The cops advance carefully. After a few kicks, as if they were checking a rabid dog they'd just shot, one of the patrolmen snaps on handcuffs.

Psycho Sam woke up as the cops tried to wrestle him into a Branchtown black and white, and now, five minutes later, the poor bastards are still trying. A handful of neighbors have come outside to watch, and I don't blame them. It's quite a show. Like trying to put a feral cat in a coffee can for a return trip to the pound.

I'm standing in Shore's parking lot, watching this post-midnight circus because I told the cops I needed some fresh air. Lucky me. I'm fighting nausea and squeezing a wad of paper towels in my palm to control the bleeding.

For his encouraging and growing street audience, Sam tosses off two cops, jams his head back out the car window, fights off fists, batons, and a choke hold to make sure we all see his bloody face. He yells at me. "I'll be back, puke. To snap your chicken neck."

I stir another teaspoon of real sugar into my artificially creamed Maxwell House. Chemical fortification. I'm worried about Mr. Vic, exhausted to the point my camper sounds alluring, and Branchtown Detective Jim Mallory is so not finished sucking my energy.

"Okay, Carr, give me your bullshit story one more time," Mallory says. "Start with why you gave Vic Bonacelli's name to the 9-1-1 operator."

We're still at Shore Securities, the scene of the crime. Mallory and I plus a bald uniformed Branchtown sergeant named Towson are seated at Shore's round kitchen table finishing the pot of coffee I made. If I lean back six inches, my right hip brushes the paper shredder.

"I told 9-1-1 it was Vic being attacked," I say.

"I heard the tape, Carr. She asked who was calling, you said Vic Bonacelli."

It's almost sun-up. My eyelids feel like stone paperweights. "If I did, Jim, it was a mistake. I was looking at Vic with his head on backward. Maybe I got confused."

Mallory doesn't believe me. Screw him. Lots of people make errors in that kind of situation, can't remember details. Let him prove I did it on purpose.

"And you were dressed like a burglar because..."

My hand has been cleaned and bandaged by the EMT guys. They said I needed a couple of stitches, but I opted for the butterfly bandages. "George Clooney, I think. One of those caper movies."

"What?"

"Fashion, Detective. George Clooney wore all black in this movie a few years ago. Presto, the all-black thing was fashionable again. Me, I'm always behind, like most of the American public. Heck, I was still wearing that Sonny Crockett, white jacket, pastel T-shirt thing at the company fish fry last summer."

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Carr. But tell me that other bullshit story, the one where it’s three o’clock in the morning, you’re dressed in solid black, including black sneakers, and you decide to come by Shore Securities because...”

I slurp my coffee. “I couldn’t remember if I had an appointment in the morning or not. I live close by.” I point with my thumb toward the parking lot.

Mallory shakes his head, no. “You’re lying, Carr. You lied to me at the hospital when you said you didn’t see a weapon in Vic’s hands, and you’re lying now. You were here to burgle Shore Securities, weren’t you?”

“I have a key, Detective. Look. Right here on my chain. I even know the pass code, Vic’s birthday. Eight-twenty-one, nineteen-forty-nine. I don’t need to wear black to burgle anything in this building.”

“You and Bonacelli meet a lot at night?”

“We’ve been lovers for years.”

“I’ve heard stranger.”

“Screw you.”

Jim’s partner, Eagle Scout, glides into the room with a message for the long wild hairs in Detective Mallory’s right ear. I watch Mallory’s face as he listens, but there’s no tell in the eyes like before, no change in the line of the lips, no muscle twitch in the jaw or neck. Maybe the Eagle Scout just lined up breakfast.

When his partner pulls away, Mallory glances at me. “Your boss is doing well.”

“Mr. Vic’s alive?”

“That’s the word. Go see him if you want, but stick close to home, case I have more questions later. Maybe when I figure what you were planning to steal.”

I dump my coffee in the kitchen sink. “I am home, remember? I live in the yellow camper out back.”

THIRTY-FIVE

Straight Up Vic's in one fine mood for a guy who had his neck turned in circles like a rotisserie chicken. They've installed Mr. Vic in one of those car-wreck neck braces. His dark brown hair is combed, and his wife must have brought him clothes because he's wearing a flashy blue and gold Hawaiian shirt, black silk pajama bottoms, and a pair of deerskin slippers. The grin on his lips tells me his wife also brought him a bottle.

Or maybe he's thinking God smiled on him. Getting up close and personal with Psycho Sam Attica almost gave me religion, and Vic was already a practicing Catholic. *Something* must have been watching over him. Sam tried to break his neck and missed. That's a freaking miracle.

"They tell me it was the football training saved my life," Mr. Vic says. "The beefed-up neck. But I figure the real hero was you and that jar of hazelnut coffee creamer. Thanks, Austin."

He laughs the whole time I'm pulling up a chair.

Five minutes later Rags strolls in, Dapper Dan in a light-weight tan summer suit, white shirt, and yellow tie. He's smiling until he sees me, then his lips shrink and his eyebrows bunch. That nutty blister in his eye gets nuttier; the man truly hates me.

"What's *he* doing here?" Rags says. He's pointing at me, of course. "He's the one responsible for your injuries!"

"Take it easy," Vic says. "That crazy guy Attica put me here, not Austin."

"He's Carr's client," Rags says.

The words come spitting out, especially my name, and there's an unfamiliar shrillness in them. Uncontrolled. There is something very wrong with Tom Ragsdale today. There's saliva on his lips, and like static electricity, I feel his malice charge the air. Must be off his meds.

"Carr should control his customers," Rags says.

I'm facing the hospital room's side wall, an unadorned slate of pale yellow except for a poster-size dry-marker board hanging at eye level. Pre-painted squares list Vic's nurses, therapists, and meals for the next three days. The meat loaf with fresh peas and mashed potatoes sounds good tonight. Maybe I'll stick around.

"True," I say. "Ideally, I could keep Sam calm."

"See," Rags says. "He admits it!"

"Also ideally," I say, "Shore Securities wouldn't sponsor sales contests and pay extra commission on bonds that default in a year. I've already heard of six lawsuits."

Vic knows I'm right. He says nothing. But Rags' gaze turns shiny and hot. Out there. The saliva on his lips begins to bubble and foam. I wonder why Vic and his daughter Carmela never noticed this craziness before. To me and most other Shore salesmen, Rags' shortage of sanity has been obvious a long time.

Of course, I'm prejudiced. I hate the bastard.

Rag's right hand slides into his coat pocket. What's he have in there? Adrenalin pumps through me. His hand clears the pocket, showing us that his fingers are wrapped around a snub-nose revolver. My heart races, each pump bringing the gun into sharper focus. I can't believe he wants to shoot me.

Mr. Vic's snatch-move from the bed is quick, grabbing Rags' wrist, pushing the revolver back inside Rag's pocket. Vic has stretched out his body as well as his hand to grab Rags, making it easy now for Vic to use his weight keeping Rags' arm tied up.

I travel quickly around the bed and wrestle the gun from his fingers.

Mr. Vic makes a call, then sends me to Sea Bright to dump Rags' gun from the Highway 36 bridge. I drive over the Navasquan River, like Mr. Vic said, but I keep the gun. Might come in handy if Psycho Sam comes for me again.

When I get back to the hospital half an hour later, Rags has left. Vic is sleeping.

"Where did Rags go?" I say.

Vic rubs his eyes. "Rags is on his way to the marina. He and Carmela are going to take a vacation, use my boat to motor out to the Hamptons, spend a week or two docked at a friend's cottage."

I pull up a chair, "You think that's all Rags needs? Rest?"

"I'm hoping," Vic says. "What do you think he needs?"

I shake my head. "A lobotomy."

I'm on my way out when Detective Jim Mallory fills the doorway, motions for me to sit down. My heart picks up tempo again thanks to the bulge in my back pocket and the loud bump Rags' revolver makes hitting the chair.

"I'm going to be putting an armed guard outside this room," Mallory says. "And Carr, you can park your camper at the police station if you like. The desk sergeant will show you where. I've already spoken to him."

"Why now?" Vic says. "There's hasn't been a guard on me all morning."

Detective Mallory lifts a fist to his mouth and coughs. "Sam Attica escaped."

THIRTY-SIX

Kelly and I spread her newly delivered bonds like a giant map of the United States. State of California general obligations on the extreme left, New York City G.O.s in the upper right edge, Iowa, Kansas, and Louisiana IOUs smack in the middle.

It's a fortune in green, rose, and earth-toned parchment, each one a federally tax-free municipal bond registered in the name of Kelly Rockland. On the bid side, each piece of paper is worth between one and two hundred thousand. Two-point-two million, all total.

Broadcast before us like this, the securities pretty much conceal Kelly's antique French dining table except for a spot near the faux Canadian border where Kelly and I made room for a Sterling silver ice bucket. Neither of us wants to keep getting up for the champagne.

"How much is here?" Kelly says.

Shall I give her face value, today's bid value, or the retail price she paid when I earned a commission on the purchase side? Each number requires considerably detailed and overlapping explanation.

Kelly saying, "They sure don't look valuable. More like a collection of old deeds...just paper...one match and poof."

What a thought. "Easy, girl. That paper's worth almost two and a half-million dollars."

"I thought you said Gerry's bonds were worth two-point-three million?"

"Two and a half face, two-point-three in current market value." Two-point-two on the bid, actually, the one hundred thousand difference being my and Shore's commission.

The blank look on Kelly's face makes me grin. Or maybe it's the champagne. I'm starting to forget about Rags, Psycho Sam, and my pain-wracked body. Starting to enjoy myself. Kelly will be gone soon. I'll miss her, the great sex, the restaurants. But I'll have my fifty-eight thousand plus thirty-six percent of the one hundred thousand commission. A little salary for all my hard work.

I'll be able to pay off the ex-wife, rent a new apartment. The courts will then lift the restraining order. Beth and Ryan will once again come for weekend visits.

"Two-point-five is what the bonds are worth when they mature," I say. "Two-point-three is what you paid on the open market."

She blinks once. Twice. That dull blank look is still there. I know the gaze well. I've been selling stocks and bonds for seven years. Everybody gets that face when I try to explain why bond yields and prices move in opposite directions.

"Pretend I'm holding two bonds, Kelly, one that pays four percent interest a year and a second bond that pays five percent. Which one do you want?"

"The one that pays five percent."

"Of course. So does everyone else. That's why one bond can be worth more than another in the open market. The bonds with old interest rates fall or rise in value to match the current yield market."

Kelly offers me her champagne glass for a refill. "I get it. So Gerry has at least some bonds in the portfolio whose interest rates are below market?"

"You catch on fast."

Her smile crunches up her nose. "Oh, I still have a few questions."

She opens another bottle of Bollinger, saying, "So if these bonds are registered to me, why won't Gerry's kids track me down and serve me with an injunction? It doesn't matter where I am, right, the bank that collects and mails the bond interest is in the United States?"

I love the shiny little bubbles in my champagne. But they are not as bright as Kelly. "I told you there are things you have to do in Mexico."

The champagne is dwindling. So are my inhibitions. We're leaning against the dining room table and I'm staring at Kelly's breasts, the gentle curve of her sculptured thigh. My left hand feels the parchment, the rough texture. I have an idea brewing and the mental image just produced a bicycle pump in my pants.

"Explain," she says.

I brush the bicycle pump against Kelly's leg. Show her how I feel. "From Vera Cruz, or wherever you end up, you fly to Mexico City and put the bonds up as collateral for a loan. Use the subsidiary of an American bank. It's easier. You'll only get about sixty-five, seventy percent of the current value, but that loan money you can hide, make clean as a whistle."

"How?"

"I'll do some checking for you. Probably through a numbered bank account in Caymans, or Panama. They've got more secrecy now than the Swiss."

I touch her shoulders, she yields, and I ease her down on top of the bonds. Can't take it anymore. I yank at her panty hose. The bicycle pump will not wait.

"But I need two million," Kelly says, "not less than one-point-five."

Quick with numbers, this redhead. She did the seventy percent of two-point-three million in her head.

"You have all that jewelry, the cash you gave me but never invested."

I'm losing interest in small talk. I mean, wow, what a meal has been placed on my table. Everything I ever wanted—a fortune in bonds and a willing, half-naked redheaded woman—spread out before me.

The symbolism is staggering, distracting even. On one level I feel so shallow. Yet my body and mind's reaction is undeniable. Instinctive. Sex and abundant sustenance is what nature taught men to seek and acquire.

Kelly groans as I push inside her.

And look, there's that Renoir she loves, the sunny summer street scene, *Pont Neuf*, hanging on the wall behind her. All those rich happy people, strolling in the sunshine. The essence of light on a summer day.

THIRTY-SEVEN

I wake up in bed, my body aching. Each ring of a telephone stings my champagne ravaged head like a swarm of angry hornets. But I'm not answering. Ain't my job.

The redhead picks up. "This is Kelly Burns."

I open my eyes. An orange sky blossoms outside Kelly's bedroom window. She's sitting on the bed, tying a black silk dressing gown at her waist. The place smells like a Nevada whorehouse. Sex, sweat, and perfume.

"Who?" she says.

Her fingers tickle the air between us, a goofy little wave to welcome me to the land of the living, or maybe get my attention. I guess the person on the phone is telling her something I'd find interesting.

"They didn't let him inside, did they?" She listens and nods. "That's good. Can you hold on one second? What? No, wait, I'll be right back."

She cups the receiver with her free palm. "Your sales manager Tom Ragsdale tried to visit Gerry at the hospice this evening."

Rags? On the loose? I thought Vic sent him to the Hamptons. "Ragsdale is crazy suspicious of the bond transfer," I say. "He probably wants to ask Gerry if he actually signed a form to give you two million in bonds. They didn't let Ragsdale in to see him, did they?"

Kelly's not listening to me anymore.

"I'm sorry," she says, "could you repeat that? You were talking about that man, Ragsdale, how he—"

She's hearing more disturbing news. Her chin slides from grim to slack. Her shoulders droop with a hundred pounds of new luggage.

"Oh," she says. Her bottom lip quivers like strawberry Jell-O. "You're sure? I don't understand why you would tell me about a visitor before—"

She sniffs. "All right. Okay. Shall I come by there now? Tomorrow? Fine."

She slips the telephone receiver back in its ergonomic cradle. Staring at her hand, she sighs.

"It's over," she says. "Gerry died twenty minutes ago."

It takes hours, more sex and another nap, but eventually I convince Kelly we need food and drink. A Clooney's martini lunch may be just the thing for our champagne hangovers.

We're on Broad Street, maybe two, three miles from the condo, when I realize the same car followed us through successive left turns. It's not an impossible coincidence, but I don't like taking chances. The memory of Psycho Sam's manual spinal tap is forever imprinted on my brain stem.

I make a quick right, another right, then another and another right back onto Broad. I pull over, wait to see if the same car—an old Chevy—shows up following us.

I count one, two, three...the same car swings around the corner. I was right. Kelly and I are being followed by an antique Chevy Impala. A '61 or '62, I think. God, I always wanted one of those.

When the old Impala passes, I gun Kelly's Mercedes away from the curb, hang a U-turn. Four blocks down the next side street is the Branchtown police department.

I pull in, ignore the empty parking spaces, and screech to a sliding stop near the big cement planter protecting the station's glass facade. Branchtown P.D. thinks their headquarters ranks high on the target list for terrorists.

My quick move into the cop station makes the old Chevy disappear, but not before I get a good look at the driver. It's Branchtown Blackie's friend, the guy in gold chains and a goatee who held Luis's arm that night in the restaurant's parking lot. This time he's all by himself. Wonder if he knows what happened to his pal Blackie. More important, why the hell is he following me?

The cops in the station house think I'm drunk. They consider charging me with illegal parking and reckless driving, impounding Kelly's Mercedes. I offer to take a sobriety test, and while we're waiting for a decision on that, I use Kelly's cellphone to call Luis's Mexican Grill.

"*Hola*," an unfamiliar voice says.

"Is Luis there? This is Austin Carr."

"No Luis today. The restaurant is not open."

"Could I leave a message? He needs to call Austin Carr as soon as possible."

"No *habla* English."

"Sure you do. Go get a pencil. Write down my name and phone number."

"Okay."

There's some rummaging in the background. A drawer opens and shuts. I hear a piece of paper being torn.

"Shoot," he says.

"A-U-S-T-I-N. 732-555-4345. Got it?"

"*Si. Nombre es Austeen. Numero, seite, tres—*"

I gave him my work number. The only number I've got. "Have Luis call me, right?"

"*Si. Luis call when he comes back from Mexico.*"

"Mexico? When's he going to Mexico?"

"He leave yesterday."

I hear laughing and the line goes dead. Was that a joke? Luis with some fake accent? A friend of his? I call back but no one picks up this time. I let it ring twenty-two times, but the dick won't answer.

Walking back to the police station bench, I wonder again why Blackie's bearded friend is following me. How did he find me to follow me?

I hope Luis isn't really in Mexico. I need his help.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Early the next morning, splintering wood tugs my mind from a heavy sleep. I open my eyes in Kelly's bed, heart thumping, the calm gray light a sharp contrast to the demolition noises coming from the condo's entrance.

I throw off Kelly's flowered comforter. What the hell is chasing me now? The bearded guy who followed us last night in the classic Impala? Rags' one-man hit squad? The Werewolf of London?

The redhead stirs and groans, stretches her arms. Where the hell are my shorts? If this is Psycho Sam, I'm burnt toast. I bunny hop toward the bedroom doorway still pulling on my plaid cotton boxers, then freeze at the big noise rushing me in the dark. A buffalo stampede?

Whack. I'm flattened by an army of dark-clad soldiers in helmets, bullet-proof vests, and plastic windbreakers. The first men through the doorway have their guns drawn. Maybe I'm double-parked.

Lights snap on. As the horde stomps over, around, and directly through me, I see the backs of their windbreakers have the words TREASURY AGENT or FBI or U.S. MARSHALL stenciled in yellow.

What the hell is happening?

One of the buffaloes sits on my chest, pokes a gun in my eye. "Don't move, asshole."

The hotel bedroom smells of cigarettes and freshly starched sheets. The furniture's new but flimsy, all materials coarse to the touch. The landscapes on the off-white walls were painted with sponges on an assembly line.

Unfamiliar voices drift in from the next room. I sit up on the edge of the bed when a man walks in, shows me his badge and federal identification.

"Special Agent Tomlin, U.S. Treasury," he says.

I keep my gaze focused on Tomlin's slow gray eyes. He's a short, squat kind of fifty-something cop. Looks more like a part-time chef. Both eyelids droop toward the lobes of his softball-sized ears. I have to hear a few sentences come out of his mouth before concluding he isn't a half-wit.

"So your name's Carr, huh?" he says.

"Austin Carr. I'm Gerry and Kelly's stockbroker."

After an hour of sitting side-by-side with Kelly on her sofa while they tore up her condo, bagged all kinds of stuff including the fake Renoir, the redhead and I were separated. I haven't seen her since. All I know for sure, they threw me in a car, brought me to this hotel room.

Tomlin seems to be in charge of several different squads of law enforcement personnel. Some kind of federal task force?

Tomlin saying, "Gerry's stockbroker, huh? That's the extent of your relationship? That's all you are?"

I shrug. "I'm a father with two kids. A three handicap golfer."

Tomlin grunts. "Bully for you. How long have you been Burns' broker?"

"Four or five years."

"How long have you known he's a crook?"

"I don't."

"Aiding and abetting criminals makes you an accessory, a felon like him."

"I'm not a felon, and as far as I know, Gerry's not either. As a matter of fact, Gerry's not much of anything anymore."

Tomlin's forehead sprouts horizontal lines. "What do you mean?"

"Gerry died last night."

Special Agent Tomlin stands up and moves purposefully to the bedroom doorway. He motions for someone down the hall to come to him. While he's waiting, he turns again to me. "Who told you Burns is dead?"

"Kelly. I was with her when the hospice called."

"His wife?"

"The redhead. But they're not married. She's just his girlfriend."

Tomlin stares at me until he's joined in the doorway by a very tanned young man with a blond mane, square shoulders, two bright red pimples on his protruding chin. Looks like the college surfing champion of southern California.

"Remember the name of that hospice?" Tomlin says.

"No. But I've been there," I say. "It's one of those old English Tudor apartment houses on West Ridge Road in Branchtown, the ones they fix up as office buildings, dentists offices. I remember the hospice's address was in the two-hundred block."

Kelly's sitting, waiting for me in the motel lobby. I can tell from her streaked makeup she's been crying. Can't say I blame her. Held and questioned for six hours. If she got the same treatment as me, nothing to eat or drink except Branchtown's sulfuric tap water.

"I called a cab," she says. "I have to go back to the condo." She sniffs. "You don't have to come if you don't want to."

I drop beside her, slip my arm around her shoulders. Feeling more for Kelly than I expected. I hope it's just compassion and sympathy. Have to stay focused on getting my kids back. "I'm sticking with you, Toots."

Kelly leans against my shoulder. "They're giving me one hour at the condo to pack a suitcase. Just clothes and toiletries. None of my jewelry or pretty clothes. The artwork."

"Jesus. Did they tell you what's going on? I mean what the hell did Gerry do?"

"They said he's a wild dog or something. A smuggler of illegal immigrants."

"A coyote?"

"That's it. They also said none of his businesses have paid any withholding taxes for two years, that he embezzled money from every one of them."

Uh, oh. That means IRS liens on everything.

In case there are mikes around I don't see, I whisper in Kelly's ear. "Where are your new bonds? Did they confiscate them?"

She forces a smile. "I don't think so. Not unless they impounded your camper."

THIRTY-NINE

The shade under this two-hundred-year-old oak tree offers cool relief from late September's emergent sun. Eight or nine stories high, the monstrous pin oak's blazing yellowing canopy dominates Holy Trinity's graveyard, stretching seventy-five feet from the stone chapel to the white picket fence that runs north and south along the church's pre-Civil War property line.

I've heard of the tree's legend, including the story of a wrongly accused horse thief, hanged from one of the oak's sturdy branches, whose ghostly rides are still reported in the local press.

And personally, now that I've actually wandered in close, let the tree's long, craggy arms embrace me, I have to say this sucker gives me the creeps. All these graves feeding the tree's roots for two hundred years? No wonder the monster's fat and happy.

Kelly's been chatting up the Episcopal priest, Father Paul, but she joins me and two dozen other guests now under Branchtown's infamous oak, Kelly's two-inch black heels clicking on the cemetery's brick walkway.

The redhead looks nifty as the widow. She's wearing a silk-trimmed black skirt with matching coat, and a string of natural pearls inside a scooped-neck, charcoal silk blouse. Took Kelly three hours to bathe and dress in our hotel this morning. Took one hour alone to pin the saucer-shaped black felt hat on her head.

"Father Paul said the ceremony will start in five minutes," she says.

I kiss her cheek. Oh, boy. Five more minutes, we can get started, get finished, get the hell out of here. I hate graveyards anyway, but this one's something special because of the oak. I can damn near feel the bastard waiting for Gerry's body, the blood-sucker's roots tingling with anticipation for the supply of fresh meat.

Hell, I can feel this flesh eater waiting for all of us.

Father Paul coughs to silence the crowd, then begins his readings. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid."

I'd be afraid of this oak tree, if I were you, Father, priests having to walk around this graveyard every day, your feet and legs exposed to those gnarly underground siphons. Blood suckers waiting for their chance.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff thy comfort me."

The valley of the shadow of death? Isn't that where I was standing before, under the sinister branches of that monster oak?

Kelly squeezes my hand. She touches a forefinger to her lips, telling me to hush. Wow. Was I mumbling out loud? Sweet Jesus. All this craziness is rubbing off on my normally rational thought processes.

Well, almost rational. Forging Gerry's name on that transfer form, going for Kelly's fifty-eight thousand dollar bribe probably wasn't my brightest moment. Depends if I get away with it, I guess.

Father Paul is hurrying through his service. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Since Gerry's about to become the latest entree on this oak's churchyard buffet, I'm not sure about the house of the Lord getting any, Father. A much bigger piece of the pie, so to speak, will be dwelling in the bark, leaves, and branches of this non-vegetarian vegetable.

Come on, Father Paul, hurry up. Kelly's looking at me like I'm mumbling out loud again. These people may be gathered for Gerry Burns' last rites, but this graveyard party's starting to feel like *my* funeral.

"Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it."

We all recite the Lord's Prayer. When that's over, Father Paul gives a nod. Kelly and Gerry's two grown children pick roses from the supply provided, toss one each on the coffin, then join the kids' spouses and children. The family seems very friendly with Kelly.

My feet find an out-of-the-way patch of plastic grass, and I check faces as people pass. Some drop a rose on Gerry's coffin, others don't. There's a small contingent of mourners not coming down from the shade of that oak tree. A dozen or so men...

Those guys in the sunglasses look familiar. That one beefy dude's wearing a plastic cord underneath his collar and an ear piece. The Feds? Hell yes, there's Special Agent Tomlin.

My palms grow clammy.

What is this? A cop convention? Just to the left of Tomlin, I see Detective Mallory of the Branchtown force and the Eagle Scout that always—

Oh. My. God.

It's Rags. Back up under the blood-sucking oak tree, a camera around his neck. He's supposed to be sailing for the Hamptons on Mr. Vic's Triple-A, but instead he tried to visit Burns at the hospice, and now he's sneaking into Gerry's funeral, still trying to prove my bond transfer was wrong. Maybe catch me and Kelly in a lip-lock with the camera.

I especially hate it that Rags is one-hundred-percent correct about the bond transfer. First time Rags has been right about anything since he weaseled the sales manager's job.

Look at that. This whole scene is surreal. Behind Rags, checking out Kelly and Gerry's kids, there's Blackie's pal, the guy who used to have a goatee. He's clean shaven now but I recognize the gold chains. What the hell reason could he have for being here? Following us before? Revenge for Blackie's death? Or just a desire to finish that fight with me and Luis?

It's a bad dream, this funeral. There's no logic. I can't make sense of it. Like there's some big joke everybody knows but me.

Maybe I could pitch this tale to Hollywood as a new reality TV show. Which villain will successfully destroy Austin Carr under the spreading arms of this vampire oak tree? Rags? Blackie's pal? The cops? Hell, Psycho Sam must be around here, too. Somewhere.

In my proposal, I'll call the show *Roots of Evil*.

FORTY

The monster oak can't follow, so the nightmarish quality of Gerry's burial stays behind when we leave the graveyard. Thank God. Unfortunately, the ugly realities—Tomlin, Mallory, Rags, and Blackie's pal who used to wear a goatee—can and do tail us out of the parking lot.

Our limousine leads a longer procession away from Holy Trinity's churchyard than we did arriving. The one piece of good news: I haven't seen Psycho Sam's dirty Mariner SUV.

"Where's the driver taking us?" I say. "Back to the hotel?"

"Unless you wanted to go for a drink," Kelly says.

I shake my head, no. "It's just that we have company." I nod my head toward the back window.

I watch Kelly turn to look. A feeling comes out of nowhere, some crazy response to stress and fear, I guess. I want to kiss the nape of Kelly's perfumed neck. Right where the wispy red hairs grow wild and long.

"Who's following us?" she says.

"The Feds from last night, that Branchtown Detective, Jim Mallory. And I think I saw my sales manager's Jaguar back there as well."

"All three of them? Why?"

"Who knows? And there's actually a fourth car behind that, I think. I was in a fist fight with some guys last week at Luis's Mexican Grill. One of them—"

Kelly saying, "I don't care about your fights, your sales manager, or that hump local sheriff. But I sure as hell don't want that bastard Tomlin getting his hands on my bonds."

I like the bonds used to be Gerry's, but now they're Kelly's. She stole them fair and square. Finders keepers, losers weepers. Possession is nine-tenths of the law. What's mine is mine, what's yours is ours. People have a million excuses for crime.

"Did you put those puppies in the hotel safe?" I ask.

"They're in the trunk. The green airline carry-on."

"And my money?"

"It's in the carry-on with the bonds," Kelly says. "Fifty-eight thousand, cash."

I take a long breath. It's going to be lots of fun seeing my ex-wife's happy face when I pay her what I owe. It's going to be positively wonderful to play again with my children. "We should get our stuff from the hotel, then lose these cops."

"Or just buy new clothes in Mexico," she says. She grins at me. "I'm think I'm going to miss having a hot tub right in our room."

I pat her arm. Strange priorities, this redhead. Me, I'm worried about the Feds pulling us over, finding the bonds and the money, locking us up. "You're not leaving town until tomorrow, right?" I ask.

"Eight-thirty in the morning."

"Do you want to check in to another hotel? I guess you could stay with me in the camper. It's smelly, but cozy."

"My stewardess friend Betty lives near the airport. I've made arrangements to stay with her. She said there's plenty of room for you, too."

Do I need another night of hot sex? "Or I could drop you off. Maybe we should say our goodbyes tonight."

The redhead shows me a world-class pout. Her lower lip must be sticking out two inches. “It’s our last night. I wanted another chance at talking you into coming to Vera Cruz with me.”

Now she loses the pout, gives me the full-boat Kelly smile, wrinkles around the nose. “It’s not too late, you know.”

I knew this was coming. Funny thing is, right now some little voice inside is saying yes, go with her. I guess a small piece of me feels like running away.

Bet I know which piece.

I sigh out loud. Would my kids be better off in the long run if I wasn’t around, confusing them about “normal” and “broken” families? Struggling with this divorced father crap the way I do can’t be a good example for Ryan. Beth either.

What crap? “I can’t leave my kids, Toots. We’ve been over this.”

“Just a week. Come with me, stay five or six days even, then I’ll put you back on a plane myself, send you home to Ryan and Beth.”

Maybe the time to disappoint her would be after I put that fifty-eight thou in my pocket. “Let’s ditch these cops, then we’ll talk about it.”

The redhead’s still grinning at me. Waiting, confident. Knowing I’m going to fix this police tail like I’ve fixed everything else—the cash, the safe, the transfer, the follow-up details in Mexico.

The only thing I can’t fix is me.

“Let me have your cellphone,” I say.

FORTY-ONE

We brake to a stop. Kelly hands the limo driver five one hundred dollar bills for the day's work. The money's crisp and new, and I watch the driver's ruddy thick fingers encircle the cash with a certain tenderness. I understand. I haven't had my hands on that much money since Susan won the attachment on my paychecks.

Special Agent Tomlin's black Chevy Suburban slides to the curb a hundred yards behind us. I see Rags' Jag and the Chevy Impala belonging to Mr. Former Goatee behind Tomlin. Mallory's Crown Victoria must be stuck at a light.

I tell the chauffeur how we want to play it and he pops the trunk for me. Kelly and I climb leisurely into the sunshine. I take my time lifting the green carry-on, too. Oh, boy, does it feel heavy.

On a carefully coded, prearranged queue, both Kelly and I will drop the relaxed attitude and execute Plan A. Run like hell. I've got the suitcase in one hand, the redhead in the other.

"Now," I say.

We scurry up concrete steps into a theater lobby. It's Saturday afternoon. The place is hopping with kids at matinees, boys and girls wrestling, giggling, and running circles around two dozen stressed-looking adults.

The smell of buttery popcorn tempts my nose. We hurry by movie posters on the wall, six-by-four-foot teasers for upcoming big-screen attractions. Space ships. Super heroes. Sexy women. Lots of guns and pointy things. A child wails down the dark hall of viewing rooms.

At the back of the lobby, Kelly and I push through red-trimmed glass doors and dump the theater crowd for the food court. The smell of pizza, burgers, and soy sauce blends into a heady, hunger-producing cloud.

I chose the theater lobby as our starting point because it serves as an entrance to Seaside County's largest mall.

I use the cellphone once more deep inside the shopping center. Five minutes, the man tells me.

Damn. Kelly and I have to kill more time without getting spotted. I saw Special Agent Tomlin once, when he and three associates first pushed through the red trimmed glass doors and looked for us in the food court. The redhead and I were in the middle of a crowd, just leaving the food area, and I don't think Tomlin or his men could have seen us, Federal agents or not.

However, since there are only four ways out of that food court, I figure Tomlin and his men split up, took one route each, and whichever one was assigned to the lucky trail—past the Verizon store, then left toward the restaurants—well, that guy is no more than ninety seconds, two minutes behind us. We've got to keep moving, and we have to stay out of open areas where he might see us.

God knows where Rags, Mallory, and Mr. Former Goatee are. Probably following Tomlin.

I pull Kelly and the green carry-on through as many crowded spaces as possible, including two wide-open restaurants and a noisy bar with the Mets game blasting. The Yankees must have been rained out.

Tomlin or his man will have to check every face in these crowds before moving on. I figure each busy establishment gives us an extra sixty seconds.

I get an idea. We're right where I wanted to be, at the mall's north entrance, near a Mexican joint I tried once but never went back because the food sucked. But instead of walking outside, looking for the taxi I called, I pull Kelly inside the Go Gonzales restaurant.

A young woman of high school age offers to seat us. I say great, could we have something close to the kitchen.

"Excuse me?"

"The kitchen. We love the smells."

The hostess throws me an "Okee-dokee, dummy" look, grabs two menus, and heads off through a rather surprisingly loaded restaurant. Geez, look at all the people eating this crap. What the hell do New Jersey people know about chili Colorado and carnitas?

At our table, I pretend to fuss with the suitcase, Kelly with her purse. Eventually the hostess leaves. We are not here to eat. I nod to the redhead and we push through stainless steel saloon doors into a hot kitchen. Must be eight, ten guys running around like crazy in here, all with towels on their heads, rags tied around their wrists. They're too busy to show us anything but curious glances.

I spot the back screen door and push Kelly toward it, then all the way outside. Through the open door, I can see the same giant circular mall parking lot in which we left the limo. Due to our lengthy walk through the shopping center, however, we're now on the opposite side, maybe half, three-quarters of a mile away from the theater.

I walk through the door behind Kelly, but the suitcase catches on a thick rubber threshold, and I have to stop, turn, and free it. Sure hope that taxi I called is where I told him to be. Five minutes should be up.

The redhead screams.

I look up and gasp. It's Psycho Sam. He's got Kelly by the neck.

FORTY-TWO

When the nut job sees me, Psycho Sam flings Kelly to the pavement like a ketchup-stained napkin. The redhead crumples on the asphalt, limp and motionless. My heart catches, then warps to fast forward. Did he break her neck?

The redhead groans, pushes up on one hand. Thank God. She sits, coughs, lifts a hand to her throat. I know she'll be okay when she begins to sniffle.

Psycho Sam's coming at me like a guy who used to play football for Notre Dame. Arms wide, weight evenly distributed so he's balanced and ready to spring whichever way I run.

Sorry, Sam. I'm not running this time.

I snap Rags' Smith & Wesson out of my inside coat pocket and point it at the big man's nose. I'm so pissed what he's done to Kelly, I almost pull the trigger. Almost. I don't think I'd have much trouble convincing a jury I thought my life was in danger.

"Think that pea-shooter's gonna stop me?"

"One in the head, one in the heart might slow you down."

"You ain't good enough to hit my heart, and my brain's even smaller than that. Ha, ha, ha."

Actually, Sam might have a point. Not concerning the size of his organs, but my ability to prevent his advance. Thirty-eights aren't really known for their major stopping power, and this three-hundred-pound maniac might need more caliber than average. Like a Cruise missile.

How did Mr. Vic talk him down that day? All Mr. Vic had was a .38.

Don't remember. But I do remember what Psycho Sam's gorilla-like hands feel like around my throat. I make an impulsive and startling decision. Even I'm surprised when words of surrender flow from my mouth.

"No need for violence, Sam. I've got your money."

He frowns. Sam's chest is maybe five feet from mine. Big as a barn door. Hell, I probably could shoot him in the heart from here. But am I really going to kill this man—any man—for fifty-eight thousand dollars? Money that's not even mine?

My finger eases off the trigger.

"Did you say you got my money?" Sam asks. "All fifty thousand?"

"In the green suitcase. Every dollar."

"Let's see," he says.

"I can't believe you gave that man your money," Kelly says.

"Me either."

The taxi showed up as we were unzipping the suitcase. We tossed Sam's money on the ground, had the taxi driver bring us to my camper, and now Kelly's nestled in beside me in the front seat. She looks wildly out of place in her funeral dress and jacket, that hat and hair-do. We're on our way to her friend's house near the airport.

"Why did you give him the extra eight thousand?" Kelly says. "You said he only lost fifty."

"Interest. Mental anguish. I wasn't going to argue at that point. He wanted to count."

"Just so you know, I don't have that much cash left," Kelly says. "I can't give you any more, at least now."

“It’s better this way. I didn’t have to kill anybody, and we’re both still alive. He was absolutely right, you know. There’s no guarantee a couple of bullets would have stopped Psycho Sam.”

“I guess I could send you some money from Mexico,” she says.

I take Kelly’s directions and turn off the Jersey Turnpike one exit south of Liberty Newark airport and head east into an industrial area of rusted buildings and abandoned dock property. We’re approximately forty-five miles north of Branchtown, across the Hudson River from New York City.

“Better yet,” she says, “I’ll pay you another fifty-eight thousand if you come to Mexico with me.”

Now there’s an offer. My mind starts working on that, and a question just pops out before I consider all the ramifications. “How long would I have to stay?”

Oops. That didn’t come out right. The words play harsh even on my stockbroker’s ears.

“Forget it,” she says.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“No problem.”

We spend the rest of the drive together in silence. I don’t mind. I’ve got a lot to think about. Sure, I’m pissed about losing the money. My plans of getting back my visiting rights have been returned to the dream category. I’ve just lied, cheated, and committed forgery for absolutely nothing—except for the thirty-six thousand dollar commission I earned on Kelly’s bonds. It’s a good start, but not enough.

The redhead’s leaving town and I’ll be alone again, living in a camper, trying to sell stocks and bonds, Wacko Rags for a sales manager. Sneaking around oak trees and ionic columns to see my kids.

That fifty-eight thousand would have changed my life.

Maybe I should have pulled the trigger.

FORTY-THREE

I make another turn Kelly points out and we go from dilapidated tin sheds and rusty warehouses into a slick new development near Newark Bay. Within sight of the Statue of Liberty, surrounded by abandoned New Jersey ship docks and broken, sinking cranes, some sharpie built luxury condominiums around a first-class boat marina.

The one-acre parking lot is full of Mercedes, BMWs, Jaguars, and Audis. Riding in such automobiles, these condos are ten minutes from the Holland Tunnel and Manhattan, Newark-Liberty International Airport, and I-95, the New Jersey Turnpike. Water access to New York's Upper Bay gives boat owners the Atlantic Ocean and, if your boat is big enough, the rest of the world.

Can't imagine what these units cost. With a boat slip, probably five to ten million for a bachelor.

I yank down Kelly's green suitcase and lock up the camper. I don't want someone stealing my NY Giant helmet. Kelly's looking for something in her purse, so I start off on my own, walking toward the condominium's common area, a two-story glass lobby that connects two, ten-story towers. Half a dozen brass sculptures and a raised platform with two security guards dominate the open lobby.

Kelly saying, "Not that way. Over there." Pointing toward the marina.

"Your friend lives on a boat?" I say.

The redhead waits for me. "A friend of hers owns the condo and the slip. Wait until you see the guy's boat. A fifty-foot Hatteras, I think she said."

She seems to be getting over our tiff.

To my right, the sinking sun dips behind a bank of broken clouds, the sunset turning everything red and gold. A motor yacht hums back into the marina after a day of fishing. Poles line up like antennae in a rack near the yacht's stern.

Kelly leads me down a spiffy planked dock with brass fittings and rope hand rails, past expensive yacht after super-expensive yacht. Hatteras, Grand Banks, Chris-Craft. Some of these babies cost millions.

The dock squeaks under my weight. The air tastes of salt and damp wood. Maybe a hint of rust.

The boat Kelly's friend occupies looks like a working fishing charter. It sports a flying bridge, a tuna tower above that, and a fighting chair bolted to a plate on the main deck. I don't see any rods, but there's plenty of racks to hold them upright.

A black-headed seagull turns a circle above me. The same breeze the bird rides suddenly gusts hard off the water, cooling my face.

Kelly shouts. "Betty? It's us. Permission to come aboard?"

The redhead and I are bumping hips on the dock, waiting for Betty. My arm's sore from pulling Kelly's damn suitcase around all afternoon, but I'm looking forward to sitting down, maybe having a drink.

I'm also considering the offer Kelly made about staying with her one last night. Not to mention the fifty-eight grand proposal if I go with her tomorrow morning. I can't ask again, of course, but I really do wonder how long I'd have to stay in Mexico. Would she really give up all

that cash for a week's stud service? She's certainly got the loot now to give away, but I'm guessing a week wouldn't qualify for the full fifty-eight thousand.

Kelly tugs on my arm. "Come on. I think we can subvert the convention. Betty must be taking a shower or something."

Kelly slips off her shoes and we climb a box step-up over the railing onto the main deck. The boat looked sharp from the dock, but on deck...wow. What a clean machine. Teakwood everywhere. Brass and chrome polished to a mirror shine. Inside the open flying bridge, I can see enough electronic equipment to monitor a strike on Iran.

"Betty? We're here," the redhead says. She's holding her shoes like you would a kitten, cradled against her bosom.

Still no word from Betty.

Kelly heads down a stairway under the main bridge. I follow her down, carrying the suitcase now so I don't scuff this puppy's perfect polished staircase.

At the foot of the stairs, in the main cabin, I'm struck again by the immaculate, hand-crafted nature of expensive yachts. Such detail. Like sticking your head inside one of those restored luxury automobiles at a car show. Only the highest quality materials. Perfectly clean and new.

I follow Kelly between two lemon-colored sofas. They run length-wise down the cabin and obviously convert to bunks. At the front of the low-ceiling room, the bow of the ship, a narrow windshield, and a skylight let in the sun. A refrigerator, stove, and counter sit directly under the skylight. Between the mini-kitchen and the sofas is a round steel table covered with maps.

Kelly walks all the way to the stove.

I follow to the table, past a slim doorway at the foot of the bunks. A head, I assume.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up as the slim door opens behind me. Must be Betty, but my heart's beating like a flat tire as I spin to see.

"*Buenos tardes*," Luis says.

The breath catches in my throat. My favorite bartender is standing between me and the exit. He's not smiling, and neither is the large-bore, semiautomatic weapon in his right hand. Looks like an old government-issue Colt .45. The muzzle points directly at my chest.

FORTY-FOUR

Kelly either can't stand or can't afford to witness whatever's going to happen now. The lying little slut takes Rags' .38 from my coat, hands it to Luis, then scoots past us, jogs up the stairs. Her stocking feet are the last I see of my redheaded Jezebel.

My mind wants to run through various explanations—Luis is playing a joke, Luis is stealing the bonds, Luis and Kelly are lovers—but the black semiautomatic aimed at my chest restricts my creative thinking. Not to mention normal breathing rhythms. Nothing really makes sense. Just like at the funeral, there has to be some big goddamn joke everybody's heard but me.

"Luis. What's going on?"

He stares sadly at me, and I figure he's probably going to shoot. Why else would he aim a weapon at me? I've seen Luis's strength, his quickness. If my favorite bartender wanted me to sit, stand, bark, or roll over, all he has to do is ask.

"*Senor Burns*' bonds and the money are in the suitcase?" he says.

Senor Burns' bonds? Not the *senora*'s? Uh, oh. Slowly, the curtains begin to part. It's not a big joke that everybody's in on but me. It's a big show.

"The bonds are in the suitcase," I say. "The cash I gave away."

Something clicks inside my slow-working rusty brain. Barely audible, like the last tumbler on a combination lock. That sign I noticed when I snuck inside Luis's restaurant that night, the one I thought looked "vaguely familiar" while Luis was in the basement with Blackie? The sign by the staircase that said, "Maria's?"

"Luis's Mexican Grill used to be called 'Maria's'?" I ask.

He nods. Oh, what the hell is wrong with me? What a numb nuts. Too much drinking, I guess. Too many bumps on the head inside my camper. How could I not remember that name before now? Sweet Jesus. "Maria's" was listed as one of Gerry's restaurants in that New Jersey state corporations file I checked out on the internet.

"You work for Gerry Burns?" I say.

He nods again.

At least Luis is being cooperative. And I'm very curious. Not that Luis's semiautomatic doesn't put a little edge on my mood, but maybe I'm getting used to guns and bad guys threatening me. And like I said, I'm curious.

"I take it Gerry's not really dead?"

My answer comes from above.

"Not by a long shot," Gerry says.

My Jersey-born Mexican cowboy hops down the stairs in a baby blue cowboy shirt, black jeans, and his Mexican silver and turquoise belt buckle, a picture of fat-boy health. Tanned, trimmer than I remember, and bright-eyed. "Surprised to see me?"

I'm pretty much speechless.

"Nothing to say?" Gerry says. "Ha. That's a fucking first."

He lays a steady hand on Luis's shoulder. A warm and friendly touch, an obvious by-product of many years working together. Friendship. Teamwork. Man, oh, man. I think the designation "my favorite bartender" must change.

"We need to get this tub moving," Gerry says to Luis. "Restrain our guest, then come up top and help me shove off. I'll get the diesels running."

My monster scrambles up the stairway like a ten-year-old. Saying Gerry's in good shape underestimates his nimbleness. The old man is spry as a big horn sheep. Oh, man, have I been had.

"Lay down on this bunk," Luis says. "On your stomach, please, with your hands placed behind."

As I obey his commands, Luis reaches for a new roll of silver duct tape from the map table and tears at the plastic wrapping. Deep below, mighty diesel engines fire to life. The vibrations rattle each disk in my spine. Cold sweat pops out on my neck and shoulders. Some scaredy-cat's heartbeat drums inside my ears.

Austin Carr, you stupid, mother-humping, egotistical, brain-numb jerk.

Here I am on this damn bunk, wrists and ankles wrapped tight in that silver tape. We've pulled away from the dock and the boat's bow is beginning to rise and fall against the Upper New York Bay's current.

Left to its own entertainment, my mind addresses an imaginary audience: Good evening, folks. Allow me to introduce Austin Carr, this year's winner of the Golden Dickhead Award. Presented, as always, to that individual making the biggest fool of himself by Thinking With His Penis.

I really do deserve some kind of prize. How could I fall for that redheaded bitch's bullshit? I can see her green eyes now, fondly gazing into mine, tearing up over Gerry's faked death. Those trembling lips when she kissed me. Can you believe I honestly thought she'd fallen for the famous, full-boat Carr grin?

A touch of irony there, right? A "full-boat" grin? I have a strong hunch this boat isn't going to be full long. Soon as they get past the Statue of Liberty, I'll probably get dumped over the side along with the rest of this ship's in-marina waste.

I can't get over how I fell for that redhead's crap. Not to mention Gerry's. The FBI and the IRS after him. The son-of-a-bitch is probably one of America's most wanted tax cheats. All those businesses. All those employees. Leaving the country like this, on a boat. No doubt the IRS's accusations are entirely accurate. Gerry must have been skipping payroll taxes for years, putting all that money in his pocket.

And what a job I did for him. Laundering that hundred thousand in cash. At least partially hiding two million from the IRS by switching the bonds into Kelly's maiden name. Shit, they probably *are* married.

Considering it was a Federal task force that burst into his house the other night, I bet Gerry's list of crimes ranks badder than awesome. Maybe smuggling illegal aliens would attract the FBI's involvement, but who knows. Kidnapping? Bank fraud? Hope murder isn't on the list, although I have a feeling it soon will be.

No way he can let me survive.

FORTY-FIVE

Via con dios, dickhead.

I'm trying to remember what I read once about the various stages humans go through when faced with impending death. I mean like if a doctor tells you the biopsies revealed cancer in all six organs. I think the stages were denial, rage, hopelessness, and finally acceptance and peace. Well, I'm pissed as hell, but it sure doesn't feel halfway to serene. In fact, I'd like to take a paring knife and slice parallel racing stripes down Gerry's back, rip his flesh off in long, thin strips. Hang them out to dry in the sun and the wind, sell them to the general public as Gerry's Special Beef Jerky.

Or maybe pork.

Whew. I need to calm down. I need to remember I'm lucky to be alive. We all are, of course. Every day we should thank God or the Great Spirit or some Higher Power for being above ground instead of under it. But goddamnit to hell, I am so angry at Gerry Motherfucking Burns, I am capable of unspeakable acts, including wasting whatever's left of my time and energy with thoughts of gruesome revenge.

Totally absurd, of course. I need to lose emotion if I'm to have any chance of survival. Logic and reason must prevail. Felt good to vent there, but I need to carefully consider my situation. When will they kill me? And how will they do it?

I suppose the second part's easy enough. I doubt Gerry's going to get fancy, risk leaving blood stains on the boat when there's cleaner options. He'll probably just toss me overboard. No Austin, no evidence.

No, when is the key. I need to figure the timing so I can draft and shape potential escape plans within that framework. For instance, there's absolutely no use working on Kelly's head—he's going to kill you, too, honey—if Gerry plans to dump me as soon as we leave the harbor. I won't have enough time to discover and penetrate the gray matter under that gorgeous red hair.

And by the same thought process, I don't see any advantage in attempting some desperate, improbable physical action right now if I have a day or two to observe and plan.

Think logically, Austin, but think fast.

Okay, if I was Gerry, I'd dump me soon as we pass the tip of Sandy Hook, enter open water. No one knew where I was going. No one knows I'm here. One of those security guards might have seen me walk across the marina's parking lot, but it's not likely. So why wouldn't Gerry get rid of me ASAP? What possible freaking reason could he have for keeping me alive longer than he has to?

None that I can think of. He might wait until dark, but that's it then. I've got less than one or two hours before I feed the fish. Hmm. Seems to me that presents only one possibility. I must attempt physical assault as soon as they hoist me on deck. Wait for Luis to look away, then hit him, kick him, drive him overboard with a head butt. Sweet Jesus, talk about long shots. How do I know they'll even let me stand up again?

And even if they untie me, Luis is Luis. Plus he's got that semiautomatic. I'm me, and all I'll ever have is the famous, disarming full-boat Carr grin, a few bad jokes, perhaps a small element of surprise.

The ever-present baritone rattle of the boat's diesel engines rises in pitch to a junk-car whine, and the bow lifts as we accelerate. We're moving out into the open water of New York harbor

now, headed south for the Verrazano Narrows Bridge and eventually the tip of Sandy Hook. After that, there's nothing but wide open Atlantic.

The odds whirl around in my head like the pictures of brightly colored fruit on a spinning slot machine. Ching, ching, ching. When all the little windows stop, and my internal bookies and odds-makers calculate my survival at one million to one, my stomach and throat issues a noise I don't know how to describe. Half groan. Half wail. Maybe a humble and guttural plea to that Great Spirit.

"Crying for help down there?" Gerry says.

I can't see the rotten bastard, but Gerry's familiar voice places my monster at the top of the stairway, up and to my right.

"Or just crying? Ha. Ha."

Can't think of anything clever to say, and even if I did, I don't trust my throat and mouth to bring forth the proper tones. There's some mysterious muscle spasm going on down there. Or my esophagus is playing host to a polka party for June bugs and beetles.

"Who do you think's going to hear your whimpering pleas?" Gerry says. "Flipper?"

Nice guy, this Gerry Burns. A warm-hearted individual spreading cheer and goodwill wherever he goes. Probably works weekends with handicapped children. Reading them Harry Potter. The son-of-a-bitch. Stoke that anger, Austin. It may come in useful later on when you need to get physical.

"Do your kids know you're alive, Gerry? Those kids and grandkids I saw at your funeral? Or are you ditching them along with the IRS?"

His footsteps clamber down the stairs and approach my bunk. Suddenly I can see him as he squats beside me, shows me his face. I smell gin on his breath. Malice flickers behind his glacier-blue eyes. I see my monster's right fist holds something shiny as the hand rises beside me, punches my left cheekbone.

Pain explodes behind my eyes. My blurred vision fills with dots and neon-bright red and green spirals.

Something builds a wall around my consciousness with coffin-size black bricks.

Sharper pain wakes me up, a searing burning heat on my right arm. Jesus. I'm on fire.

My body convulses in reaction, flailing against the bulkhead. I'm gasping for breath as my eyes open.

Gerry's kneeling beside me, smoking a cigar, the circumference of which perfectly matches the round, still-smoking ashy wound on my right forearm. The pain cuts across every nerve in my body.

"Oops," he says.

My nose gets a whiff of my own crisped flesh, flipping my stomach like an Asian virus. I wrench a tablespoon of clear bile onto the yellow bedcover.

Gerry saying, "You were so busy thinking about Kelly's pussy, the money, the fact that you might not have to sell stocks and bonds anymore, you never even considered your new girlfriend could have another motive."

I hate it when guys I hate are right.

FORTY-SIX

A crackling sizzle scratches quietly at my ears. The smell of burning raw meat snaps open my eyes, gooses the heart rate. What the hell's cooking, me? Another flesh-branding session with the Cigar Meister?

I shake my foggy, throbbing head and try to focus on the movement I sense close by. Oh, my. Look at my redheaded Jersey Jezebel doing the dance domestic there in front of the miniature stove, frying up some dinner inside a twelve-inch pan. Poking at the hissing meat with a flaming red spatula.

I don't remember Kelly coming back down the stairs. Could I have been daydreaming? Or coming in and out of consciousness? The pain in my forearm is so bad I can't believe sleep was involved. The burning sensation is still there.

"Hi, Austin," she says. "I thought you were going to sleep through dinner."

Well that answers that question. Some people get going when the going gets tough. Me, Austin Carr, I like to pass out. The KO-Kid.

Jezebel's changed into designer jeans and a V-necked forest green sweater, white deck shoes. I can't think of anything to say. Can't decide if I want to call the redhead names, pump the bitch for information, or just stare like Dickhead of the Year at those bra-less bouncing jugs under the green sweater.

Complicating my decision is the memory of those luscious bare breasts and the white bow she's wearing now in her hair. The bow really makes me hot.

"Not talking to me?" she says.

I grunt, still unable to make a decision.

"I cleaned up that burn for you," she says. "Put Neosporin on it."

Gee, Kelly, that's wonderful. So nice I have a friend like you. Really appreciate the caring concern. In fact, I'm getting a little love-glow all over thinking about how generously you've been taking care of me.

Although now that I consider all the facts of our relationship, seems to me I did an even bigger number on myself. Hell, I remember feeling pity figuring Jezebel as the poor, over-taxed nurse.

An astute observer of the human condition, that's me. Austin Carr. A professional people reader. Trained by telephone sales as a master supplier of people's inner desires. Full-boat grin my ass. An infamous, a full-boat Carr fuck-up is what I am.

The clue should have been, as it always is, that the redhead gave me a boner. When will I learn this simple lesson? Never ever make decisions with a hard-on. Were I King, boys would be taught this important subject as early as the fifth grade. Whenever it came up, so to speak.

Jezebel spins away from the stove, wiggles closer to my bunk. She clenches that red plastic spatula in her dainty right fingers like it's a sword, or a magic wand. Is she going to cast a spell, or whack me?

"Look, Austin. I understand you're mad. But I'm a working girl. I've been collecting paychecks from Gerry for twelve years, longer than Luis. Part of that two million in bonds you swiped from his account is my retirement bonus. You want to call me nasty names, feel free. Get it out of your system, especially if it makes you feel better. Nothing you say is going to bother me one little bit."

“Fuck you.”

I didn’t plan such a lame curse. Like a wake-up morning hard-on, my banal epithet just popped out there all on its own. Dickhead independence.

Kelly smiles. “Oh, Austin. You’re so articulate.”

“Fuck you.”

She bounces back to her pan of frying meat, which I decide must be cheeseburgers as I see on the tiny counter a package of round sesame seed buns and slices of Kraft American, fresh tomato, red onion, and lettuce. The redheaded bitch is probably planning a little survivor’s picnic as they watch me drown.

Kelly saying, “I don’t know if I can stand any more of this witty, urbane dialogue, Mr. Carr. Maybe you should just stop sugar coating it, tell me how you really feel.”

She throws her head back and laughs. Her eyes shut and her red hair shakes the way it does when my Jersey Jezebel makes love.

FORTY-SEVEN

I take a slow breath. Scary feelings grip me. I want to choke Kelly and kiss her at the same time.

There's some kind of physical pull on me I didn't fully understand until this very minute, a feeling I've had before in my life, but only two or three times. The "magnet thing," I call it. Jezebel's drawing me to her like a circling tether ball around the pole.

Can't believe I didn't feel this before. Or maybe she always did this to me and I was too distracted with all the other crap going on in my miserable life—losing my visitation rights, Rags, Psycho, poor Cruz.

Damn. These feelings do not bode well for my million-to-one shot at survival. Come on, Austin. Lose the emotion, use this time alone with her.

Jezebel reaches for a king-size, red and yellow bag of potato chips, rips at the packaging, pours the contents into an orange mixing bowl.

More than sizzling burgers, the crisp whisper of tumbling fresh potato chips makes me want to share in their dinner. Can't believe I'm hungry. Wonder if I'll be alive when the chips are served.

I take another long breath. "How come Gerry's so pissed at me? I understand using me for the transfer like you guys did, but I don't quite fathom the torture part."

"That's better," Kelly says. "Finally starting to get a grip, are we?"

"Come on. What the hell did I do?"

She shrugs. "He wasn't planning on burning you, I'm sure. He told me you said something nasty about his children."

His children? "I asked him if his kids knew he was still alive. That's nasty?"

Her head tilts back. "God. No wonder he burned you. It killed him he couldn't tell his children about faking his death. He actually cried because they had to attend his funeral. But he couldn't put his children in jeopardy by telling them the truth. It would make them accessories."

Jezebel swipes at her forehead with the back of her hand. Must be hot at the stove. "The whole plan, collecting everything he could for this move to Mexico, it's all for those two kids. He's the proudest father I've ever seen. He'll contact them and explain himself after he sets up shop in Mexico. Or wherever he ends up."

That last bit sounded like it might have been a lame attempt at cover-up. Mexico, huh? I'm guessing Vera Cruz, Luis's hometown. "Why is he so proud of his kids?"

"They're both doctors. Went to Princeton pre-med together. Then Harvard Med. Both of them interned at Columbia-Presbyterian, both are now doing their residencies at John Hopkins. They're only the second brother-sister act there ever."

Jezebel flips three burgers in the frying pan. She handles the spatula better than I would have thought, but I guess the redhead can handle just about anything. She sure as shit handled me. Me and my full-boat Carr grin. Should I worry she flipped only three patties, not four? Or maybe Luis doesn't like *hamburguesas*.

"Well, kids or not, he's still running from the Feds, saving his fat ass," I say.

The redhead doesn't look up. "Sure. But when he found out the IRS was onto him, getting close, his goal became preserving what money he could for the son and daughter. The IRS was going to seize everything, even if Gerry's lawyers tied up the criminal cases."

“But all he got out of his Shore Securities account was the two million you said is partly your retirement. There was another two or three-million in stock and cash.”

She peeks over her shoulder. “No. The rest was transferred from that Shore account to his Panamanian bank two days ago. You’ve been too busy to check the papers on your desk. Besides, can’t you see what’s over there in the corner?”

I strain my neck to follow her eyes. There’s some kind of package under that brass porthole, tucked between the blond wood bulkhead and the bunk opposite mine. Something wrapped in a thick blue and yellow baby quilt. Oh, my. I can make out eight to ten inches of a familiar and very ornate gilded picture frame.

“That can’t be real,” I say.

It’s the Renoir, the painting I’ve been admiring for two weeks. All those rich happy people, strolling in the sunshine.

“Oh, it’s real,” Kelly says. “Gerry thinks it could be worth a hundred-million, but since it was stolen from a private collection, public auctions are out. In Mexico, or wherever, brokered by a worldly art dealer he knows, Gerry’s got a buyer for twenty.”

If I could whistle, I’d whistle. Although something’s bothering me about this...yeah. Wait a minute. “The other night, when those agents broke into your condo, I saw them impound everything, the Renoir included.”

“The FBI impounded a very expensive fake,” she says. “Gerry’s got a couple.”

FORTY-EIGHT

When I'm done rubbing my loosened but sore wrists, and finished being surprised, I pull a chair up to the table, snatch a bun, a slab of greasy meat, slices of American cheese, red onion, and lettuce. This is no time to skimp on burger toppings. Could be my last meal.

Good old' Gerry. He must have felt bad burning me because a few minutes ago he freed my hands, invited me to sit and eat with them. The mood seems pretty much friendly, too, although I'm slightly offended when my monster now tells that Jezebel redhead Kelly to aim Luis's government-issue semiautomatic at my face.

Kelly saying, "I'm hungry, too, you know."

Gerry swallows a mouthful of fried burger. "You got two hands, right?"

"Yes, but I need both of them to hold the Colt. It's heavy."

"Here," Gerry says. "Give it to me."

The transfer is never made. A loud thumping noise interrupts, turns all our heads. The yellow-blanketed bunk I was lying on before is not a bunk anymore. It's a newly revealed hideout with its hinged lid—the thin mattress—swung up against the bulkhead. That's what made the thumping noise.

Guess who's now standing inside this suddenly exposed hideout, pointing a gun at the three of us? It's Mr. Former Goatee, the same guy who fought with me and Luis at the restaurant. The same man who followed Kelly and me from the burial service to the shopping mall. The same *hombre* who obviously knew the whereabouts of this boat and eluded Gerry and Luis to stow himself away.

His eyes are the color of roasted coffee beans and slightly buggy, wildly shifting back and forth between me and Gerry. His glossy black hair is pulled into a small ponytail this afternoon, and his squared jaw is set hard, trying to look tough. I'd believe him if it weren't for the beads of sweat checkering his forehead.

Is Luis in on this move?

Kelly fires the Colt semiautomatic. Whoa! The noise is stunning, knocking me back from the table, numbing my ears and mind. Inches from Mr. Goatee, a piece of bunk lid the circumference of a coffee can explodes in splinters. My ears ring like it's Sunday morning and I'm inside a church bell.

Mr. Goatee fires back and Jezebel's right shoulder is slammed by the bullet. The blow spins her backward against the counter and the stove. A spreading patch of red blooms on her green sweater. The Colt clatters to the floor. Jezebel slumps and tumbles beside the gun.

Gerry sticks his hands in the air like a bad western movie. Not a bad idea, though, especially to avoid a gunshot wound like Kelly's. I raise my hands just like Gerry.

Mr. Goatee lifts his legs and feet out of the storage space, one at a time, his weapon leveled at a spot between Gerry and me. The gun in his hand is a revolver. Small caliber. Cheap and chromed. A Saturday night special. Seagulls squawk somewhere near the boat.

The diesel engines power down to an idle. The three of us stagger as the bow falls in the water and the slant of the floor changes. What do you want to bet Luis heard the gunshots and is headed downstairs right now to check it out?

Mr. Goatee reads the boat action the same way I do. He waves his pistol, directing Gerry and me around like an armed traffic cop. He's in a hurry to make us sit on the opposite yellow bunk,

out of his line of sight to the stairway. Can't blame him for that. Luis is going to barrel down those stairs any second.

Kelly groans, clutches her shoulder. Blood flows between her fingers. At least she's conscious, always an encouraging sign for us friends and family.

What the hell did I just say? Things are happening too fast. I'm confused. Do I want Kelly to get better? Or watch that bitch Jezebel bleed to death?

When Mr. Goatee has Gerry and me where he wants us—sitting together on that opposite bunk—he crouches against the far bulkhead and points his cheap chrome gun at the top of the stairs.

Sounds like Luis is up there, but he's not in a big hurry to come down. My ex-favorite bartender is no dummy. And he can't be part of Mr. Goatee's surprise either, or this guy wouldn't be aiming his revolver at Luis's expected point of entry.

Without showing himself, Luis calls down. "*Senor Burns?* Are you all right?"

"I'm okay," Gerry says. "It's Nestor. He shot Kelly."

"Shut up," Mr. Goatee says. He briefly aims the gun at Gerry's head.

Nestor, huh? Too bad. I was starting to like calling him Mr. Goatee. Wonder why he shaved the beard off, anyway? Even finally ditched those gold chains? I thought the goatee made him look distinguished, worldly. Like the dragon tattoos on his forearms.

"Stand up," Nestor says to Gerry.

Gerry's a little shaky getting to his feet. He was Mr. Spry a few minutes ago. Maybe the excitement's getting to him. Nestor locks an arm around Gerry's neck and drags him into the center of the cabin, cuddles him between the yellow bunk beds. He touches the muzzle to Gerry's neck, Nestor saying, "Luis? Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"I am holding a gun at *el patron's* neck."

"Why?" Luis asks. "Because you and others believe you have been cheated? You will destroy yourself by threatening *Senor Burns*."

"I am not going to die. You must turn around the boat, take us back. *El patron* will find a little money for me and my family."

"You are going to die, my friend," Luis says. "This is now a certainty."

Nestor seems a tad rattled by that line. The beads of sweat on his forehead turn into a steady stream down both temples. His eyes are blinking. He cringes backward, sucking deep breaths, tugging Gerry along with him.

"Turn the boat around, or I will shoot *el patron*," Nestor says.

Silence from the top of the stairs.

Nestor calls out. "Luis?"

No answer.

"I will give you three seconds," Nestor says. "If I do not hear the engines, feel the boat begin its return, I will shoot *el patron* in the head."

Nothing from Luis.

FORTY-NINE

“One,” Nestor says.

I’m guessing it’s been a few years since someone held a gun to *Senor* Gerry Burns’ neck. His face looks as pasty gray as it was that day at the hospice. Only difference, this ghost-story make-up is a natural phenomenon.

Boy, that seems like a long time ago. Riding down that freight elevator with Kelly, the guys with the big gurneys. Those two dead bodies taking their last ride together. Talk about your basic bad omen. Wow. I should have locked myself in a closet until Christmas.

Nestor saying, “Two.”

A creak on the deck above barely reaches my ears. Tiny, quiet, almost not even there. But I hear it. Nestor doesn’t. Or least he doesn’t let on if he does. He’s too busy getting ready to say three, maybe pull the trigger. Or maybe not. Tough to tell. If he kills Gerry, Mr. Former Goatee—I mean Nestor—he would be giving up his only leverage with Luis. Call me cautious, but that doesn’t sound like a good idea.

It’s a bad play and I think Nestor’s figured it out. I’m watching his upper teeth bite his lower lip, no doubt trying to figure his next move, when I notice a change of light inside the cabin. I can’t describe the alteration much more, no big illumination, nor a plunge into darkness. Just a minor thickening of the room’s shadows, as if another source of light had been added from a second, slightly different direction.

“Three,” Nestor says.

He presses the muzzle hard into Gerry’s neck. His finger flexes against the trigger. Gerry’s nerves give out and he loses the ability to stand. His weight sags, his knees buckle, and suddenly he’s hanging himself in the crook of Nestor’s arm.

I hear a swishing sound, like a bat zipping past in a cave. Then a chucking noise, like a thrown knife, sticking into a tree trunk. Oh. My. God. Where did that come from? The black and chrome handle of Luis’s humongous switchblade, plus three or four inches of bare steel, suddenly emerges from the top of Nestor’s head. Buried like a shovel, the sharp heavy blade has pierced four or five inches of brain matter.

Sweet Jesus.

Nestor oozes to the floor like melting butter, the gun still in his hand. Blood runs across one eye and down his cheek in a thick stream. Gerry tumbles with him, still inside Nestor’s grip. The men meld into a single pile of twisted arms and legs.

Only then do I look up, see the open, two-foot-square skylight. I waste precious time in surprised gaping, admiring the knife throw, maybe waiting for Luis’s face to appear in the framed opening above.

What a goof I am. Slow, bordering on stupid. Takes me five or six, maybe ten seconds to remember there are loaded guns nearby and readily available for the grabbing.

My hands are free but my ankles are wrapped. I can only bunny hop toward the pile that is Gerry, Nestor, and Nestor’s Saturday night special. It’s close by, though. Maybe only three or four jumps. Jezebel’s semiautomatic is too far away, on the far side of the table.

Luis’s feet touch maybe two stairs on the way down into the cabin. His lean muscular frame is a streaking blur in the left corner of my vision. Like he jumped off the roof of a building.

I give up my rabbit hops and dive for Nestor’s gun. Luis is almost on top me.

My knees and belly slam against the floor as Luis hits me like a linebacker, but the fingers of my extended right hand touch warm metal. I scratch at the gun's muzzle, trying to acquire a grip.

Luis scrambles on my back. Air rushes from my lungs. I'm in trouble, but I can't quit. Have to battle with everything I've got.

My fingers wrap around the handle of Nestor's revolver. I get a finger on the trigger.

I jerk-twist to the left, trying to aim the weapon at Luis, but his weight restricts me. His hand grips my wrist, then squeezes my arm like a carpenter's vise. Damn, Luis is strong. Lifting all those beer kegs, maybe. My hand's going numb. He's bending my wrist backward. Keeping the muzzle away from himself.

Come on, Carr. This is it. Probably your one chance for survival.

I summon every bit of strength my muscles and spirit can possibly create. Got to wrestle this gun away from Luis. I've got to win.

The cry escaping my lips is a warrior's shriek.

FIFTY

Fierce and wild though my shriek may be, the battle cry does little to improve my quickly deteriorating position. About as effective as General Custer calling for his mommy, actually. Guess there are good reasons I always felt safe at Luis's bar. Strength. Quickness. *El hombre*.

My arm goes dead where Luis's fingers clutch me. The weapon begins to slip from my fingers. Come on, Austin. The prize is survival. Fight for your life, goddamnit. Luis gives my unconscious arm a brutal shake, and that's the end. The Saturday night special rattles free onto the hardwood floor.

This is not good. I've got another problem, too. Luis's weight not only prevents ninety-nine percent of my breathing, he anticipates every twist and roll I make to unseat him, pull air into my lungs. Now I know how those rodeo horses feel when some fat bronco rider stays on all the way to the horn.

A steely fist crashes into the back of my neck. My forehead slams the cabin floor. Pain erupts deep inside my brain. The last bit of my strength oozes away.

Luis flips me, squats on my chest. His knees mount my shoulders and he presses a forearm hard against my Adam's apple. Plenty of *hombre* muscle behind that forearm, too. No air whatsoever seeps through my windpipe now. Blackness creeps around the edges of my vision.

Luis punches my nose. Stars and planets orbit inside the black universe behind my eyes. Blood gushes from my nostrils. Before The KO-Kid blacks out for the umpteenth time in two weeks, Luis lifts his arm, lets me catch a breath. While I'm sucking oxygen, he lifts his weight from my shoulders and stands above me.

I swipe the blood from my eyes, roll onto my hands and knees, gasping.

Luis picks up both guns and the roll of duct tape.

Minutes later I'm stretched out again as if nothing transpired since my last term at bed rest. No dinner invitation. No burgers. No Nestor. My chance came and went in less time than it takes to brew a fucking pot of coffee.

At least I'm still alive. For Nestor, pretty much everything came and went. I don't imagine he survived Luis's brain surgery.

When Luis grabs the embedded switchblade, Nestor doesn't even twitch. My ex-favorite bartender has to work the blade briefly back and forth, too, like King Arthur tugging on Excalibur.

Luis next attends to on Kelly, stretching her out on the other bunk, cleaning and dressing her wound, giving her a couple of pills for the pain. She's conscious throughout, holding onto the glass while she drinks, crying a little before and after, asking about her condition.

Gerry takes a shot of whisky. "You'll be all right," he says. "The bullet went right through." Talking to Luis now, saying, "I'm going up top, get us moving again. Join me when you're done playing nurse."

Not so happy now, my Jersey cowboy. Sounds a little tired, a little pissed off. Poor baby. Did little Nestor-westor spoil your dinner party? I can't see the son-of-a-bitch, but from the sound of his step, my former monster is dragging his fat ass up those stairs.

Luis finishes working on my nose with a wet towel and Q-Tips, saying, "Your nose is perhaps cracked, but not broken enough to set. The bleeding is stopped."

"Thanks."

"Would you like a drink of water?"

"I'd rather borrow your gun."

Luis smiles. Nice to know I can still amuse *el hombre*.

Luis went up to the main deck a few minutes ago, and now, through the open skylight no one's bothered to close yet, I can hear Luis talking with Gerry. Can't quite make out all the words, so I scrunch myself down toward the foot of the bunk, sit up on the edge.

Gerry saying, "You don't think we can bring her through customs?"

"Perhaps," Luis says, "but it is taking a great risk. Her wound is clearly a gunshot. If they look closely, they will spend many hours searching the boat."

"Shit," Gerry says.

Down below the voices, I glance at Kelly. Her eyes are closed, her breathing regular and slow. Asleep, or maybe drugged from the pain pills. Wouldn't mind a few narcotics myself once the end is in sight. Might as well slide into oblivion peacefully.

Gerry saying, "Can't we hide her somewhere? Under the bunk like Nestor?"

"Yes. But again, it is risky. Sometimes they look everywhere. It depends on the mood of the Federales. If they find her hidden, we are both in serious trouble."

Gerry grunts. "I can't let them do that. You know I can't. The theft of that Renoir is all over Interpol. I could lose everything."

FIFTY-ONE

The diesel engines power back up, the boat's bow lifts, and like a shove in the chest, the new angle pushes my weight back onto the bunk. With much effort and little grace, I worm myself back into a prone position, try to relax and think.

Listening to Gerry and Luis through the open skylight, sounds to me like Kelly might get tossed overboard along with yours truly. What do I do with this information? If I try to tell the redhead, would she believe me? Maybe, maybe not, but I can't see any advantage in not telling her. I mean, if we work together, plan something, we can definitely improve the odds of extending our lifespan. Worth a try.

"Kelly?"

No answer.

Louder this time. "Kelly. Wake up. Did you hear them? Gerry's going to kill you, too."

No answer. Her steady, deep breathing makes me think she's out cold.

The next time I open my eyes, darkness has invaded the cabin. The smell of seawater has replaced the aroma of fried burgers. The diesel engines buzz like a swarm of flying bugs, enveloping me in steady vibration. Reminds me of having a tooth drilled.

Been at least an hour since I heard any other sound. Even Kelly's breathing has all but disappeared, hidden by the steady hum of the boat's motors. I've been searching deep inside myself for a creative and workable plan, but all I can think of is my children, the likelihood I will never see them again.

If I really wanted to wallow, I could start blaming the ex-wife for this. The way my mind puts it together: If she hadn't lost interest in sex after Ryan was born, I wouldn't have gotten divorced, wouldn't have chased Kelly, wouldn't have been vulnerable to the redhead's fatal deception.

Like almost every situation, we have a saying for this in the office. When some broker starts telling you he almost made this big score, you interrupt with "Woulda, shoulda, coulda, pal." Or sometimes, if you really feel like sticking it to the bastard, you say, "Yes, and if the queen had balls, she'd be king."

We stockbrokers know full well that "ifs" are a complete waste of time and psychic energy. Every salesman does. My wife did lose interest in me after the kids. I did decide to mess around on her, and I definitely got caught. I should have kept my mistress a secret. So really, what do I have to complain about? I'm here because of things I did, choices I made a long time ago.

Deal with it, Dickhead of the Year.

"How's that shoulder, hon?"

It's Gerry's voice. Waking me up. He's a fat dark shadow sitting on the edge of Kelly's bunk, a silhouette beneath the forty-watt bulkhead light above her. One of Gerry's hands holds a glass, the other offers her something in his palm. More pills?

"It hurts like hell," she says.

"I know," Gerry says. "You were groaning in your sleep."

She was? I didn't hear groaning.

"Take a couple more of these," Gerry says. "You'll feel better and sleep more soundly. I can't get you to a doctor until tomorrow."

I watch Kelly use one elbow to sit up. Her skin is pale, the red hair disheveled. She struggles to reach for the pills, so Gerry cradles her shoulders, pulls her into a sitting position.

"Don't take those pills, Kelly," I say. "He's going to kill you."

"What are you talking about?" Gerry says. Incredulous tone. Nice acting.

"I heard Luis tell him your gunshot wound will force Mexican customs to search the boat," I say. "He's afraid they'll find the Renoir."

Gerry laughs. But Kelly's hand hesitates with the pills.

"That's a good one," Gerry says. "You come up with that bullshit all on your own? Or did you see it in a movie?"

"Think about it, Kelly," I say. "Would he risk that Renoir for you?"

Gerry's anger crosses the space between our two bunks like a cloud of hot smoke, his desire to strangle me clearly visible. Or maybe Gerry wants to fire up a new cigar. He won't though because Kelly the Jezebel might then easily recognize I'm telling truth about the poison.

Gerry saying, "You're talking nonsense, Carr. I would never hurt Kelly, number one. And even if I did have such plans, there's no way I would have spoken of them in front of you, would I?"

"Look up at the skylight," I say. "It's open. I heard them talking right after you were shot."

Gerry's silhouette turns to look at the skylight. Kelly doesn't move. Her hand is frozen in mid-reach. Obviously, she's concerned. Or at least thinking about what I've just told her. Why would Gerry look up at the skylight unless he worried what I'd heard?

Gerry grunts. "Honey, do what you want. You don't trust me, don't take the pills. Either way's fine with me."

Another two seconds of hesitation, Kelly slips the pills into her mouth.

Hasta la wego, Kelly. Pretty sure that medicine is going to cure your pain forever.

FIFTY-TWO

Flat on my back, staring up at a cloudless sky, zillions of stars begin to float in the inky blackness. They flickered before, like wind-tossed candles, but now the pinpoints of light have liquefied, slipping and sliding across my field of vision like melting ice cubes. I shudder when I realize I'm crying.

Sweet Jesus, Austin, are you wimping out? Has a pain-wracked body and a bruised spirit made a simpering boob of you? I suppose it would be understandable, especially for a New Jersey stockbroker. Especially after multiple betrayals, attempted murders, frequent beatings, torture, and facing death on the high seas. Or maybe I'm frightened to tears by the eerie, funhouse green glow of the radar screen casting strange light on Luis's white dress shirt.

Luis with his sleeves rolled up.

Blinking, I reconsider my emotions. Am I really so frightened, filled with self-pity? Am I really such a wuss? Wait a minute. Bullshit. I'm frightened, sure. Who wouldn't be in this situation? But I'm not sad, goddamnit. I'm angry. Frustrated. When Gerry and Luis brought me up to this flying bridge fifteen minutes ago, I figured it was because they didn't want me keeping Kelly awake, maybe getting her to throw up those pills.

But I see now it was just another move to take away my power. You keep surprising these guys, don't you, Austin? Fighting Luis for that gun, almost shooting him. Hearing their plans through the open skylight, almost getting Kelly to join my team.

Gerry's worried about me, and therefore Luis has been assigned the difficult task of keeping me in sight and at bay. I'm not a frightened wimp. I'm pissed as hell, a thinking, fighting dangerous *hombre*. Tied up with silver duct tape, yes, but far from helpless. I've temporarily lost my capacity for counter-attack, and it's frustrating. The anger makes my tear ducts flow. But don't worry, pal, Austin Carr will be back.

Beneath that endearing, disarming full-boat Carr grin beats the fearsome heart and steely mind of a warrior. And my weapon is words.

I just need to stop crying. "So, when is Gerry going to get rid of me, Luis?"

My ex-favorite bartender remains motionless and silent. He stands at the boat's wheel like the Ancient Mariner, sturdy and fixed on his task. Maybe my question got lost in the wind and diesel engine noise.

I decide to shout it. "Hey, Luis. When is Gerry going to toss me over the side?"

He heard me that time, I know it. But he's not talking. Gerry must have explained how dangerous I am, forbid Luis to engage me in conversation. Gerry knowing that if we talk, Luis will remember what a nice man I am, how unsuitable I am for drowning.

"Remember that night in the restaurant parking lot when those three guys jumped you? Remember how I helped you, Luis? I could have driven out of there, never looked back, right? But I didn't, did I? I ran over fast as I could and fought beside you."

Nothing. Not a twitch.

"Remember I'm the one who found your knife?"

Still nothing. The Ancient Mariner is made of stone. My silver bullet words bounce off. Damn. I can't believe he won't even talk to me. It's not normal.

Good thing I never had to make a living selling stocks and bonds to guys like Luis.

“Before you dump my ass overboard, let’s have one last shot of Herradura together, okay? It would mean a lot to me, you’re being such a good friend and all.”

Immediately, I regret the sarcasm. That reminder of the parking lot was my hole card, my ace, my best shot at turning Luis around to my side. But I probably killed it with that nasty reference to friendship. Luis hates sarcasm and insincerity.

Luis’s arm moves a little and suddenly the pitch of the engines drops, the bow dips, and I can see a sliver of golden moon on the expanded night horizon. Did I piss off the Ancient Mariner? Is he slowing down to toss me over the side right now, save Gerry the trouble?

An old memory comes back to me, a very special little blue-bellied lizard. I must have been about ten years old at the time, playing with a friend, and we caught this lizard, tied a rock to his tail and threw him in my friend’s swimming pool.

I can still see that poor little guy clawing for the surface. He struggled for the longest time. Pawing the water. Flailing. When he stopped fighting, and we brought him back up dead, I never wanted to hurt another living thing. Don’t think I ever have, at least on purpose. Even spiders get carried out of my living quarters and dumped in the flower bed.

If Luis throws me overboard now, that little blue-bellied reptile will be the last thing on my mind. Payback from the Great Lizard Spirit.

“Why are we stopping?” I say.

“We have reached The Hole,” Luis says. He turns to look at me now, a half-smile on his face. Wow, Luis, I can’t take all this attention.

“What’s The Hole?” I ask. “Is this where I walk the plank?”

Luis shakes his head no. “Your time is not now. Gerry will sleep until the dawn.”

I hear both good and bad news in that line. More importantly, however, Luis is talking. Time to turn on the full-boat Carr charm, use those words like spears and daggers.

“So, what happens tomorrow morning?” I say.

Luis shrugs.

“Come on, Luis. Tell me. What happens?”

He turns his back on me, once again facing the ship’s bow, the horizon and that sliver of fourteen-carat moon. “I am sorry,” he says.

That sounds bad. Thoughts of that little lizard begin to creep back in my head, but I fight it off because of the look on Luis’s face when he said he was sorry. I saw pity, sadness, and I take heart. My ex-favorite bartender does not want me to die. In fact, he is deeply disturbed by whatever it is Gerry has planned.

And yet...if that’s how he feels, why would Luis let it happen? Hmm. Let’s see. Hard to say exactly, but whatever reasons he has for letting Gerry run his life, they are very important to Luis and probably go back many years, somehow involving my ex-favorite bartender’s honor, family, or both.

Luis will always do his duty, but he definitely feels sorry for me, and that makes him vulnerable. If I can find out exactly what those ties to Gerry are, maybe I can sever them.

FIFTY-THREE

I collect my thoughts. Breathe deeply and slowly. Chant a couple of stockbroker mantras. Woulda, shoulda, coulda. The market's looking stronger. I need to sound calmer than I actually am because right up there with honor, duty, and sincerity, I believe Luis will appreciate even minor signs of bravery.

"So how long have you been working for Gerry?" I say.

He shrugs again. "What does it matter?"

He's got a point. Still. "I want to know, that's all. And you owe me an answer. I understand you can't prevent what's going to happen, but you can talk to me. At least let me understand why I'm going to die."

Luis glances at me, and strange green shadows fly across his face again from the radar. There's something else in his expression, too. It's only a hunch, but maybe my ex-favorite bartender feels a bit strange out here on the Atlantic, bobbing over some place called The Hole like a discarded beer can. I've always believed the ocean makes people insignificant, part of something so big it defies identification.

"Gerry Burns has been my benefactor for nine years," Luis says. "Since I was what you call a teenager."

"Benefactor?"

"Did you not hear Nestor call him *el patron*?"

"Yes. So?"

"He is like our father, or perhaps, Godfather. The boss. It was the same for Nestor as it is for me, plus many others. *El patron* pays us good wages, helps us become American citizens, but also assists the small village where we were born."

"In Mexico?"

"Yes. Zempoala. A fishing village near Vera Cruz. Senor Burns built a small hospital for our children, paid a doctor to live there and help our families."

Benefactor isn't such a terrible word now that I think about it. No blood connection with Luis's family, no mention of love. I can see how Luis feels duty, an obligation, but the whole thing sounds like a business relationship to me. Giving Luis and his pals American jobs, a place to live, bonus pay in the form of hometown construction projects for their families.

"If *el patron* was your benefactor, why was Nestor so angry? And how about that guy I saw in your restaurant, the one dressed all in black? Did he work for Gerry, too?"

Luis doesn't answer right away, and in his silence, the boat disturbs a flock of large birds roosting on the water. They flap and splash, take off in a squadron. The ruckus is louder than a helicopter. Pelicans, I imagine.

"Come on, Luis. Tell me. What difference does this stuff make now?"

Almost unperceptively, Luis's punching bag shoulders lift then fall in a sigh. "*El patron*'s departure was a sudden thing. He left many, including Nestor, without jobs. The man dressed in black wanted me to help him take over some of *Senor Burns*'...operations."

"He wanted you two to go into business for yourselves?"

"That is how *el patron* said it as well," Luis says. "When I refused to betray our benefactor, we argued, and later in the parking lot he and the others tried to...change my mind."

"Who killed Cruz?"

“Alejandro. The man dressed in black.”

“That’s why you killed him? Because of Cruz?”

“Si.”

While I’m thinking this over, feeling better that Luis is giving up the skinny, but also unable to as yet find a wedge to slip between him and his benefactor, a previous conversation comes to mind. In the restaurant that evening, right after I saw Kelly for the first time in a year. The memory is a bit foggy, thanks to all the tequila I drank that night, but I think I recall the gist.

“If Gerry is your benefactor,” I say, “why did you warn me about Kelly that night in the bar?”

No answer. Have I touched a nerve?

“You were really warning me about Gerry, weren’t you? Trying to keep me from getting sucked into this.”

Luis shrugs. “I said only that Gerry’s woman could be deceiving you.”

Too bad I didn’t listen.

FIFTY-FOUR

The hazy, orange light of dawn brings texture and a bit of color to the Ancient Mariner's silhouette. Strange that even on the boat, my ex-favorite bartender wears his standard, hombre-issue black slacks and white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Black Reeboks may be his only concession to functional deck wear, although he might have worn sneakers behind the bar as well. I don't ever remember noticing Luis's feet.

"*Buenos dias,*" I say.

No answer. Luis quit talking to me hours ago and it looks like the new day brings no change in this new non-verbal status. Damn. I was getting somewhere last night, too. I know it. That's probably why he discontinued our conversation.

Below us on the main deck, the clatter of metal equipment draws my attention away from Luis. Must be Gerry working on something down there. A torture device, perhaps, or maybe he's just rearranging deck chairs to give himself a better view of the morning's proceedings.

Today's the day I feed the fish. I can feel it in my bladder.

"Bring him down here, Luis," Gerry says.

My monster's voice jolts me as if I'd been asleep. Maybe I was. My brain is so foggy. This horror at sea has begun to take on dreamlike qualities.

Luis touches something on the controls and spins away from the bow. He steps closer and kneels by the bench on which I lay bound with duct tape. His face looks even sadder than before, and I can't help but imagine he's thinking of my looming destruction. Wow. It's crazy to think this, I know, but after everything's that happened, everything that is about to happen, I still admire Luis and want him to like me. How freaking ridiculous is that?

"Can you sit up?" he says.

My attempt is feeble and Luis slips his arm under my shoulders to assist. When I'm sitting on the bench, my feet flat on the deck of this flying bridge, Luis yanks his big black switchblade from his pocket and deftly slices the tape around my ankles.

My leg muscles cramp as he pulls me into a standing position, and I need him for support. He offers a strong arm, supporting me under the armpits until the blood returns to my muscles.

"Come on, Luis," Gerry says. "Get him down here."

As my ex-favorite bartender leads me toward the stairway, guiding me toward oblivion, I feel something hard and heavy slide into the front pocket of my slacks. What the hell was that? Could it be? Did Luis just give me his switchblade? Or was it a roll of nickels for additional weight?

Even taped together, my hands can reach that pocket, or at least the fingers of my right hand can, and I try to confirm the identity of Luis's gift. He slaps at my hand and shakes his head covertly. Oh. My. God. The famous full-boat Carr charm has once more worked its magic. It *must* be Luis's knife.

Gerry waits for us at the bottom of the chrome step ladder. He's holding something that looks like a leather virginity belt, only there's a hollow cup-holder thing fixed to where one's virginity would most be at risk. Some kind of fishing harness?

Oh, shit. Is he going to use me for bait? Austin Carr on a hook?

With Luis behind, steadying me with a hand at the scruff of my neck, I descend the stairs slowly and carefully. Don't want to fall and break a leg before getting thrown overboard, do I? "Ready for a swim?" Gerry says.

Ah, confirmation of my destiny. I like being right, of course. Who doesn't? But here's a case I could have easily lived with miscalculation. Ha. Lived with. Very funny, Austin. What a card.

One villain on each of my arms, Gerry and Luis escort me toward the boat's fighting chair. The contraption is bolted to the main deck, and its steel frame, the head and foot rest remind me of a barber's seat. What's with this setup? Are we going to have a fishing tournament before I get tossed overboard? Maybe Kelly's chopped up body is going to be the bait.

I stumble and almost fall as Gerry and Luis suddenly freeze. What are they staring at? I look up as Kelly's red hair appears in the stairway, struggling now up onto the main deck.

Kelly, my Jersey Jezebel, is still alive? Oh, boy, is she. Kelly's holding a pistol. No wait. The muzzle's too big. Like a shotgun's.

She points the weapon our way and I see it's a flare gun, one of those doodads you shoot into the sky to signal distress. The redhead's aiming it right between Gerry's eyes.

Gimme a K, gimme an E, gimme an L,L, Y.

Yeah, Kelly.

FIFTY-FIVE

Seagulls circle the boat like Apaches. I can feel Gerry and Luis's surprise in their grip, a sudden tension. Me, I can't believe the famous, full-boat Carr luck. First Luis slips me his knife. Now Jezebel switches sides. Again.

Hope springs infernal.

After he gets a good look at that flare gun, Gerry lets go of my arm, takes a step in the redhead's direction. "Hey, hon. You're feeling better. That's great. I thought you'd be out of it until—"

"Shut the fuck up," she says.

Her gaze flits back and forth between Luis and Gerry, her lips pressed tight. Pissed as hell, this redhead. "I know you tried to kill me. I put those pills under my tongue last night, spit them into my hand. This morning I could see what they were. You didn't give me two hundred milligrams of Oxycontin to help me sleep, you bastard."

My thoughts exactly.

"Oxycontin? No way, hon. Just a couple more Percocets to make you—"

"One more word, I'm going to burn a hole in your fat stomach the size of a dinner plate. Now cut Austin's hands loose, push him over here with me."

Gerry and Luis glance at each other, some kind of signal apparently because the very next second I'm left wobbling on my own, Gerry moving one way, Luis the other. Coming at Kelly around the fighting chair from opposite directions.

Kelly's eyes get bigger. Her jaw drops. She hesitates another second, then fires the flare gun at Gerry. Not the wisest choice in my estimation, although I can easily understand her impulse. *Senor Burns* is the world's biggest creep.

There's a whooshing sound, like the Fourth of July, and a red streak of sparkling mini-rocket exhaust zooms past my monster's head, sails out across the calm morning sea. The seagulls squawk and disperse.

The redhead screams as Luis tackles her. The flare gun clatters onto the deck.

"Oh, God, Gerry. Please don't kill me. Please."

"I can't stand the racket anymore," Gerry says to Luis. "Put some tape across that big mouth."

Kelly has cried and begged for her life steadily since Luis began to bind her wrists and ankles. Now he rips off a four-inch piece of duct tape and covers her lips. Her green eyes bloom to the size of teacups. The cords in her neck stretch taut as she flails her head back and forth.

"Grab her shoulders," Gerry says.

Sweet Jesus. This is tough to watch. I feel my stomach turning sour, my knees getting weak again. Such a waste of redheaded talent.

Luis stands motionless. Is he refusing Gerry's order? "Surely, *patron*, there has been enough killing."

"Get her fucking shoulders," Gerry says. "You told me yourself we can't take her through customs."

"I will not do this," Luis says.

Gerry stares at him. Seconds tick by. Finally Gerry shrugs. “Okay, fuck it. Go on back up to the flying bridge. I’ll handle this myself.”

Kelly’s body bucks wildly as Luis turns his back. Her throat makes awful sounds as Gerry drags her toward the railing.

I must say this is going exactly as I anticipated. Gerry wants no blood, no evidence on the boat. Gruesome as they are, staff reductions are to be carried out with a minimum of physical violence.

I think I’m going to throw up.

Gerry grab’s her waist and struggles to lift her onto the rail. Kelly’s emerald eyes bulge like a frog’s. I am once again reminded of that blue-bellied lizard of my nightmares. At least that little guy didn’t know what was going to happen to him. Kelly’s horror—mine, too—is the anticipation.

“Goodbye, hon,” Gerry says.

My monster lets go of her waist and begins to push on her shoulders. It’s a lot of weight for Gerry, and the redhead doesn’t slide easily. Her head shakes wildly, eyes aglow with fear, and then thrashing, she drops quietly out of sight.

I almost feel the splash more than hear her hitting the water, my gut imagining her panic, and my knees buckle beneath me. A glop of bile climbs my throat and splatters onto the deck.

The stench of my own vomit fills my nose. Breath comes in short, shallow gasps. Why doesn’t Gerry just shut the hell up and get this over with? Blabbermouth.

“Those shoulder straps okay?” Gerry says. “Not too tight, I hope.”

Bastard. Sitting in the fighting chair, though unbuckled to it, I am bridled by what Gerry called a stand-up fishing belt and harness. Straps circle my waist and chest as well my shoulders. Locking brass clips fix me to the harness, the pole, and the rod-mounted Penn 130 International reel.

“I think I see a school,” he says. “What luck.”

Gerry leans close to push the chrome drag lever on the Penn 130. “This will be the second time I’ve seen this happen,” he says.

Something heavy bumps the half-pound metal lure to which I am fatally attached. The line draws taut, digging deeper into the green rolling swells. Eternity tugs on my shoulder straps.

“I think you’ve got a hook-up,” he says.

Should I reach now for Luis’s knife?

FIFTY-SIX

Funny how many things you can think of in a split second of terror, facing almost certain death. Sure, I have what I imagine to be Luis's infamous switchblade knife in my pocket. But Gerry's standing right beside me. If I start wiggling Luis's Excalibur out of my pants, Gerry's going to take away my ace. No, my best shot at survival is to wait until I'm in the water with Big Tuna, try to cut myself free then.

The smell of saltwater and deck wood warming in the morning sunlight brings back memories of my father, the two of us fishing off the municipal pier in Oceanside, California. Pop would get me up before dawn and we'd be there with our lines in the water as the first rays of daylight warmed the damp wooden planking. We rarely caught a fish, but I loved those mornings, those few summer weeks when Pop didn't have to work. He enjoyed that time with me and Mom so much.

The IGFA Unlimited Bent-Butt pole bows deeply, tugging my harnessed torso closer to the boat's open transom and a probable ocean grave. I've never been big on praying, but right now my mind can't help but talk to God. "Why me, Lord? What did I do to deserve this?"

Funny, too, that God's answer comes in clear, an FM radio station broadcasting from heaven: "Why not you, Carr? It wasn't me who told you to fall for the redhead, forge Gerry's name on those transfer documents. Free will is a bitch."

Good point, God. But are you sure this has nothing to do with that blue-bellied lizard? Payback? Is my body going to wash ashore someplace where other lizards roam, where that long-dead reptile's distant cousins will feast on my miserable, rotting corpse?

The giant bluefin on the other end of my line has pretty much decided to quit messing around. I'm sliding off the chair, headed for that open transom. I once more go over my quickly formulated plan. When I hit the water, I'll go for the knife, being very careful not to drop it. Yuk. What a thought. I'll slice the line first, stop that giant bluefin from towing me, then maybe try to unfasten these brass reel clips. Or not. Maybe I should just try to reach the surface as quickly as possible, breathe again, the pole and reel still attached.

Why was I so worried? I've got this all figured out. No problem. I'll free myself from this monster fish, avoid Gerry and Luis for twelve hours, until its gets dark again, then swim thirty or forty miles—there's no land in sight—to the coast of New Jersey.

Hey, and I thought I was in serious trouble.

Big Tuna lifts my butt completely off the fighting chair and my split second of contemplation is over. This is it. I'm going out the open transom, my doorway to heaven.

My gaze picks up little images to take with me, probably to eternity. Snapshots of a disappearing world; a seagull riding the air behind Gerry's head, the bird motionless in flight, observing me in wonder; the horseshoe belt buckle on Gerry's abdomen, its silver flashing sunlight; and finally Gerry's gaze getting closer, checking the drag switch again. Maybe he's worried he didn't get the drag on full his first attempt, thinks I'm not going overboard fast enough.

You know what, Gerry. I think you just made the biggest, stupidest mistake of your fat fucking life. Yes, I'm zooming off that fighting chair now, unable to resist Big Tuna, but I'm pissed enough to throw every muscle hard to the right, reach out my taped hands for your Mexican silver belt buckle.

Yes! I've gotten a hold of it, too, a death grip, and there's enough time for me to look up, see Gerry's eyes pop open like full moons before we both fly through the open transom.

FIFTY-SEVEN

I'm in the water, upside down and tumbling. But I'm using the buddy system, holding onto Gerry's belt buckle. His weight strains my elbows and shoulders, stretching my biceps like gum. Together, the two of us are a twisting, rolling mass of arms, legs, fishing pole, and thick invisible line.

I congratulate myself until reason kicks in. Nice little piece of revenge, Austin, grabbing Gerry like that, but you might want to consider letting go now and reaching for Luis's sharp, last minute gift. That bulge in your pocket has the potential of saving your life. Gerry's belt buckle, not so much.

Big Tuna is towing us deep.

I let go of Gerry and point my fingers toward that switchblade in my pocket. I assume Gerry will stay behind, but he doesn't. His roly-poly shape struggles with an invisible opponent right beside me, both of us going deeper every second.

My brain sends an emergency message, a short telegram: You need to breathe. Let's suck a little oxygen, okay?

My fingers find the bulge in my pocket. It is in fact Luis's switchblade. I remember the shape from that night in the restaurant's parking lot. I work the big knife out of my pants pocket and push the chrome button that makes the blade spring open.

This is a very lucky knife, Austin. Make sure you don't drop it.

A second, more urgent message arrives from my brain: Dude! We are running out of time. And getting farther from the surface every second.

I work the blade around the thick fishing pole and, as best I can, slash at the invisible line near the reel. Nothing. Where is that freaking see-through fiber? I slash the blade at a spot closer to the pole itself, and instantly my descent stops.

I'm free of Big Tuna, though not the pole and reel.

Gerry is free of me and the pole, but not the giant bluefin. My monster is a dark, struggling shape in the water, shrinking in size below my feet, the Jersey cowboy tangle-tied to his own giant bluefin by thick monofilament line around his leg. He must have gotten snared while we were tumbling.

Gerry, my monster, Mr. Blabbermouth, the Cigar Meister, fades into the blue-black realm of the deep Atlantic. That place Luis called The Hole.

The saltwater begins to sting my eyes as I search for the surface. I kick my feet and twist. There's a small spot of brightness, like a night light down a dark hall. Okay, Austin, that's where you have to go, up, toward the morning sun.

My brain sends another message, words that pump another blast of adrenaline through my blood: This is your final warning, Austin. We are now officially out of air. Breathe right now, this instant, or I—Mr. Brain—am going to shut down.

Wait, brain. Hang on. I'm almost there, rising toward the surface.

The water gets darker as I draw closer and closer to the surface. Almost black now. Shouldn't the water be getting lighter? Am I headed the wrong way?

No, wait brain, don't leave me.

I'm almost there, but it's too late. My muscles stop working. One giant cramp. I didn't make it. My strength, my will, are used up. My brain is in fact shutting off. My lungs are going to breathe, like it or not. Unfortunately the only substance available is water.

Nice try, Austin. You almost made it.

I gasp. Filling my lungs with water doesn't hurt as bad as I thought it would. Peaceful blackness engulfs me.

Goodbye world. I love you kids.

Beth and Ryan.

FIFTY-EIGHT

What I assume to be final, semi-conscious mental images are of Beth and Ryan, the three of us playing whiffle ball in the old backyard. I'm tossing soft underhand lay-ups to Ryan while his sister roams the grass behind me, eager to snare a fly ball so it'll be her turn to bat. That's the rule. The hitter stays up until the defense grabs one in the air.

Ryan swings and misses.

I repeat a baseball mantra taught to me as a child: "Keep your eyes on the ball, son. Watch the ball hit the bat."

Ryan's face pinches with concentration as I lob another softie over our make-shift home plate, in this case my well worn outfielder's mitt. I last used that glove to catch actual baseballs in high school.

My son makes good contact this time. The whiffle ball zips on a hard line toward my chest. For some reason, I am unsuccessful in my attempt to make the catch, and the white hollow ball slams me in the chest. Wow. Feels like a truck load of bricks. I'm knocked right on my ass.

On the grass, looking up at a blue New Jersey sky, I try to laugh. Strange. I can't make a sound. I don't have any air with which to issue sound. Gee, Ryan. You knocked the wind out of me.

Mild panic invades my dream. How could a whiffle ball knock me over? And, more importantly, why the hell can't I breathe?

Ryan and Beth start jumping up and down on my chest. Pounding me over and over again with their sneaker-shod feet. Doesn't hurt too much, maybe because of their rubber soles. Or maybe it's because my chest and belly feel like they're full of...full of what? Cement?

I roll onto my side and puke. Sweet Jesus. Feels like I just barfed a five-course dinner for eight. No, make that a case of very salty California merlot. This vomit is all liquid.

But now I can breathe. Or gasp at any rate. Boy, that air tastes good. Sweet as sugar.

"Open your eyes, *afortunado*."

Who was that? I don't see anybody but Ryan and Beth. When did they start speaking Spanish? And why do they think I'm the lucky one? Didn't I just drown?

I open my eyes. Oh my, what a strange dream. Ryan's face has turned into my ex-favorite bartender's. Milk chocolate skin. Those black penetrating eyes. I can even hear Luis talking to me, too, clear as a fall blast of Canadian air.

"Did you lose my *cuchillo*?"

Huh? What's a koochi-koocho? And what the heck is going on with these changing faces and voices? Ryan to Luis to Charro? Man, this is one weird vision.

I puke again, another case of merlot...no...wait. It's saltwater. The stuff's coming out of mouth, my ears, my nose, even my...oh, you know. The other end.

How exactly does that happen?

"Can you speak?" Luis says.

Oh. My. God. It is Luis. Looks like I'm on the main deck of Gerry's Hatteras, lying on my side a few feet from that stupid fighting chair. Am I dead or alive? Or dreaming in between?

Luis saying, "Are you finished with the vomits?"

Actually, no. Another spasm racks my belly and I deposit several more cups of saltwater very near Luis's black Reeboks.

This last disgorging triggers a new level of clarity. I sure the hell am alive. Back on Gerry's boat. The puffy white clouds above me no longer look like tombstones.

"Luis?"

"Here," Luis says. "Drink this."

I put the shot glass to my lips. Can this be what I think it is? Luis tips the contents down my throat. The taste is unmistakable. Herradura Gold.

The tequila bounces off the inside of my stomach and spews back out my mouth. Yuk. A little bit flies back into the shot glass. Most lands directly on Luis's Reeboks. Along with one final quart of saltwater.

"You lost my knife," Luis says, "and now your vomit soils my shoes. Many would consider these actions ungrateful, my friend."

"Sorry."

He slaps my shoulder. "I was joking. It feels good to be alive, eh? Perhaps your humor will also return."

I shake my head, wipe the spittle from my nose and mouth. "What the hell happened? I was drowning. How did you get me back on board?"

He smiles, and I'm glad Luis is happy about my return. I don't think I could take another swimming lesson. "You were very lucky," he says. "I circled back when you took *el patron* with you over the railing. At first I saw nothing, no sign of either you or Senor Burns. But then the tip of your fishing pole returned to the surface right before my eyes."

"You pulled me out by the pole?"

"I lashed the wheel so that the boat turned in a circle, then jumped in after you."

Luis's dripping wet clothes attest to his bravery. I can't believe he did that for me. If the wheel had slipped, even a little, the boat could have moved hundreds of yards off course and Luis would have drowned out here with me and Gerry. Speaking of *el patron*...

"Did you pull Gerry out, too?"

"There is no sign of *Senor Burns*."

Can't say I'm surprised, or sorry. In fact, I hope that giant bluefin drags him all the way to Japan. A sushi surprise for the Tokyo markets. Although Gerry's death does raise another question.

"Are you mad at me for killing Gerry?" I say.

Luis shakes his head, no. "You only fought for your life. There is no blame. Remember it was I who gave you the knife."

I sigh. Well son of a bitch, Austin. You cheated the grim reaper and avenged Gerry's rude behavior with that cigar. Not bad for a New Jersey stockbroker who lives in a rusted out camper.

I push up onto my hands and knees. My head spins. My muscles feel like rubber. Perhaps some kind of fortification is needed for permanent reassembly. "Hey, Luis, can I try another shot of that Herradura?"

"*Si*. But only if you allow me time to step farther away."

FIFTY-NINE

Randall Zimmer, Esq. taps his pencil on a new pad of lined yellow legal paper. His hawk-like eyes are the same color as his walnut desk. "From what I know of A.A.S.D. regulations, Austin, it could be a while before you sell stocks and bonds again."

"I figured."

"We'll see. There are livelihood issues. The children. At least you're not the one who forged Gerry Burns' signature on that transfer document. Right?"

"No, sir. It must have been Kelly."

I nod knowing no one will ever find an original. He nods as if he believes me. Or least Mr. Z wants to believe me. He's a referral from my friend and co-worker Walter Osgood. "I think that's most of what we need to discuss today," he says. "I'll need to contact the various government and law-enforcement agencies involved, the insurance company and set up interviews. We will have to wait and see what kind of response we receive."

"You really think I might get a reward for the return of the Renoir?"

"I'm fairly certain. The company that insured the painting is very small. A reward has been offered. They were expecting to take quite a financial hit." He smiles, maybe a half-boat Zimmer grin. "And frankly, Austin, it would be difficult for me to take you on as a client if I thought otherwise. As you stated earlier, your current financial situation is somewhat desperate."

"Right."

Zimmer taps the pencil again on his legal pad. A small wrinkle forms over his eyebrows. "You've told me everything?"

"Yes, sir. The whole truth and nothing but."

"And all the bonds and all the money are in this green suitcase? Two-point-two million in tax-frees, ninety thousand in cash?"

I shrug, give myself a few moments to consider my answer. You have to be careful with lawyers, even your own. They're all officers of the court and you don't want to admit stuff that could be construed as a crime. See, they can't present false evidence, even a client's testimony if they know it's a lie.

"That's everything Luis and I found on the boat. I guess I might have borrowed a hundred or two, maybe three, since Luis docked in Cape May. You know. I needed food. Cab fare. That kind of thing."

He nods, reaches for his back pocket, and pulls a small wad of bills from his black leather wallet. A Gucci, I think. The bills are all hundreds. I just love those new portraits of Ben Franklin.

"I'd suggest you leave the Burns' cash and bonds with me," he says. "Use this money to live on until I can talk to the company insuring the Renoir. It won't take too long, I trust."

I accept his cash, fold the money and slip it into my blue jeans.

"The painting is safe?" he says.

"Definitely. I could leave that camper on the worst block in Newark and no one would steal it."

My lawyer leans forward. "But the Renoir is in the camper."

"Trust me, Mr. Zimmer. No one would touch that heap. Besides, I don't plan on leaving your parking lot until we work this out."

His eyebrows rise. "Well then, I suppose that's all right. I'll have my secretary inform and warn the guards."

I stand. "Anything else?"

He rises from his chair. "I think that's about it. Oh. I checked the records on that restaurant-bar. It is in fact registered to Luis Guerrero and Gerald Burns. Ownership changed more than a year ago so I think your friend is correct in assuming the IRS cannot put a lien on his half-share."

We shake.

"One more thing," Zimmer says. "Does Mr. Guerrero know he will be asked to give a deposition?"

"Yes, sir. He's going to call you, in fact, maybe hire you for more than the deposition."

"He wants our help in securing his interest in the bar?"

"Exactly."

"Tell Mr. Guerrero to call as soon as possible."

"I will."

"So." Zimmer taps his pencil again. He's like a ticking clock. "When Mr. Guerrero gives his deposition, his account will back up your story?"

"Yes, sir."

"One hundred percent?"

"Yes, sir."

It had better. Luis and I practiced telling the details of our story half a dozen times.

"I'll call you when I have news," Zimmer says.

I dust a couple of crumbs off my shirt. Zimmer's secretary brought me an onion bagel with my coffee. "As I said earlier, I don't plan on going anywhere. Just send someone out to the parking lot, knock on my window."

He smiles, maybe a full-boater this time.

"It's the yellow Chevy camper," I say. "With rust spots."

SIXTY

I step back to admire a masterpiece, the essence of light on a summer day, *Pont Neuf*, painted with oil on canvas in the year 1872 by Pierre August Renoir. The reproduction arrived yesterday, and now hangs over the working brick fireplace in my new, two-bedroom apartment.

Look at all those rich happy people, strolling in the sunshine.

“Ready to go?” Ryan says.

I ruffle my son’s scruffy blonde hair. “I’m ready. Where’s Beth?”

“In the bathroom.” He sidles closer, leans his head against my ribs. “I’m glad you paid Mommy the money you owed her, Pop. I missed seeing you.”

I wrap my arm around Ryan’s shoulders. I blink away moisture from my eyes. “Me, too, Big Guy. Me, too. I’ve been lonely.”

Ryan breaks off our mini-embrace to touch the new, sixty-four-inch plasma television we picked up earlier today. “This TV is so cool. Your whole apartment is. Those people must have paid you a really big reward for catching those bad guys.”

Beth joins us in the living room. “Daddy got the reward for returning the stolen painting, not catching bad guys. Mom showed us the story in the newspaper, remember?”

“The paper didn’t mention Pop,” he says.

“Yes. Why was that, Daddy?” Beth says.

“I’ll explain on the way to the beach. We better get started if we want to eat Mexican food tonight. It’s already dark and I have to stop for something on the way.”

“Are we really going to build a bonfire before dinner?” Ryan says.

“We sure are,” I say. “A big one.”

I explain all kinds of stuff on the way down to the now deserted Navasquan Municipal Beach Club: Impressionist art. The crimes of Gerry Burns. My friend Luis who didn’t before, but now owns Luis’s Mexican Grill. Why Mr. Randall Zimmer, Esq. kept my name out of the Renoir story. Giant bluefin.

Besides the violence, the only thing I refuse to discuss about my adventure is the score I made on that “little” insurance company Zimmer mentioned the other day in his office. I just couldn’t help loading up on the stock before the company announced publicly that they’d recovered *Pont Neuf*.

And I bought options, actually, not the common stock. The Nasdaq-listed common only went up three points, from fourteen to seventeen. What I bought—out-of-the-money call options—jumped in value from fifty cents to three bucks.

Austin Carr, market timer.

“All right, kids. You two get out, wait for me here while I drive down a little closer to the waves.”

“But we want to see the bonfire,” Ryan says.

“Oh, you’ll see it,” I say. “*Everybody’s* going to see it.”

Our bonfire sparks, crackles, and hisses above the surf and the stars. Hot orange light, fifteen-foot flames dance with our shadows on the cool beach sand.

Voices filter down through the sound of softly crashing waves, people talking on a balcony. I turn to find a middle-aged couple leaning against a railing outside their bedroom, both sipping drinks, the wife pointing at our fire.

“Remember to tell people we came for a walk on the beach, not to build a bonfire,” I say.
“Even later when we get to Luis’s.”

“That means we can’t tell anybody about stopping for gasoline, right?” Ryan says.

“Definitely.”

The kids understand why we watched the fire from so far back when my old Chevy camper’s gas tank finally explodes. A license plate and my NY Giant football helmet both land ten yards short of our feet.

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Wiley's Lament
Wiley's Shuffle
Wiley's Refrain
Dark Paradise

(*) Coming soon

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Here's a sample from Bill Moody's *The Man in Red Square*.

Prelude

At first glance there was nothing to distinguish the slightly built man, body thickened by a heavy parka, standing opposite the Lenin Mausoleum. A look, a nervous gesture, a tell-tale tic behind the wire-framed aviator sunglasses, none of these would have been evident to the casual observer. It's difficult to recognize a man poised, however reluctantly, on the brink of his own destiny.

He'd been standing there for nearly an hour, squinting into the glare of an unseasonal sun that had briefly thawed Moscow and brought its bewildered and confused citizens out in droves to bask in the unexpected mid-winter warmth.

A lot of the snow had melted, still scattered about Red Square, thick jagged patches remained, like a chain of white islands stretched from the dark, red stone walls of the Kremlin to the incongruous onion-like domes of St. Basil's Cathedral.

The icy wind blowing off the Moskva River swirled briefly about the Kremlin towers and whipped across the square towards the GUM Department Store, stinging the faces of lunch time shoppers scurrying in and out of its ornate facade.

Was it an omen perhaps, this freakish weather? Nature bestowing her approval? He couldn't decide. He only knew the earlier confidence and assurance had deserted him now, vanished like the puffs of his own breath in the wind, leaving him with only a cold knot of indecision clawing at the pit of his stomach.

It wasn't going to work. He was sure of it.

But even now, as his mind flirted with abandoning the whole idea, playing with the notion like a child with a favorite toy, he could feel several pairs of eyes, watching, recording his every move, tracking each step. There was no turning back now. One step and he would set in motion a chain of events from which there was no retreat.

He was committed, as surely as a diver who springs off the high board and waits only for the water to rush up and meet him.

Only his reason for being there defined him, set him apart from the swarm of foreign tourists and Muscovites waiting patiently in the long line snaking towards him across the square. Weary pilgrims to a godless shrine, shuffling ever closer for a fleeting glimpse of Lenin's waxen figure encased in glass.

Still motionless, his eyes restlessly wandered over the slow moving file. The Russians were easily distinguishable. Uniformly dressed in drab olives and dark browns, their enduring somber faces wore resignation like a mask. They were in sharp contrast to the animated group of Japanese, nervously chattering, eyes darting everywhere, clutching cameras and thumbing guidebooks.

Just ahead of the Japanese group, his eyes stopped and riveted on a man and woman. The man—tall, angular, seemingly oblivious to the cold in a light coat, tie flapping in the wind—stood ramrod stiff next to the much shorter woman. A mane of blond hair spilled over the folds of her thick fur coat.

They were exactly as he remembered.

The woman's breath expelled in tiny puffs as she gushed in obvious delight and pointed around the square. The man nodded absently, occasionally following her gestures. Once, they turned in his direction; he thought for a moment the man's eyes locked with his own. He turned away quickly, pulling the hood of his parka up around his face. Then, almost angrily, realizing he couldn't possibly be recognized at this distance, jammed his hands in the pockets of the parka, and felt his hand close over the small slip of paper.

Relax. How long had it been? Years. He forced himself to take several deep breaths and tried once again to shake off the anxiety. Was this all it would take? A hastily scribbled note?

The file was moving faster now. He would have to make his move soon. But there was something wrong with his legs. They wouldn't move. Again, almost angrily, he took off his sunglasses, as if they were the cause of his immobility. He turned into the wind and strolled casually towards the line.

He pushed through a large crowd coming out of the tomb, unmindful now of the grunts of protest as he jostled for a position nearer the Japanese group. A few turned to eye him curiously as he suddenly veered away and broke into a kind of slow jog. His boots crunched over a patch of snow; the blood began to pound in his ears.

Abruptly, he changed direction. He turned quickly, pushed through the orderly file, directly in front of the man and woman. Startled, the woman cried out, clutching her handbag close as he brushed against her. The fur of her coat lightly grazed his face. Angry voices filled his ears. Someone was shouting for the guards. The man, equally surprised said something but it was lost in the shouting.

He palmed the folded slip of paper and slid it easily into the tall man's coat pocket.

For a fleeting moment, so vital that everything depended on it, he turned his face squarely to the man. He saw the flashing spark of recognition dissolve into shock, the mouth drop open to speak a name, silently formed on bloodless lips. Then he was gone, melting into the crowd, past curious stares, indignant voices.

It was done.

He walked hurriedly, zigzagging across the square, glancing back over his shoulder, knowing there would be no pursuit. He paused at the steps of the Metro, free at last of the crowds.

Perhaps, free of Russia.

Tommy Farrell was waiting for Santa Claus.

He'd had other plans for Christmas Eve—plans that didn't include freezing his ass off in the back of a broken down van on the New York Thruway. He sat hunched on the floor near the rear doors, shifting his position for the third time in as many minutes but finally gave it up as a useless exercise. There was simply no way to get warm or comfortable. He could only take solace in the knowledge that the red, disabled vehicle tag flying from the van's aerial was as false as his hopes that the Jets would make the Super Bowl.

He looked out the van's rear window. The late evening traffic rushing by was lighter now than when he'd taken up his position nearly an hour before and moving steadily. The road had been cleared, but new snow flurries were already starting to fall and a heavy storm was predicted by midnight. Perfect weather for Santa Claus, Farrell thought, lighting a cigarette and pulling the collar of his coat up around his ears.

He checked the luminous dial of his watch. Eight o'clock. He dragged deeply on the cigarette and tried to dredge up thoughts about duty to country, but they were easily obscured by the vision of his wife, at home in front of a glowing fire, putting finishing touches on the tree and explaining to their two young children why daddy had to work on Christmas Eve even if he is in the FBI.

He shivered again and poured the last of the coffee from a thermos. It was still hot but flat, tasteless. He felt the van shudder and turned sharply as the interior was suddenly bathed in blinding light, revealing for a moment the tripod-mounted Nikon with a long-range telephoto lens. A klaxon horn shattered the night as a heavy diesel thundered by dangerously close.

Farrell's hand shook; the coffee spilled. He cursed the huge truck as the hot liquid splashed on his hand. Tossing the cup aside, he wiped his hand on his jacket and squinted through the lens of the Nikon.

The camera was trained on a phone booth across the expressway.

He carefully adjusted the focus and checked the meter reading. With high speed, infrared film to compensate for the poor expressway lighting, the pictures would be sharp and clear if conditions held. He rotated the lens slightly until he could read the number on the dial of the telephone.

"Bingo One, Bingo One, this is Caller." The metallic voice crackled out of the small hand-held radio beside Farrell.

"Go, Caller," he answered.

"The Navy's on the way. Just passed the toll booths. ETA, four minutes."

"Gotcha." Farrell laid the radio aside, checked his watch and the camera once again and nervously watched the minutes tick off. In just under four minutes, a dark blue sedan pulled off the expressway and parked in front of the phone booth.

The driver emerged cautiously from the car, briefly scanned the oncoming traffic and gave Farrell's van a cursory glance. For an instant, the driver's face was framed in the lens. "Gotcha," Farrell murmured aloud. The Nikon's motor drive whirled as he clicked off several frames.

Through the lens, Farrell continued to track the man as he strode towards the phone booth. Inside, a dim light came on over his head as he closed the folding door. Farrell watched tensely as the man took a large envelope from under his coat and stuck it under the shelf below the phone. He hung up the receiver and quickly returned to his car. Farrell shot the last of the roll at the retreating car as it merged with the traffic heading toward New York City.

With practiced hands, Farrell rewound the film, loaded the camera with a fresh roll and re-adjusted the focus. He paused for a moment, lighting another cigarette, then picked up the radio.

"Caller, this is Bingo One."

"Go Bingo," the voice replied.

"Santa's helper has come and gone."

"Roger, Bingo. Santa should be along in a minute. How you doin' out there?" The business-like voice suddenly became friendly.

Farrell smiled. "Okay if I ever thaw out."

"Hang on. I'll buy you a drink when we wrap this up, okay?"

"No thanks. It's Christmas Eve remember?"

"Aw, you married guys are all alike. Why don't you...wait a minute. Santa just went through the gate. Black Buick, four-door."

"Right," Farrell said. He snapped off the radio and rubbed his hands together. He counted off three minutes and forty-two seconds before the second car pulled off and parked near the phone

booth. For more than a minute, the flashing tail lights winked at Farrell, but no one got out of the car.

“C’ mon, c’ mon.” The snow flurries were beginning to thicken. As if responding to Farrell’s anxiety, the door opened and a man got out. Short, thick-set, and as with the first man, his face was briefly framed in the lens.

Farrell’s breath quickened at the sight of the familiar face. He pressed the shutter button. Swiveling the camera, he tracked his prey to the booth and locked in for a waist-high shot.

This time there was no pretense of dialing. The man simply held the receiver in one hand and felt under the shelf for the envelope. He seemed to stare directly into the lens, as if he knew it was there, Farrell would remember later.

While the man grappled with the folding door, Farrell shot the remaining film and grabbed the radio, almost shouting now. “All units, go!”

Red lights flashing, tires screeching in protest, a police cruiser arrived seconds later. It skidded to a halt blocking the outside lane and was quickly joined by three unmarked cars. Together they boxed in the black Buick.

Farrell continued to watch through the lens. The expression of bewilderment and shock on the man’s face quickly gave way to resignation as he was led away to one of the waiting cars. Then, police cruiser in the lead, one of the policemen driving the Buick, the convoy roared off, leaving the phone booth deserted once again.

Farrell quickly packed up the camera and lens in an aluminum case. He jumped out of the van’s rear doors, tore off the red tag from the aerial and climbed into the driver’s seat. Turning the ignition key, he smiled in relief as the engine came to life easily.

He paused for a moment wondering as always where his photos might end up. On the desk of the Bureau Chief? In the Kremlin? Well, it didn’t matter really. He’d done his job.

He shoved the van in gear and pulled onto the expressway. With any luck he’d be home in time to help with the turkey.

One

It was nearly nightfall as the jumbo jet burst through the heavy dark sky over Washington and touched down at Dulles International Airport. The chirp of tires and sudden reverse thrust of engines jolted John Trask, brought him to the surface of an uneasy slumber. He rubbed a bony hand over his sharply chiseled face, blinked out the window at the airport lights flashing by and unbuckled his seat belt.

Once inside the terminal, Trask eased through customs and immigration. Diplomatic status has its rewards, he thought, smiling at the novelty of traveling under his own name. He moved quickly to beat the crowd to the ground transportation exit and scanned the rank of taxis for the car that would take him to Langley.

There was snow on the ground and the night sky promised more of the same. In a moment he was joined at the curb by a much younger man and directed to the waiting car. Trask eased in the back seat, and closed his eyes as the driver negotiated the airport traffic and angled towards the Virginia Expressway.

Gratefully, he sank back against the seat, feeling the fatigue spread through him. But even his weariness could not stop the jumble of thoughts racing through his mind. It was happening again.

Just when he thought he had the answer, it slipped away, triggering the familiar signs he'd grown to trust that meant something didn't quite fit.

The arrest of a Soviet official—especially one without diplomatic immunity—was always welcome news, but this one didn't make any sense at all. Why would a senior trade delegate, with an unblemished record, jeopardize his career and usefulness to Moscow with a stupid blunder?

Yes, the stakes were high and the target, seemingly ready-made: a dissatisfied young naval officer, up to his neck in debt with access to a guidance system project. Normally an ideal situation, but not for Dimitri Zakharov. He was an old hand and knew better than anyone how Moscow viewed mistakes. The evidence was undeniable. The photos wrapped it up very neatly and were no doubt giving the Kremlin fits. Too neat? It all stacked up on paper, but Trask couldn't shake the feeling something was wrong.

Zakharov had seemed oblivious to the FBI surveillance. There were several meetings on film and the financial arrangements were astonishingly amateurish. Cash wrapped in brown paper and deposited the morning after a drop. Still, the material he was buying was top grade so maybe he could be excused the indiscretion and the speed of the operation.

Moscow normally took months to set up a recruitment. Zakharov had moved in on the naval officer in weeks. Maybe he was coming over. It was an unusual approach, but it had been done before. To avoid suspicion in Moscow, a would-be defector forces an arrest, then quietly disappears into a new life, new identity and leaves the Kremlin to wonder what went wrong.

For the moment, Trask discarded these thoughts. He had his own defector to worry about. An American defector.

"How much further driver?" Trask asked. He sat up straight and lit a cigarette. He'd lost track of where they were.

"Not long, sir," the driver replied. "Turnoff is just coming up."

Trask looked out at the rolling hills blanketed with snow as the car swung off the George Washington Parkway and sped up to the Langley complex. Identification cards were checked quickly and they were waved through towards the seven-story main building. The car submerged into the basement garage. Trask nodded his thanks to the driver, grabbed his briefcase and took the elevator to the Director's conference room. Only the quiet hum of the heating system and the faint throb of the computer center broke the stillness.

Trask saw he was the last to arrive. They all looked up as he entered. Eugene McKinley, sitting in for Director Richard Abrams, a young aide from the State Department, a gruff looking Admiral from Naval Intelligence, and of course, Charles Fox, old friend, former mentor, looking a bit tired, a bit older, but Trask was happy to note, the sparkling blue eyes were bright as ever.

"Ah, John, at last," Charles said rising. "Good to see you again. How are things in Moscow?"

"Fine, Charles. Good to see you. It's been too long." They clasped hands warmly, memories reflected in both their eyes. Field work in Budapest, debriefings in Berlin and Prague. They had crisscrossed Europe together. Looking at Charles Fox, one would be surprised to learn that this urbane, distinguished gentlemen had once run one of the most effective networks in Eastern Europe. It was just too bad about Prague, Trask reflected.

He nodded greetings to McKinley and was quickly introduced to the others. A Filipino mess steward brought in coffee and sandwiches while Trask dropped into one of the easy chairs arranged around the fireplace. The blazing logs gave off a pleasant aroma of cedar and pine. A fireside chat, Trask thought. This should be interesting. Abrams from State, looking far too cool and young for such a job, shuffled through a pile of papers and munched on a ham sandwich.

The admiral puffed sullenly on his cigar and stared into the fire. The amenities were quickly over as Eugene McKinley led off.

"Well, gentlemen, shall we get started," he began. He was a beefy man and bulged under his dark suit. His face was pink and freshly shaved. "The Director asked for this meeting to iron out the initial details, give us a starting point so to speak, and hopefully, after tonight we'll have our bearings. As I'm sure you're all aware, the Director is devoting his time, as is the president, to the current situation in Iran." He looked around the group for confirmation and found it in the expressions and silence of everyone present.

It was unthinkable, but fifty-two Americans were at the mercy of a fanatic Islamic leader and the U.S. Government, with all its power and resources, was seemingly helpless. Everyone there silently contemplated the consequences of an unfound solution.

Trask wondered if it were true that at the time of the hostages were taken, there was not a single operative in Iran with the exception of those in the embassy.

McKinley broke the silence and turned to Abrams from State. Trask eyed him coolly. Sharp, perhaps too sharp. He had Ivy League written all over him and reminded Trask of those young, ambitious men of the long but not forgotten days of Watergate who had hovered about the Nixon White House.

"Richard, suppose you bring us up to date on the Zakharov arrest," McKinley said.

Abrams barely referred to his notes as he began. "Dimitri Zakharov, a senior official of Amtorg, the Russian trade organization based in New York City, arrested December twenty-four by an FBI surveillance team. At the time of his arrest, he was in possession of highly sensitive classified material secured from," he paused to check the name, "Lieutenant Mark Hopkins, U.S. Navy." Abrams flicked a glance at the Admiral and got a stony stare in return.

"What about this Hopkins?" Charles interrupted.

"I was coming to that," Abrams said. He seemed slightly annoyed at Charles's question. "Hopkins, age thirty-seven, was working on a guidance control project. I don't really know all the details, but he had apparently gotten above his means. New house, new car, charge accounts, and of late, some gambling debts." Abrams paused again. "As we all know, this is exactly the tailor-made situation the Soviets ferret out these days."

No one disagreed with Abrams. Blackmail, subversion, compromise, even the odd assassination were still very much a part of the Soviet arsenal but in recent years, they had gone right to the core of things—money.

"Hopkins was put under routine surveillance as part of a periodic security check when he was accidentally seen in the company of Zakharov," Abrams added.

"Accidentally?" Charles broke in again and exchanged the briefest of looks with Trask, who was thinking the same thing.

"Well, not exactly by accident." Abrams appeared slightly flustered. "He and Zakharov were spotted together in the same restaurant on two separate occasions. Coincidence was ruled out enough to step up surveillance on Hopkins and take a closer look at Zakharov, although at the time of his arrest, his record was clean."

"Maybe somebody should have been a little more careful with Zakharov," the admiral put in from behind a cloud of smoke. His edginess was understandable. Hopkins was the navy's responsibility and the admiral would be held accountable.

"I'm afraid I'll have to agree with the admiral," Charles said.

"Oh, certainly Zakharov had been routinely checked out a number of times, as I'm sure you're well aware, Mr. Fox, the FBI's most conservative estimates set the number of Soviet operatives

at about three thousand. Or, in effect, one in three Soviets in the U.S. are engaged in some type of clandestine activity. That requires a lot of manpower to keep track of them all.” It wasn’t the State Department’s fault Abrams was saying.

“Yes, quite right,” Charles said, shrugging at the admiral.

McKinley looked like he’d heard it all before and Trask noted that Abrams was now regarding Charles with a good deal more interest. He shuffled his papers and continued.

“Over the next several weeks, Hopkins and Zakharov met several times in which no exchange was detected. Naval Intelligence was alerted. Hopkins’ record was spotless, but he was engaged in highly sensitive work. The meetings became more frequent and less covert. Parks, hotels, bars, convincing the FBI something was in the offing.”

Everyone digested the information Abrams read out in his precise, clipped tones. Even if both were out of character, a high-ranking Soviet official and a naval officer in a sensitive job spelled just one thing.

“At first,” Abrams continued, “the FBI thought there might be some sort of sting operation through naval intelligence. Unhappily that turned out to be negative. Finally, Hopkins was discovered lifting photo-copied material and later dropped. But the actual exchange was not detected.”

“And the material?” Charles asked.

“Low grade stuff,” Abrams said, smiling reassuringly. “It was obviously a first step so a decision was made to allow Hopkins to go all the way in hopes of a bigger drop.”

What was Charles after? Trask wondered. He knew the mechanics of an operation better than anyone. Was he just trying to keep Sonny Boy on his toes or was something bothering him as well? He looked forward to a private talk with Charles.

Abrams rearranged his notes and continued. “There was a hurried meeting before Christmas Eve, quite in the open this time. The FBI pulled all the stops, and on Christmas Eve, Hopkins made a drop in a phone booth on the New York Thruway. A few minutes later, it was recovered by Zakharov. Both were arrested immediately. Hopkins of course, will be court martialed.”

“What’s the man’s state?” Charles asked, turning to the admiral.

“He’s made a complete confession, claims the money was too good to pass up. His family is taking it pretty hard. His wife apparently knew nothing, but his father is also Navy, which makes it difficult. Looking at Hopkins record, well, financial problems or not, it was a shock to everyone.”

Charles sat back in his chair and stared pensively into the fire. He only half heard McKinley’s question. “What about Zakharov?”

“He’s being held pending further investigation, and although he doesn’t have diplomatic immunity, the Soviets have lodged the standard protest over his incarceration and accused us of withholding information. I assume, however, Zakharov will stand trial and be sentenced by Federal Court following lengthy debriefings. Returning him to Moscow is naturally out of the question and for once we can do more than simply declare him *persona non grata*.” Abrams paused dramatically, to ensure he had everyone’s attention. “Gentlemen, I don’t have to tell you what an opportunity this is.” His attitude was almost as if he’d single handedly brought about Zakharov’s capture.

“Yes, well, I think John has something to add that might complicate matters,” McKinley said. All eyes turned to Trask who had been quietly absorbing Abrams’ monologue and Charles’ probing.

“Yes, John, what’s all this about a defector coming home?” Charles sat up and faced Trask.

“Defector? I...” Abrams was clearly perplexed.

“Sorry, Richard,” McKinley said. “This is all pretty recent. That’s why we recalled John from Moscow. He’s senior man and talked to Mason himself.”

“Mason? Is that the defector’s name?” Abrams was frantically searching through his papers.

“No, Owens is the defector,” McKinley said. “Well, go ahead, John. It’s your show from here.”

Trask got up and stood in front of the fireplace. “I guess I should start from the beginning. Five years ago, in late 1974, Robert Calvin Owens, an employee of Triton Industries in Sunnyvale, California, turned up on the doorstep of the Soviet embassy in San Francisco. He was five years back from Vietnam and seemingly on the verge of a brilliant career in microchip technology, Triton’s specialty. Owens’ mother—he has no other family—was shocked and his friends, what there were of them, were dumbfounded. The Soviets, of course, could hardly contain their excitement. Silicon Valley is one of their prime targets, and with Owens background, they didn’t stop to ask questions. He was on the first plane to Moscow before anything could be done. Since then, we’ve had only sketchy reports about his whereabouts, but we do know he was assigned to Bureau T in Zelenograd, the Russian version of Silicon Valley.” Trask paused, aware of the attention of the others.

“Three weeks ago, an American couple, Arthur and Joan Mason, were in Moscow, sightseeing in Red Square. Owens apparently appeared out of the crowd, brushed against them and stuffed a note in Mason’s pocket.”

“What did it say?” Charles asked.

Trask paused again, looking around the group. McKinley stared into the fire; Abrams clutched his briefcase and listened open-mouthed. The admiral reached for another cigar.

“It was a simple message: My name is Robert Owens. Can I come home?”

“Extraordinary,” Charles said. He searched Trask’s face for some sign.

“And you interviewed Mason?” McKinley asked, looking away from the fire.

“Right. I have a transcript of the interview. Mason came directly to the embassy with the note. He was quite sure it was Owens. They had worked together briefly at Triton, but he said Owens seemed to be almost making sure he was recognized. I have the note also.” Trask opened his case and took out a sheet of paper. “This is a photo copy,” he said, handing it around. “We’ve done a preliminary hand writing check but it will get a full analysis.”

“Any report yet?” Charles asked, looking at the note.

Trask lit a cigarette and nodded. “This is either Owens’ hand or an excellent forgery.”

“Forgery?” Abrams was sitting on the edge of his chair. “But why would you suspect forgery? I mean...”

“I didn’t say we suspect anything,” Trask shot back. He looked at Charles and saw the realization already spreading over his face. Only Abrams and the admiral didn’t know, he guessed.

“But I don’t see the connection between this and the Zakharov arrest,” Abrams said. “This...” His voice trailed off as if he suddenly realized his own execution was known to everyone and he was just finding out for himself.

“Tell him, John,” McKinley said.

Trask stared for a moment at Abrams. Time to drop the bomb and send this whiz kid back to State with his tail between his legs.

“Moscow wants a trade,” he said evenly. “Owens for Zakharov.” He threw his cigarette into the fire and listened to the silence. Charles, he noted, was smiling.

Abrams began to stuff papers into his briefcase. "Oh really, I mean how can we even discuss this. A defector, a traitor for a top Soviet caught in the act. I've no doubt the Russians would like Zakharov back. Of course they want a trade." Abrams ignored the admiral, but looked imploringly from McKinley to Trask to Charles.

"Well, I'm afraid that's the way it has to be worked out, Richard, and we'll expect full cooperation from State on this. Thank you for your part. We'll take it from here," McKinley said, clearly dismissing Abrams.

Abrams nodded and was joined by the admiral as McKinley accompanied them out. Trask and Charles were left alone.

"Well, John, you've managed to pull out another surprise," Charles said.

"I don't know what I've pulled out, Charles. I'm only a messenger on this one. But anyway, you're ahead of me on surprises. Are you back in the fold or is this a special guest appearance?" Neither man would mention Prague.

Charles shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. They keep threatening to retire me and I keep resisting. I do some consulting now and then for the Eastern desk. Still, perhaps this means something substantial is in the works."

Trask nodded. "I guess it will be a routine exchange, but we'll have to see what Eugene says."

"Yes, I'm inclined to agree, but it does seem a bit strange, Zakharov's arrest, I mean. Still, as you say..." Charles seemed preoccupied, drifting off before Trask could pursue him. McKinley returned and broke out a bottle of brandy.

"Now then," he said, sitting down and filling three glasses. "Let's get down to business. I'm afraid our young man from State is a bit miffed. The Zakharov case was his baby and he's been liaison with the FBI. I couldn't resist letting you break the news, John. The president has already been advised, of course, so I think Abrams can stand a little feather ruffling."

"So," Charles began, "I can understand Moscow wanting Zakharov back, but why are we so keen to welcome Owens home?"

"Owens could be invaluable," Trask answered. "Technology is the Soviets highest priority these days, and according to our sources, Owens has been at Zelenograd all this time. Someone who's been on the inside, even a defector, will have a wealth of information. Then, there's also the possibility Owens was recruited much earlier, maybe while he was in the army, for example. A kind of reverse sleeper. Don't forget, we're well ahead of the Soviets in development. Owens could confirm that."

"Yes," McKinley said, "or refute it. If only we could stop the insane student exchange program. We send our students to Moscow University to study Russian fairy tales and they send us older graduate students to study physics and laser development." McKinley sighed. "The main thing is to ensure Owens' attitude is going to be cooperative."

"And," Charles said, "that he is indeed Robert Owens. Which makes it difficult for us if I'm correct in assuming that, with the exception of this fellow Mason, nobody's seen Owens for what, five years?"

"Exactly," McKinley said. "I believe John has the only viable plan if we're to go ahead with this. To positively confirm Owens, we've got to come up with someone from his past—college roommate, co-worker, army buddy—someone who could ask questions only the real Owens could answer. Even with intensive background briefings, there are certain details of a man's life that can't be anticipated, especially if you go back far enough." McKinley paused a moment. "I don't like to think about it, but there's certainly a consideration Owens could be a ringer. Find someone who looks enough like him, plastic surgery, well you both know how it works."

Charles nodded and then said. "What about this fellow Mason he contacted in Moscow? If Mason worked with Owens, surely he could make a positive identification."

"No, Charles. It was seven years ago, and besides, he didn't know Owens very well. In any case, I don't think he'd be a willing candidate."

"Well, suppose we find such a person. What then?" Charles asked. "Even assuming Moscow will agree, won't it mean sending an inexperienced man into a potentially dangerous situation?"

"How do you mean?" Trask asked.

"Moscow will certainly stipulate any such confirmation be made on their home ground won't they? They're certainly not going to let Owens just walk away while we still have Zakharov."

McKinley allowed himself a smile. "As usual, Charles, you're absolutely correct. We want you to find this man for us and convince him a trip to Europe would be a grand experience. With the help of our computer records of course. We'll iron out the details after we see what we have to choose from. I can think of no one more qualified, right, John?"

Trask nodded. It was true of course. Charles Fox had recruited and run agents all over Eastern Europe under the worst conditions. His natural, persuasive charm would be perfect. People talked to Charles. Trask had seen it time after time.

"Well, it's settled then," McKinley said. "John will go back to Moscow and work out things there. Charles, I'll authorize all the computer time you need starting tomorrow, but we have to work fast. We've pulled Owens' file already, there isn't much to go on, I'm afraid." McKinley drained his glass. "In fact, what I've seen makes me wonder if Robert Calvin Owens even existed."

Charles caught McKinley and Trask exchange an almost imperceptible glance.

A shared secret? I wonder, he thought.

Two

Speeding along an endless, two-lane asphalt strip towards Cable Falls, Montana, Charles Fox smiled, remembering a sports commentator's description of a boxing champion on the eve of his retirement. An aging pro in the twilight of a fading career, the sportscaster had said.

An aging pro perhaps, but his career, if somewhat dimmed, had not faded completely. Not yet. At fifty-seven, Charles Fox had been an American citizen for more than twenty-five years. But the traces of his native English accent, the Etonian mannerisms could be called upon and unleashed in full if the situation required it.

The hair was silver and thinning, complimented by a narrow white mustache. The compact body, except for a few extra pounds, was the same as when he'd roamed the back streets and alleys of Eastern Europe.

First with the OSS and later with the CIA, he eventually ran a network of operatives which had become as legendary as Fox himself. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 had changed all that, though he rarely allowed himself to think about it anymore.

In recent years with his wife dead and a daughter in college, Fox had been a consultant for Eastern European operations, lecturing, teaching, drawing on his knowledge of the area. Since Prague field work had become a thing of the past.

It was rumored there was a woman somewhere although no one thought to ask. Fox was often seen in the more fashionable restaurants around Georgetown. Always impeccably dressed,

usually in the company of an old friend or former colleague, Fox was seemingly content to enjoy the delights of good food and wine.

But beneath the veneer of complacency, he harbored a longing for a return to action. The blue eyes still sparkled and the mind was as wily and cunning as ever. Charles Fox was glad to be back in the fold, even temporarily. Even in Montana.

The snow, so he had been told by the Hertz clerk in Billings, had stopped several days ago. The road was clear and the hard packed snow gleamed like polished stone in the bright sunlight. Frozen lakes and streams flew by in a blue blur, and despite the heavy sheepskin jacket, the car heater was going full blast. Montana was cold and lonely. He hadn't seen another car for nearly an hour.

He flipped around the radio dial but continued to find only weather and farm news, laced with the heavy staple of country and western music. Grimacing, he gave up finally, snapped off the radio longing for a Beethoven Quartet. He let his mind focus on why he was in Montana.

After further meetings with Eugene McKinley and John Trask, the list of possible candidates for Owens's confirmation had been shortened to five. It had been agreed to concentrate on the period which encompassed Owens' stay at college, military service and finally, the point of his defection. But even with the aid of the Langley computers, Owens' life was virtually a blank slate. Preliminary inquiries had confirmed the initial impression that Owens was indeed a loner. With the exception of his mother—and she had refused point blank to discuss her son's defection to the Soviet Union—Owens had no other family. Anyone who did remember him could make only vague references. In the end, they were left with Owens' army service and his employment at Triton Industries.

It now fell to Charles Fox to narrow down this short list to one. Final approval of the project was dependent upon finding a suitable, reliable man to verify Owens as genuine. One man. To go where? Western Europe? Hungary? Czechoslovakia? Russia? It still wasn't agreed where the meeting would take place. Trask had returned to Moscow to make those arrangements and once there, this man, singled out purely by chance, would be called upon to erase any doubts about Robert Owens identity. At least that was the idea.

Charles warmed to the task before him, flushed with anticipation at the thought of playing an active role again. Choosing the right man would be important and Charles was convinced the answer would be among the survivors of Owens' unit in Vietnam. Two of the five candidates had already been eliminated. One had been killed in a car crash three years ago. The second, a bleeding mind that had never recovered from the horrors of Vietnam, was institutionalized in a Veteran's hospital in California. For the remaining three, Charles was left with a high school teacher in Las Vegas, the security chief of Triton Industries, and if the file could be believed, a Montana farmer with long hair, an even longer record of drug arrests and decidedly leftist politics. To Charles, none were promising.

Nearing Cable Falls, Charles braked, skirted a slow-moving tractor and watched the sun, now an orange disk, sink into a sea of snow. He drove slowly past the city limits sign toward a cluster of wood frame buildings. The town looked nearly deserted as he reached the end of the main street and pulled up in front of what appeared to be the town's only motel.

Charles gazed through the windshield at its run down look, guessed he would find lumpy beds and moaning water pipes. Sighing, he parked and got out of the car, feeling the chilled air on his ears. His feet crunched over the hard-packed snow as he tramped up the steps to the entrance. A hand-written placard in the window read: Vacancy. "I should think so," he muttered to himself as he surveyed the empty parking lot.

A tiny bell jangled as he opened the door. Behind a scarred desk, a rail-thin man lounged sullenly, head bobbing to the blaring radio, moaning a mournful song of a trucker's lost love. Charles shuddered inwardly and walked up to the desk.

The clerk regarded Charles curiously, shifted a toothpick to one corner of his mouth and grunted. "Hep ya?" A gnarled hand clawed at the radio and turned it down slightly.

"Possibly," Charles said. "I'm looking for the Savage farm."

"That so," the clerk replied. "You a friend of Mike's then are ya?" His voice was almost a whine and thick with contempt. His already narrowed eyes grew more suspicious.

"Not exactly. This is kind of an official visit." Charles produced a wallet crammed with credit cards and casually let the clerk take in the government identification. "No problem however. Mr. Savage might even thank you for pointing me in the right direction."

"Mr. Savage, eh?" The clerk snorted at the address and spat out the toothpick. He paused for a moment in indecision. "Well, I reckon you'd find him anyway. Usually down at Maggie's Bar come supper time. Drives a pickup. Anybody down there can tell you how to git to his place," the clerk added, making it obvious it wasn't going to be him.

"Fine," Charles said, deciding the clerk wasn't going to volunteer any more information even if he pressed him. "In the meantime, have you got a room? I'd like to clean up a bit."

"Spoze so." The clerk dragged a dusty ledger off a shelf and opened it to a page of indecipherable scrawls to which Charles added his own. The clerk glanced at the name and handed him a key attached to a wooden block. "Ah, we pay in advance here—cash," he drawled as Charles turned to go.

"Of course," Charles said, trying to keep the amusement out of his voice. He laid two twenty-dollar bills down. "Will this be sufficient?"

"Yeah, I reckon so. Have to git your change to you later."

Charles nodded and left the clerk to gnaw another toothpick as the radio resumed full volume. He took his bag out of the trunk, found room five—only a slight improvement over the office—and dropped on the bed. The drive had been tiring, but he was surprised to find he'd slept for nearly an hour when the knock came at the door. It was the clerk with his change.

"Don't see Mike's truck at the bar," the clerk said, peering over Charles shoulder into the room. "Course on the other hand, he might have gone up to the mountains." The hint of a smile crossed his face.

Especially if you've warned him off, Charles thought. "Well, thank you for your trouble. Where can I get something to eat?"

"Bar's the best place. Maggie does a good chicken fried steak."

"Right," Charles said. "Thanks again."

It took ten minutes for the water to get hot. Under the shower, Charles decided it was going to be difficult to even find Mike Savage, much less talk to him. He began to regret his decision to arrive in Cable Falls unannounced.

He dressed quickly, put a well-placed paper clip in the door and headed for Maggie's Bar. It was dark now. The shapes of the buildings were silhouetted against the white landscape. A dog barked somewhere as he passed several small pickup trucks and pushed through the door.

Three men in heavy overalls huddled at the bar. At one of the tables, two grizzled old men slapped checkers on a board. In one corner, under a stark hanging light, two younger men were shooting pool and drinking beer out of bottles. A third leaned against the wall in boredom. Everyone looked up as Charles came in. He could feel their eyes follow him as he walked to a table in the rear.

“What’ll it be, mister?” A woman Charles guessed must be Maggie appeared out of the kitchen. She had a hard lean face, rough, red hands and strands of hair hung down over surprisingly soft brown eyes.

Charles smiled at her. “The man at the hotel says you do a good chicken fried steak. That would be fine. Oh, and a beer please.”

Maggie nodded and shuffled away, returning a few minutes later with an ice cold beer and the steak, batter fried, alongside a heaping mound of mashed potatoes swimming in brown gravy. There was also a small dish of sweet corn.

Charles ate hungrily, listening to the snatches of conversation over the drone of the radio, the crack of pool balls and checkers. He was acutely aware of the searching glances of the few customers. A few newcomers came in, but none of them was Mike Savage. Maggie seemed to read his mind though; he was sure the hotel clerk had already spread the word.

“Mike won’t be in tonight,” Maggie said, ringing up the bill on an old cash register. “If he comes in, it’s always earlier than this.” She slammed the register drawer shut with a bang.

“I don’t suppose you could direct me then?” Charles ventured. “It’s rather urgent that I see him.” The pool game had stopped. Charles was aware of the heavy silence that swept over the bar.

Maggie studied Charles for a long moment, glanced toward the pool table and pushed back a wisp of hair from her eyes. “Follow the road out of town north about twelve miles. There’s a turnoff on your right. Can’t miss it in this moonlight. Little ways up, there’s a fork. Take the one on the left. Mike’s place is about half a mile further up.” She turned abruptly and headed for the kitchen.

“Thanks,” Charles called after her. The crack of pool balls resumed as he stepped out onto the street.

He walked back to the motel for his car and drove out of town, checking the odometer and the rear-view mirror as he drove. No company and the turnoff was exactly twelve miles. He turned and soon reached the fork Maggie had described. He stopped the car for a moment. The one on your left she had said. Charles went right. Another couple of minutes and his headlights caught a sign: BEWARE OF OWNER. Smiling, Charles parked the car off the road and got out.

He tramped up the hill along a worn trail recently cleared of snow. Every few paces he stopped, listened intently for any sounds, but there was only the wind through the trees until he’d gone a few more steps.

“Hold it right there, mister.” Charles froze. A shadowy figure emerged from behind a tree and moved toward him cautiously. “Hands on top of your head.”

Charles complied and looked at the man as he came closer. Just over six-feet tall, he guessed. Bushy eyebrows, heavy mustache and dressed in faded jeans and a scuffed sheepskin jacket. Despite the cold the man wore no hat, but his long hair was tied back in a ponytail. Charles knew he’d found Mike Savage and he was now looking down the double barrels of a shotgun pointed at his middle.

“They tell me at Maggie’s a government man’s lookin’ for me. That must be you, eh?” Savage moved closer. In the moonlight, Charles could make out his features, but he was not close enough to make a grab for the gun even if he wanted to.

“I confess,” Charles said. “May I be permitted to identify myself?”

“That’s the idea. Real careful now, with one hand, take out your wallet and lay it down in front of you.”

Charles knew the drill. He complied again and stepped back. "You're a very careful man. I guess news travels fast around here. Do you always greet visitors this way?"

Savage grinned as he glanced at the ID card. "Mister, you're trespassing on private property and this is a small town." He studied the card for a moment, keeping one eye on Charles. "Okay, this looks good. Now what can I do for you? My taxes are up to date, I don't owe anybody anything and I send my ex-old lady two hundred a month." Savage shifted the shotgun to the crook of his arm.

"Nothing like that I assure you," Charles said, putting his hands down. "I came to talk to you about Vietnam." Even in the shadowy light, he could see Savage's grin vanish.

"What about it? Nam was a shithole and I don't recommend it," he said flatly.

"Your time there is actually what I mean. More specifically, an officer you served with. Lieutenant Robert Owens."

"Owens?" Savage spat out the name like a curse and laughed without humor, a hollow, chilling sound. "Served with, huh? Yeah, I guess you could say that. He left us to join some intelligence unit after. What about him?"

"He defected to Russia about five years ago and now he wants to come home."

Savage lowered the shotgun further and flipped Charles his wallet. "You're CIA, right?" Savage studied Charles intently.

Slowly, Charles returned his wallet to his pocket. "Let's just say government attached. Can we talk about it?"

Savage gazed at Charles for a full minute before answering. "Why not? You're the first guy that's asked. C'mon, we'll be more comfortable inside."

Savage turned abruptly and started up the trail. A few minutes later they arrived at an expanse of cleared land. A small, rough-hewn cabin squatted near the edge of a bluff. A wisp of smoke curled up from the stone chimney. From the edge of the bluff, Charles could see a wooded meadow stretching below. He could only imagine what the view was like in daylight.

A honey Labrador bounded around from the back of the cabin with a tail-wagging greeting for Savage and a curious sniff for Charles. "That's Pappy," Savage said, roughly stroking the dog. "Come on in."

Inside the cabin, Savage lit an oil lamp, threw a couple of logs on the fire and motioned Charles to a battered leather chair. "Coffee or whiskey?"

"Whiskey's fine."

Savage returned with a tumbler of Scotch and a beer for himself. "I didn't figure you for a beer drinker," he said, dropping into another stuffed chair next to Charles. The moonlight spilled in the window and snow flurries began to cling to the glass, forming tiny patterns of crystal before sliding wetly down. The fire made the room glow and Charles suddenly wished he were there for some other reason.

"Built it myself," Savage said, sensing Charles' silent approval. "Good place to get away from things." He took a gulp of his beer. "Look, I'm sorry about the greeting, but there are a couple of people I don't really want to see again. The town is alright once you're accepted, but they can be a bit tight-lipped."

"I noticed." Charles smiled. Savage seemed suddenly more relaxed, as if he were happy to have a visitor, unannounced or not. Charles guessed few people had seen the inside of the cabin.

"You eaten? I got some chili on if you don't have a squeamish stomach."

"No, thanks. I had one of Maggie's steaks before I came up. She told me the way. Well, almost the way. She made a slight mistake about the turn at the fork."

Savage laughed. “No mistake, but Maggie figured if you could find the way, you must be okay. She’s alright, kind of adopted me when I moved here. Her son bought it in Nam.”

Savage stood and went to the kitchen. He brought Charles another drink and a steaming bowl of chili in a stone bowl for himself. He ate in silence, occasionally glancing at Charles who sat contentedly, warmed by the fire and Scotch, letting his gaze roam over the cabin. On one wall, some rough shelves held an impressive collection of paperback books.

Savage followed his gaze. “Passes the time,” he said. He finished eating and lit a cigarette. “What do you want to know about Owens?” he asked as he popped open another beer.

Charles shifted in his chair. “I’d like to hear about you first.” He regarded Savage with real interest. Remembering the file, he wondered how a boy from the streets of Chicago survives Vietnam and ends up on the side of a mountain. “How did this all come about?” He waved a hand around the room.

Savage smiled understandingly. “That’s what my dad wants to know. He doesn’t like this either,” he said, fingering the pony tail. “I haven’t cut it since Nam.” Shrugging he went on. “After I was discharged, I went back to Chicago. Got married, got a nothing job—probably exactly what I would have done if I hadn’t gone to Nam, but it didn’t work. Nam changed a lot of guys. Me for one. I got into some heavy dope dealing. I guess you know about that. Anyway, I made some money, got lucky on some investments and split for the open skies. Just got in my truck and drove till I saw this place. It’s about as different from Nam as you can imagine. Parked the truck, built this place and well, here I am.” He flipped his cigarette into the fire.

Charles sat back. How many were there like Mike Savage? Scarred invisibly by a war they didn’t believe in but fought nevertheless. Returned to scorn, confusion, hopelessness and broken lives. Scattered about the country, their fears locked away, dreams unfulfilled.

Charles took out a briar pipe and a pouch of tobacco. “Owens was only with your unit a few months, right?”

“I got something better to pack that with if you feel like it.”

“No, thanks. I tried it once with my daughter. Didn’t do anything for me,” Charles said.

Savage shrugged and took a stubby pipe from over the fireplace. He filled it from a stone jar. Lit, the pipe produced the pungent aroma of marijuana. On the floor, Pappy raised his head, sniffed the air and moved to the corner.

“Pappy doesn’t approve?”

“Naw, doesn’t like the smell, I guess. Found him when he was a puppy. Just a stray, like me.” Savage settled back in his chair and stared into the flames. “Yeah, Owens wasn’t with us long, a few months was enough. Guess you’ve done your homework,” he said, looking at Charles.

“How is it you remember him so easily?” Charles sat forward and sipped his drink.

Savage’s laugh was hollow again, like a rattle. “Remember him? Hell, I almost killed the bastard. Had him right in the sights of my M16, then just as I pulled the trigger, one of the guys jerked it away and I missed.” He laughed again. “Just think, I might have saved you a trip up here and you’d have one less defector to worry about.”

“How did it happen?”

Savage took a pull on his pipe, sucked in some air and coughed slightly. “Owens was a replacement. Nam wasn’t like your war. We didn’t train together, ship over together, fight together or come home together. Everybody shipped in one at a time. Our second in command got wasted when he stepped on a mine and what was left of him was sent home in a bag.” Savage paused, shaking his head.

“No real experience. Owens, I mean. Green as they come. A twink with bars on his shoulders. There were some nineteen year olds that were scary, man.”

Charles nodded. Child men, transformed overnight into hardened combat veterans with blank gazes, storing up memories they'd never be able to shake.

“Anyway, on this one patrol, Owens panicked under fire. He called for support mortar shelling, but he fucked up the coordinates. Our own guys were shelling us. Everyone begged him to hold off, but he wouldn't listen. He hadn't paid any attention in the briefings. Always had his face in some computer book. He'd been to college, he was always telling us.

“We were caught in some pretty heavy action about then, which if we got out of it was okay because that meant we could up the body count. That was the big thing in Nam, man. Body count. If it was really good we'd get a shipment of ice cream and cold cokes dropped by chopper.” His shoulders slumped and he looked at Charles with a pleading expression. “I mean what was that war about anyway?”

Charles wished there was something he could say that would penetrate what Mike Savage was feeling, even after all these years.

“Like I said,” Savage continued, “Owens thought he knew better than anyone else. A few of our guys bought it. One took a direct hit. He'd been in Nam three days. He was seventeen. Hello and goodbye war.”

Savage seemed to sink even deeper in the chair. His pipe had gone out. “We survived, the rest of us, though, I don't know how. The mortar fire was finally straightened out and I guess Owens got his ass reamed good when we got back. Big fucking deal. We got into a light skirmish on the way. Owens was just up ahead and when I saw him there in my sights, I thought, fuck it, I just...” His voice trailed off and he stared into the fire.

Charles remained silent. The wind rustled the snow against the windows. The dying fire crackled and hissed. After a bit he said, “And Owens left after that?”

Savage sighed, returned from wherever his memories had taken him. “Yeah, not long after. They disappeared him somewhere behind the lines where he couldn't do any harm. Lucky for him, too. Someone would have wasted him sooner or later if the VC didn't.” He shook his head again. “And while that was going on, those assholes in Paris were arguing over the shape of the goddamn table.”

Charles had no answers. He could feel for Mike Savage, but this was not his man. The ten years of pent up emotions seething inside him threatened to spill over at any moment. Savage would not fail to kill Owens a second time if he were given the opportunity.

“What are your plans now if you don't mind my asking?”

“Oh, I don't know. I just kind of cruise along up here.” His smile returned and Charles could almost see the tension visibly drain from his face. “I've been trying to get my brother out here, help me clear some more land, maybe build some kind of lodge. You know, catch the Canadian tourists who want to get away from it all.”

Charles smiled. Savage would be an expert at that. He put down his glass and stood to go. “Well, it's getting late. I'd better be getting back to town. Thanks for the drinks and talk.”

“No problem, man. I hope you got what you came for. I'll walk you back down.”

Pappy led the way as they retraced their steps down the trail to Charles' car. He gripped the young man's hand firmly. “I hope everything works out for you,” Charles said.

Savage nodded. “Watch it going back. Might be some ice on the road.” He started to go then turned back. “You know Owens isn't worth the effort.”

Who knows? Charles thought as he drove away. Maybe Savage was right. He headed back to town somehow relieved that he could leave Mike Savage on his mountaintop.

Three

In the study of his comfortable *dacha* twenty miles outside of Moscow, Colonel Vasili Aleksevich Delnov, Second Chief Directorate KGB, was pleased; quite pleased.

He sat at a huge oak desk and let his eyes roam over the dozen color enlargements spread out before him. Pulling the heavy woolen robe closer around his massive body, naked under the robe, he pursed his lips and whistled softly as he studied the photos one at a time. His eyes, cold and hard, flicked around the desk, now here, now there, as if playing a game with himself, willing his eyes to find some tiny discrepancy somewhere.

Without taking his eyes from the photos, he reached to his right into a carved wooden box, took out a long Cuban cigar and lit it with a small, heavy, gold Dunhill lighter. He pulled the swivel lamp down over the desk closer to the photos, at an angle that all but made the harsh glare on their glossy surface vanish.

Continuing to study the photos, he weighed the heavy lighter in his right hand, clasp and unclasp his stubby fingers over its smooth finish, bouncing it lightly in his hand. Over the years, this action with the lighter had become his own peculiar version of worry beads. Occasionally, as now, the mannerism signaled intense pleasure. The gesture was well known to his subordinates in the Seventh Department, although none of them, even Delnov's most trusted assistant, was ever sure if the gesture meant pleasure, simple annoyance or intense anger.

He shifted the position of the photos, studying them carefully, much in the way a casting director might do, agonizing over a choice for a major role in a film with a multi-million dollar budget. But in this case, there was no decision to be made, no array of stars to choose from. The photographs were all of the same man.

The twelve photos—six profiles, six full facial shots—revealed the smooth even features of an almost handsome man. The eyes that stared back at Delnov were soft and deep brown. The lower lip protruded slightly under a narrow nose and the chin was also narrow and tapering. The dark, straight brown hair was neatly parted on one side, and although the man could be no more than thirty-five, the hair was already thinning. On the full-face shots, the expression was blank, vacant, full of resignation.

Choosing one at random, Delnov picked it up and held it closer to the light, turning his head slightly to tap ash in an onyx ashtray. As his gaze returned to the photo, he felt the familiar feeling of power that he held over this man. Impulsively, he turned the photo over and glanced at the letter neatly printed in felt tip pen.

Nodding in self-approval, he raised his eyes to the window in front of him and peered out at the white landscape. The hint of a smile curled around his mouth. The lighter bounced happily in his hand.

"Yes," he murmured softly to himself and leaned back in his chair. His eyes returned to the photographs. They were like a magnet, giving him an inner warmth as delicious as the furry slippers holding his wriggling toes. He continued to inspect the photos for another few moments, then put out the cigar, rose and crossed the room to a small drinks cabinet. For a large man, Delnov's movements were quick and graceful. He broke the seal on a bottle of spiced Vodka, poured out a hefty tumbler full and walked back in front of the desk to stand at the window.

He stood gazing out at the woods to the left of the *dacha*. The moon shone through the trees bouncing light in soft slivers through the slim birches onto the snow. He toasted his reflection in the glass and downed the vodka in one gulp, feeling the burning warmth spread through his body immediately.

“Who is he, Vasili?”

Delnov turned sharply from the window. He was so absorbed in his thoughts he hadn’t heard Natalya come into the room. She was standing over the desk looking at the photographs.

A light silken robe was draped casually about her body, her bare feet wriggled in the soft carpet. She’s like a polar bear, Delnov thought. She never felt the cold. The light from the desk lamp silhouetted her body beneath the robe. Delnov took in the easy rise and fall of her breasts, the taut nipples jutting ahead stiffly, eager to be released from the confines of the fabric.

“No one important, my pet,” he said, joining her at the desk. “Do you think he’s handsome?” His gaze followed her own to the photos.

Her lower lip pouted. She shook her head and wrinkled her nose. After a moment’s hesitation, she shook her head again. The light blonde hair fell about her face haphazardly. It was damp and fresh from the bath and he could smell the faint aroma of perfumed soap on her skin.

“No,” she said finally. “Not ugly, but not handsome either.” She turned toward Delnov. “Not at all like you, Vasili. You are handsome,” she murmured throatily.

Delnov smiled, accepting the lie as she rose on her toes, grazed his cheek with her lips and blew softly in his ear. She slipped her hands inside the robe, around his body and pressed herself against him.

“But, Vasili,” she persisted. “He must be important for you to have so many pictures of him. He’s not Russian is he?” She pulled back slightly, looking into his face with that innocent expression of curiosity he had come to know so well.

Delnov’s eyes narrowed. At first he had believed her to be one of Shevchenko’s stooges, sent to ferret out information. That would have been typical of him. Shevchenko had opposed him from the outset, cautioning at first, then raising objection after objection, and finally, even threatening. But Shevchenko’s threats were empty, like those of a small boy and not to be taken seriously. And, despite Shevchenko, he had triumphed in the end, overcoming all objections and receiving approval from Andropov himself. *That* had silenced Shevchenko.

Still, one could never be too careful. He’d had Natalya checked out to his complete satisfaction, and even though he was reluctant to admit it, relief. She was evidently nothing more than what she appeared to be: a beautiful but largely untalented actress with a Moscow theatre company, and apparently, she was in love with Delnov.

“Nothing to worry your pretty head about, my pet,” he said soothingly.

She was quick to recognize the tone of finality in his voice. The issue was not to be taken further.

“Now, go and warm up the bed for us. I’ll join you shortly. I have a little surprise for you.”

Natalya’s eyes sparkled like a child’s. “Oh, tell me, tell me,” she squealed in delight.

“Later,” he said. “If I tell you now it won’t be a surprise.” He pushed her away gently, but let his hands linger for a moment over her supple hips. He felt a tremor of excitement rush through him as he watched her pad to the door in almost liquid motion. The robe fell open as she walked, affording him a teasing view of her smooth thighs.

She stopped at the door and looked coyly over her shoulder. “If you don’t hurry, I shall be asleep,” she said mockingly, with practiced skill.

“Then I shall just have to wake you, won’t I?” She smiled and shut the door noiselessly behind her. Delnov sighed. She was beautiful and she was his.

He turned back to the desk, and after one last glance, gathered up the photographs. Stacking them neatly, he put them in a large brown envelope, closed its clasp and returned it to a drawer in the desk. He frowned as his hand brushed against a similar envelope. It too contained photographs, three in all, also enlargements, but printed in black and white. He spread them on the desk. Unconsciously he felt for the lighter as he studied the new photos.

The light was not good, but the images were clear and unmistakable. They showed a man standing in a phone booth, staring into the lens. “Zakharov.” He spat the name and gripped the lighter tightly.

In the second photo, Zakharov was between two other men, obviously the FBI agents. Zakharov’s expression was one of resignation tinged with fear. It was a waist high shot and even there, Delnov could detect the slump of the shoulders, the sagging face, the blank stare. The third photo showed Zakharov getting into a car. The lighter felt cold in his hand as he gripped it tighter.

What was considered Zakharov’s apparent blunder had nearly ruined everything. His ingenious plan, the greatest stroke of his career, a plan that promised the highest praise from his superiors, perhaps even the Order of Lenin. Yes, that was certainly possible. All nearly, but not quite ruined. Instead, he had turned Zakharov’s arrest, exactly as planned, to his advantage, arguing it was not a disaster as Shevchenko had, but merely extra leverage, perhaps even a blessing in disguise. Delnov had not counted on such violent opposition from Shevchenko. In the end, Andropov had agreed and from that point, Delnov was once more in command.

Of course they wanted Zakharov returned and Delnov himself would be there to greet him. He relished the thought of being a witness to Zakharov’s debriefing, his disgrace, his sentencing. A pity but sacrifices must be made. It’s too bad, he mused, that Zakharov would never know how he had advanced his own career.

He gave the Zakharov photos one final glance, returned them to their envelope which he placed in the desk drawer. He locked the drawer, poured himself another vodka and again toasted his own reflection.

The photos of Zakharov had been delivered to him only yesterday by his assistant following a meeting with the American John Trask. Obviously, Trask thought they would influence their decision to allow the verification of Owens to be made outside the Soviet Union. Perhaps they would concede, Delnov thought. Not completely, of course. Prague, or perhaps Budapest, would be equally safe. Just enough to keep the Americans convinced. No more, no less. Yes, it was all falling into place, exactly as he had engineered the plan from its inception.

He could well imagine the surprise of the Americans that Owens wanted to return and also their elation that he would be allowed to. Fools, he thought. Were he in their place, Owens would be left to rot in Siberia. But then, that’s what makes the game so interesting. The varying viewpoints, the diverse allegiances, the differing approaches. Delnov enjoyed it all. He downed the vodka. Well, enough of this for tonight.

His mind turned easily to Natalya, lingering over the vision of her waiting submissively on the huge bed, her golden hair spread out over the pillow, her breasts rising and falling, his erection pressing between their warmth ever closer to her inviting lips.

Still, he would have to oversee everything carefully. Trask was no fool and there was Fox to contend with, the old devil. Delnov chuckled. If Charles Fox was involved, however indirectly,

he would have to tread with caution. He had dueled with Fox before and not always triumphantly. But of course there had been Prague. Even now Delnov savored the memory.

Extreme care must be taken during the verification period the Americans were insisting on and the actual exchange when it took place. If only they could get Zakharov first, the rest would be easy. Perhaps too easy and then all the fun would be out of it.

Well, there was still time to decide and now Natalya waited. He snapped off the light, grabbed another cigar and headed for the bedroom, whistling softly to himself, the lighter bouncing happily in his hand.

If Mike Savage had a complete opposite, it was Mel Highlands, the security chief of Triton Industries. Fox spotted him immediately from the personnel file in the arrivals lounge at San Francisco International Airport. Medium height, short brown hair, well cut three-piece suit and carrying a light attaché case. Fox caught his eye and stepped out of the crush of passengers.

Highlands was all business as he greeted Charles. "Mr. Fox?" He extended his hand in a firm grasp. "I have a car waiting. Do you have any other luggage?"

"No, just this bag," Charles said. "I left some things in Los Angeles."

"Right then, shall we?" Highlands guided them through the labyrinth of the tunnels and passageways to a car. They were whisked across the airport to the executive terminal and the Triton plane. It was a small Lear jet, fitted as a company plane might be expected: comfortable lounge chairs, a bar, and a television. A quick nod to the pilot from Highlands and they were off. Once airborne, Highlands filled Charles in on their day.

"The telex said you're cleared for anything which makes it easy for me. You have anything specific in mind or is this just a general look around?" Highlands' manner was easy, efficient, and reassuring. Charles suspected he was good at his job.

"No, just a quick look around and of course anything you can tell me about Owens. I'd like to see his personnel file." Highlands knew about Owens, but had not been informed about his planned return.

The security man nodded and stared out the porthole of the small jet, reflecting for a moment over the city of hills. "You know, even now," he said, "after all these years, it's hard for me to believe anyone would leave all this."

Charles wasn't sure whether Highlands was referring to the company jet or the city of San Francisco. "People are motivated by different things," he said. "Perhaps Owens was fighting some inner battle."

Highlands' answer was a disapproving shrug, but Charles could sympathize. His job was an unenviable one at best. Despite the stepped up security measures in recent years, the Soviets continued to concentrate their efforts in securing technology and Silicon Valley was a prime target. The Soviet consulate and communications facility sat atop one of the highest hills in the Bay area and targeted the valley as well as Mare Island Naval Base where the U.S. nuclear submarines were serviced. Here and in other principal areas of Soviet activity, such as New York and Washington, D.C., the centers were staffed with the cream of the KGB crop. And despite the massive campaign by the FBI to stem the tide of information flowing to Moscow, Robert Owens had simply walked into the Soviet embassy and offered himself, his head crammed with data the Russians must have salivated over. And all right under the noses of men like Mel Highlands who tried to prevent such occurrences. It was no wonder Highlands felt little sympathy for Owens.

"We'll be landing in a moment," Highlands said, breaking the silence. The plane glided in smoothly and taxied to a small terminal. Another short drive brought them to Triton, a complex of manicured lawns, low white buildings and impressive landscaping. Triton was but one of hundreds of companies in Silicon Valley that had become the very heart of the computer industry and microchip technology. Triton, Charles reminded himself, was the only company with the dubious distinction of having one of its former employees defect to the Soviet Union.

They checked in at the front gate where Charles was given a visitors pass and Highlands led them to his office. "Thought it would be better to talk here," he said, motioning Charles to a comfortable chair. "I'll order us some lunch in if that's all right with you. Then we'll do the big tour."

"Fine," Charles said. "I suppose we can get started by telling me about Owens' work here at Triton. What kind of projects was he working on when he left?"

Highlands leaned back and clasped his hands together. "Developmental stuff mostly." He consulted a dark green file folder on his desk. "We do all kinds of things here. Research into laser physics, non-linear optics, spectroscopy, as well as tunable lasers."

"I'm afraid you've lost me already," Charles said laughing. "Science was not one of my strong subjects."

"Nor mine," Highlands said, slapping the file. "But the list goes on and on. I know about enough to know how valuable it would be to any foreign power, never mind the Russians." His eyebrows knitted into a frown. "We might just as well open the gates and let them walk in and take notes. We've almost done that already, though not at Triton," he added quickly.

"How do you mean?" Charles asked.

Highlands leaned back in his chair again and lit a cigarette after offering one to Charles. "A few years ago, the State Department, in its infinite wisdom, arranged for a group of Soviet aircraft specialists to visit some of our factories—Boeing, Lockheed, McDonnell Douglas—to improve relations," Highlands said sardonically. "Give them a look at our production lines, have a little shop talk, that kind of thing. Well, it turns out that this supposedly benevolent group of visitors the tour were wearing special shoes to pick up metal scraps and shavings from the factory floors. Those particles were later analyzed back in Moscow and eventually led to the Soviets being able to acquire the metal alloys necessary to produce their Ilyushin II-76T transport plane." He paused to give Charles a rueful smile.

"Want more? Okay. I was told that story, by the way, to impress on me the importance of security at Triton." He shrugged again. "The Soviet embassy in Washington spends several million dollars a year for copies of thousands of technical reports on file at the Department of Commerce's Information service. They get this stuff *legally*. The magazine *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, each issue mind you, is flown directly to Moscow and translated en route. A friend of mine at the FBI tells me they get up to ninety percent of their intelligence from open sources—unclassified material, seminars and trade shows." Highlands angrily stubbed out his cigarette. "You figure it out. Then along comes a guy like Owens and well..."

"What exactly was Owens working on?"

Highlands consulted the file again. "Oh, nothing important," he said. "Just a device called an accelerometer. Apparently, it measures changes in the pull of gravity on an airborne vehicle. It's crucial to guided missile systems. I'd say that would be fairly high on the Soviet shopping list, along with high-speed micro pressers and integrated circuits. All stuff we do here at Triton."

Charles got up and walked to the window. Over the complex he could see a number of white-coated employees hurrying in and out of buildings, reading printouts on the run, talking,

laughing. He tried to imagine Robert Owens in this setting. What had made him do it? And more important, why were the Soviets willing to let him go now? According to the latest word from Washington, the Kremlin was getting impatient over Zakharov. Why again? It wasn't as if Zakharov was a prize catch and they must have him back at all costs. Zakharov was not a known operative, so why the panic?

Charles fought to grasp the thread of an idea running in his mind, but it continued to elude him. What was the key? He turned back to Highlands.

"Anything you can tell me about Owens' personal life?" There was always the chance there was a name that hadn't already turned up.

Highlands shook his head. "No, not really. He didn't have one. Clean record but a real loner. Obsessed with work, seldom if ever spent any time outside with anyone. Lived with his mother, definitely not a bar hound. We were pleased with that because the Soviets trawl the singles bars for any likely tidbits. Owens had been doing a lot more than that. Art Mason might help you there. You still want to talk to him?"

"Yes," Charles remembered. "If you can arrange it." Arthur Mason had at least seen Owens in Red Square, but Charles felt there was little he could provide considering the shock the sighting must have caused him.

A buzzer sounded on Highlands' desk. He picked up the phone. "Right," he said. "I'll be right down." He hung up and turned to Charles. "Something has come up but I shouldn't be long. Make yourself at home. I'll have lunch sent in."

"Fine," said Charles. He sat down wearily. There was nothing here and Highlands certainly didn't fit the bill. In a different way he was just as unsuitable as Mike Savage, who would have been ideal had Charles been recruiting for an anti-terrorist group. Highlands' attitude in regard to Owens was equally negative and Charles realized he was no closer to finding someone to identify Owens. Only one name remained on his list.

With Highlands gone, he took the opportunity to look at the file the security chief had left on his desk. Almost absently, he flipped through its pages, but halfway through, something caught his eye.

When Highlands returned, he found Charles already at work on lunch. "Sorry about that," he said. "Minor problem."

"I'll take the tour now if you don't mind," Charles said.

"Sure," Highlands said, grabbing a sandwich. He brightened slightly. "Might as well make your trip worth something. This is a pretty interesting place you know."

Charles followed Highlands out of the office, struck suddenly by the thought that Robert Owens must have felt the very same thing.

The interview with Arthur Mason had proved to be as fruitless as Charles expected. The tall computer scientist had worked with Owens briefly, but could add nothing more to what Charles already knew. He was sure it was Owens he'd seen in Red Square, and he'd been obviously shaken by the experience.

The news from Washington was equally disappointing. Moscow had reluctantly agreed to a confirmation of Owens identity, but reserved the right to choose the site and demanded the operation be a joint effort between the CIA and KGB. That will be the day, Charles thought.

John Trask was holding out for neutral ground but wasn't optimistic. As expected, the Soviets were outraged over Zakharov's arrest and were screaming frame. Until the time of his arrest, the Russian was a seemingly innocuous trade official, not a known operative and yet Moscow was apparently willing to trade for Owens, who had spent five years in one of their most sensitive installations. Charles was still puzzling over it all when he found Harry Peck leaning on the fence of his chicken ranch just north of San Francisco.

"I think the sun agrees with you, Harry," Charles said getting out of the car.

Peck smiled and glanced at the sky, the sun beating down its late afternoon heat. "Good thing I guess, eh?" He was a tall gaunt man with a weathered face and narrow set dark eyes. "What brings you out here, Charles?"

"Can we talk inside?"

"Sure. Betty's gone into town for some shopping." They walked across the yard to a low frame house, past rows of chicken coups. Hundreds of chickens squalled in protest over the intrusion.

"Retirement seems profitable," Charles said.

"Yeah, I guess so, if you like chickens. I can't eat eggs anymore though," Peck said.

They sat at the kitchen table while Peck poured coffee from a pot on the stove into two chipped mugs. Charles took it all in for a moment and flashed on his own retirement reflected back at him in Harry Peck's lifeless face. Peck had been out of the bureau five years now.

"So, what's up, Charles?" Peck drawled. "You didn't come all the way out here to see my chickens. You still globetrotting for the competition?" The FBI and CIA had always been rival organizations, but often their areas of concern overlapped. Charles and Harry Peck went back a lot of years.

"Names, Harry, names. I need some help. A defection in 1974. Robert Owens worked at Triton Industries. Remember it?" Charles studied Peck's lined face almost hoping he was wrong.

Peck rubbed a hand over the stubble on his chin and looked out the window. "Yeah, always thought there was something strange about that one. I wasn't working the case, but I know we were getting a file together on the guy. I was working the Russian end, keeping tabs on one of their boys who had just come over from Moscow. New kid on the block." Peck sneered and lit a hand rolled cigarette.

"What was funny about it, Harry?"

Peck shrugged, "We just about had the Russian nailed down. He got pretty careless."

Charles took out a photo and pushed it across the table. "Was this the man?" he asked.

Peck took the photo and studied it a moment. "Yeah, that's him all right. Is he in trouble again?"

Charles returned the photo to his pocket. "What happened, Harry? Why didn't the operation continue?"

Peck shrugged and sipped his coffee. "We got word from Washington to drop it, forget the whole thing. They even sent someone out here to make sure we understood."

Charles felt a shudder go through his body. "Who was that? Do you remember?"

"C'mon, Charles," Peck said, smiling. "It was one of your people. Said it was going out of our jurisdiction." Charles held himself still. Moscow was certainly out of the FBI's jurisdiction.

"Trask I think his name was," Peck said. "Yeah, that was it. John Trask."

[*Back to TOC*](#)

Here's a sample from Trey R. Barker's *Exit Blood*.

Three Weeks Ago

Church of the Bloody Souls
Valentine, Texas

Father Bob handed me the package. A delivery man at the church's back door, Phil stitched on the left side of his yellow shirt.

"He smoked, too," Father Bob said.

"Lots of us do." I opened the package.

"Our body is a temple. Shouldn't be fouled with cigarettes."

"What about fouling it with weed? That acceptable?"

"As our newest member, you would do well to try and remember that."

This time, I managed to keep the smart ass answer in the back of my throat. I'm new and who knows what the fuck is going on with these guys anyway. The quieter I am, the better off I'll be.

In the box was a commemorative plate. *Barefield Centennial*, blared cowboy rope letters. Arranged around the sentiment were pictures of oil derricks, cattle, barbed wire, and fences.

"What the shit is this?" I asked.

Father Bob was already gone, leaving me alone in my tiny room.

There was no return address.

Ten Days Ago

"Again?" The box was open and another commemorative plate sat heavy in the middle of newspaper used as packing. "What the hell?"

With a shrug, Father Bob disappeared down the hallway. I slammed the door to my six-by-six room and stared at the plate. Barefield. This was a message. Or a bullshit reminder.

Problem was I didn't remember much of my last night in Barefield. And what I did remember, I'd just as soon forget.

"Fuck."

I smashed the plate—just like I'd done with the previous three—and began to pack the few belongings I had. Obviously, it was way past time to slip this bizarro church into my history.

Eight Days Ago

—Whap!—

The sound of whips against skin.

—Whap!—

Blood it out.

Blood, scalding hot at one hundred forty-five degrees, poured down my back while I kept an eye on the visitors. Had to be cops. Who else would be here looking for me?

They made my nerves twitch like a meth junkie on the haul. Straight up knew they were here for me, and that my pleas would have zero effect on them. Bullets bouncing off of Superman's chest. They didn't care if the murder was an accident. They didn't care that my father had gotten me drunk, had stuffed two or three or, hell, maybe four, spliffs between my lips. Anything I might say would cut me exactly no ice.

Didn't know them, but I damn sure knew the shock on their faces. I recognized it. It had been on mine when I arrived.

It was the blood that was so shocking.

And that the priests did it to themselves.

Thirty men, their heads tilted back, eyes closed; supplicants at the altar of violence. Every arm stretched out like the arms of a cross. Every right arm holding a short leather whip, every mouth moving, filling the sanctuary with chants. Each man hit himself, spattered his own blood on the ceiling in hundreds of short, straight lines. Each new line of blood covered an old one which itself covered still an older one.

They're cops.

The fact that they never looked at me was what told me. Too studied in how they avoided my gaze.

And not just cops, but friends of SuperCop's...of Kurston's. They were scoping me out and trying desperately to be cool about it. Probably they had already called SuperCop. He was probably already busting ass down the road to snatch me up.

'Cause there ain't nothing better for a cop than bagging a killer.

My stomach tightened.

Would they let me call my step-father before they snapped on the cuffs? Would they let me apologize for being such a disappointment to him? Would they let me tell him how sorry I was that I'd screwed things up so fully and completely? If I could make him understand, then I could go happily.

Well...not happily. I sure as shit didn't want to go to prison, but I was tired. I'd been running for weeks now and was exhausted. The back of my throat was coated in fear, but it was spiced with relief because this thing was just about over.

Except I never found Mama's pendant.

Or the damned money.

And I still didn't actually remember killing him.

—*Whap!*—

"Y'all hitting y'allself pretty hard." His name was Cope, an old black man who munched cucumbers and who'd brought me to the church. He had a big, gaudy ring on every one of his fingers. "Got some angry penance going on today."

"That's what happens when—"

The gun suddenly, painfully, in my ear snapped my words off. I tried to move away from the thing, but a powerful arm held me tight against the barrel. My whip, covered in my one hundred forty-five degree blood, hit the floor. "SuperCop...you came."

"What? Yeah, sure as fuck did. Didn't think I wouldn't, did you?"

I'd known I'd be scared when SuperCop—Kurston—finally arrested me. Everybody is scared all the time, even if they don't admit it, but the sheer amount of terror surprised me. Kurston's gun stayed hard against my head and my fear tightened my brown robe like a noose. My heart stopped as though that noose had snapped it dead.

I managed to look sideways at him. "Who the fuck're you?"

“Nice try,” the cop said. “Where is she?”

“Who—” I coughed. My vision swam. “Who are you?”

He frowned. “What? I’m Captain Brooks.” He bared his teeth, a dog looking for dinner.

“Carson City Police.”

“Where’s SuperCo—Detective Kurston?”

“Who?”

“Detective Kurston. Barefield PD.”

“Never heard of him. I’m from Carson City.”

“Carson? By San Antonio?” I asked.

“San Antonio? Fuck, no. Carson City, Nevada, asswipe. Remember? You shot up my town? Killed a couple of my local thugs? Ringing any bells?”

“Whoa...hang on.” There were huge chunks of that last night I didn’t remember—thanks to the ganja and whiskey—but Nevada? All the way to Nevada, shoot the place up, and then back to Barefield?

In...like...two hours?

“I have never been to Carson City.”

The cop made a game show buzzer sound. “Wrong answer.”

This had to be more of Fagan’s bullshit. This cop—curiously alone, I realized—had to be chasing my father.

“Fagan leave you a message?” I asked. “Maybe tell you it was his New York number? ‘Cause that’s what he did to me. I was 16 and it was a damned dry cleaning shop in Little Havana...Miami.”

The cop backed up, but his gun stayed at my head. “The hell’re you talking about?” But instead of letting me answer, he yanked me around to cuff me. “I don’t care what you’re talking about.”

He pinched my arms and I yelped. “Wait, I didn’t do anything.” I stumbled over his feet and fell to the floor. “You can’t arrest me, I wasn’t even there. I was in Barefield.”

And did something there.

“Whoa,” Cope said. “What’s up?”

“Back up,” the cop said to Cope. “This is official business, boy.”

“Boy?” Cope grinned. “Y’all didn’t just say that.”

“You gonna play hero, black boy, beat me to death with the cuke? Kick my ass so I don’t shoot your boy in the head?” When Cope said nothing, the cop nodded. “Thought so.” He looked at me. “Where the hell is she, Hal?”

There was a pause.

“Who?” Cope said.

“Hal. You didn’t tell your jungle bunny friend how you shot up my town and I followed you right into this...church?”

“Darcy,” I said.

The cop’s head tilted. “What?”

“I’m Darcy.”

“You’re Hal.”

“Darcy.”

“Hal.”

“Who’s on first?” Cope’s laugh spiraled into the dank air.

A handful of chanting priests glanced at us.

“Pretty good, lawman,” Cope said. “Y’all ain’t even got the right bad guy.”

“Wrong man? Fuck that noise.” But the cop’s face was red. “I’m here for—” He stopped and his gaze went straight to the visitors. “Son of a bitch. That’s them.”

Then he was gone, across the room in a blur, pushing his way through the tight pack of self-flagellating monks.

But their blood never stopped. They tore it from their own backs and flung it through the air. The tang was the odor of a chemical spill. The blood patterned all over the ceiling and dripped on their heads.

The art of self-mortification.

Staggering in its intensity.

But I was pretty sure this idiot with the badge hadn’t really seen it yet. He’d been pretty well focused on me. Did he even realize he was standing in a chapel built from the living rooms of four mobile homes lashed together, walls removed? Did he see the giant wooden cross hanging over the altar? Or the windows, blacked out with shoe polish? Only a smudge of late afternoon sunlight managed to bully its way in and it was just yellow enough to make the priests appear to be dancing in stale piss.

“What in the hell...” The cop tried to move through the crowd of priests to get at the visitors.

“Best be getting to the door,” Cope said.

I didn’t move until Cope shoved me.

“Do it slow and ritualize all the damned way. Get a little luck and mayhap this cheap Dirty Harry forgets we here.”

When I saw Cope’s eyes, my ass puckered. “Holy fuck, you’re scared.”

Cope slapped me with a hard pop. “Blasphemer.” He nodded toward the cop. “And yeah...that cop scares me. Time for us to be getting on down the road.”

Cope and I both moved our arms in tandem with the other priests, what Cope called ritualizing, whips against backs, bleeding our sins out. Doing that, we headed for the back door of the chapel. Through it was the rest of the church.

“Why not the front?”

“Bullets start flying and all them priests gonna head for that front door. They’ll pile up like gristle after a steak fry.”

—Whap!—Whap!—

The cop brought his gun to bear on the two visitors I had thought were cops there to nab me. “You’re under arrest.” But his voice got lost in the chanting and the blood. “You guys are craz—”

“Go.” The visiting man shoved the woman toward the front door.

She tore through the priests, disappeared into the forest of brown.

“Here we go,” Cope said.

He was right. This woman, cutting through the place, brought most of the monks out of their ritualizing trance. At which point they saw the cop.

And fucking panicked.

Most were at the church because they were running from Johnny Law. Or from something that would interest Johnny. So seeing a cop in the place, in the literal and metaphoric sanctuary, wasn’t something they’d planned on.

It was a fucking explosion. Howls and shouts, priests ducking into the shadows. Some priests kept bleeding, some yelled at the officer. Some randomly screamed. “Who called the cops?”

“I’m wanted in—” “—didn’t mean to kill—” “—the other bodies—” “I’ll kill again, motherfu—”

And then the shooting started.

A single shot and I had no idea which priest fired it. Then a second shot. And then a fucking fusillade. Smoke and the stink of gunpowder. More blood but now in drops and spatters rather than slick lines on a ceiling.

A priest I hadn’t met jerked a gun from under his robe and blasted away. Another priest yanked a knife from somewhere and swung it wildly as he headed for an exit.

The shots hit the walls and pulverized the cheap adobe. Bullets shattered the windows and sent shards through the air like New Year’s confetti in Times Square. Huge gouts of sunlight poured in, the naked neon light from that New Year’s celebration. Monks squinted, yelped, at the sudden explosion of harsh light.

And I couldn’t get the fucking stench of gunpowder out of my nose. Smell reminded me of firecrackers...big ass, industrial firecrackers.

In the tangle of bullets, the cop yelled, “This guy’s wanted for murder.”

“That’s crap,” I said to Cope. “He’s not a cop. He’s lying.”

“What y’all talking about?”

It was anarchy around the cop and the male visitor he fought with. Screams and yells, fists and feet, dust. Bits of wood shot off the cross buzzed through the air. Cordite and adobe, blood and maybe even the piss of scared men. It filled the church and created a gumbo of foul odors. Reminded me of desert roadkill left too long in the west Texas sun.

God, Mama, I really need you. Can’t save myself...obviously...I need you.

Everyone fled for the exits. Somewhere in the middle of the pack, a head disintegrated in a shower of bone and brain. Beyond him, a single line of bullets poked holes in the walls. Those bullets marched around the chapel and as they got to me, Cope jerked me to the floor. His big paw covered my mouth and though he yelled in my ear, his voice was a whisper.

“Y’all get to the bike.”

Cope had been right. Bodies stacked at the doors. Screaming priests scratched and pawed over those bodies, seeing escape rather than a growing junkpile of flesh.

I headed the other direction. The back door beckoned, damn near a portal to another World where none of this shit was happening.

And maybe a World where Mama was even still alive.

“Brother Darcy.” A weak voice. “Take me with you.”

Brother Enrico. A junkie from Sante Fe who told me he’d been fighting his demons for years. He was on the floor. He’d fallen in the confusion, but when I bent over to grab him, I heard two pops and then watched two blooms appear on his chest.

He looked at himself. “Son of a bitch. I knew that cop was here for me.”

I said, “He’s here for me.”

From the hallway, Cope sneered. “Fuck y’all, he’s here for me.”

Along the far side of the sanctuary, something had caught fire. Flames and smoke rose in meandering plumes toward the stained ceiling. The plastic windows were already beginning to melt open and inch down the frames and walls to the floor, a leper’s skin sliding off his body.

“Shit,” I said. “What is that?”

“Yeah...that’d be a fire.” Enrico coughed up yellow and pink fluids, then blood. “This pisses me off.”

“Damnit. Darcy, what y’all doing?”

"I'm dying, Blackie." Enrico tried to smile.

From the doorway, Cope looked at him, something soft in his brown eyes. "Then die already so I can get outta here, Mex."

Enrico laughed up a huge amount of blood. "Is that sass? God, I love him."

"Love y'all, too, Enrico, now die."

The fire raced, fed by the carpet and tossed-aside robes and sandals.

"Don't I get...a...send-off?"

Crossing himself, Cope came to Enrico and said, "Hail Mary, Mother of God, here's another one."

Enrico closed his eyes. "Best he could do, I guess."

"Hang on, Mex, don't croak out on me yet." Cope pulled one of his rings off and closed Enrico's hand around it. "Y'all been a good boy. Maybe this'll help when you get there."

Enrico nodded. "Bless you."

I didn't think he was quite dead, but we couldn't wait any more. The place was burning down around us, the heat so stifling that breathing was getting tough. The hair on my arms burned away and I knocked a handful of embers off my robe. So we left him there, clutching Cope's ring and talking to Jesus.

The hallway was already full of smoke. But it wasn't black. Rather, it was a dingy gray.

As dirty as the last few weeks.

"Where are we going?"

"Thought y'all had the plan."

Cope laughed, though damn me if I could see anything remotely funny about this nightmare. I tried to yell at him some, but great gouts of smoke flooded me. So instead of yelling at that old black man, I hacked up his name and then panicked. *This* was how it was going to end. Not with a bullet to the head or in a cell at the Texas State Prison for the accidental death of my father, but here in a hell fire that was going to roast the outside of me as badly as I had roasted my own insides.

A Little Less Than Eight Days Ago

The streets of Valentine, Texas

There was darkness and maybe it was a dream and maybe it was death.

Either way was fine because I didn't hurt and that was just fine with me.

Who knows, maybe I'd managed to get out of the church without getting shot. Or maybe I had been shot, but then died and so there was no more pain. There was a certain beauty in that notion.

That was a notion I didn't believe for shit.

So in this darkness, I saw everything blown away. The church, the guns, the priests, the cop. Everyone in the church glared at me like it was all my fucking fault. Dead or dreaming or both, my guts twisted. Last thing I wanted to see was their faces...or the blood rain from their bodies.

But I saw something else, too.

A skanky tattoo shop, sandwiched between two flea-bag hotels, walls thin enough that everyone could hear how good business was for the five-spot whores. Squalid neon advertising that painted the street in lurid reds and blues, purples and greens, and bent the shadows throughout the wet and scummy streets. Music poured through the open window, sometimes rap, sometimes 1970s soul, sometimes twangy country. The rap came from gangsta wannabees, black

and white, who cruised with their hands hanging out windows holding cell phones to look the slightest bit like guns. The twang came from tough country boys who'd grown up on the ranches forgotten in the Zachary County outback and who came to town on the weekends looking to trade their homemade meth for a quick roll with a city chick, preferably dark skinned but don't tell anybody.

A single, hanging bulb cast the room in the same yellow as the sanctuary, and exactly as in the church, the yellow didn't hide the blood. The main chair, where the artist had done his work, and the two benches where people waited, were both bloody.

And it was pretty much my fault.

That much I knew. But seeing the room didn't tell me anything else about that night.

Didn't tell me who else might have been dead besides my father. Didn't tell me how they died. Didn't tell me why I'd killed my father. Or why I'd chopped his foot off and taken it with me.

All of that was lost in repressed memories or drunken memories or just a cheap black hole of fear.

The question was why did that black hole of fear smell like pig shit?

I opened my eyes as we drove past a muddy yard filled to overflowing with swine. Had to be a hundred porkers there, farting and snorting and staring at me with an odd complacency.

"Y'all gonna live or what?"

Live? Probably not. I was, after all, in the side car of a broken down piece of crap that would absolutely kill me. "The hell am I doing here? Where's my damned cooler?"

"Relax, White-Boy Darcy. Down by y'all's feet."

Blue, beat up, and scarred. With a cracked handle. Somehow, Cope had managed to get both the cooler and me out of the church.

"I put my veggie in there, right on top. Why'n't y'all hand it to me?"

"Keep your food out of my cooler," I said as I handed the man his cuke. "You did a good job, boy scout, saving me and all. Now stop this thing and let me out."

"Ain't happening. Gotta get us safe." Cope jerked his head toward the church and crunched into the cuke.

My stomach rolled. Above the church, orange fingers scratched at a black smoke that burned the entire Valentine, Texas, sky.

"Holy fucking Mary of God."

A quick sting snapped my face; not Cope's hand, but the cucumber he held. He growled. "Blasphemer. Watch your language."

"Ease up with banging on me, Cope. I get'cha, no problem, but I don't—"

"Speaking of problems, that li'l fire ain't our only one."

Sirens filled the air, a soundtrack to the burning. Squad cars—Jeff Davis County deputies and Valentine police and probably squads from Culberson and Brewster Counties—as well as fire engines and ambulances, blasted through town, smearing screams through the afternoon air while those orange fingers kept giggling at that sky.

Beneath the racket of the sirens, I clearly heard the pops of aluminum melting and wood snapping and the moans of the dying. But I could smell, as though I were standing there in the middle of it, burning flesh.

I leaned over the side and threw up. Ropes of vomitus trailed behind us.

"They all ever'where." Cope's voice fought with the sound of the bike engine. "Robe's trailing."

I grabbed my robe, which had been flapping out behind us, and stuffed it under my ass.

"We got Five-O behind us right now." Cope eased up on the accelerator.

"Shit fire."

Though I couldn't see the cop, I felt him big as day. Cruising behind us, nose up our butts, watching. Probably running the license plate.

"Son of a bitch, he's going to run the plate."

"Calm down," Cope said. "Don't worry 'bout that plate."

He signaled, turned, and I wrenched the right side rearview mirror around so I could see. A Valentine city car came around with us, then abruptly stopped, backed up, blasted its siren and headed down another street.

"Jesus Christ, that was close."

"Y'all best not take that name in vain."

I chuckled, but Cope did not. He kept his eyes on the road while his lips tightened.

"I ain't playing. I am a lot of things, White-Boy Darcy, but I ain't blasphemous."

"Uh...okay. Sorry." I swallowed. "The cops can't find us."

"Y'all think?"

"Listen to me. They. Can't. Find. Us. They'll ask all kinds of questions. Damnit, they'll want to take us in."

"I know, Darcy, I know."

"Fuck. We can't let them—"

"I know." Cope's voice boomed. "Shut up and let me drive."

"Damnit. It was just a little fire."

"Little got big."

All those cops and deputies. They led back to SuperCop. It was inevitable. SuperCop would hear about the fire and he'd know I was involved. He was that kind of detective, made those kinds of intuitive leaps. Ninety percent inspiration, eight percent shoe leather, and two percent Pop-Tarts and Dr Pepper. That's how he worked, always had been and always would be until they laid him and his shoe leather in a nice rosewood coffin and shoved him six feet down.

"We've got to get out of town."

"Ain't going anywhere any time soon," Cope said.

He whipped the handle bars and the bike shot across the street and down an alley. Cope crouched close to the gas tank, maybe looking to disappear into it. He slung us into a driveway, then into a wide garage. A tiny car filled a little more than half the garage. Cope angled the bike sideways and killed the engine.

"Are you crazy? Don't stop, they'll find us."

"We keep going they gonna find us. Got to hunker down." Jumping off the bike, Cope slammed the garage door. It was an old garage, with a creaky door and loose slats. Cope peered through those slats. "God's lookin' out for us, ain't She? Leaving this garage open?"

When I looked through those slats, a county car crept through the alley. In front of the garage, the deputy stopped. His face was clear. He fixed on the garage and took a long, serious look at the door.

Because of our tracks.

Right into the garage. Rather, from the dirt alley onto the paved driveway where they ended. But they ended pointing to the garage.

"Y'all gimme that board."

Together, and as quietly as we could, we put the board through one end of the door frame and tied the other end with a bit of wire hanging against the wall.

The deputy—he looked like a Davis County cop—climbed from his cruiser, radioed something on his portable, and headed for the garage. His hand wasn't on his gun, but he was twitching to put it there. The town was burning down and he had no idea what was going on. He stopped and listened, his head cocked.

Our breath stopped. Behind us, a dull metal tick came from the bike's engine.

I think he heard that tick. His frown deepened as his gaze slid smoothly over the door twice. Finally, he headed back to his car. When he climbed in, Cope sighed hard enough to blow cobwebs off the dirty wall in front of him.

"Not yet." I quickly found an old tarp and tossed it over the bike. "Get under the car or the tarp."

Dropping to the dirt, Cope scabbled under the car while I slipped under the tarp. Fear sweat, covering me as hot and sticky as it had that night at the parlor, glued the thing to me.

When the flashlight banged against the door, I almost shit. Then the light laid a tight beam through the loose slats and across the tarp. A second later, it snapped off and the man's heavy boots thunked against the driveway. The cruiser's engine was a soft purr that belied its power. How I loved hearing that purr disappear down the alley.

I helped pull Cope out and coughed up a wad of dirt. "This is bad. This is so bad. This is going straight to hell bad."

A squeak of a laugh slipped from Cope. "Man, we all of us are going to hell...and for shit we done long before this."

"You don't know what I've done." I sounded defensive, though I wanted to be big and strong. In this garage, with half the cops in Texas looking for me, I wasn't a man in his prime on a soul-defining search for the meaning of his life. I was just a scared thirty-eight-year-old who'd stumbled his way through day after day.

"Y'all were at the church so I know it's got blood behind it."

After pulling the tarp off the bike, we opened the door and I took a careful look up and down the alley. We moved through Valentine an alley at a time, checking the cross streets for the police. Cars raced back and forth, their sirens as heavy on the air as the fire's black smoke.

"Church of the Bloody Souls, boy," Cope said. "Y'all cain't get in you ain't spilled blood."

"Got that base covered."

A sheriff's deputy, this one from Brewster County, ripped down the street, a cloud of dust hanging behind the dirty white squad car. I watched it pass, saw the cop's concentration on getting to the fire.

A single, simple look down the alley and he would nail us down. "Man, we gotta get different clothes."

"What I was thinking. Gotta get to ground for a few hours, too."

Down another alley. Along a narrow dirt road.

"What happened back there?"

"Pretty sure y'all died," said Cope. "Good thing I was able to save your ass."

"By stuffing me in this sidecar?"

"No." Cope's voice was thin, getting beaten down by the wind. "By giving y'all fucking mouth-to-mouth, getting some good air in them lungs. *Then* I stuffed y'all in the sidecar."

"I told you I didn't want to ride in this death-trap."

"Didn't tell much of anything when y'all was dead."

"I wasn't dead."

"Looked dead. Shoulda been dead, the way y'all got tossed." Cope nodded. "Blew your ass about twenty feet. Smashed against the wall. Lucky y'all ain't got a broken back."

"Then you came and saved me."

"Sure did."

"So you've had a pretty good day, being the hero and all."

Cope shrugged. "The good day is probably y'all's...not being dead and all?"

"Fair point."

"Hang on, we're almost there. New clothes. A little dinner maybe. A place we can disappear for the night." He grinned. "Whatever else we can find."

He jerked the bike into a huge, overgrown parking lot. The asphalt was cracked, nothing more than hard-packed dirt in some places. At the back side stood a Victorian-style house. Three stories, each level done in different shades of color coordinated paint. The woodwork, the styles and shutters, the handrail around the gigantic front porch, were all brightly colored.

At one edge of the parking lot, facing the road, stood a giant sign. *The Valentine Cultural Arts Playhouse*, it said. *Performances Weekly. Now Showing: Arsenic and Old Lace.*

Cope killed the bike as a large woman burst through the theater's back door. She stood on the landing, her hands on the rail, leaning over just enough for me to catch a glimpse of her ample cleavage.

"Ah, Esther," Cope said.

"Well, Mr. Elmer DiFranco," she said, drawing each word out. "Didn't think you'd ever darken my doorstep again."

"Elmer?" I asked.

Cope glared at me. "Don't gimme no sass." He climbed off the bike. "Darken? That a racial slur?"

"Racial slur? Me?" Gracefully, she reached inside the door and withdrew a shotgun. It sat intimately in her hands.

"Uh...Cope?"

"You remember my friend Diamond here, right?" she asked.

"I do, Esther. A Beretta Diamond, I remember correctly. A .410?"

"Cope, we oughta talk," I said.

"Hush up, Darcy, we're good."

"Not so good from this end," Esther said. She racked the slide.

"Why's that, baby?" Cope said.

"Because I'm gonna shoot him."

"Why him?" Cope asked.

"He's with you, ain't he?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Good enough for me."

Cope laughed. "What about me?"

"I'm gonna shoot you, too, but I'm gonna get me some manliness first." She pulled the hammer and that metallic click was the loudest sound I'd ever heard.

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Here's a sample from J.L. Abramo's *Chasing Charlie Chan*.

LENNY ARCHER

When Lenny Archer managed to open his eyes, the first thing he saw was a small black circle with a white spot at its center. As he began to focus the circle became deep red and he recognized the white object. A tooth. Lenny probed the inside of his mouth with his tongue and found the space where the molar and a few of its neighbors had once been. And he could taste blood. Lenny realized he was face down on the floor and made an effort to move. The pain in his lower abdomen was unbearable. He shifted his gaze to the significantly larger red pool that spread from the floor up into his shirt below his waist. Archer let out a ghastly sound, part animal moan and part angry prayer.

"This mope is still breathing," said Tully.

"Put him out of his fucking misery."

"Maybe he'll tell us where he stashed it."

"If he was going to spill, he would have talked before you knocked his fucking teeth out," said Raft. "The guy is a fucking mess. Kill him. You'd be doing him a favor."

Lenny Archer tried to remember where he was, remember what he'd been doing before taking a bullet in the stomach and a kick in the face. He wondered if it really mattered.

Archer remembered sitting at his desk looking over the notes Ed Richards had handed him and hearing the noise in the hallway outside his office door. Midnight, too late for a social call and long past business hours. Archer had instinctively placed the notes in the fold of the newspaper on his desktop and quietly slid open the top drawer. Lenny pressed the remote switch to start the office tape recorder and he pulled out his handgun. And he listened.

Silence.

Archer rose from his chair and moved to the door, his gun in hand, intending to check the hall. He slowly turned the knob, the door knocked him to the floor and his weapon discharged. Then another shot and the terrible pain in his abdomen and the crushing blow to his head.

Archer thought he heard voices, in his mind or in the room, debating his fate. He seemed to remember questions. *What did Ed Richards tell you? What did Richards give to you? Who else did Richards talk to? Who did you talk to?* And each time he had failed to respond he could remember another blow to the face. And then blackness.

Lenny looked in horror at the pool of blood growing larger at his waist. The voices were louder now.

"You'd be doing him a favor," Raft said.

Tully pressed the gun barrel against Lenny's head.

"Bingo, Richards' notes," said Raft.

Tully looked over to the desk. Raft held the notes in one hand and he tossed the newspaper at Lenny with the other.

"Shoot the motherfucker already," said Raft.

"We're still not sure who else knows about this."

"The sooner you kill this fuck, the sooner we can get to Richards. And trust me; Richards is going to spill his guts."

An hour earlier, Tully and Raft had followed Richards to the parking lot of a donut shop on Fifth. The shop was closed for the night. Richards pulled up next to the only other car in the lot. They watched from a distance as he climbed out of his car and moved to the driver's window of the other vehicle. Ed Richards passed some papers through the window, quickly returned to his own car and drove off.

"Follow the other car," Raft had said.

"What about Richards?"

"We know where Richards lives, he can wait. Let's see where this guy goes, who the fuck he is and what he knows."

They followed the second car to a building on Fourth Street and waited for the driver to enter. When they saw the light go on in a second story window, they left their vehicle and moved to the front entrance of the building.

"Fucking private dick," said Raft, checking the names on the mailboxes.

"There are two of them," said Tully.

"Not tonight. Whoever this one is, he's alone up there. Let's go and check his ID."

Tully and Raft stood in the hallway outside the office for a minute, unsure about how to play it. They had pulled out their weapons.

"Sounds like he's coming this way," Tully said.

They heard the footsteps and watched the door. When the knob began to turn, Raft slammed his shoulder into the door. A shot went off. They stepped into the doorway and saw the man on the floor, a gun in his hand. Tully fired a round into the man's stomach and then quickly moved to kick the man square in the mouth.

Raft found the wallet in Lenny's jacket pocket.

Lenny Archer knew he was a dead man. Tully held the barrel of the gun against Lenny's temple.

"It's not too late, Leonard," Tully said. "We call for an ambulance and you survive this mess. All you need to do is help us out a little."

Lenny Archer could feel the life spilling out of the center of his body.

"Is your partner in on this?" Tully asked.

"No."

"You wouldn't lie to us at a time like this, would you, Leonard?"

"No."

"Any last words?"

Archer closed his eyes, felt the lightness in his head and saw the bright light behind his eyelids.

"Life is a carnival," Lenny Archer said.

Tully pulled the trigger.

JAKE DIAMOND

I met Jimmy Pigeon on the set of a film shoot on a Los Angeles sound stage. All I knew about private investigators was what I had found in the Hollywood movies I was desperately trying to break into.

Nick Charles, Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade.

After arriving in LA in pursuit of fame and fortune, I had managed to land several small film roles. Very small. Always a low budget crime melodrama. Always a second-string petty criminal or thug. If it was a prison movie—a man framed and incarcerated for a crime he didn't commit—I would be the slow-witted convict at the far end of the mess hall table eyeballing the hero's mashed potatoes as he laid out plans for escape. If it was a heist film—an FBI agent negotiating the release of hostages following a failed bank robbery attempt—I was the gang member lurking in the background listening stupidly while the boss and his right hand man argued the destination of the getaway jet. On the film shoot where I met Pigeon, it was kidnapping. A private eye was employed by a prominent politician to locate his young daughter being held for ransom. The abductors had strongly advised the girl's father against involving the police. I played the role of the kidnapper with the fewest lines.

Jimmy was a genuine private investigator engaged as a consultant for the production. Pigeon's job was to help the actor playing the PI in the film look more like a real private eye than an actor playing one, which was nearly an impossible task. I watched Jimmy closely while we were on the set together, his character, concentration, style and charisma. I talked with him about his work as often as he would allow between takes, studying his every move as if I would one day be competing for the lead role in *The Jimmy Pigeon Story*. And then something entirely unexpected and unexplained occurred. I found myself much more fascinated with the notion of *being* a private eye than with the idea of portraying one. On the final day of shooting I found the nerve to ask Jimmy what he thought of my wild impulse. Pigeon invited me to visit his Santa Monica office to mull it over.

A week later, Jimmy was sitting at his desk looking at me as if he wasn't sure where to begin or whether or not to begin at all. I sat opposite Pigeon in what he informed me was the *client chair*. I was learning already.

"Well, if nothing else," Pigeon finally said, "Jake Diamond is a perfect name for a PI. Did you come up with it yourself?"

"Gift from my parents," I said. "How about yours?"

"James C. Pigeon," he said. "Since day one."

"C?"

"Not important," Jimmy said. "Why do you want to give up acting? Believe me, it's a lot more glamorous than what I do. And certainly more lucrative."

"There's not enough glamour to go around," I answered, "and I'm weary of waiting for some to get around to me. I wondered if you ever considered taking on a partner."

"Had a few."

"And?"

"How about this, Jake," Jimmy said. "I'll tell you the story of my last partner and then you tell me if you want to leave the bright lights of Hollywood for the dark alleys of Southland."

As he was making his offer, Pigeon had pulled a bottle of bourbon and two small glasses from a drawer in his desk and began pouring.

"Sounds fair," I said as he passed me a glass.

"There's not too much about fair in this particular story, Jake."

Jimmy took a pack of Camels from his shirt pocket, lit one and dropped the package onto the desk between us.

"Light up if you like," Jimmy Pigeon said.

And he began.

JIMMY PIGEON

Jimmy Pigeon sat up in his bed. His eyes were leaking like a faucet. He grabbed a roll of toilet paper from the bedside table. It had replaced the empty tissue box sometime during the night. Pigeon sopped up the tears running down his cheeks. His right nostril was packed as solid as a car full of clowns. Jimmy considered trying to blow his nose but he was afraid of what might spill out of his ears. He had hardly slept all night, the plop plop fizz fizz cold and sinus cocktail he had guzzled before crawling into bed had him up to urinate every thirty minutes. He had arrived home late the previous night from a rare vacation, visiting his sister and her family in South Carolina. Six dreadful days. Everything down there, from the family station wagon to the family kitten, was covered in layers of fine yellow dust. By day two the pollen had settled on his shoes, had found refuge in his nose, mouth and eyes. By day three he could barely breathe. His sister, her husband and the kids seemed unaffected, immune, adapted, empirical validation of some Darwinian theory. Pigeon dried his face again and made his way to the bathroom. He adjusted the water to a few degrees below scalding and he stepped into the shower, making a plaintive wish for an unobstructed nasal passage.

Ninety minutes later, Jimmy took the short walk from his apartment to the office. He looked out at the brown haze hovering over downtown Los Angeles in the distance. It was a sight for sore eyes. As he turned onto Fourth Street he spotted two uniformed officers planted at the front entrance to his office building. Pigeon pulled a business card from his wallet and he quickened his pace. One of the young patrolmen stopped Jimmy at the door.

"Can I help you, sir," he asked.

"Just trying to get to work," Jimmy said, carefully offering the officer his card.

"Please wait here, sir," the officer said. He turned and carried the card into the building.

"Something happen?" Jimmy asked the second uniform.

"Officer Sutton will be right back, sir," the cop said and then nervously added, only for something to say, "there was a high pollution warning this morning."

"Love it," Jimmy said, taking in a deep breath for the first time in nearly a week.

The uniform returned his attention to the street.

A few minutes later, Sutton was back.

"Would you please come with me, Mr. Pigeon," he said.

Jimmy followed Sutton into the building and up to the second floor.

The building superintendent stood in the hall, pale as a ghost. He looked at Jimmy and then turned his eyes away. At the office door, Jimmy immediately noticed the crack in the opaque glass pane which ran diagonally across the hand painted words. *Archer and Pigeon, Private Investigation.*

Sutton pushed the door open. Jimmy's eyes went to the floor. Lenny Archer, his face nearly unrecognizable, lying in what seemed an ocean of blood.

Pigeon sadly looked away and surveyed the room. It had been turned upside down. File cabinet drawers open, papers scattered everywhere. Two men in white lab coats dusting for

prints. Two plain clothed detectives staring back at him. The older of the two starting toward him.

"Are you okay, Mr. Pigeon," the detective said. "You don't look very well."

Allergies, Jimmy thought to say, *aversion to violent death*.

"When did this happen?" Jimmy asked.

"I can't say. The call came in a few hours ago. The medical examiner is on his way. We'll know more after he takes a look. Do you feel up to a few questions?"

"Give me a moment," Jimmy said. "I need some air. Can we talk outside?"

"Sure. We'll be down in a few minutes."

Jimmy walked back down and out of the building. He passed Sutton and the other uniform at the door. They had nothing to say. He walked twenty feet from the entrance, leaned against the building and lit a cigarette.

Jesus Christ, Lenny, what the fuck was it about?

Jimmy was crushing the cigarette under his shoe a few minutes later as the two detectives approached him.

"Go ahead, ask," Jimmy said before either could speak.

The older of the two took charge. The other detective took notes.

"When was the last time you saw your partner?"

"Monday evening, a week ago today. I left town early Tuesday morning, got back in late last night."

"Did you speak with Mr. Archer while you were gone?"

"No. I imagined Lenny could stay out of trouble for six days."

"Do you have any idea about why this happened?"

"None."

"Whoever it was seemed to be searching for something."

"No idea," said Jimmy.

"A case you were working on? Something particularly sensitive or dangerous?"

"Nothing I was involved in," Jimmy said. "Nothing Lenny told me anything about."

"Did you usually work separate cases?"

"Most of the time."

"So, you can't really help us on this."

"I'll let you know as soon as I learn anything."

"Mr. Pigeon, it would be much better for all concerned if you left this to us."

Not much better for Lenny.

"I didn't get your names," Jimmy said. "I thought I knew all of the Santa Monica homicide detectives."

"I'm Detective Raft and my partner is Detective Tully. We're LASD," said Raft, handing Jimmy a Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department business card.

"Oh?" said Jimmy.

"We were handy," Raft said. "Can you tell us anything about Mr. Archer's next-of-kin?"

"He had none," said Jimmy.

"Here's the ME," said Tully. "I'll take him up."

Tully started toward the Ford that had pulled up in front of the building. An ambulance turned onto Fourth Street. Tully led the Santa Monica Medical Examiner into the building. Solomon Meyers, a familiar face.

"When can I get back into the office?" Jimmy asked.

“Hopefully by early this evening. Is there somewhere I can reach you before then?” Raft asked.

“I’m not sure where I’ll be. You have my card. You can reach me at the office number, hopefully by early this evening. Can I go now?”

“Sure,” said Raft. “I think that’s all for the time being. You have *my* card, if there’s anything we can do.”

“Thanks, I’ll let you know,” Jimmy said and he quietly walked away.

Raft returned to the office. The medical examiner was studying the corpse, the ambulance drivers were waiting for the ME to release the body, the crime scene investigators were dusting, collecting, shooting photographs. Detective Raft called Detective Tully out into the hall.

“Do you think Pigeon knows anything?” asked Tully.

“I don’t believe so,” said Raft. “Archer and Richards both said no. But Pigeon is a snoop and from what I hear a very good one. And he has a poor fucking attitude. We’ll need to keep a close eye on him.”

“Do you think they’ve found Richards yet?”

“I’m sure they have,” Raft said. “I imagine that’s why the Santa Monica PD was too busy to take this one.”

Pigeon spent the remainder of the day alone. He sat for hours at the Santa Monica Pier, watching the ocean. He dropped into a few bars along Third Street, nursing more than one drink in each saloon. A toast to Lenny Archer. At a table in the rear of Murphy’s Saloon four men in military uniform, all in their late sixties or early seventies, sang patriotic songs and tipped drinks in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the allied invasion of Normandy. It was too much celebration for Jimmy to handle. He left the bar and treated himself to a steak dinner before returning to his office.

Someone had tried valiantly to scrub the floor, most likely the building superintendent, but a large faint stain remained. The strong scent of bleach had taken the place of the hideous smell of fresh blood. The office was still in shambles. He knew he would need to call someone in to pick up, to fix the glass pane on the door, maybe drop an area rug down. He knew he wasn’t up to it himself.

Jimmy went over to Lenny Archer’s desk and opened the top drawer. In the top center drawer of each of their desks sat a small ceramic change bowl filled with coins and paper clips. Imbedded into the bottom of each bowl was a remote switch, a small button which started the tape machine that recorded sound through a microphone hidden in the ceiling light fixture. The tape recorder was hidden in the wall behind a metal vent cover. Jimmy emptied the bowl in Lenny’s drawer.

The record button was depressed.

Jimmy went over to his own desk for a screwdriver. He detached the metal grill and he pulled out the machine. He carried it back to his desk and rewound the tape. He lit a cigarette and pressed the play button.

Pigeon could not identify the voices but he could tell there had been two men in the office with Lenny. The dialogue was audible, as were the background noises. The first gunshot followed by a close second. The awful sounds of the beating Lenny had taken. The brutal interrogation, a name mentioned more than once. Richards.

Ed Richards.

Something to go on.

They had found what they came looking for; Lenny had been of no use to them.

And then the final fatal gunshot.

Pigeon replaced the tape recorder and switched on the small portable TV hoping to catch the late local news. He pulled the pint of bourbon from his desk and drank from the bottle. Jimmy caught the lead story, a Santa Monica author and journalist found shot to death in his beach house. The place had been ransacked. The Santa Monica police suspected a robbery turned felony homicide.

The name of the victim was Edward Richards.

Jimmy turned off the TV, slipped the bottle into his jacket pocket and left the office. He stopped at the front entrance to check the mail. He unlocked the box and found two bills and a postcard. The card had been addressed to Jimmy at his sister's place in South Carolina, but the street address had been transcribed incorrectly and the postcard was stamped *Return to Sender*. On the front of the card was a photo of the Santa Monica City Hall Building and on the back side of the card was an eight word message to Pigeon.

Chasing Charlie Chan.

Wish you were here.

Lenny.

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